

The Price of Vengeance

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The Price of Vengeance

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Summary

Garrus helps Zaeed with a personal mission and in the process is forced to learn some uncomfortable things about himself as V'lana builds bridges with Aria.

Notes

The next series of stories are reimaginings of the loyalty missions with some new material to fit everything better into the "Raptorverse". These stories, along with the one that came before, will set the stage for the big story arc coming up next. So...I hope you enjoy the story and please feel free to leave your comments and reviews.

Prelude

Kelly Chambers' Office

"Hello Subcommander." Kelly Chambers smiled as she stood up to greet the *Gallena's* commanding officer.

"Keep your seat, Kelly." V'lana replied as she sat down on the chair opposite the counselor's desk. "I won't take up too much of your time."

"It's all right." The ship's counselor exclaimed with a smile on her face, "My next appointment isn't for another couple of hours." Her smile fading, the counselor prompted, "I take it you're here about Garrus and Zaeed."

Nodding her head, the subcommander responded in the affirmative. "Yes. Can you give me a progress report on how they're doing?"

"Without violating confidences..." Kelly responded with a frown, "I'd have to say not good. Neither one feels any remorse for their actions. They both see it as administering justice, but for different reasons."

"Can you go into their rationale?" V'lana inquired.

"I'm sorry, Subcommander." Kelly shook her head, "That would be a violation of their privacy. To be honest, I don't think I'm going to get any further with either one of them right now."

"Understood." V'lana nodded her head, "What do you recommend?"

"Hmmm..." Kelly pondered her commanding officer's question for several moments before responding, "Until they are willing to accept remorse for their actions, I don't see any alternative other than to continue as we have been. However, I think you can lift some of their restrictions such as being confined to quarters. I still suggest that they not be included on any combat missions and that they continue to see me until they do begin to show some progress."

The subcommander nodded her head in agreement. "I spoke with Councilor Sparatus about it. While he was most displeased at what happened, he said that no charges will be pressed so long as neither one of them sets foot on the Citadel."

"That's more than generous." Kelly declared. "To be frank, I'm surprised he didn't ask for them to be turned over."

"I think he would have had I not explained to him what menhei'sahe was. That it in no way frees either Garrus or Massani from the consequences of their actions and offered to extradite them if he should so request. That seemed to have struck a responsive chord in him. We talked about how similar the turian code of honor was to ours in a lot of ways and that he would speak with Executor Pallin. Then Pallin contacted me and we came to the agreement I just told you about—that they'd stay away from the Citadel until further notice. Pallin also told me that he filled Garrus's father in on the news." Her lips turning up in a wry smirk, the subcommander quipped, "I have a feeling Garrus is going to get an earful in the very near future."

"So..." Kelly inquired, "What are your orders concerning them?"

"I'll follow your suggestions and give the order to lift their confinement to quarters, while continuing the mandatory counseling sessions. And they'll continue to be grounded as far as combat missions are concerned until you recommend otherwise."

"Hopefully, we'll be able to achieve progress." Kelly responded, "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"Hmmm...not right now." The subcommander replied, shaking her head.

"Anytime, Subcommander." Kelly answered back, "You know where to find me."

Garrus's Quarters

"I cannot express how displeased I am in you." Castis Vakarian declared, his image on the computer monitor glowering down at this son. *"I had thought you knew better than to take the law into your own hands. Instead...you disregard everything I tried to teach you and go off to Omega to play vigilante. Then...when you're given a second chance...you fuck that up by committing cold blooded murder on the Citadel."*

"I don't expect you to understand." Garrus defiantly responded, "You've never had your entire team slaughtered because someone you trusted turned out to be a traitor!"

"What have I always told you?" The father demanded, the disapproving glare still on his face.

"Do things right or don't do them at all." Garrus answered back, maintaining his rebellious stance. "The right thing was for me to seek justice for my team by punishing the man who betrayed them."

"You could have done that without blowing his head off." The elder Vakarian declared, *"Once you found out about Harkin, you could have called in C-Sec. They would have taken him into custody."*

"He wouldn't have told them a thing—assuming they could even catch him!" Garrus bit back with a derisive laugh. "That vole..."

"Vole?"

“A rodent like species common where the Romulans are from.” The younger Vakarian explained before continuing, “As I was saying, Harkin had enough bolt holes and escape routes to easily flee the station. Plus he had the Blue Suns and all those mechs covering for him.”

“Then you definitely should have turned the matter over to Executor Pallin and C-Sec.” Castis lectured, rebuking his son. “C-Sec had the resources to deal with the situation—and probably cleaner and with less loss of life than you and friends just charging in shooting up the place.”

“You weren’t there.” Garrus retorted with a sneer. “C-Sec would have been torn apart.”

“Maybe...maybe not.” Castis replied, somewhat conceding, “But that wasn’t your call to make. You didn’t and still don’t have any justification other than appeals to a code of honor that we happen to share somewhat with these Romulans.”

“Are you quite through?” Garrus scowled, “I have things to do.”

Letting out an exasperated sigh, Castis responded, “We are. I can see that you’re not interested in anything I have to say. I guess that human expression is true that sometimes you have to learn things the hard way.”

“I guess so.” The turian vigilante grumbled, “I’ll talk to you later, Father.”

“Take care of yourself, Son.” Castis replied, “And please...think about what I and the others are trying to tell you—before it’s too late.”

As his father’s image on the monitor faded away, to be replaced by a blank screen, Garrus heard the door chime. Taking a deep breath, he called out, “Who is it?”

“It’s me...Liara.” The voice of his asari comrade and friend replied through the speaker, “Can I come in?”

“Sure.” Garrus responded, permitting entry. Flashing the turian equivalent of an ironic grin, he quipped, “I suppose you’re here to chew my ass out too.”

“Cilla told me that your confinement to quarters has been lifted.” Liara replied with a smile as she entered her old friend’s quarters.

“You and Lieutenant Commander Oudekirk have been spending a great deal of time together from what I’m hearing.” Garrus remarked as his old friend sat down on the sofa.

“We’ve become good friends.” Liara answered back with a smile, “We have much in common and share a lot of the same interests.”

“Such as?” Garrus prompted grinning.

“Bridge.” Liara responded, “Philosophy...history...archaeology. She’s very well read—you should see her library sometime.” Turning the focus of the discussion back to her friend, she inquired, “What about you? How have you been doing? Any plans to celebrate your release from house arrest?”

“I’m still grounded.” Garrus grumbled, his smile vanishing. “The Subcommander doesn’t trust me on away missions. She’s afraid I’ll go off half-cocked or something.”

“Does she have reason to feel that way?” Liara queried.

“No.” Garrus shook his head. “I laid to rest the ghosts of my team. I did the right thing and no amount of ‘counseling’ from our resident shrink is going to change my mind on that.”

“I see.” Liara sighed as she realized that her task was futile. Rising from her seat, she said her goodbyes, “I’m sorry, but I have to go now. Cilla and I have the holodeck reserved. She’s taking me, Satra, and Samantha to the Tulip Festival in Amsterdam. We’re going to see the Flower Parade and then visit the Keukenhof Tulip Gardens.”

“Sounds like a fun afternoon.” Garrus replied. “Enjoy yourself.”

“Thanks, I will.” The asari archaeologist responded as she made her way to the door. “Oh...one last thing that you might want to think about...” she uttered as the door slid open, “What would Shepard have said to you if she were able to talk to you now?”

As the door closed behind his old friend, the turian vigilante let out a breath of air as he muttered in a low voice, “She’d have said that I was a better man than that.”

The Raptor’s Nest—Garrus and Zaeed

“Knew I’d find you here.” The grizzled mercenary said as he took the stool next to Garrus at the bar. Calling out to the Bolian bartender, he ordered, “Whiskey—the real stuff.”

“Zaeed.” Garrus acknowledged as he held out his glass for a refill of turian beer. “I see the Subcommander freed you too.”

“Yeah.” Zaeed responded, “Also told me that I had to continue going to those bloody counseling sessions or she’s going to drop me off when we get to Omega. Told her to drop me off.” Downing his whiskey, the hardened soldier lowered his voice, “I got a lead on where Vido’s located. I’m going after him and I could use your help.”

“You realize that means I’m going to get kicked off too.” Garrus answered back as he took a drink.

"I figure you owe me." Massani responded. "Besides..." The mercenary added, sweetening the pot, "My sources tell me that he's taken over an Eldfell-Ashland refinery and is using the workers there as slave labor. Figured that might interest you."

"And you're calling it in." Garrus sighed, "All right. I'll do it for two reasons. First, to free those workers and punish Santiago. Second, I honor my debts. I'll inform the Subcommander and be ready to leave with you when you're ready to go."

"Good man!" Zaeed exclaimed as he patted the turian vigilante on his back and told the bartender to refill their glasses, "And keep 'em coming! I'm paying the bill for the both of us."

Gazing into the eyes of the turian seated on the other side of her ready room desk, V'lana gave him one last chance to change his mind, "Are you sure this is what you want, Garrus? If you decide to go through with this, you'll have to do it using your own resources—I can't let you have any of our weapons, armor, or technology."

"I'm sure, Subcommander." Garrus replied, matching the Romulan's gaze. "It's a matter of honor."

Letting out a sigh of exasperation, V'lana snapped angrily, "I'm getting sick of hearing that phrase. Very well, we'll be at Omega in two standard hours. You and Massani can disembark there. Once you leave the ship—you're on your own."

"I understand, Subcommander." Garrus acknowledged, rising to his feet, "I'd better get packed and say my goodbyes. Thank you."

As the turian vigilante turned to walk away, V'lana called out to him, "Wait a second." She requested, "I just wanted to say one last thing."

"Ma'am?"

"This." The Romulan's eyes now taking on a worried look, she declared, "As far as I'm concerned, once we drop Massani off, that's it for him. He will not be allowed to return. In your case, it's different story. After you've finished fulfilling your debt of honor, if you want to come back, you can."

"Why make the exception for me, Subcommander."

"You fucked up, Garrus. Make no mistake about that." V'lana forcefully exclaimed, "Maybe it's just my human part coming through and pushing the Romulan part back, but I think the difference between the two of you is that Zaeed is a lost cause, while you're still a decent being at heart, and I'm willing to give you a second chance. We have a monitoring station at Wrex's camp on Tuchanka with subspace communications. Contact us, and we'll arrange for you to be picked up and you'll be welcomed back."

"Thank you." The turian responded in a subdued voice as he turned to leave, "I'll think on what you just said. If there's nothing else..."

V'lana replied in parting, "Jolan tru, Garrus."

Saying goodbyes

"You don't have to do this, Garrus." Tali pleaded as she watched her old friend pack his things into a carryall. "You don't owe that bosh'tet a damned thing."

Smiling warmly at the young quarian, Garrus responded, "It's not so simple, Tali. Even if I didn't owe Massani for coming to my aid, I'd still go after Vido Santiago. He's a very bad man and bringing him down will give a lot of people who've been hurt or lost loved ones because of him get at least some peace of mind."

Raising her voice, Tali rebuked him as she turned and walked away, "Do you honestly think that Massani is a total innocent here? That bosh'tet was head of the Blue Suns until his 'friend' turned on him. Don't think that he won't do the same to you."

"Gonna try to talk me out of going too, Alenko?" Garrus asked as he nursed his drink at the bar.

Shaking his head, Kaidan replied as he took the stool next to his old comrade, "Nope. I know better. It would just be a waste of time and breath. I just thought I'd buy you a beer or two before you left."

Nodding his head as he held his glass out to the bartender, Garrus replied with a slight grin, "I'll take you up on that."

After several minutes of small talk and reminisces about their time together on the old *Normandy*, Kaidan remarked, the thoughtful look in his eyes belying the smile on his face, "Do you remember the time Shepard and I went with you when you tracked down that salarian doctor?"

"Doctor Saleon?" Garrus nodded his head as he took a drink from his glass, "Yeah. He was calling himself Dr. Hart at the time." His face now taking on a sour expression, the turian bitterly remembered, "She held me back from killing him, but he drew down on us and we had to take him out anyway." After a momentary pause, the turian inquired, "Did she tell you about our conversation when we got back to the *Normandy*?"

"No." Alenko shook his head, "You know how she was—a private conversation was just that. Private."

"Yeah." Garrus acknowledged with a sigh as he revealed the details of their discussion. "She told me that I couldn't predict how people could act, but that I could control how I respond to what they say and do and that was what mattered in the end." Shaking his head, the turian vigilante growled, "She was right in that you can't predict how someone is going to act, but she was wrong in letting someone who was obviously bad take the initiative. And that wasn't the only time that she left herself open—or have you forgotten about that batarian terrorist, Balak? The one who took over that asteroid and tried to crash it into Terranova?"

“Yeah.” Kaidan replied. “I was there. It was me and Ashley on that run.”

“Then you remember what happened.” Garrus declared challengingly. “Balak had taken hostages—the survivors of the engineering team working on the asteroid. You broke into their main facility after shutting down the torches.”

“Right.” Kaidan affirmed, at once seeing where his turian friend was taking the discussion. “Jane was faced with a hard choice.”

“Let Balak go or disarm the bombs he had set and save the hostages.” Garrus declared. “She choice the hostages and let a brutal terrorist go. A terrorist who has since gone on to raid colonies, take slaves, and kill far more people. All those people would still be living now had she just chose to kill him when she had the chance.”

“You can’t guarantee that.” Kaidan responded, “Someone else might very well have raided those colonies.”

“Look...” Garrus argued back, “Jane was a great person. No doubt about that. But she wasn’t perfect.”

“I know.” Alenko conceded with a mournful sigh. “I think her biggest weakness was that she always tried to see the best in people.”

“I agree.” Garrus answered back with a single nod of his head. “That resulted in her getting blindsided on more than one occasion. Like that asteroid and Doctor Saleon not to mention letting the rachni queen go. Letting Balak go was a big mistake and I bet her decision about that queen will come back and bite us in the ass one day.”

“Maybe...maybe not.” Kaidan shook his head, “I told her that she should have punted it to the Council.”

“I’d have just pushed the button and dropped that acid on that thing.” The turian vigilante growled. “Don’t forget she also let that asari on Feros go even though she admitted that she joined Benezia and Saren of her own free will. Not to mention that asari scientist on Virmire.”

“You mean Shiala on Feros and what was that other one’s name...?” Kaidan replied, trying to recall the name of the geneticist he, Liara, and Shepard had run into in Saren’s lab. “I remember now!” The human biotic exclaimed, suddenly recalling, “Dr. Thanoptis.”

“Right.” Garrus declared, “She took a big risk letting both of those go.”

“Not necessarily.” Kaidan disagreed, shaking his head, “Don’t you believe in second chances, Garrus?”

“Not when the stakes were as high as they were at the time.” The turian responded, “And definitely not in their cases. Shiala joined Saren and Benezia of her own free will. And Thanoptis used those salarians as test subjects in studying indoctrination.”

“You’re forgetting...” Kaidan countered, “I was there at the time. The last I heard, Shiala was keeping her promise and helping rebuild Zhu’s Hope.”

“What about the other one?” Garrus argued back.

“There’s been no trace of Dr. Thanoptis since that nuke went off on Virmire.” Kaidan answered back in a hushed tone. “I think it’s safe to say that she was killed in the blast along with Ashley and Kirrahe.”

“Perhaps.” Garrus allowed, concluding his argument as he finished his beer and rose to his feet. “The thing is, Kaidan...Jane’s good nature led her to be taken off guard too easily. She never really learned that the most important aspect of being a SPECTRE is that it’s almost always better to act rather than react. Now...if you’ll excuse me, we’re going to arrive at Omega shortly and I have a few final details I need to take care of.”

“Okay, Garrus.” Kaidan, also rising to his feet, responded as he placed a brotherly hand on the turian’s shoulder, “Take care of yourself and come back soon.”

Act 2

Chapter Summary

Garrus and Zaeed set their plans for vengeance into motion

Garrus and Zaeed—Hangar Bay

“About time.” Zaeed grumbled as Garrus entered the shuttle bay, carrying a bag containing his possessions. “Ready to go?”

“Yeah.” Garrus laconically replied as the pair walked together to a waiting Alliance Kodiak shuttle.

“Good.” The hard-bitten mercenary responded, “I’ve got a safehouse with a stash on Omega. We can get outfitted there. Gavorn owes me a favor—I pulled his ass out of mess he got into a while back. Decided to go hunt vorcha and got more than he bargained for.”

“What happened? Did he run into a nest?” Garrus inquired.

“Sure did.” Zaeed laughed. “I swear that turian shit his drawers at least twice before I finally got him out of there. He’ll get us a shuttle that we can take to Zorya. Once we get there, we deal with Vido.”

“Works for me.” Garrus replied as the pair entered the shuttle. “Let’s get this thing started.”

Bridge—RRW Galena

“Shuttle Two has departed.”

“Good.” V’lana acknowledged from the center chair. “Aria said that she’d have someone at the shuttle to pick up the package we have for her.” Her lips turning up in a wicked grin, the subcommander quipped, “She also told me that she’s got something interesting for us, but I’m going to have to come and pick it up myself and to bring along some muscle.”

“I wonder what...or who...it is.” Tovan bantered back, a slight smile appearing on his face.

“Should be interesting.” V’lana smirked, “Have my gig readied and alert Solana and Vega.”

“Aye, Subcommander.”

Turning to the human biotic sitting next to her, the lovely Romulan quipped, “Well...you coming, Kaidan? The ‘queen’ awaits.”

Omega—Garrus and Zaeed

“Right.” Zaeed said as he and his partner got off the shuttle. “First things first. My safehouse. Then Gavorn. Then we get off this rock and get Vido.”

“Lead the way.” Garrus simply replied as the pair exited the docking tube and entered Omega proper. “Where’s your place?”

“Over here.” The old mercenary jerked his head towards a dilapidated apartment complex. “Best place to lay low. No one asks questions and no one bothers you unless you bother them.”

Entering the building, Zaeed led his ally up several flights of stairs and into a corridor. “Third one on the left.” He said as he passed his omnitool over the front of the door. “The lock and security system are coded to a frequency on my tool. Someone tries to tamper with it or force their way in...” The gun for hire chuckled, “Boom.”

“That’s one way to keep out nosy neighbors.” Garrus quipped as the pair entered the sparsely furnished apartment.

“Help yourself to a beer.” Zaeed said, motioning towards the kitchen. “It’s in the refrigerator. Don’t worry...” The mercenary laughed, “It’s dextro. I keep a few for turian or quarian guests.”

“Thanks.” The turian vigilante replied as he walked into the kitchen and grabbed a turian beer from the cooler. Opening the bottle, he took a hearty swig. “Not bad.”

“Yeah...I don’t know turian booze for shit.” Massani declared as he entered a combination into a keypad, revealing a secret door. “Armory’s in here.” He said as he motioned for his associate to join him. Gesturing at a variety of armor and weapons on display, the mercenary directed, “I’ve got a couple of turian armors—take your pick.”

His eyes widening in astonishment, Garrus exclaimed, “Is that what I think it is? Phantom armor?”

“Sure is.” Zaeed laughed. “Try it on. Then check out the weapons.”

“Damn.” Garrus smiled as he put on the armor and moved about in it, getting a feel for it. “I thought this was limited to SPECTRES and turian military elite. How did you manage to get hold of it?”

“Got it from a turian general—Septimus something or other.” Zaeed replied. “Did him a favor. Took out some trash for him and he gave me this as part of the payment.”

Moving to the rifles, Garrus eyed one sniper rifle in particular. Picking it up and checking its balance and sights, he let out a whistle, “A Krysaë. I’ve seen a few of them, but never held one until now.”

“Got a range set up in the basement.” Zaeed declared as he suited up in Colossus heavy armor and grabbed a vindicator assault rifle and scimitar shotgun, fixing them to their magnetic clamps on his suit. “Might not be a bad idea to get in some target practice.”

“Good idea.” The turian vigilante replied with a nod of his head, “That plasma sniper rifle I’ve been using has spoiled me.”

After an hour or so on the range, the equivalent of a smile appeared on Garrus’s lips. “Shoots like a dream.”

“Thought you’d like it.” Zaeed replied as the pair made their way back up the stairs again. “Now…you ready to get off this rock?”

“Yeah.” Garrus answered back, “Where do we meet Gavorn? His usual place?”

“Right.” The mercenary nodded his head as the pair exited the apartment complex and made their way down the street. “He’ll be in front of Afterlife sniping at vorcha. We get the access code and clearance for the shuttle from him and then we’re out of here. Easy-peasy.”

“I’m surprised Gavorn actually delivered.” Garrus chuckled as the pair entered the turian transport, its old Hierarchy markings long painted over.

“He knows better than to cross me.” The grizzled merc replied. “Now…let’s get the hell out of here. I’ve got a score to settle.”

Act 3

Chapter Summary

V'iana and Aria find common ground in their mutual dislike for Cerberus as Garrus and Zaeed continue their quest for vengeance with its ultimate tragic result

Chapter Notes

One of the big things I'm hoping people pull out of this part is--once again--how important Shepard was to the people around her and how keenly her absence is missed. Shepard was probably the only one who could have reached Garrus during his quest for vengeance on the Citadel and persuaded him to stay his hand. Shepard also was probably the only one who could have gotten through to Zaeed at this crucial moment. Even in absence, Shepard is an important character.

Omega—V'iana and Kaidan

Debarking from her commander's gig, V'iana and her party were met at the end of the docking bay by two of Aria's personal guard, both batarians. The first batarian stepped forward and introduced himself, "My name is Bray, and this is Anto. We were sent by Aria to take you to the prisoners and turn them over to you. What you do with them afterwards is up to you."

"Thank you." V'iana politely replied, "Take us to them, please."

"This way." Bray pointed towards Afterlife. "Aria keeps special facilities for certain guests." He stated as he led the tiny group to their destination. "She will meet you there."

"In other words, she has her own private brig." V'iana quipped, bringing a slight smile to the batarian's face.

"Right."

Cracking a grin, Vega joked, "Those poor bastards must have forgotten the first and only rule of Omega."

"Don't fuck with Aria." V'iana bantered back.

"Not this time." Anto interjected.

"So what is their story?" Kaidan inquired.

"Aria will explain when we get there." The batarian bodyguard replied as the group neared their destination. Taking out a scanner, Bray stated, "You know the routine."

"Your scanners won't pick up our weapons." V'iana responded with a laugh as she slowly took out her phaser one and passed it undetected through the scanner. "See?" She then handed the weapon to Bray. "It's a phaser and set to stun."

"Doesn't look like a weapon to me." Bray responded with a laugh as he handled the pocket-sized weapon.

"That's intentional." V'iana answered back, further explaining. "It's Starfleet design, not Romulan. You've seen our weapons. We deliberately design them so that look like they can do damage. But don't be deceived, these little jewels can pack a punch."

"Heh." Bray replied, "I'd like to see one in action."

"Maybe we can arrange a demonstration some time?" V'iana tempted, "I'm sure your boss keeps a training ground or target range for her and her guards to use."

"She does." The batarian bodyguard responded as he handed the phaser back to its owner. "Aria said that it was okay for you to keep your weapons. You'll need them anyway to transport your prisoners." The door opening, Bray gestured, "This way."

Entering the prison wing, V'iana at once recognized the asari boss of Omega leaning casually against a counter. Her lips turned up in a sly grin, the subcommander remarked, "I hope you liked the Saurian brandy I sent you a while back."

"I did." The unofficial queen of Omega responded with a grin of her own. "And I trust that you enjoyed the asari mead."

"It was very good." V'iana responded before getting to the point. "So...what...or rather who...have you got for me?"

"Come with me and I'll show you." Aria requested, leading the subcommander and her people down a corridor. "You did me a good turn by passing on that data pad so I'm returning the favor."

"I trust you've taken care of your little problem." V'iana quipped.

Chuckling, the former asari commando replied, "Let's just say that the new mercenary leadership has learned from their predecessors' mistake."

"Don't fuck with Aria?"

"Precisely." The Omega crime boss replied as they reached a cell containing three men wearing Cerberus livery. "Pirates hit their shuttle a week ago and brought them here."

"I'm surprised they didn't just outright kill them or sell them into slavery." V'lana noted as she observed the three men.

"Normally they would have." Aria affirmed, "But I put out a bounty on anyone from Cerberus. After a little bit of persuasion..." laughing at the knowing look the subcommander was giving her, the crime boss explained, "Oh don't worry. We didn't do anything irrevocable to them. Anyway, we didn't get anything out of those two" she pointed first to a slender pale skinned male with brown hair, and second to a somewhat more muscular and stocky dark-skinned man, "They were obviously trained to resist interrogation. I'll let you deal with them."

"What about the other one?" V'lana asked, pointing to a dark-haired man of medium height and weight sitting apart from the other two.

"It took some doing with him too." Aria replied, "I didn't want to push too hard. While we did a careful medical scan to ensure that they weren't implanted with something unpleasant, that doesn't rule out drugs or post-hypnotic suggestion."

"Or any of a dozen other ways to ensure that an agent doesn't pass on sensitive information if captured." The subcommander interjected, her asari escort nodding in agreement. "Our intelligence agencies where I'm from do much the same. I have a telepath. She should be able to find any mental triggers and dig out anything they're keeping hidden." Pausing for a moment, she inquired, pointing to the man sitting alone. "What did you learn from him?"

"As I said..." Aria replied, "Not a whole lot. We were able to find out that those three are from Shepard's ship. And that they were involved in a recent attack on an Alliance base that was hit at the same time as a Collector attack on their colony."

"They're the pendejos that hit Fehl Prime and probably Ferris Fields, Lola." Vega snarled as he glowered angrily at the three prisoners.

"Easy, James..." V'lana answered back in a soothing voice as she placed a gentle, yet firm, hand on his forearm. "We'll get the truth out of them and then turn them over to the Alliance. I don't need any more honor crusades right now."

"It's okay, Lola. I'm cool." Vega, after taking several deep breaths, responded in a low voice. "I'm not gonna go half-cocked like Garrus. I just want one thing..."

"What is that?" V'lana inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"I wanna be there when Neilana gets hold of them."

"Done." The subcommander nodded her head once in affirmation. "I'm also going to want our resident SPECTRE there for the interrogation as well."

"You mentioned something about a telepath earlier?" Aria queried with an amused look on her face as she half-jokingly remarked, "I'd like to borrow her sometime should my people run into something like this again."

Responding in kind, V'lana chuckled before extending an offer, "If you're serious, I think we can work something out."

Seeing that her guest was taking her half-jesting request sincerely, the queen of Omega replied in a more thoughtful tone of voice, "I'll get back with you on that."

V'lana inquired, getting back to the prisoners, "Did you get anything else from him?"

"He was supposed to transport the other two from Shepard's ship to a Cerberus base and then pick up their replacements to be brought back to the *Normandy* or whatever their ship is called. Apparently Cerberus has a secret project going."

"Was it at that base?" Kaidan inquired.

"No." Aria responded, "At least that's what the prisoner said. Most likely he was taking them to a transport hub and they'd have gone on to the base from there. Odds are Cerberus will shut the hub down once they find out their people had been taken." Her brow furrowed, the boss of Omega queried, "This secret project? Is it something I should be concerned about?"

"Perhaps." V'lana answered back, then amended with an affirmative nod of her head. "Probably. Care to take a trip?"

"Where to?" The asari crime boss responded warily.

"My ship." V'lana grinned, "Don't worry...you can bring your guards with you if you want. They'll have to surrender their weapons when we get to the ship though." Noting the sour look on the asari former commando's face, the subcommander pointed out, "Just like you've got one rule on Omega, I've got one rule on my ship."

"And since you've been good about catering to my preferences here..." Aria continued, "It's only...polite...for me to respond accordingly." Turning to her bodyguards, she commanded, "Bray...Anto...you're coming with me and when they order you to give up your weapons, do so without complaining." Pausing for a moment, she inquired of the Romulan guest, "Not that getting a chance to see your ship doesn't rouse my curiosity, but is there any reason why you can't just tell me what you want to here?"

The subcommander explained to her cautious host, "There's some information I think you need to know now that I didn't think you needed to

know earlier, and it would be easier to just show it to you. As the humans say, 'seeing is believing.'"

Chuckling, Aria responded, giving the two humans in the party amused glances, "Good point. Every now and then humans do come up with something useful. Very well. I'll take you up on your offer. Let's go. As I said, I'm curious to see your ship."

Turning to the prisoners, Bray gave the burly man a hard shove. "You heard the boss. Get moving. You're going to your new home."

"You sure about this, 'Iana?" Kaidan whispered as the tiny group, prisoners in tow, left the asari crime boss's prison area and made their way down the street to the docks.

"Yeah.' V'Iana whispered back as their asari guest quietly listened in with an amused expression on her face. "Omega's too strategically important. We can't afford to alienate Aria. Better to work with her than against her."

"Okay." Alenko nodded his head, "If you say so."

Zorya—Garrus and Zaeed

The first thing that caught Garrus's eyes as they touched down on Zorya was a towering structure exuding black smoke from the top.

"The Eldfell-Ashland refinery." Zaeed said, "That's where we'll find Vido." Activating his omnitool, the grizzled veteran merc advised, "I'm tapping into the Blue Suns comms. Keep an eye out for ambushes."

As the duo began making their way down a dirt path, they soon heard Blue Sun comm chatter. "*Squad Bravo. A shuttle landed near your location. Check it out.*"

"That's Vido's voice." Zaeed grumbled as they drew closer to several dead workers, shot execution style. "That's also Vido's work. Shot 'em in the back and left 'em there to rot as a message to anyone else."

Their comms again came to life with the voice of Zaeed's enemy. "*Command to Bravo. Take a position and expect trouble. Looks like we might be dealing with more than just runaways here.*"

They then heard another voice, "*Report to base! Armed intruders incoming at the southern checkpoint.*"

"Looks like they're prepping a reception committee for us." Garrus noted wryly.

"Move it!" Zaeed shouted as he quickly raced for cover, diving behind a rock before the Blue Sun mass accelerator rounds could strike.

Moving even quicker than the old mercenary, Garrus dived for cover and, readying his sniper rifle, took careful aim and fired, downing the Blue Sun who had pinned his partner down. "Scratch One." The turian noted in a low voice as he began keeping score.

The ensuing firefight was short and sweet with the duo quickly bringing down their adversaries. "Not much of a challenge." Zaeed growled, his lips curled in a derisive sneer. "Vido's holding back his best to guard his sorry ass."

"That missile gunner was a problem for a while." Garrus noted as he checked his rifle. "No excuse for missing that first shot. I should have calibrated those sights one more time before we touched down."

"You got him anyway." Zaeed pointed out before shouting, "Reinforcements. This time they brought pets along with them."

Seeing a pair of Fenris mechs dashing towards them, Garrus called out as he touched a button on his omnitool and activated an overload charge. "Got 'em!"

"I got the pyro!" Zaeed shouted, firing an incendiary round that entered the flamethrower specialist's fuel tank, causing it to explode taking him and a fellow trooper out simultaneously.

"Nice." Garrus shouted as he caught the heavy weapons specialist in his sights and pulled the trigger. "Scoped and dropped."

"That's the last of 'em." Zaeed announced as he felled the remaining Suns trooper. "Over there." He pointed to a console. "That retracts and extends the bridge."

"Right." Garrus replied, "Let's get that bridge extended so that we can cross."

"Took the words right out of my mouth." Zaeed quipped as his turian partner operated the controls, extending the bridge.

As the bridge lengthened to reach the other side, they once again heard Vido's voice through their comms. "*This is Commander Santiago. If any of you retreat before the intruders are killed, I'll kill you myself. Get the hell back out there and fight.*"

"Sounds like he's rattled." Garrus commented.

"Hasn't changed a bit." Zaeed growled.

"How well do you know him?" The turian sniper asked.

"Well enough." The old mercenary responded. "We started the Blue Suns together. Back then...it was a reputable mercenary outfit. Yeah... we worked for hire, but no slaving...no dealing in red sand...none of that shit."

“So...what happened?”

“I knew he was a sadistic son of a bitch when we founded the Suns together.” Zaeed recalled, “After he stabbed me in the back and took over, the Suns got meaner—got into all that shit I said they didn’t get into when I ran the show.”

“I’ve never heard any mention of you as leader of the Blue Suns.” Garrus commented, “And I’d been in C-Sec for several years before I met Shepard and my father longer than that.”

“Not a whole lot of people know.” Massani responded, “After he took over, Vido wiped out any mention of me in the records. Back before his coup, he ran the books while I ran the men. Good arrangement for a while. Then Vido decided to hire batarians. He said they were cheaper. I told him they were goddamn terrorists.”

“Vido give you that eye and those scars?” Garrus inquired.

“Yeah.” Zaeed nodded in confirmation. “He paid six men to hold me...put a gun to my head...and pulled the trigger. For twenty years all I could see was that bastard’s face—you know what I mean.”

Nodding his head, Garrus responded in a soft voice, “Yeah. I do.”

“Rage is a helluva painkiller, isn’t it?” Zaeed growled as the bridge locked into place on the other side. “Let’s get moving. I want to get that bastard.”

Omega

“Subcommander V’lana to *Gallena*.” V’lana signaled, tapping her comm badge. “Decloak and take us in. Have a security detail meet us on the hangar deck. Also, have Jodrum meet us in the hangar bay, we’re bringing in Cerberus prisoners.”

“Aye, Subcommander.” Samantha Traynor’s voice responded through the speaker. “*Centurion Kev and SPECTRE Jodrum are on their way. They’ll be there by the time you arrive.*”

“Thank you, Samantha.” The subcommander responded, “We’re also going to have guests joining us. Have all senior officers and Mordin and Miranda ready to meet when I give the order in Conference Room One.”

On hearing Traynor’s acknowledgement, Aria queried, “So...where is your ship?”

Cracking a crooked grin, Vega joked back, “Wait for it...”

As the warbird suddenly materialized where there was once empty space, Anto gasped in alarm as his boss and his fellow bodyguard both looked on with stunned looks on their faces, “What the hell?”

“My ship.” V’lana replied proudly.

“How did you?” Aria stammered, her normally unflappable exterior now giving way to a look of astonishment, before quickly regaining her composure. “Total invisibility. No one...not even the salarians...have been able to accomplish that. The power output alone for a ship that size...”

“No wonder they were able to trash those ships so quickly the last time they were here.” Bray noted.

As Cortes smoothly brought the shuttle down, V’lana turned to her prisoners, warning them, “Last chance. Tell me what I want to know now and you’ll spare yourselves a great deal of unpleasantness.”

“Go to hell you pointy-eared freak.” The dark-skinned Cerberus prisoner cursed, spitting at the subcommander’s feet.

“Easy, ‘lana.” Kaidan, at once noticing the warning signs in his lover’s body language, whispered in a low voice, “We don’t want them killed before we’ve had a chance to interrogate them.”

“Stupid move.” Vega whispered to Bray. “Lola’s got a temper. He’s gonna pay for that.”

“How?”

Solana let out a breath, “She’s gonna sic Neilana on him.”

Exiting the shuttle, V’lana turned her prisoners over to her executive officer, accompanied by the salarian SPECTRE, and a Romulan security detail. “Take these veruul to the brig, Big Brother.” Then, giving the human who had spat at her a withering glare, she added, pointing at the man. “Bring in Neilana. Have her start with that one. I want a complete debrief in Conference Room One in an hour.”

“Understood, Little Sister.” Tovan acknowledged as he motioned for his team to take the prisoners into custody. “I’ll inform Neilana to meet us in the brig immediately.” Glancing at the Cerberus prisoners as they were being marched away, Tovan remarked in a low voice, “She should have whatever information they have out of them by the time of the meeting.”

“Good.” V’lana replied. Turning to her guests, she explained as she motioned towards the turbolift, “Not only is Neilana a strong telepath, she also conducted interrogations for the Tal’Shiar before defecting to the Republic. If those bastards know anything—she’ll find out—even if she has to rip their minds apart to do it.”

“Works for me.” Aria responded with a nonchalant shrug of her shoulders as she and the others entered the turbolift. “Where are we going?”

“The Raptor’s Nest.” V’lana replied, “It’s what we call the ship’s lounge. As we have an hour to kill before the conference, I thought we could all stand for a drink right about now. Also, it’s a good place for your guards to hang out while we talk.”

“Bray? Anto?” Aria called out to her batarian bodyguards. “Think you two can keep yourselves out of trouble for an hour or so?”

“Aleena’s tending bar right now.” Vega whispered to Bray, “She fixes a mean Aldebaran depth charge. Guaranteed to give even a krogan a kick in the quads.”

“We’ll be all right, Boss.” Bray responded, speaking for his fellow batarian.

“First round’s on me.” Vega grinned as the group entered the ship’s lounge. “If it’s all right with you, Lola, me and Solana are going to take our friends to the bar and introduce them to Aleena.”

“Works for me.” The subcommander responded as she guided her guest of honor to her table. “So...what do you think?” V’lana asked as she made a sweeping gesture with her arm.

“Not bad.” Aria replied, her expert eye scanning the lounge. “Décor’s all right...but it’s a bit boring. No action. I’d add some gambling tables...strippers...”

“We’re not Risa or Argellius.” V’lana chuckled at Aria’s reaction to the Bolian waitress who took their orders. “Try the Argelian nine layer cocktail.” The subcommander suggested, “I think you’ll enjoy it.”

“All right.” Aria responded with a slight nod of her head. “How long will it take for your interrogator to break our prisoners?” The crime boss asked as the waitress returned with their drinks.

“Not long.” V’lana answered back. “She’ll crack the big guy first to serve as an example. That’ll scare at least one of the other two into talking.”

Nodding her head, Aria commented knowingly, “That should work. The pilot—the one that we already partly broke—he’ll squeal first.” Adding as an aside, she noted, “Of the three, he seemed to be the least fanatical. I got the impression that he’s beginning to find out that Cerberus wasn’t what he thought it was when he joined up.”

“How did you come to that conclusion?” Kaidan asked as he took a swig of beer.

“I’m curious about that too.” V’lana remarked, taking a sip of her khali’ fe.

“Little things.” Aria responded, her lips turning up in an appreciative grin as she took a drink of her cocktail. “Body language. The look in his eyes when I mentioned Fehl Prime and Ferris Fields. A little hitch in his voice when he insisted that Cerberus was trying to stop the Collectors. There was just the slightest hint of doubt there that I picked up on. We honestly didn’t have to get that forceful with him.” She said as she took another drink. “Once we got him separated from his pals, he was more cooperative. Not a whole lot, mind you, but still more talkative than the other two. I’m betting your interrogator will tell you much the same thing.”

“Probably.” The subcommander agreed as she glanced at her chronometer and finished her drink. “We should be hearing something soon. Meeting’s about to start.”

“Good.” Aria replied, downing the rest of her cocktail as well, “I was getting tired of sitting here.” Calling out to her bodyguards, the asari crime boss commanded, “We’re on our way to the meeting. You two stay here and enjoy yourselves.”

Laughing, Vega ordered another round, “You heard your boss.”

His lips turning up in a wide grin as he drank yet another depth charge, Bray replied, nudging his fellow batarian in the ribs, “We always do what the Boss tells us—right Anto?”

Zorya—Zaeed and Garrus

“They’re at the southern access. All squads at the gatehouse—Now!”

“Sounds like Vido’s preparing a welcoming committee for us.”

“Good.” Zaeed sneered, “More sons of bitches to kill.”

Crossing the bridge to the other side, they heard more Suns chatter through their comms. *Squads Charlie...Delta. Mass at the gatehouse. Company’s coming and the boss wants us to give them a warm reception.”*

Entering the gatehouse, the duo at once spotted a man standing on a ledge, flanked on either side by a squad of blue and white armored mercenaries. “You finally tracked me down, Massani. Took you long enough. You should have stayed dead. Now, I’ll make sure of it.”

“Asshole.” Massani scowled as he reached for his rifle.

“Don’t be a dumbass, Massani.” Vido threatened with a sneer on his face. “I’ve got a whole company behind me ready to kill or be killed on my command.”

Spotting a fuel line connecting to a valve near him out of the corner of his eyes, Zaeed listened quietly as his enemy gloated, “No...I changed my mind. I want you to go ahead and take your best shot. It’ll give my men an excuse to put you down like the mad dog you are—again.”

As his foe uttered his final words, Zaeed dashed forward apparently firing wildly with his rifle as a seemingly stray round pierced a pipe, allowing the flammable gas to escape.

“Gone nearsighted, geezer.” Vido snorted as gas hissed out of the pipe.

“Burn you son of a bitch.” Zaeed cursed as he fired incendiary rounds at the pipe, the sparks from the projectiles igniting the gas resulting in a large explosion that caught most of Santiago’s squad except for him.

“You just signed your death warrant, Massani.” Vido snarled as he struggled back to his feet. Motioning at a backup squad, he turned about as the mercenaries fired ferociously at Zaeed and Garrus.

Garrus, under cover, watched nonplussed as his partner hammered at the valve, heedless of the opposing mercenaries’ fire. “What the hell are you doing, Zaeed?”

Ignoring the turian’s calls, Zaeed continued to beat at the valve until it opened fully, the escaping gas combining with the fire still burning from the earlier explosion to create multiple explosions that wracked the facility. As the explosions wiped out their opposition, the hardened mercenary finally answered his partner’s question. “I was opening the gate.”

“Give me fair warning next time.” Garrus remarked with a frown on his face. “I thought we were here to free these people trapped here. Why the hell are you trying to blow up the refinery?”

“I’m here to kill Vido Santiago.” Zaeed angrily responded, “And I’m not going to let anything...or anyone...stand in my way.”

“You want him dead.” Garrus grimly replied, “He dies.”

“Good.” Zaeed answered back, “I don’t care about anything else so long as Vido eats a bullet.”

Entering the burning refinery, the pair quickly mowed down the surviving Blue Suns troopers as they advanced until a refinery worker standing on a ledge, waving at them to attract their attention, shouted a plaintive appeal. “Please! Help us! We can’t get to the gas valves to shut them off! We’re all going to die!”

“We don’t have the time.” Zaeed growled, “Vido’s probably already halfway to his shuttle by now.”

“Vido took a bullet.” Garrus replied, “That’s gotta slow him down—even with medigel. We can still save those people and catch him before he leaves.”

“Vido isn’t stupid.” Zaeed declared, “We stop and help those people—he’ll use that time to get away. And if he gets away, I’m blaming you.”

As he weighed his options, the turian vigilante remembered Shepard’s words. “*You can’t control how people will act, but you can control what you say and do. It’s the way you respond that matters in the end.*” “Damn it.” Garrus muttered to himself as he looked up at the frightened worker. Turning to Zaeed, he growled, “I’m going to save these people. You want to go after Vido—go ahead. I’ll catch up with you.”

“Fuck you. I knew you were soft.” Zaeed snapped back angrily as he loaded a fresh clip into his rifle and walked away. “I’m going after that son of a bitch even if I have to do it myself.”

His eyes going first to his partner who was determined to press on with his vendetta and then to the terrified man on the ledge seeking his aid, Garrus gritted his teeth as he made his final decision. Moving rapidly, the turian vigilante, racing against time and drawing off the skills he learned as a C-Sec officer, bypassed the security lock to the door and rushed inside, relying on his suit’s environmental to protect him from the fire long enough to reach the three valves. As he cut off the third and final valve, he heard one of the workers shout out to him.

“The doors won’t open until the fires are out! The extinguishing system is upstairs! Please hurry! I don’t wanna die!”

Dashing rapidly, Garrus reached his destination and activated the extinguishing system. Sighing with relief as he heard the fire suppression chemicals extinguish the fires, the turian vigilante remarked in a low voice as he watched the workers dash out of what could have been their tomb. “I hope I did the right thing, Shepard. Now, I better get to Zaeed before he’s killed or Vido gets away.”

Moving rapidly through the refinery, he finally caught up with his erstwhile companion who was currently pinned down by heavy fire, Vido’s words coming loud and clear through his comm. “*There’s a big bonus for whoever brings me Massani’s head!*”

“Try to collect it, assholes!” Zaeed shouted as he emptied an entire thermal clip at a squad of onrushing mercenaries. Spotting the turian vigilante out of the corner of his eye, Massani growled, “About time you showed up.”

“Your turian pal’s not gonna help you here!” Vido shouted as Garrus downed a Blue Suns pyro encroaching from the flank with a single shot from his Krysaë.

“I took the Suns! I took your life! And now I’m going to take it again!”

“That’s it.” Zaeed muttered as he fired another burst at his foe, “Keep talking asshole.”

“Give up and maybe I’ll forget all about this.” Vido taunted as Garrus took down two more pyros.

“Turian!” Vido called out, “I’ve got no beef with you. You can still walk away if you go now. I promise you safe conduct back to your

shuttle.”

“Get ready Zaeed, here it comes!” Vido shouted as a leaking fuel tank traveling overhead on a conveyor line began spewing flames, burning anyone in its reach—Blue Sun or not.

A sly grin appeared on the turian’s face as he spied a cluster of mercenaries under the path of the fire-spitting tank. Biding his time until the right moment, Garrus fired, bringing the burning tank down on the hapless Suns.

After a brief lull in the fighting, Garrus heard an unmistakable sound, “Ymir!” He called out in warning as he quickly triggered his rifle to fire disruptor rounds.

“Fuck.” Zaeed muttered to himself before shouting, “That piece of junk’s not gonna save you Vido!”

Their combined firepower bringing the mech’s shields down, Garrus switched to armor piercing rounds while his partner converted to incendiary. Maintaining fire and diving for cover to avoid the lumbering mech’s minigun and rocket fire, the pair slowly whittled down its armor as it advanced ever closer, its fire now beginning to wear down their own kinetic barriers. Wincing as a round pierced his armor, Garrus sighed in relief as the medigel kicked in, anesthetizing the wound as it went to work healing it.

“Got it!” Zaeed shouted as the mech exploded into fragments. “You’re next, Vido!”

Dashing out on to the shuttle pad, the pair watched as a gunship slowly lifted off. *“Not this time, Zaeed, you son of a bitch! You can try again in another twenty years!”*

Screaming his rage, Zaeed, heedless of the collapsing structure and not even noticing the fact that he was standing in a pool of liquified fuel leading to a tank still leaking its contents, the fluid forming a trail from the tank to where Massani was standing. Firing madly at the gunship Zaeed screamed his rage until, his ammo spent, he ejected the still hot clip right on to the puddle of fuel. Leveling his rifle at his turian partner, the grizzled merc shouted, “You just cost me twenty years of my life.”

Before Garrus could call out a warning, a trail of fire snaked out from the puddle to the tank, setting off a massive explosion that pinioned his partner under the debris in a fiery hell. As he tried in vain to reach his fallen companion, the turian vigilante couldn’t help but hear Zaeed’s screams of agony as he quickly succumbed to the flames. Then, the rain came, dowsing both the turian and putting out the fires. Looking down at the charred remains of his fallen friend, Garrus heaved a dejected sigh. “I’m sorry, Zaeed. I’m so sorry.”

As he reluctantly turned and walked away, Garrus once more heard Shepard’s words, *“You can’t control how other people act, but you can control what you say and do. It’s the way you respond that matters in the end.”*

Act 4: Denouement

Chapter Summary

Garrus reflects on his actions as Aria and V'lana come to a mutually beneficial accord.

RRW Gallena

"I have the debrief on the prisoners." Tovan declared as he entered the conference room. "It went as expected. The pilot, Hawthorne, once we separated him from his mates, cracked first without Neilana having to go into his mind. Ms. T'Loak was correct in her assessment that he was beginning to have second thoughts about his involvement with Cerberus. The other two...the heavy weapons specialist, Jackson, and the team sniper, Markham, were especially resistant. Neilana had to dig pretty deep into their minds in order to extract any valuable information. You were also correct about them being conditioned. We almost lost them a couple of times. Dr. Aven and Dr. Chakwas estimate that they will be out for at least forty eight hours. By the way, Little Sister..." Tovan added in a gently chiding tone of voice, "Dr. Chakwas is very upset at you right now. She was not at all pleased at Neilana's interrogation techniques."

"Got any extra Serrice Ice Brandy, Aria?" The Romulan subcommander asked only half-jokingly. "I don't want Dr. Chakwas to stay pissed off at me for too long."

"I think I have a bottle or two lying around." The asari queen of Omega responded with an amused smirk. "I'll send it to you before you depart."

"Thanks." V'lana replied before speaking once again to her XO. "Anything else of note?"

"Perhaps." Tovan replied. "Their interrogation confirms what we were able to recover from Tuchanka. There is a Cerberus secret program called ETAP. Hawthorne stated that it was supposed to be an elite training program. Neilana could pick up no signs that any of them were aware of any cybernetic or genetic enhancements beyond that already in use here."

"Sounds like the Illusive Man is playing Shepard and her people for saps." Aria surmised,

"Good guess." V'lana agreed before once again addressing her Big Brother, "Anything else on the more cooperative one—Hawthorne? Were you about to determine whether he was getting suspicious? Or did other factors come into play?" V'lana inquired as Aria attentively listened.

"A little of both." The centurion responded. "He, along with a few others in the *Normandy's* crew, had originally joined to combat the Collectors. He stated that there were others who were supposed to be on the crew--some of whom we already know such as Joker, Dr. Chakwas, and Councilor Chambers, but they were dropped from the roster and replaced by...Hawthorne stated...Cerberus die-hards. He and a few others were the only ones they kept."

"That is exactly what happened." Miranda concurred, "He declared a clean slate on my project and diverted to an alternate scheme--most likely the cloning project." Taking a deep breath and exhaling, the Australian biotic remarked, "The Illusive Man always has a Plan B and often a Plan C ready just in case."

V'lana nodded, "What else, Big Brother?"

"It seems that the attacks on the Alliance base at Ferris Fields and the archaeological dig on Fehl Prime has weakened Hawthorne's confidence in their cause, along with a few others among the crew. "

"Could be useful later." V'lana mused, Aria nodding in agreement.

Continuing his debrief, the Romulan XO surmised, "The final straw appears to have been shortly before and during the attack on Fehl Prime."

"What happened?" Aria inquired, her curiosity getting the better of her.

Tovan answered back, "A friend of his who was also a member of Shepard's ground team deserted. She was the team engineer—Doris Whaley. She also made off with an android that she had constructed and assisted in the transference of the ship AI to that body."

"I'll bet Shepard and Mr. Illusive were pissed off about that." V'lana chuckled. "Any idea as to what happened with this deserter and the android accompanying her?"

"No idea." Jodrum, who had also witnessed the interrogation, chimed into the discussion for the first time. "Her, the mobile platform, and Dr. Treeya knocked the prisoner out and hijacked the shuttle he was piloting that carried Shepard and her team. The shuttle was slightly damaged due to rocket fire from the one named Jackson and, once Shepard and her team were recovered, the *Normandy* gave pursuit. The one called Doris managed to escape to a mass relay, but before jumping, she set the relay where it would fling them to a random location."

"A smart play, but desperate." Aria noted, "Had she not done that, the *Normandy* would have pursued and caught them. The downside is that our defector had no way of knowing where she'd end up. Hell...as far as we know, she could have wound up in a system with no mass relay or even in the middle of a star."

"It's been some time since Fehl Prime." Satra interjected, "That shuttle's reserves of power and fuel would have been long exhausted by now."

“They’d have run out food and water even before that.” Miranda pointed out. “A Cerberus shuttle would not have been outfitted with extensive provisions or reserves for a simple ground mission drop such as this.”

Mordin declared with a shake of his head. “Odds are defector and Dr. Treeya dead. Status of AI...problematic. Could have survived.”

“We’ll pass word on about the deserter along with the results of our interrogation to both the Council and Admiral Hackett and arrange for an Alliance or Council ship to pick up our prisoners.” V’lana decided. “I’d like to know more about this deserter.” Turning to Miranda, she inquired, “I recall you mentioning that defections from Cerberus are rare.”

“They are.” The Australian Cerberus defector declared, “The only one other than I that I am aware of besides her is Jacob. The Illusive Man’s system of internal surveillance and informants is very good at weeding out both spies and potential defectors.”

“That’s what I figured.” V’lana acknowledged. Turning her attention back to her XO, she inquired, “Were you able to get any more information?”

“We did get some valuable intelligence on the *Normandy’s* command structure.” Tovan replied. “While Shepard is the nominal commander and is generally deferred to, the Executive Officer, a Cerberus loyalist named Kai Leng...”

“That little shit.” Miranda scowled, further elaborating, “That toerag is a sociopath. He’s a cold-blooded assassin. The Illusive Man uses him when he wants to be sure that the job gets done. If you see him—kill him.”

“Thanks, Miranda.” The subcommander replied and then motioned for her XO to continue his briefing. “Anything else, Big Brother?”

“Leng’s role seems to be that of monitor...ensuring that Shepard doesn’t break conditioning.” Tovan replied, as Miranda nodded in agreement.

“Had the Lazarus Project succeeded and we were able to bring back the original Shepard, that would have been my role.”

“There’s more information on the internal relationships within the *Normandy’s* crew, but nothing else of significance.” Tovan declared as he handed the padd to the subcommander.

“Now that we’ve finished that.” V’lana declared, moving to the next part of the meeting, “Aria? Are you ready to have your universe shaken and rocked as it never has been before.”

“Let’s see what you’ve got.” The asari responded with an amused chuckle, “I’ve seen just about everything there is to see. I doubt anything you’ve got can surprise me.”

“We’ll see about that.” V’lana replied as she activated the monitor screen and the images played out.

“Fuck.” Aria cursed, “You win. You just caused me to shit my pants. You were also correct in showing me this.” Aria declared in an unusually subdued voice as she saw images of the Battle of Wolf 359 and other Borg incursions, followed by the *Gallena’s* and other starships’ battles against the Elachi, Tal’Shiar and Imperial Romulan Navy, Hirogen, and Cardassians played out on the conference monitor. “If you had just told me that you were from another universe and that Cerberus was importing this Borg and Elachi tech from people in your universe without showing me, I’d have thought you were dangerously insane and needed to be put down.”

“And now?” Kaidan inquired with a raised eyebrow.

“Now...I believe you.” Aria replied, adding in a low, dangerous voice, “I am not going to let Cerberus...these Elachi and Borg...or anyone else no matter what universe they’re from...threaten Omega. What do you want from me?”

“Right now...” V’lana replied, “A secure base of operations for us and anyone allied with us, and your aid in diverting any pirate or mercenary groups under your control away from Citadel and Alliance shipping. We’re willing to offer a variety of trade inducements in return. Plus one of the Ferengi merchants we have on board as traders has a proposition he wanted me to relay to you, but we can discuss that later. So...”

“I’ll accept an informal agreement between Omega and the Alliance and Council.” Aria responded, “Provided their authorities look the other way on certain...nontaxable...cargoes that my ships might want to provide to consumers on their planets and stations.”

“Jodrum? Do you think the Council will go for this?” V’lana inquired of the Salarian SPECTRE seated at the table.

“It will with my recommendations—with conditions, of course.” The SPECTRE answered back.

“What sort of conditions?” Aria asked in a suspicious tone of voice.

“Nothing severe.” Jodrum assured, “No transport of slaves, red sand, or similar dangerous drugs. Non-addictive and relatively benign recreational drugs will be overlooked.”

“I can live with that.” Aria conceded with a nod of her head.

“Kaidan?” V’lana prompted, “Do you think you can swing Anderson and Hackett over?”

“I think I can talk them around.” The Alliance liaison responded, “Of course they’ll want to impose the same conditions that Jodrum mentioned.”

Aria again positively responded, “Acceptable.”

“Then we have a deal?” V’lana asked the asari crime boss.

“We have a deal.” Aria affirmed. “I’ll send out instructions to my people immediately. Of course, you understand that where the mercenary groups are concerned, I only have control over those that are actually on Omega. As of now I do not have pull with either the Blue Suns, the Blood Pack, or Eclipse. Although...” she added with a sly grin, “I am working to change that. Now...” She declared as she rose to her feet, “If you don’t mind, I need to fetch my guards before they get falling down drunk and return to Omega. There is much work to do.”

“I’ll see you back to your shuttle.” V’lana offered, standing up as well. “We can talk about my trader’s business offer on the way and maybe a few other mutually beneficial proposals.”

“Lead on.”

Garrus

Exiting the shuttle, Garrus at once recognized the subcommander waiting alone for him. Feeling a rare churning in his gizzard, the former vigilante came to a halt as he neared her. Taking a deep breath, he uttered the traditional formula, “Permission to come on board, Subcommander?”

“Permission granted.” V’lana flatly responded as she motioned to the turbolift. “I read your report...” she remarked in a kindly voice as the pair walked together. “I’m sorry about Zaeed, but you did save a lot of lives. I hope that gives you some consolation.”

“I...” Garrus stammered as his mind flashed back to his partner burning in the fire, trapped by all that debris that had landed on him. “I should have expected that would be the final outcome. When I saw the look on Zaeed’s face whenever he talked about killing Vido...I thought about how I must have looked and sounded to everyone around me.” Taking a deep breath, he admitted, “It forced me to think...to reevaluate some things. I think I’m ready...really ready this time...to talk to Kelly—that is—if you still want me on the ship?”

“I told you before you left that I did.” V’lana told the prodigal turian grabbing him by the arm in a welcoming gesture. “And I’m glad to hear that you’re serious about getting counseling. I promise, the moment Kelly says that you’re ready, you’re back on the active roster. I need you Garrus Vakarian, you’re a good shot and a good man.” Her smile now replaced by a stone faced mask, she chided the returnee, “But don’t you ever...ever...pull a stunt like that again. Because if you do, I’ll boot your sorry ass from one corner of the galaxy to the other. You read me?”

“Loud and clear, Ma’am.” Garrus responded crisply.

“Good.” The smile returned to the subcommander’s lips as the pair exited the turbolift on to the crew quarters. “Now, I think you had better hurry up and stow your gear. I got word that there’s a surprise welcome home party being held for you in the Raptor’s Nest and you don’t want to disappoint your friends.”

“You mean I still have friends?” Garrus smirked, only half-joking.

“You should have heard the shouting and cheering when word got out that you were returning. I think Vega bought up most of Aria’s stock of turian ale when he found out.” V’lana laughed. Breaking protocol, she gave her returning crewman a friendly hug. Releasing him from their embrace, she smiled, “Welcome back.”

Giving the subcommander a smile in return, Garrus walked away speaking to himself as he strode down the corridor, receiving greetings from the passing crewmen and officers, both Romulan and Starfleet as he went by them. “It’s good to be back home.”

Epilogue: Cerberus Base—Undisclosed Location

“While unfortunate, the loss of the shuttle and its passengers and crew is inconsequential, Agent Brooks.” The Illusive Man declared as he read the report his aide had handed him. “They didn’t know anything of importance. For now, we’ll just write them off as casualties and proceed as normal. On to the next matter. Subject Zero and Subject Grunt should arrive on the *Normandy* shortly. I’ll have Shepard’s next mission for her on their arrival. I’m interested in seeing how our two newest enhanced soldiers perform in action.”

“Anything else, Sir?” Brooks replied as her boss lit a fresh cigarette.

“No.” He said as he took a drag and exhaled, “That’ll be all for now.”

As his assistant walked away, the Illusive Man sat silently in his chair, smoking his cigarette as he gazed at the red star blazing dully in front of him. A *setback*. He thought to himself as he contemplated the loss of the shuttle, “*But only a minor one. This is a long game. The occasional loss of a pawn is inevitable. The winner is the one who checkmates the king, not necessarily the one who takes the most pieces.*”

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