An Imperial Affliction

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Summary: The war with the Reapers is over. Yet from the ashes a new threat emerges from the edge of the galaxy. Shepard is saved from the ruins of the Citadel but she now must fight a new and unknown enemy. Whilst a Sangheili warrior must face the truth of all he believes, and soon determine the fate of his species and the galaxy. [femshep/paragon/AU Halo/TalixSangheili/FemshepxGarrus]

1. Chapter 1

**Authors' Notes: So hello everyone! And welcome to the Mass Effect/Halo Crossover: An Imperial Affliction! This came about when myself and my good friend and partner in crime The Shadow Gryphon got talking about our favourite games, we saw potential for a crossover, and here we are. Seeing as I know next to nothing about Halo, Shadow Gryphon will be writing all things Halo in this story, and I shall be writing all things Mass Effect. ;) **

**A few things you may need to know going in: Firstly, this mainly takes place in the Mass Effect universe, set straight after the Reaper War, and as such in 2186. Because of that it will be an AU Halo universe set four hundred years before the start of the first Halo game though everything to do with the Covenant will still be present in this story. So there will be no Master Chief but mainly OC's for the Halo side of things. We are sticking to the Lore as closely as we can in this however, so we hope that pleases you. **

**I hope everyone enjoys this and please do not forget to review!**

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An Imperial Affliction: Chapter 1
"That's complete crap â€“ and you know it!"

"That may be so, but it doesn't change the facts â€“"

"What, the fact that you would all rather sit on your assess whilst â€“"

"My hands are tied, Vakarian."

Garrus couldn't shake off the rage that was building inside of him, the energy was too much, and he began to pace back and forth across the small office that Admiral Hackett had claimed as his. Light poured in from the window behind the admiral's cheap desk, showing the destruction of the Reapers in full now that the light of day streamed down onto the surface of London. In the distance, the fallen shell of a Reaper lay, its massive bulk crushing several buildings, yet its side was still tall enough to see looming over everything around it. Garrus still couldn't believe it: they'd done it, they'd defeated the Reapers, they'd won. But at what cost?

"So, after everything she did," he growled out, mandibles clicking, his teeth bared, and his talons subconsciously flexing in a clear show of his building aggression as he continued to pace, though he fixed his blazing blue eyes on Admiral Hackett as he went.

"Everything she fought for, every sacrifice she made â€“ it was all for nothing?! She gave you everything she had and you would leave her in the dust?!

"You're preaching to the choir, Vakarian," Admiral Hackett said firmly, he stood resolute and unyielding to the hostile turian in his office, but his eyes still held sympathy as he looked at him. "If it were up to me, I'd have every man, woman and child in this system looking for her. But I can't. It's only been a day since the Crucible fired â€“ hell Vakarian, you and the rest of the crew of the Normandy just barely managed to limp back here as it is!"

Garrus's mandibles pressed themselves hard on either side of his face, as he ground his teeth in frustration, knowing the human to be right on at least that account. During the final battle against the Reapers, Shepard had had him extracted from the battle after he'd been badly injured â€“ he still had bandages across most of his chest underneath his armour. He'd stubbornly fought against her to stay, but she'd been having none of it, and even after her whispered words to him as a form of farewellâ€“! Garrus had to pause for a moment to choke back the emotion that crept up his throat and threatened to strangle him. He'd fought all the way to the Medbay, against the many hands that had restrained him in an attempt to get him to lie still so that Dr Chakwas could treat him. He'd had to be sedated in order for them to properly restrain him. He'd then remembered waking up only a few hours later, his instincts screaming at him that something wasn't right, and it had taken him a moment to realise that he couldn't hear the dull thrum of the Normandy's engines. He was so used to the sound that he normally blocked it out until he couldn't hear it anymore, but by straining his ears he could tell that the Normandy was offline. Stumbling out of the Medbay, he'd asked EDI for a status report, only to have the no familiar warm feminine voice absent, and the silence had been deafening. Garrus had stumbled out of the Normandy to discover that the Normandy had crashed in jungle
environment, which Garrus later learned was in the artificial environment of the Colony on Venus. By talking with the rest of the crew, Garrus had learned that the Crucible had fired, and killed the Reapers, just like they'd all hoped for, but something must have gone wrong, or they must have missed an important detail; because all synthetic, the Geth, and even EDI had all been killed in the blast. They had all then worked as hard as possible to get the Normandy back online and fit to fly to at least get them back to Earth, Garrus putting in double time despite his wounds, driven by a urgent need in his gut to get back there and find Shepard. They'd gotten scattered reports of the chaos that followed, though none of them contained any news of the woman he loved. It hadn't taken them long to get the Normandy running, and as Hackett had said, they'd limped their way back to Earth, to London, and the Normandy now sat in hasty repairs. Garrus had managed to make that a priority as he pulled some strings with his authority as the "Expert Reaper Advisor". Garrus had then learned of the explosion on the Citadel; whilst Shepard had still been on it, and that no one was making a move to rescue her.

To say that Garrus was furious was an understatement."

"It's chaos here," Hackett was continuing to say. "My remaining superiors want us to get everything back under control, we can't spare the resources."

"And now that the Reapers are destroyed, she doesn't matter anymore," Garrus spat out venomously. "Just like with Sovereign, just like with the Collectors,"

"It's not like that," an odd note of empathy was in Hackett's voice as he looked up at the turian, who stopped his pacing to stand in front of the desk, talons clenching into fists at his sides. "I know what she meant to you; Garrus," the informality made the admiral hesitate a little, though his sincerity was true enough. "But no one could have survived that explosion. Not even Shepard."

"She is NOT dead!" Garrus slammed his hands onto the desk, making it rattle as he bared his sharp teeth, glaring at the admiral for even daring to suggest such a thing. He couldn't believe it; he just couldn't! Not Shepard! Not Jane! "She died once and came back to us; she's not dead this time."

"But it took two years for her to come back," the Admiral pointed out.

"I'll only believe she's dead when I see a corpse. Until then, I'm not giving up!"

"Then I don't know what to tell you, but there's nothing I can do." Hackett sighed as he sat down at his desk, picking up a datapad as he ignored the turian that was still glowering over him. "Primarch Victus is asking for you, I suggest you report to your station,"

"This is not over." Garrus growled out as he turned on his heal and marched out of the ramshackle office.

People quickly got out of his way as they saw the obviously furious turian marching through the halls. The base was a large docking
hanger that was now being used as a dock for ships to report in and fitted for repairs, but also as a shelter for the surviving civilians of the city. Once he went into the throng of people in the main bay, personal space was a thing of the past as people of all races crowded in around him. Garrus was quickly losing his patience as he weaved his way through the mob of people. There was too much noise, of people shouting, crying, wailing, it all mixed together in a cacophony of sound that hurt his ears. A mob of people surrounded the port, all survivors of every race crowding round in an attempt to find some hope in the soldiers that had fought for them. They all wanted their lives back, for their heroes to help them rebuild, it was chaos as no one knew what to do from here, though all Garrus knew was that their greatest hero was lying in the rubble in space somewhere, and no one seemed bothered in the least to even look for her. It infuriated him to no end.

Janeâ€¦ he thought, her name alone causing a strike to his heart that screamed inside of him in grief, the words of the Admiral affecting him more than he had realised. He had to bite his tongue in order to not give in to the rage and grief that was building inside of him, to not drop to his knees and roar all of the emotions that were building inside of him with volcanic pressure. He shook his head to clear himself, he couldn't think like that, he couldn't believe any of it. Jane needed him to stay strong, she needed him to come and find her, and he wouldn't rest until he had her in his arms again.

He approached the bay where the Normandy was placed in, sparks flying from panels as people worked tirelessly over it. Garrus was about to work his way up the ramp to the airlock, when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He paused, bewildered, when a skinny human in Alliance uniform stepped in front of him.

"I'm sorry sir, you can't go through," he said in a monotone voice.

"What? What are you talking about?" Garrus demanded, mandibles clicking in confusion.

"The Normandy's grounded, sir," the Alliance officer said.

"Grounded?!" Garrus demanded, all of his earlier rage coming back to him tenfold as he loomed over the officer threateningly. "For what?! Are there more repairs needed? Is she more damaged then we thought?!"

"No sir, the repairs should be done soon," the human tried not to stammer, though Garrus could smell the human's growing fear as he backed up a step from the enraged turian. "There wasn't that much damage sustained but â€”"

"Then can you tell me why I can't get back onto that ship." Garrus demanded.

"Alliance heads have grounded it until further notice,"

"WHAT?!" he roared. "They can't do that! This is Commander Shepard's vessel, and she was a council spectre, thereby putting it into council jurisdiction â€”"
"But the Alliance has reclaimed it, sir. With Shepard being dead and..." the human didn't get another word out as Garrus' talons wrapped around his throat and hoisted him into the air. The human gasped and choked, eyes widening in terror as Garrus brought him within inches of his face, mandibles flared to reveal his large fang-like teeth, eyes blazing dangerously.

"The next person I hear say that she's dead, I'm going to put a bullet in their skull. Is that understood?" he growled out in a deadly quiet voice. The human's eyes were rolling in his head as he choked and barely managed to nod. Garrus grunted, but let the human go, allowing him to drop to the floor, where he coughed and gasped for air. Garrus sneered as he snapped: "Now get out of here." The human scrambled to his feet and fled as fast as he could.

"Vakarian," came the deep yet smooth voice that made Garrus instinctively stand a little straighter, as he turned to see Primarch Victus standing not ten feet away, an unreadable expression on his face. "I've been looking for you,"

"Primarch Victus," Garrus nodded with respect, his only consolation for protocol. Although he respected Victus more than any politician, his current emotional state was not very agreeable. "I'm sorry sir, I haven't been in the right mood to deal with everything yet,"

"I know. I heard about your argument with Admiral Hackett." Victus nodded, before cocking his head to study Garrus with those dark eyes, the wait paint on his face contrasting starkly. "I knew you weren't one to follow the chain of command, but this is ballsy, even for you,"

"I've got a lot on my mind." Garrus dismissed in clipped tone, looking over the Primarch's shoulder.

"So I've heard, that's why I'm clearing the Normandy," Victus said, and it took Garrus a moment to understand the words, as he blinked at the Primarch in confusion.

"Sir?" he asked.

"Her repairs are almost done, and she's taking up too much space for the other ships that need attention. I'm clearing her out of the dock and back into operation," Garrus could have sworn he saw a brief flicker of a smirk at the edge of Victus' mandibles.

"But the Alliance grounded her," Garrus blanched, still confused as to what this could mean. Surely Victus wasn't...!

"The Normandy is half turian made, remember? I have some jurisdiction on it, though not much. And like you said, this is a Council vessel with it being Commander Shepard's ship. And from what I know of human military protocol, they can't declare her dead after her missing in action for just a day,"

"Do you mean...?" Garrus could only breathe out, his shock not daring to hope until it was confirmed.

"I do." Victus nodded. "The galaxy owes her everything after all this, but even if we didn't, we need answers of what happened that
only she can give. So you're now under orders to find her, Officer Vakarian, no matter the cost."

"Understood sir," Garrus nodded, a burning determination in his eyes, a light that had been previously missing since returning to earth.

"Carry on then," Victus dismissed before turning away.

Garrus quickly boarded into the airlock, almost impatient as he radioed all other crew members with his news and ordering them to return to the Normandy if they were fit for duty. Of course, all of them jumped at the opportunity, quickly confirming that they would make it back in double time. Even Javik was anxious to get going as soon as possible. Garrus boarded the Normandy, informing Joker and all the other staff of what they were about to do: to take the Normandy and go to the Citadel wreckage in search of Shepard. Garrus was pleased to even hear a cheer from the crew. He waited in the CIC for all the other squad members to return, which didn't take long, telling to report to their stations whilst they waited for the repairs to be done and they could leave before the Alliance was able to stop them. Garrus was just talking with Cortez on the status of the shuttles, when all of a sudden, Garrus heard loud, stomping footsteps as the doors to the airlock opened. Garrus turned in time to see a hulking mass of Krogan stomping towards him, a determined scowl on his scaly face. Garrus instantly recognised him, from the red armour, eyes and crest, to the claw scars down the right side of his face.

"Wrex?" Garrus blinked in surprise, raising a brow plate in confusion as the Krogan approached him.

"Heard you're going to the Citadel or what's left of it." Wrex grumbled out in the deep, reverberating voice of his.

"How did you know that?" Garrus asked automatically.

"Word travels fast. You're going to find Shepard?" the Krogan leader asked bluntly, something entering his eyes as he studied Garrus' face.

"You bet your ass I am." Garrus replied fiercely, mandibles flaring wide.

"Good. I want in." Wrex smirked.

"What?"

"The Krogan people owe our very future to Shepard, we have a debt that can never be repaid so long as another healthy child is born to us. That's something she gave us, when no one else would." Wrex said, obvious passion in his voice. Garrus remembered, he'd been there when the mission to cure the genophage had been over, and Wrex had come running towards them, a beaming grin on his face as he swept Shepard into his arms in a fierce 'bear-hug' as humans called it. Wrex had even gone so far to call Shepard sister, showing exactly what her actions meant to him. "The whole Krogan people now want to bring her back alive. And besides, Shepard is a friend. And I don't forget my friends."
"Welcome aboard Wrex," Garrus smiled, holding out a hand to his old friend.

"Ha!" Wrex barked a laugh as he shook the offered hand with a grin. "Like you would have stopped me," he patted Garrus on the back as he passed him straight towards the elevator, chuckling to himself. Garrus watched him go, a small if slightly forced smile on his face. It was good to have Wrex back on the team, they might just need him.

"As soon as we're ready to go, Joker, get us to the remains of the Citadel," Garrus ordered up towards the cockpit as he turned and headed towards the elevator as well.

"Aye-aye." Came Joker's steady reply as the doors closed behind Garrus.

* * *

The five ships flew through the air at high speed, as they left the orbit of the small moon they just entered, coming closer to the surface with each second they flew. Unlike most ships, these seemed to have something organic, thanks to the streamlined design and the purple coloring of the ship. Because of this coloring, the ships were relatively easy to spot from both on the ground, as well as in the air. However, what it lacked in stealth, the Phantom dropships made more than up with their speed and heavy weaponry, consisting of several plasma cannons and turrets.

In one of the ships, a large alien creature sat in a chair, looking down at a datapad, reading the words on it carefully and every now and then touched the blue screen with its clawed fingers, adding new words to the text. The Sangheili sighed as he leaned back into his chair, letting out a sigh in boredom as he looked at the datapad. He hated writing reports. Hell, he hated administration in general! But it had to be done. It was one of the less exciting, yet necessary tasks that came along with the rank of Supreme Commander.

Which was exactly what he was. A Supreme Commander, leader of one of the most powerful fleets that the navy of the Covenant Empire possessed, known as _Justified Vengeance._ Ah yes. He remembered it like it was the day of yesterday he had been promoted from Field Marshal to Supreme Commander Shen 'Kongmengee...

The doors behind him opened and he turned around to face the newcomer. It was another Sangheili, dressed in the traditional armor of a Field Marshal, the second-in-commander of a Supreme Commander. "Good morning, Supreme Commander" He said formally, greeting his superior with a polite nod. Shen looked at him and nodded back. "Same for you, Field Marshal", before he curled his lips and growled loudly, which was the Sangheili version of a laugh.

"Do not be so formal, Don!" Chuckled Shen, as he gestured the Field Marshal to sit down. The Field Marshal, Don, returned the 'laugh' and sat down on the chair. "You know you we do not have to call each other by rank when we are in private" added Shen. Don nodded. "Of course, _Supreme Commander_" He said, smirking at his superior. Shen rolled his eyes and then turned serious again. The time for joking was over, and he was eager to hear what his Field Marshal had to say.
"Now let us talk strategy, Don. What have you found out about these Heretics?" asked Shen. Don leaned back in his chair, as he pulled out a datapad of his own with a variety of notes on it. His eyes scanned the datapad quickly, and then looked up at the Supreme Commander. "According to a Kig-Yar smuggler we encountered at the Covenant Fringe, the moon known as Ortus is indeed the base of the Heretic fraction we are after."

Shen frowned. "Are you sure that smuggler spoke the truth? The Kig-Yar are not well known for telling the truth..." He stated. Don nodded in agreement. "Yes, that much is true. But multiple Kig-Yar and T'vaoan we encountered told us the same story. And even if they did not, we captured an Unggoy who was part of a group of these Heretics who went out to pick up a new load of weapons, which was a trap we set up for them. Although the majority had been killed and their leader disappeared, we managed to capture this Unggoy and he told us of this location" Answered the Field Marshal.

"And you are certain this Unggoy speaks the truth?" Asked Shen. Don nodded. "Yes, I threatened to feed him to some Kig-Yar if he had lied. And we all know that the Unggoy are anything but brave" he chuckled. Shen nodded. "Ah, I see. Any information on their leader?" He questioned.

Don's confirming came in the form of another nod, as he clicked on his datapad and a hologram appeared. The hologram had the shape of a, as far as Shen could tell, female T'vaoan. She was covered in gray feathers, with a red feather crest and wore golden armor, the armor of a T'vaoan Champion. In the hologram, the T'vaoan wielded an Energy Dagger with one hand, with a Plasma Pistol in the other and a Focus Rifle attached to her belt.

"If our information is correct, and I am highly convinced it is, then our target is a former T'vaoan Shipmistress known as Ra Vel, originally born on the Kig-Yar colony of T'vao, Ra Vel later moved to Dal'koth where she created a mercenary team of Kig-Yar and T'vaoan, one of the many that that were hired by our Covenant" explained the Field Marshal.

Shen looked at the hologram, and then blinked in surprise. "I have seen her before! Was she not that Shipmistress that was well known for finding holy relics?" He asked. Don nodded, again. "Yes, but apparently, she kept the majority of the relics for herself and sold them on the Covenant Black Market in the Covenant Fringe and on the Kig-Yar colonies, as well as on _High Charity_."

Shen snorted in disgust. Messing with the relics and structures the Forerunners left behind was an unforgivable crime, heresy even. And it was one of the first laws of the Write of Union that those who practiced it were not worthy or pity, nor mercy. A quick death was all the mercy this T'vaoan Shipmistress and her followers would get. "It was foolish of her to start her heretic trading on _High Charity_" he stated.

"It was" Agreed Don. "It didn't take long before one of our Rangers found out and told the Hierarchs, which is the reason why we are here."

"Then it is settled." Said Shen after a short moment of silence. "We
shall infiltrate the Heretic base, terminate Ra Vel and kill all of her allies, as well as retrieving any holy relics she has in her possession." stated Shen.

Don was about to reply, when a voice was heard throughout the room, as another hologram appeared, in the shape of a Sangheili Major. "Supreme Commander 'Kongmengee, Field Marshal 'Vanomee. We are entering into enemy territory now. What are your orders?" asked the Sangheili on the intercom. Shen turned towards a device and pressed a button, before talking. "Warriors, prepare for combat! Majors, organize your lances and wait for my signal to leave your Phantom. Over and out" he said, before breaking the conversation.

"It seems we are nearing combat, my friend" Said Don, as Shen turned towards him. Said commander nodded in agreement. "We are, Don. Prepare the warriors on this ship for combat. Tell the Majors to organize the lances and keep the Unggoy under control." 

"As you wish, Supreme Commander" Said Don with a polite bow, before he smirked. "So, Supreme Commander, how many of these Heretics do you think will lose their lives by our swords? I have a feeling I will kill more then you..."

Shen raised an eyebrow and returned the smirk. "Do not make promises you know you cannot keep, Don. There is a reason I am Supreme Commander, and you are Field Marshal...Now, move out and prepare the lances! We will land any minute now!" The Field Marshal nodded and turned around to fulfill his superior's and friend's orders, the daring smirks still on his mandibles. Shen chuckled and turned around as he walked towards the table in the middle of the room, were an Energy Sword and a Plasma Rifle were located. He took hold of the Sword, while putting the Rifle on his belt, next to the Plasma Pistol he always had in case of an emergency. Shen bared his fangs in a smirk, as the Phantom neared the structure and he started to made his way to the main room within the ship.

* * *

>Garrus couldn't just sit around to wait, his mind was too full of thoughts that swam around inside his head, some more unpleasant than others. His usual reaction would be to go to the Main Battery and fix up some calibrations. But he couldn't, not now. He was in no state of mind for that. He neededâ€¦ he neededâ€¦ her.<p>

So he took the elevator up to Shepard's cabin, locking the door behind him so that he wouldn't be disturbed. He looked around the empty room, the blue light of the empty fish tank washing everything in a rather monotone mood, only adding to the well of emotion inside of him. He knew he couldn't lose control in front of the crew. They looked to him to be strong, to keep it together, to help lead them to finding Shepard. Ever since he'd refused to put her name on the memorial wall, he made it perfectly clear that he believed she was alive, and that he was going to find her, and they had all listened to him, and they'd all followed him with question. They all looked to him for hope, and only now did he understand what Shepard had had to deal with when she had been Commander. In front of them, he couldn't let his emotions rule him, but when he was aloneâ€¦ it was too much to take. Everything reminded him of her; this ship was like a home to them all, but it had always been Shepard's. Their fight against Saren, the Collectors, the Reapers, crew members had come and gone,
but Shepard had been the one constant thing throughout it all to Garrus. He passed her desk as he walked deeper into her cabin, her pet hamster squeaking at him as he passed. Garrus briefly had to lean against the fish tank, his arm propping him up against it, fist clenched, jaw trembling as he bit back all of the emotion inside of him. His breathing became ragged, and he realised how much his shoulders were shaking, he wouldn't allow himself to weep, he refused to mourn her a second time when there was no definitive proof to tell him that she was gone forever. He would never give up hope. He couldn't let her down like thatâ€¦

He stripped himself of his armour, until he was in nothing but his skin-tight under suit. He laid down upon the bed, not knowing whether it was just his imagination that allowed him to feel the fading warmth still on the mattress, as if she'd only just gotten out of bed and was in the bathroom. He curled up there, bringing the pillow against his face as he took a long inhale, desperate for the faint scent of her that still lingered there. He could smell the scent of her skin, earthy yet with a pleasant tang. If he closed his eyes, he could almost picture her body was in place of the pillow, pressed against his, and he pulled her close, burying his face in the curve of her neck, inhaling deeply to make sure that she was safe and that she was realâ€¦ when of course she wasn't. Nuzzling his face into the pillow in his arms, he thought he caught the floral scent of her hair, from the shampoos she put into it to keep it clean. He felt his chest vibrate as a high keening sound escaped him, something primal in his body calling out for the mate that was not there, the despair growing inside of him at the thought that he would never hold her in his arms again, never see her green-blue eyes. He didn't want to believe she was dead, but her absence was all too apparent around him. But until he had her again, he would be content to lie there for all of eternity if he had to, surrounded by her last moments in this room, from her scent to the way her datapads were piled chaotically on her desk. He would lie there, eyes closed, and pretend that she was with him again. And he imagined their night together before they hit the Collector Base, or when they were about to storm the Illusive Man's headquarters. Their bodies entwined, giving in to instincts and emotions that had been held at bay until that point. The physical intimacy had been good, better than that â€” Garrus had thought at the time that Turian women had been spoiled for him. But what he remembered of those nights so vividly, what he cherished in his memories now, was when they simply lay in the dark, holding each other in their arms, sharing in something so much deeper then what they had ever imagined, something secret and precious as they would share a kiss in the dark, a simply embrace, before sleeping soundly together.

He didn't know how long he'd stayed there before he heard the voice of Joker over the speakers saying that they were approaching the Citadel. Garrus reluctantly relinquished his hold on the fantasy he had created within that hallowed space, and left it for reality. As he moved off of the bed, her scent was already fading from his nostrils, and he sighed, willing his heart not to break down and force him to mourn her. He couldn't, not when he was now so close to finding her. He painstakingly slowly put his armour back on, making sure all of his weapons had the right mods and were at optimum capacity. He made sure to strap two pistols as well as his assault rifle and sniper-rifle, as well as enough amo to keep a small army happy; he also made sure he was carrying twice the amount of medi-gel he needed. Just in case.
He took the elevator down to the bridge, standing beside Joker as he looked through the front windows at the wreckage fast approaching. Garrus noted how odd it felt to not have another presence in the cockpit, the co-pilot's chair empty across from them. Garrus noticed how Joker seemed to be actively avoiding looking at it, and the turian sighed quietly to himself in guilt and sympathy. He'd been so focused on his own struggles, he was in such a state but his love could still be alive. Joker however, was already grieving. Everyone had grown attached to EDI, it was hard not to, but Joker had something special with the AI, something that transcended the laws of organics and synthetics; and he'd lost her. Joker was putting on a good show of keeping it together, but everyone could tell that he was falling apart inside. No one knew why EDI and other AI's across the galaxy had shut down, and it was just one more question that Shepard could answer when they found her.

They then entered the wreckage. The once proud and magnificent looking Citadel was now scattered in pieces within a 30 mile radius. It all floated around them, deathly quiet, devoid of light and life. Garrus tried not to look at any of the wreckage too closely, he didn't want to recognise his favourite store, or the C-Sec academy, or even someone's apartment building, now lying in ruins. The Citadel had been a place for every race, a place of peace where all were equal, it was a symbol of how far every race had come, and now it lay broken and destroyed. It was a testament of how much the Reapers had taken from them, right down to the last moment. The debris ranged from large to small, but so many pieces lay scattered about, they were uncountable.

"Good god!" Joker breathed. "How are we supposed to find Shepard in this place?"

"That part." Traynor's smooth voice answered as she came to stand by Garrus, holding a datapad in one hand and pointing to a large piece of wreck in the distance of the destruction field. "It's the largest intact piece; and the scans show that it still has some semblance of life support still operational. We need to start somewhere, so it might as well be there."

"Understood." Garrus nodded, before tapping onto his omni-tool to contact his chosen team members. "Vega, Liara, Wrex, you're with me. Gear up and meet me on the shuttle."

"Of course," Liara's melodic voice came over the comm.

"You got it scars." Vega affirmed.

"Already beat you there, Turian," Wrex drawled.

"You're not taking me with you?" Kaiden asked, and Garrus turned to regard the human who now stood behind him, he had a somewhat hurt look on his face.

"Kaiden, someone needs to man the ship, and you're the official XO," Garrus tried to ignore the fact that even though that was true no one had been listening to Kaiden's orders in favour of Garrus's since being back on the Normandy without Shepard.

"But I can help," he tried to plead.
"We've got the brutal muscle in Wrex, the biotic talents of Liara and Vega is good cover fire should we encounter resistance."

"You're expecting trouble?" Kaiden asked, hard eyes on edge.

"Not particularly, but pirates and looters may already be sweeping through for whatever valuables they can find. I don't want to be caught with no weapons if they want to fight us off for the spoils." Garrus explained. But he noticed the dejected look on the human's face, and sighed, doing his best to comfort him as he placed a hand on his shoulder. "If it's any consolation, Tali's not coming either."

"Which I'm resenting you for," chimed Tali's voice over the comm.

"If you both want to help, then make sure Chakwas is ready for when we get back, or scan other debris for any signs of life. If we find nothing here then I want to go to the next likely spot as quickly as possible."

"Got it," Tali said and quickly signed off.

"Understoodâ€¦!" Kaidan agreed reluctantly. Garrus nodded, and then headed for the elevator as he picked the level of the shuttle bay.

The ride in the shuttle was quiet, everyone looking at the screen to see what Cortez was looking at in the pilot's seat of the shuttle. Garrus refused to look, he didn't want to chance seeing something he didn't want to. It was only ten minutes before the shuttle began to lower itself and stop, and everyone attached breathers or helmets to be provided with breathable air. Despite Traynor saying that life-support was still in effect here, Garrus didn't want to chance anything, and so ordered everyone to suit up completely, also having gravity mods on their boots so that if they treaded on a section with lower gravity shields, they wouldn't start floating away. The door to the shuttle opened, and Garrus jumped out first, sniper rifle in hand as he looked around, his greater eyesight and the help of his visor making his vision superior to the others in the group. When he was certain it was clear, he signalled for them all to come out.

"Eyes up, look sharp, be ready for anything," was all Garrus said as he held his rifle out in front of him, and began to lead them through the wreckage. It was deathly silent, their footsteps being the only noise, or he occasional scrap of metal on metal as the piece of debris they were standing on, roughly a mile and a half long, floated through space. The group of four quietly picked their way through the ruin, climbing or ducking under obstacles, sometimes having to move larger chunks out of the way. They didn't speak too much, and their eyes were focused entirely on their surroundings, slightly on edge for the first thing that would come jumping out at them. They searched for over two hours, combing through every part they could reach, going through rooms and corridors. Garrus's visor was primed to pick up any heat signatures, the filters into his helmet of both air and sound to maximum capacity so he could still scent the air or hear stray sounds even with his helmet on. But still their search came up with nothing. But not one of them suggested going back; not until they'd picked it clean.
"It's all trashed to hell," James cursed. "How are we supposed to find Shepard in this?"

"I don't recognise this part of the Citadel!" Liara's voice came out hesitantly as they turned a 'corner'.

"Considering how much we used to comb over every inch in the old days, that's rather surprising," Wrex grumbled.

"Good thing there's no elevator's here to slow our progress even more," Liara tried to make things just a little lighter for them, but no one laughed, they didn't even smile.

But Garrus wasn't listening, his whole body had frozen in place as his helmet had filtered in air to allow him to catch a small snippet of a scent, one that sent his heart racing and his stomach churning. Quickly checking his visor, he could see that the air was just about breathable, and quickly tore at his helmet in a desperate attempt to get it off.

"Garrus?" came Liara's concerned voice, but he didn't pay attention. Garrus threw his helmet on to the ground as he finally tore it off, and took in a large breath as he inhaled the air. At first, he couldn't smell it, and he panicked that his mind had simply imagined it, that it had never been real. But then, faintly, he caught it again. The scent of earth and a slight tang, and something floral. It was ever so faint, but it was there.

He sprinted through the wreckage ignoring the cries of his companions as he left them to run after him. He raced through the debris, following his nose, listening for any sound. Leaping over fallen walls, pushing past blockades, Garrus left his own trail of destruction in his wake as he blindly followed his instincts, ones that screamed that she was close, that she was just under his nose! He turned a final corner and came into what had probably been a very large room, but he didn't recognise this part of the Citadel. He noticed shattered glass as well as rubble and pieces of fallen metal, the floor and walls and pieces of debris blackened with the marks of scorchers from an explosion.

The scent was strongest here, almost overpowering, along with the very uncomfortable scent of blood and death. She was here, he could feel her nearby. He began picking up bits of random debris as he attempted to dig through it all, hearing the clomping of Wrex and the others following close behind before entering the room after him. He ignored them, and simply continued in his search. Without a word, the others immediately set about helping him, Wrex and James using their brawn whilst Liara used her biotics to help move pieces carefully.

"It'll take hours to get through this!" James cursed.

"We should contact the Normandy for backup!" Liara was about to say, when Garrus thought he caught something.

"Wait!" he snapped, standing straight, body primed as if ready for battle, eyes wide and breathing quiet as he strained his ears to pick up even the slightest sound. "Quiet!" he murmured, and they all obeyed. They waited! and waited! and! Garrus almost flinched as
he thought he heard the ever so smallest intake of breath, like that of an infant not daring to take more than it needed. "Did you hear that?" Garrus asked aloud, as if he dared not believe his own senses, sure he had been imagining.

"By the goddess!" Liara's gasp confirmed that he had not been imagining it.

"Quickly! Help me!" he shouted as he picked the piece of rubble that seemed to be blocking their way from where the sound was coming from. A large heavy piece of metal barred their way, and even as Garrus put all of his strength behind it, his arms shivered under the force needed to move such a great weight.

"Out of the way! Krogan coming through!" Wrex shouted as he came to stand beside Garrus, clamping hold of the edge of the thick metal beam, setting his shoulder against it as he tried to move it aside. The Krogan and the turian attempted to move the blockade, but they only managed to move it ever so slightly. Somewhere above them, dust momentarily rained down onto their armour.

"Hold on!" Liara shouted at them, a sense of panic in her voice. "You move that too fast then you'll set off a slide! Let me help with that!" she said as she created a barrier around the debris above them that was supported by the beam, so that it wouldn't fall and crush them or worse Shepard when they moved it. Garrus and Wrex went back to pushing the metal beam, and as it groaned under their combined strength, Garrus could have sworn he heard a ragged breath somewhere behind the blockade.

"Shepard!" Garrus shouted, his anxiety clear in his voice, desperation in his eyes as his instincts suddenly demanded that he try to reach her. "Come on! Push!" he roared to the others.

"I'm coming!" James shouted as he ran up beside them, and hefted his weight into the beam as well. All three of them battled together, pushing against the force of the weight, but slowly, ever so slowly, they felt it move just an inch. Emboldened, they redoubled their efforts.

"ARGH!" they roared as they gave one last final push, all of their strength going into it. There was an ear-splitting sound of metal scraping against metal, before the beam finally gave way and they hauled it off to the side, where it landed with a loud crash. Garrus instantly took off, ignoring his now aching muscles from the exertion, as he ducked his way through the wreckage as he looked for a familiar figure. His avian eyes scanned the ruin around him, until they finally caught sight of a familiar symbol on black armour that poked out of the rubble: the N7 symbol.

"Shepard!" Garrus shouted, sliding onto his knees as he came to a stop beside her, pushing away the rubble that covered her as he slowly dug her out. Piece by agonising piece, he revealed more of her burned, cracked and ruined armour, her pale flesh that was marred with blood and soot and dust, faint burns on her now exposed forearms and across her neck. Her face was covered in bruises, her blonde hair dirty free of its usual pony tail as it was spread around her head like a halo. "Shepard! Jane! Jane!" Garrus called to her as he carefully snaked his hands at the back of her head and shoulders and gently lifted her up and out of the rubble, cradling her against his
chest as if she were made of glass. His hands were shaking as he brushed hair and dirt from her face, and his fingers dart to her throat to check for a pulse. But he found none. "No, no, no, no, no! Come on, you're not dead, you're not! You promised me!" he shouted, a chasm splitting through his heart, wrenching him in two until he thought he would die from the physical pain of it as he looked upon her pale face and limp body. "Jane pleaseâ€¦ pleaseâ€¦" he begged her quietly, his voice laced with despair as he placed his forehead to hers, something that had only been for them since that first night. His shoulders were shaking, tears stinging his eyes as he held his lover's body close to him, unwilling to let her go. He then heard something, causing him to pause as he looked at her, not daring to believeâ€¦ but then he heard it again, the unmistakable sound of a ragged and forced breath. "Oh spirits!" he gushed as he quickly held her up, the others coming forward as they realised that there was still hope. Liara quickly placed a breather-mask over Jane's nose and mouth so that she could take in more air, Garrus' visor quickly sweeping over the human's body until it found wounds. Garrus focused on the most immediate, what appeared to be a gunshot wound in her side, and started to apply the med-gel as quickly as he could. "I'm here, Jane, I'm hereâ€¦" he whispered to her constantly, a mantra, for himself as much as for her. "Don't you dare give up on me yet!"

* * *

The Heretic hide-out was a small Forerunner structure. Or rather, it was small for one, as it was still very big compared to most buildings the Covenant had, excluding the towers that were present at *High Charity.* Like most Forerunner structures, it was curved in shape with several platforms and large, glass windows. However, thanks to the sandstorms that raged on Ortus, the facility was painted in a faint brown color, giving it a dirty appearance. Scattered across the ground were large crates, filled with no doubt with holy relics.

This went not unnoticed to Don, he stood next to Shen as the doors of the Phantom they were on opened. "It seems this structure is more..._unclean_, then we are used too..." he said, observing the Forerunner building. Shen nodded, not taking his eye of the structure. "Yes, that much is true...It fits the nature of its current residents, would you not agree?" He asked. Don nodded in agreement and Shen nodded back.

The Commander then turned around and faced the lance that was on the Phantom with him. Like most lances, the lance existed out of about five Minors, with two Majors and about eight Unggoy. Usually, some Kig-Yar accompied them, serving as snipers and scouts. But because most of the Heretics they were about face were Kig-Yar, and given the greedy and treacherous nature of the Kig-Yar, he had not trusted them to come along with them. It was all too possible one of the treacherous creatures would be tempted to betray their superiors, and that wasn't a risk Shen was willing to take.

A moment later, the ships were close enough to the ground for the lances to jump out, and they did, the Unggoy grunting in slight discomfort as they landed, while the Sangheili immediately stood up, looking around with unsheathed weapons.

Shen looked around and sniffed the air, trying to get a smell. "Do
you smell anything?" Questioned Don, and Shen nodded, confirming the question. "I do smell something. The whole place reeks of Kig-Yar of various kinds, with T'vaoan here and there, and a faint scent of Unggoy." He said, as he activated his Energy Sword.

Don growled, sniffing the air too. "And they're close..." He said, activating his own Sword. But before the Energy Sword had even been fully activated, the sound of a gun was heard, followed by a high-pitched cry of pain, as one of the Unggoy fell on the floor with a purple needle just between its eyes, as blue blood splattered on the floor. It was dead before it hit the ground, and needless to say, this caused most of the Unggoy to panic and run away, before they were stopped by the Sangheili Majors. "Sniper! Take cover!" Shouted Shen, as he ducked behind one of the crates that were scattered around the place.

Don quickly took place next to his Supreme Commander, as he traded his Sword for the Plasma Rifle at his belt, and held it in front of him, trying to figure out where the shots had come from. "Stay close to cover!" He called at the Majors, who nodded and gave the orders to the Minors and the Unggoy.

However, after ten minutes had passed, nothing had happened. No further sniper attacks, no ground forces engaging them, not even a Plasma Grenade was thrown at them. Don frowned and looked at Shen, whose eyes were scanning the area critically. "They know we are here...Why do they not attack us, or at least hinder us? We could walk right in if we wish too!" Said Don.

Shen didn't glance at the Field Marshal, but merely nodded. "Indeed...It is obviously a trap. As soon as we enter the structure, there will be tons of soldiers at our throats, probably snipers." He concluded. "And how will we solve it?" Asked Don. Shen only now broke away his gaze from the structure and looked at Don. "By letting them know we do not have the patience, nor the desire to play their game." He said simply, before looking at his lances. Among the ranks, he spotted a Special Operations Unggoy, with a Fuel Rod Gun hanging over its shoulder. It was a rather amusing sight, in Shen's opinion, to let such a small and weak creature carry a weapon that was quite powerful.

"Unggoy! Yes you, come over here!" He called, as the Unggoy yelped, startled as the Commander called him, before making his way towards Shen, obviously nervous. And Shen could completely understand why he was being nervous. The Unggoy were among the lowest of the lowest in the Covenant hierarchy, and it usually wasn't a good sign when a member of a 'higher' species addressed them.

"Y-Yes your Excellency?" Asked the small creature as it looked up to the Commander, obviously trying to be brave...And failing at that. "Give me your weapon" Commanded Shen, as he held out his hand to receive the weapon. The Unggoy frowned (or so Shen guessed, as that was hard to see because of the mask the creature was wearing) and was about to say something, when it nodded. "Of course, your Excellency" It replied with a hint of unwillingness in its voice, as he handed over the gun.

Shen nodded and, to the Unggoy's surprise, said "Thank you", before he reached to his belt and gave the creature his Plasma Pistol. "Take it. You'll need it" He said, before looking at the door again. The
Unggoy muttered a word of thanks, and then quickly ran back to his lance, much to the confusion of Don.

"Shen, why did you give him you're Pistol? You might have needed it later!" He argued, frowning. Shen glanced at his friend. "I am armed with two Plasma Grenades, an Energy Sword, a Plasma Rifle and now a Fuel Rod Gun. He only had the Gun I just took away. I am quite sure he is in more need of a weapon then I am" He stated, before lifting the Gun up and aiming at the door. "On my signal, you storm the structure and fire! Understood?" Called Shen, not looking at his lances. He didn't wait long for the confirming growls, as he lifted the Fuel Rod Gun higher and narrowed his eyes. "Time to make these Heretics see the errors of their ways..." He said softly, before pulling the trigger.

Immediately, the weapon released a large ball of green plasma, which was fired at the door, creating a large explosion. Shen immediately dropped the Gun and activated his Energy Sword and took hold of his Plasma Rifle, before storming off to the newly formed entrance as the smoke cleared. "Attack!" He shouted, as he ran forward.

"Attack!" Repeated Don, as he ran after his superior along with the lances towards the entrance. As soon as Shen entered, he could see the carnage the blow had down, as several dead Kig-Yar and Unggoy lay around the place, with burn marks all over their bodies.

However, not all of them were dead as a large group of Kig-Yar, Unggoy and a surprisingly large number of T'vaoan were standing in front of them, weapons ready to fire. One of the T'vaoan, a red-feathered Major, coughed as the smoke cleared and then glared at Shen, raising an Energy Dagger at the Commander. "Attack!" it shrieked in the raspy voice his kind was known for. Immediately, the Kig-Yar and T'vaoan that were present in the area raised their weapons and fired at them, while the Unggoy were pushed forward as cannon fodder.

_How pathetic _thought Shen, as he decipated an Unggoy with ease as it, foolishly, attacked him with a mere Plasma Pistol. Unggoy were the weakest members of the Covenant. Fighting with them was almost an insult! But nevertheless, it didn't take them long before most of the Unggoy and the Kig-Yar that followed that lead them into battle were either scattered, or laying dead on the floor.

"Commander, what do we now?" Called a Major, while breaking the neck of a Kig-Yar who had attempted to stab him with an Energy Dagger. Shen growled and looked around, noticing the T'vaoan and the majority of the Kig-Yar had fled the scene. "Follow the Heretics! Show no mercy!" He growled in reply, before running down a corridor which reeked of fresh Kig-Yar.

"You heard the Commander! Come on!" Called Don, as he ran after him, followed by the Sangheili and the Unggoy that had survived the skirmish, with the former having lost no one.

Once out of the corridor, Shen looked around and sniffed the air, as they entered a large area with seemed some sort of storage, as the large crates once again. Shen slowly entered and looked around. There were defenitly Kig-Yar here. But he couldn't quite figure out where they where hi-
"Brother, look out!" Called the Field Marshal suddenly, as he leaped forward and pushed Shen out of the way, just in time as the deadly beam of a Focus Rifle missed them by mere inches. Don quickly stood up and took out his Carbine, before shooting into the direction the beam had come from. A second later, a loud cry of pain was here and a Kig-Yar fell of one of the crates on the ground, with its head quite deformed as the plasma had hit him.

"Does saving you're life gets me extra points?" Asked Don, as he turned towards with a smirk. Shen frowned and was about to answer, when more beams, needles and plasma came from all directions.

"Take cover!" Shouted Shen, as he and Don ducked behind one of the crates, shooting at the snipers every now and then. "Why are there so many of them? The Unggoy assured me there was a very limited number of these Heretics here!"

Shen opened his mandibles to reply, and then spotted something on the ground...A very large shadow, of an enormous beast raising its limbs...His eyes widened as he realized what it is.

"Mgalekgolo!" he called, pushing Don roughly aside, before he started fire at the towing beast with his Plasma Rifle. The giant Mgalekgolo, however, simply raised the enormous shield on its right arm, successfully blocking the plasma. It moved the shield out of the way and raised the Fuel Rod Cannon on his left arm, in order to blast the Sangheili to the afterlife...And held back in surprise as the Sangheili was now where to be found. The Mgalekgolo growled in surprise and looked around, terribly confused. Then suddenly, it heard a feint noise, followed by a 'clunk', as if something was attached to its shield.

It looked at said piece of armor and if Lekgolo had eyes, they certainly would have been a lot wider, because two small, blue Plasma Grenades were attached to it. Before the Mgalekgolo could try and shake them off, the Grenades exploded and it was surrounded by the blue flames. And although it didn't kill the creature, it did wound it. And more important, it was now enraged. And no one wanted to mess with an enraged Mgalekgolo.

All except one.

The Mgalekgolo let out a mighty roar and prepared to charge at Don, before it felt a burning pain in its exposed back, as if something very hot had penetrated through the layers of Lekgolo worms that were his essence, which came further and further. The great behemoth roared in pain and then...Nothing...

Don tried to catch his breath and looked at the Mgalekgolo with wide eyes as it fell down, missing him by inches. And behind the monster, stood Shen with an activated Energy Sword. Shen too was panting, but he still had the same smirk as he had earlier on the Phantom on his mandibles. "You know...A Mgalekgolo consists out of thousands of Lekgolo worms...And what was that about life saving gaining extra points?" He asked amused.

Don growled and stood, shaking the dust of his shoulder pats. "That still counts as one!" He protested, earning a chuckle from his superior. "Of course, Brother, of course...Now, let us go. The target is close by, according to our sources" He said, before running
off into a small tower, followed by Don, as they entered the elevator that would bring them upstairs, right into the lair of Ra Vel...

* * *

><p>A first, Garrus refused to leave her side as Shepard was brought to the Medbay. It was a sea of turmoil as everyone rushed around him, Chakwas and her assistants hooking up machines and prepping their instruments whilst most of the crew gathered outside to watch through the window. They all wanted a peak at their Commander, to know if she was alright; that is until Chackwas pushed a button and shutters rolled down to cover the window. Garrus gently laid Shepard upon the bed, and the doctor immediately began to set to work, working to cut Shepard out of her ruined armour so that they didn't have to twist her to get it off. Garrus stayed by her side, holding onto one of her hands, his eyes completely focused on her face, not even blinking in case he missed the smallest detail. At one point Chakwas told him that he needed to leave, but Garrus quickly snapped something at her that he later wouldn't remember save for the fact that it was most impolite.<p>

Four men and Wrex had had to wrestle him out of the Medbay on Chakwas' orders; Garrus roared and fought against them, a primal urge inside of him demanding he fight. His mate was hurt and he needed to protect her, those were the only thoughts racing inside his mind as he struggled with all his might to stay by her side. He broke one human's nose when he head butted him, and sprained another's wrist when he twisted it. Eventually, Wrex roared as he punched Garrus in the face, almost breaking his face plates, the Krogan taking that moment as Garrus was stunned from the pain of the blow to wrap lift turian into the air and drag him out of the medbay. Garrus had begun to regain some of his senses when Wrex dumped him into one of the chairs at the mess hall table outside the medbay. He tried to spring back up, to charge back to Jane's side, but Wrex shoved him back into his seat. When Garrus growled savagely at the Krogan, Wrex leant forwards as he pushed his face right in front of Garrus'.

"You're not gonna held her like this," Wrex growled at him. "So piss on that turian honour â€“ or whatever the hell it is that's making you act like this â€“ and make yourself useful," Garrus sat there, completely shocked into stumned silence as the words slowly got through to him. Wrex turned to leave, but paused, looking at his old friend, an odd note of sympathy in his eyes. As if he thought his previous words had been too harsh, the Krogan placed a comforting hand on Garrus' shoulder, giving him a gentle squeeze. "She'll be alright," he murmured softly, and then left.

Eventually the haze subdued, but Garrus couldn't take his mind away from what was happening in the Medbay. He refused to move further the mess hall just outside, sitting at the table, leg shaking with a trapped nerve as he waited for any news. Chakwas had sent a message to Joker to get them back to London and to a working hospital as quickly as possible. Chakwas was doing her best to stabilise Shepard until they could reach a facility with more equipment then they. Hospitals had been the one thing the resistance on Earth had fought for the hardest against the Reapers, and it had also been the first thing the Alliance had put back in order in the hours after the Reapers had been confirmed as defeated. Knowing that he needed to do something to be useful but still refusing to leave the mess hall, Garrus wrote a message to Admiral Hackett via his omni-tool,
detailing of how they had found Shepard but she was in need of urgent medical attention. He sent the same message to Primarch Victus. The response was almost immediate. Both Hackett and Victus congratulated him on finding the Commander and that they were having the best doctors on standby ready to await them for when they arrived. After that was done, all Garrus could do was wait.

It was painfully slow, the minutes seeming to tick by to seem like hours, hours seeming like an eternity. Garrus eventually drifted into a trance like state, his mind in a haze to block out the horrible images his imagination conjured up of what was happening in the room across the hall. Spirits, what if he lost her? If that happened Garrus thought he'd pay whatever was left of Cerberus to rebuild her a second time. He loved Shepard, and spirits be damned the one time he wanted to love a woman for all of eternity and make his bond mate if he could, had to be a human! A human with a death wish it seemed. But he loved her, he couldn't imagine living in this galaxy without her, it was tearing him apart just thinking about losing her. He'd mourned her once, when she'd died the first time they'd been best friends, but even that had been hard. It had sent him into a depression he'd only managed to kick himself out of by going to Omega, to drown his sorrows in blood and violence. But the war was over now, what violence would be left to him if he lost her now?

Eventually, Joker sounded the approach for London, and Garrus was instantly on his feet and storming towards the medbay. Chakwas was already prepping Shepard to be moved, and Garrus wasted no time as he strode to her bedside and gently lifted her into his arms. Though she'd only been in there just a small amount of time, the change in her was shocking. Out of her burned and broken armour and in a hospital gown, Jane looked almost fragile, her arms pale and although cleaned of blood they were mottled with slight burns and cuts and bruises. He could smell the scent of her blood through the bandage around her middle from the gunshot wound. Her lip was split, one eye swollen and bruised until it was almost forcibly closed, one cheek grazed of its skin, her hair combed and pulled out of her face and away from the wounds on her neck. Garrus was almost hesitant to hold her too tightly in case he broke her bones. He held her close against his chest as he carried her bridal style through the Normandy, Chakwas right behind him. Garrus' armour clanked as he strolled through the Normandy towards the shuttle bay where Cortez was waiting for them, and as they climbed in he quickly shut the doors and punched in the co-ordinates, and they were off.

Cortez double timed it in the shuttle ride to the hospital, Chakwas sitting beside Garrus as she constantly kept an eye on Shepard's vitals. Garrus still held Jane in his arms, though she now sat in his lap with her head leaning against his shoulder. She hadn't moved or stirred once or given any sign that she was still alive, except for the constant beating of her heart that Garrus could faintly hear and feel beneath his fingers. He never took his eyes off of her face, thumb of his hand stroking her shoulder tenderly in what he hoped she could feel as a comforting gesture; it was about the only thing he could do as he was currently useless. The ride to the hospital was quick, and from a quick look at the screen that gave them feed from the outside, he could see that the hospital building itself was in poor shape, an entire wing being completely obliterated from the war, though most of it was still intact. Cortez quickly set them down, and Garrus and Chakwas stood, Jane still in Garrus' arms as they awaited
for Cortez to punch the button to open the doors.

As they exited the shuttle, they were swarmed by doctors and nurses of every race as they led them into the hospital interior. Garrus kept a tight and possessive hold on Shepard, growling ferociously at anyone who dared to try and pry her from him. The doctors led him and Chakwas further into the heart of the crumbling hospital towards the working surgery suit. But it was at the doors, that common sense entered Garrus' brain and he realised that he would not be allowed to enter with her. He stopped, a sense of panic rising in his chest. He couldn't let her go now, he only just got her back! What if he lost her for good behind those doors and he wasn't there to... he didn't know what. But he knew that if he didn't let her go, she wouldn't survive. He looked down at her, a choked whimper escaping his throat as he looked down at the woman he'd ever truly loved, how broken she looked in his arms, so different from the strong invincible hero he'd always admired in her. Ever so gently, he laid her down upon the bed that the doctors wheeled in front of him, one hand tenderly brushing aside a lock of her hair from her, his eyes sketching every inch of her, wanting just some sign that she was going to be alright!

And then, the doctors spirited her away from him, taking her to where he could not follow. He followed them initially up until the glass doors that closed behind them and bared him entrance. Garrus pressed his hands against the glass, eyes wide and searching for Jane. He watched the mob of doctors that had surrounded her bed as they continued to wheel her down the corridor, and he continued to watch them until they turned a corner and were out of sight.

All he could do now was wait.

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<<p>>Both Sangheili raised their weapons and looked around, in case Ra Vel had any soldiers around here. Luckily for them, no Kig-Yar or Unggoy was in sight, as far as they could see. "I see no one" Said Don softly, as he carefully walked in, both his Sword and Rifle raised.<p>>

Shen frowned and sniffed the air, and he immediately caught a scent. He could indeed smell Kig-Yar, but it was a very old scent, as least a day old. However, the stench of T'vaoan was wherever he smelled, along with the slightest hint of fear...

"No Kig-Yar indeed...But _she _is here without a doubt" Growled Shen. Don was about to reply, when a familiar sound was heard and a blue flash was thrown at them...

Shen's eyes widened as he recognized the Plasma Grenade. "Take cover!" he shouted, as keeping quiet would now be useless. Both warriors immediately jumped out of the reach of the Grenade, and just in time as the explosive went of a second later.

Shen coughed as he accidently inhaled the now file air, trying to see his way into the blue smoke...And that was when he heard it...

It was the sound of something running swiftly across the floor, in the direction of the elevator. No doubt it was Ra Vel, as the scent of T'vaoan infiltrated his nostrils. And seeing how the T'vaoan were known for being the fastest and most agile species of the Covenant,
Shen knew the blasphemous Shipmistress would escape...Unless...

It was a bad plan, but it was better than nothing, so Shen decided to go with it. He raised his Plasma Rifle and fired in the direction of the sound and scent, expecting to hear the sound of plasma hitting the wall.

Instead, it was met by a loud shriek of pain, followed by the sound of something heavy landing on the floor. And as the smoke cleared, Shen could recognize the shape of a T'vaoan, crawling towards the elevator as one of her legs was obviously burned.

"Well, well, well...What do we have here?" Chuckled Don, as he stood up. "That was impressive, my friend! I hate to admit it, but that certainly gives you bonus points!" He added.

Shen, however, didn't reply and instead walked up to Ra Vel. The T'vaoan Shipmistress noticed and tried to crawl faster, but yelped in pain and fear as she felt one of Shen's large claws wrap around her throat and lifted her up. She was turned around and now looked directly into the yellow eyes of the Sangheili Supreme Commander.

"Ra Vel" Hissed the Sangheili, in a tone full of disgust and disdain. Ra Vel gulped and then growled, trying to bite Shen. This act of rebellion, however, resulted in Shen tightening the grip on her throat, making her gag.

"You have committed heresy of the worst kind imaginable. Desecrating holy relics with your filthy claws, and offending the Gods! " Growled Shen in a cold tone, as he raised the Energy Sword.

Ra Vel's eyes widened as she felt the heat of the Sword, and then started to talk, slightly muffled. "Easy there, Excellency" she said in a soothing, yet raspy tone. The tone her kind, along with the Kig-Yar, were known most for. "I-I have an idea! I give you the relics and you can do with my crew whatever you want! But we-just..forget I was here, and I shall reward you greatly! Doesn't that sound great?" She asked in a silver tongue. "I mean, we-AH!" She gagged as Shen's hold got even tighter and she was lifted up even more.

"You committed heresy, that is already bad enough" Growled Shen in a deadly voice. "A Heretic doesn't deserve pity, nor mercy...A coward who is willing to sacrifice her own men in order to save herself deserves the same fate" He said. "When the Great Journey shall begin, all who walk the Path shall follow the Forerunners into Salvation...But you, and everyone foolish enough to have followed you, shall be left behind" He said. Ra Vel gulped and looked at the Sword, shaking in terror. Shen, however, chuckled. "But fear not...This blade shall not harm you" he spoke. Ra Vel frowned in confusion, but her eyes then widened in realization as Shen walked up to one of the windows.

Immidiatly, she started to kick and struggle, while screaming her pleads for mercy, but Shen ignored it all. He took one last glance at Ra Vel, who looked back at him pleading, terrified eyes and then roughly threw her at the window, shattering it completely as the T'vaoan fell through it. The Shipmistress screamed in fear and tried to grab something, clawing into the air. Her screams were soon
replaced with a loud 'Thumb, as Ra Vel fell on the ground and died instantly. As soon as the corpse hit the ground, the sounds of battle slowly stopped and were replaced with desperate cries and pleads for mercy, as the Heretics realized they lost their leader.

Shen gave a satisfied grunt and then looked at Don. "We have spend enough time on these Heretics. Let us round them up and give them their punishment, before we return to _High Charity_" so that we may tell the Hierarchs of Ra Vel's death" He spoke.

Don nodded and bowed his head. "By your word, Supreme Commander" He said respectful, before following Shen into the elevator.

* * *

<<p><strong>AN: ****Hello everyone! The Shadow Gryphon here!**

**As Donovan already told you, this story was made when we discussed science-fiction video games, and we both took a liking to the games we talked about. Heck, I might even buy Mass Effect, that's how much I like it now! ;)**

**I'd also like to thank Warrior of Spectra ****and LunaMoonLight100****, because he helped me with several things regarding Shen and Don. But of course, I'd like to thank Donovan most of all! :D**

**However, I have seen that most Halo + Mass Effect crossovers have the same story. Humanity has joined the Covenant or started a new 'Covenant' after the war and for some reason, is now fighting the Citadel. In those stories, the Covenant are usually the good guys and are unrealistically powerful. In this story, the Covenant and Citadel will be somewhat equals and the Covenant will NOT be the protagonists, as they should be the antagonists.**

**That being said, I hope you'll like this story. Critics are always welcome, so feel free to review! :D**

2. Chapter 2

**Author's Note: Firstly, a big thank you to everyone who read/reviewed/favourited/followed this story. It really means a lot to us both, and be sure that we are looking at all of your comments and taking them into consideration. As some of you were concerned in the first chapter, do not worry, as this chapter will prove we intend for some significant amount of time to pass between now and when the Covenant and Citadel races meet. We hope you all enjoy this chapter, and please don't forget to review! **

* * *

<<p>An Imperial Affliction: Chapter 2<p>

* * *

"For the last time Shen, killing Mgalekgolo's does not grant you extra points!" Said Don, as he frowned at Shen. Shen, in return, merely chuckled at the Field Marshal's argument."
"Ah, but I can recall you said that saving lives counts for extra points. And like I said, a single Mgalekgolo exists out of thousands of Lekgolo worms. That has got to mean something, right?" he argued.

The two Sangheili were currently sitting across a table in Shen's apartment, which was located in one of the towers that were quite common in the Lower Districts of High Charity. And Shen, and every other creature that had seen his apartment, would be quite impressed with his home. The apartment consisted out of a couple of rooms, with a living room and bed room all in one, with an alternative room for visitors, along with a bathroom. However, another room next to the visitor's chamber served as Shen's office, where he kept several reports, datapads, scrolls as well as a large amount of weapons that hung on the wall.

"They share a single mind" Don reminded him. "So it is basically one individual."

Shen frowned and then chuckled. "In that case...Let's say it's a draw." he suggested. Don looked at him and eventually nodded.

"On that I may agree...Although I do think I may have killed two or three Kig-Yar more then you!" He smirked. Shen rolled his eyes and was about to say something, when a knock on the door of his home was heard.

Shen frowned and stood up as he walked to the door. He pressed a button, and it opened itself. "Yes, how may I-" he immediately stopped as he saw what was standing in front of his home. It was a small group of Sangheili, three to be exact. But they were no ordinary Sangheili. They were dressed in the uniform of a soldier, a Zealot to be exact.

Both Shen and Don this time couldn't hide their surprise. It was unusual enough to have an escort of Zealots at your doorstep. The reason why they came was even more unusual.

"The Hierarchs wish to see me?" Asked Shen after a few seconds, successfully hiding his excitement by taming it with caution.
"That is correct." Answered the Field Master. "Now you must come. We do not wish to keep the Hierarchs waiting." he said.

Shen nodded. "Of course" He answered, before turning around to face Don. "Field Marshal" He said, using Don's formal title in front of the Zealots. "Could you watch my home until I am back?"

Don nodded. "Of course Commander," He answered, with the same formal tone in his voice. Shen smiled and then turned to the Zealots. "Alright then. We can go"

"Excellent." Nodded Field Master 'Ravamee. "If you follow us, we shall escort you to our Phantom." he spoke, before turning around, followed by his Zealots and a nervous, yet excited Shen.

* * *

Three months. Three months he had waited.

Three months of surgery after surgery, to fix bones, torn muscles, repair damaged organs, it was a wonder that she was still in one piece. Garrus remembered talking with Jacob one night back on the mission against the Collectors, when Jacob had described what Shepard was like once they'd recovered her body and began their work to bring her back. Meat and tubes, that was how Jacob described it, and the mental image combined with Garrus' own imagining of what the doctors were doing to her now was enough to make him feel sick. The doctors had done their best in order to fix Shepard up as best they could, and then they'd left her in an induced coma, claiming that the sleep would help her to heal and allow her body to adjust to everything she'd been through.

Since Shepard had been in the care of the hospital, her people had gone where they were most needed. Liara had stuck close by helping everyone she could and finding information to help with the rebuilding of the Mass-Relays. Thanks to this information as well as the combined effort of all the survivors of the Battle of Earth, the Charon Relay was only just finished, and not a moment too soon, as supplies for each of the alien armies had been about to reach the emergency lows. With Liara co-ordinating information to the other species elsewhere in the Galaxy, the other relays were also near completed. When the Crucible had fired, the relays had only been slightly damaged, not completely destroyed, so the rebuilding was much easier. The first one to be finished outside of the Sol system had been to Palavan so that the Turians and Quarians could leave to get their dextro-amino foods. A few scattered others had been finished, only a small percent, but enough to get the other alien armies out of earth's orbit and back out into the galaxy in order to help with their own people. Wrex had returned to Tuchunka immediately to lead his people with the female Krogan Eve, or Bakara as she was actually called. Tali was sticking with the migrant fleet until the relay to their system was complete and would allow them to return home. Javik had offered whatever help was possible with his prothean knowledge, though he was adamant that he was a soldier and not a scientist. Those in the alliance who had been under Shepard's command were reassigned to help in any way possible wherever the military needed them, though Joker had asked for shore-leave, for reasons he would not say, but everyone knew the reason. Garrus was rather surprised when Miranda had showed up from wherever it was that she
had been hiding since the assault on the Illusive Man's base. She'd just one day arrived at the hospital and started working with the doctors to help put Shepard back together again.

But Garrus had stayed. He hadn't been skulking around the hospital all day every day. He'd made himself busy by helping the forces of earth rebuild, helping to co-ordinate the Turian fleet with Primarch Victis and organising the rebuilding of the Relays. Garrus had also personally oversaw the calibrations of the Charon Relay's drive systems. It had been much more complex then he'd first thought, but it was still a more then worthy challenge. It had been the perfect distraction, as he'd huddled over a work desk going over all the algorithms, throwing himself into the work and concentrating so hard he completely forgot about everything else. He forgot about the shivering fear in his stomach that he would get a call from the hospital at any second with dreadful news. He forgot about the cold bed in the apartment he'd been given, or the way he often woke up at night from horrid nightmares that deprived him of sleep for the rest of the night. His father had called him only once since the end of the war, to tell Garrus that he and his sister were alright. Garrus couldn't stop his sigh of relief, though even just over a video-call, Garrus's father had been able to somehow know how unsettled his son was, and had pestered for answers, though Garrus had been very brief and blunt, saying only that he had a lot of work and would see them soon. He'd then terminated the call. His only solace was when he visited the hospital every day to see how Shepard was doing. He only ever stayed for a maximum of an hour, for any longer and his heart begin to ache and he knew he wouldn't leave her side at all until the next morning when he was needed outside the hospital again. He spoke to her, having been told that she might be able to hear him even if asleep, but her unresponsive silence was too much for him to take, and he would often sit there, not saying anything, just holding her hand and watching her, waiting for her.

And now, after all this time, he was finally going to see her open those eyes he'd been waiting to see. Earlier that week, Miranda had told him that they believed her healed enough in order to be woken, and were going to bring her out of the induced coma. Garrus had immediately called people like Liara, Tali and the others to tell them the news. The excited Quarian had been so emotional she'd practically been on the verge of tears to him as she promised to be there.

Now, he waited in the hallway outside Shepard's room, looking through the large window to see her lying in her bed, tubes stuck down her throat, wires and more tubes plugged into her arms, the machines beside her beeping steadily. Doctors surrounded her on all sides, watching the monitors or making notes on their datapads. Miranda came and stood beside Garrus, not saying a word as she looked in onto the scene as well.

"Garrus!" Came a voice, and the turian turned, almost surprised by the sound of his name to see the blue figure of Liara and the black and purple suit of Tali as they jogged down the hall towards him. Miranda also turned to see them, the edges of her lips just tugging into what one might call an "almost-smile".

"Keel'ah!" Tali said breathlessly as they reached him. "We're so sorry Garrus, the admiralty board tried to delay my departure from the fleet. They're only just giving me these few days before I need
"I was waiting for her at the port," Liara chimed in. "I managed to pull a few strings in order to get her ship docked quickly."

"It's alright. You're here, that's all that matters now." Garrus said softly, his voice a little gruff from disuse.

"You'd really come all the way here for this?" Came Miranda's voice as she raised an eyebrow at them with a rather snooty look.

"We're Shepard's family," Liara said firmly, her eyes filled with pride as she stood a little taller. "We may not be the most orthodox, but we're hers. We wouldn't miss this for the world."

"Noâ€¦" Miranda said slowly, eyeing the aliens with an unreadable expression, almost like one ofâ€¦ envy? But then the moment was gone and the woman turned back towards the window. "I guess not."

"Are they about to wake her up?" Tali asked as she stepped forward.

"Yeahâ€¦" Garrus said, a somewhat uneasy tone in his voice as he turned back to face the window.

The doctors surrounded Jane, injecting something into her arm, the monitors beginning to beep irregularly, picking up activity. The doctors stood tense, like predators waiting for the chance to spring.

Garrus waited for very long tense minuets for something to happen, the fear in his gut that she wouldn't wake up ever present. He'd done extensive research whilst she'd been asleep, had felt compelled in the lonely hours of the night when he couldn't sleep. He knew that some humans had spent years in comas, though nowadays that was rather rare, but some humans described it as their "soul" just leaving the body, never returning and so their physical forms just stayed in eternal slumber. Garrus wasn't the religious type, but he hoped to whatever deities of the universe there were, that his Shepard would wake upâ€¦

Finally, after what felt like forever, her eyelids fluttered open.

"Shepard? Commander Jane Shepard? Jane? Can you hear me?" One of the doctors asked as he leaned in closer to Shepard, speaking softly and soothingly.

Garrus pressed himself against the window, talons pressed against the glass as if he wanted to walk through it and be straight at her side. His heart was suddenly in his throat, an unknown fear making his stomach flip inside of him. He never liked being out of the loop on anything, to not be able to know exactly what was happening and then act accordingly. Shepard had always been there with him, and to have her suddenly so helpless; it made him nervous like a predator pacing in its cage. Shepard opened her aquamarine eyes, confusion and incoherence plain on her features as she looked around at the unfamiliar surroundings. On the heart-rate monitor, Shepard's heartbeat began to slowly pick up as her eyes darted around, like a cornered wild animal.
"Jane," The Doctor was saying, and instantly Shepard stilled, eyes locking onto the unfamiliar human hovering close to her. "I know this is quite a shock, and you're a little confused. But please nod your head if you can hear me and understand me,"

Slowly, Shepard nodded.

"Okay," The doctor nodded. "Now don't try and speak. You've been asleep for a while now, but I want you to please look over to your left. There's some people out there, please nod if you recognise them."

Here it was, the moment of truth. Shepard looked over each of their faces, a guarded expression on her face as she looked over Tali's helmet, unable to see through it, though it was the same one the Quarian always wore. Her eyes then snapped to Liara, forever quick and sharp, and Garrus thought he heard Liara gasp under her breath as she trembled under that stare. When that gaze was directed at Miranda, Garrus could sense how the human woman had the same reaction but was trying her best not to show it. Garrus knew that look, had seen it when Shepard had first come to him on Omega, when she didn't know it was him who was Archangel. It was the gaze of a predator sizing up its opponent, wondering if you were friend or foe. Usually, Shepard was a warm soul, instantly likeable and she always did her best to get on with everyone on her ship; but when you met her for the first time, she was unreadable, a hard and cold mask on her face that asked the silent question: friend or foe? Garrus felt the fear stir in his stomach, wondering what on earth he would do if Shepard's memory had gone? What would he do if she couldn't remember him? And then her eyes finally fell on his. He stayed perfectly still, matching her stare as he did not blink, did not shift his gaze, did not move even once. He matched her, predator for predator. Her eyes stayed on his the longest, looking over every inch of his face, a slow warmth beginning to enter her eyes as she gazed onto the features she already knew. Her cold mask began to subside and melt away, and all that was left was her as she stared at him with only her love and loneliness communicated in her eyes. Garrus felt his heart ache for her, but he spread his mandibles in a smile, just for her. And in her eyes, he saw her smile back.

She nodded.

* * *

As Shen walked down the pathway that lead to the Sanctum of the Hierarchs with his Zealot escort, he could feel the gazes of the Honour Guards following him and the Zealots at every move. And although he did not show it, Shen was slightly uncomfortable under the gazes of the Honour Guards. Their helmets covered their faces, so he could not read their facial expressions and they stood, for the most part, completely still. It was like they were statues. But Shen knew better than that. It was common knowledge to everyone in the Covenant that the Honour Guards were among the best of the Sangheili warriors, handpicked by the Hierarchs themselves. They were the best of the best, and all were willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the Hierarchs. And while Shen was probably one of the best warriors in the Covenant military, he wouldn't have become a Supreme Commander if he wasn't at least a decent soldier, he knew for sure he couldn't handle all of the Honour Guards.
Not that he needed too, of course. Why would the Honour Guards attack him? The thought made Shen mentally blink. Why did the Hierarchs call him to them anyway? His mind wandered to his latest mission, which had been the execution of the Heretic group of the treacherous T'vaoan Ra Vel. Could he have forgotten a relic? Or accidently destroyed one? That could be a reason for execution of demotion...But it was not important enough to be called to the Hierarchs.

Shen was snapped out of his thoughts when Field Master 'Ravamee spoke. "Are you ready to meet the Hierarchs, Supreme Commander?" He asked, as they stood in front of the doors that would lead them to the private chambers of the Hierarchs. Shen looked at the Field Master and nodded.

"I am" he confirmed.

The Field Master nodded and pressed on a button, which caused the doors to open and lead to the central room of Sanctum of the Hierarchs.

The central chamber was a very large round-shaped room with a lot less details then one would expect, with a grand view over space. A holotank sat in the middle of the room, although there were currently no holograms on it.

And in front of the window sat the three Hierarchs of the Covenant, floating in their Anti-Gravity Thrones. Like all Hierarchs before them, and the one's that would come after them, they were San'Shyuum, the highest-ranking species of the Covenant. The San'Shyuum were the Prophets of the Forerunners, translating messages, developing new technology and much more.

The Hierarch on the left sat the High Prophet of Wisdom, dressed in a yellow robe with silver lines. On the right side sat the High Prophet of Conquest, dressed in a red robe with golden lines. And in the middle sat their unofficial leader, the High Prophet of Peace, dressed in a green robe with bronze lines. All three of them wore the traditional golden crowns which displayed a hologram of a Halo ring.

As soon as they reached the High Prophets, Shen kneeled down, along with the Zealots, not daring to make eye contact with the leaders of the Covenant. It stayed silent for a minute. Then, the Prophet of Peace spoke.

"Greetings, Commander 'Kongmengeeâ€¦" he spoke softly, yet his voice echoed throughout the chamber." Do you know why we have summoned you are here?"

"I do not, oh Holy One," answered Shen, still not looking up to the Hierarchs. The Commander didn't show it, but he was extremely nervous. Being called by the Hierarchs could be very good...or very bad. And it was usually the latter.

"We assumed you did not," snorted Wisdom. Wisdom, as Shen had heard, took the superiority of the San'Shyuum to a whole new level. While not openly hostile, the Prophet of Wisdom wasn't exactly too fond of the Sangheili, as his Honor Guards could confirm.
"We have summoned you here, because we have discovered something important... Something that could change our Covenant," spoke Peace, glancing at Wisdom, before looking at Shen.

"What might that be, if I may ask, noble Hierarchs?" Asked Shen, genuinely curious. He, again, did not show it. He wasn't summoned to be punished after all.

Instead of answering, Peace looked at one of the Honour Guards and nodded at him. The Honour Guard walked up to them and typed something on the holotank, which made a map appear. Shen recognised it almost immediately. It was a map of the Covenant territory throughout the Orion Galaxy, something Shen had seen more often than most.

Yet there was something different about this version of the map...

Shen blinked in surprise as he saw a large grey void at the far right of the map. A rather large area. He frowned and pointed at the new spot. "Noble Hierarchs, if I may ask, what is this new location on the map?" Asked Shen.

"We do not know. And that is exactly the reason why we have summoned you," said Peace. "A few days ago, a Kig-Yar vessel discovered a strange signal coming from the end of this 'void'. It is a strange one...It is very similar to the relics that the Ancients left behind, yet different..." said the Hierarch, as he looked from the map to Shen. "We want you to explore what it is." he said.

This time, Shen could not hide his surprise, as his eyes widened. "Me?" He repeated.

"You." confirmed Conquest, speaking for the first time. "We have no idea what this signal is. It could be a new relic, a shield world, a new race that uses Forerunner technology. It might even be one of the Sacred Rings!" Exclaimed the Prophet of Conquest. "The possibilities are limitless!"

"And you want me to find this...signal?" asked Shen, not believing this was really happening. Out of all creatures in the Covenant, out of all Sangheili, out of all of the warriors, out of all of the Zealots and out of all Supreme Commanders in the Covenant Military, the Hierarchs had chosen him?! It was a great honour to serve the Hierarchs directly.

"That is correct." Answered the Prophet of Wisdom impatiently.

The Prophet of Peace ignored Wisdom and kept looking at Shen. "We have assigned a Frigate known as The Divine Lightning to you for this mission, Commander. It is not one of the strongest ships, but it is a fast one. With it, you will reach the signal in a small amount of time." he said.

The Honour Guard pressed another button and a hologram of the Frigate appeared. Shen nodded and looked at the Hierarchs before bowing once again.
"I accept." spoke Shen. "I am honoured that you trust me by retrieving the signal, and I shall do everything I can to find it and discover what it hides." he said. "I shall not fail you!"

"We expect nothing less!" spoke the Prophet of Peace, smiling.

"Because you know what happens to those who fail a task as important as this one..." added Conquest.

"So do not fail us." finished Wisdom.

"You have your orders now, Commander. You will be given ten cycles to prepare. After that, your mission will begin. Now, you may go." spoke the High Prophet of Peace, as he nodded at the Field Master.

The Field Master nodded and stood up, along with his Zealots as they escorted Shen out of the chambers under the gazes of the Hierarchs and their Honour Guards. But unlike when they arrived, their gazes didn't bother Shen this time. For he was too busy thinking about the important task just given to him. After all, it was not every day the Hierarchs gave you a mission that could change the future of the entire Covenant...

* * *

A week later Shepard had the tubes removed from her throat, allowing her to breathe easier. She hated the feel of those plastic cylinders forcing her mouth open, providing her good air but also half choking her and almost making her gag. It reminded her too much of the horrifying reality on Project Overlord, when she had found David hooked up to multiple tubes all over his body. It made her skin crawl then and it made her sick to her stomach to imagine herself in that situation, even only for an instant.

It also was brought to disgusting clarity by the fact that it coincided with her nightmares all too well. In the darkness that she thought had been death, she'd seen herself, hooked up and restrained to a table whilst monsters experimented on her. They would shock her with electricity, remove pieces of her to replace it with cybernetics, slowly turning her into a mindless and soulless machine. And then they'd play with her more just to see how far they could push until she screamed. Sometimes her tormentors were Cerberus, either once again bringing her back from the dead only this time with the mind control chip they had refused before or they were turning her into a husk like what they did on Sanctuary. Other times, her torturers were husks and other abominations, ripping her apart and spearing her on Dragons Teeth whilst she slowly turned into one of them, and all the while she could hear the laughter of the Reapers ringing inside her mind. She never gave into them, never let them have the satisfaction of hearing her beg for mercy. But then, if she did not submit, they would resort to desperate measures. They would pull out the corpses of her family, dead from long ago on that fateful night on Mindoir. They would replay the deaths in front of her eyes: her father gunned down, her friends dragged away screaming, her mother dying trying to protect her as little-Jane hid in a duct vent. Then, her enemies would attack her present loved ones: Tali with her mask ripped away as she choked on the unclean air, Liara slowly turned into a Banshee, Joker being beaten as they easily broke every bone in his body, and Garrusâ€¦ He would already be a Marauder,
roaring at her as his eyes were replaced with synthetic lights, he would charge her and he would either gun her down, or she would be forced to kill him. That was what made her scream, seeing the hate in his eyes, or hearing his last breath as he choked on his own blood from her shot. And then, as she screamed in her grief, the nightmares would always end with other screams accompanying hers, the synthetic screams of a million voices, all ringing inside of her head. She would turn and see in horror the dying forms of the Geth, of EDI, they all cursed her name, asking her why she would do such a thing to them, why she would betray them, and thenâ€¦ they would die. Because of her.

So when she woke up, it was always to that white-washed room, the monitors beeping and ringing and reminding her of the synthetic noises from her dreams, and it would always take her a second too long to remember where she was and that she was not in danger. It would then take her a lot longer to control her racing heart and the pain in her chest that her nightmares always left her with. And it was becoming harder and harder to rest easily. The nurses all thought she was simply going through a light form of post-traumatic-stress and it would pass, each of them giving her a sedative to help her sleep. But it never worked. Nothing ever worked, the dreams would come anyway.

Once the tubes were taken out, Admiral Hackett had quickly come in order to visit her. He had been more than happy to see her. Beneath all the formality, Shepard could see the relief in his eyes as he looked at her warmly. It had been good to hear from him. He'd then debriefed her on what had happened since the Crucible had fired, and it was every bit as terrible as Shepard had imagined. The Reapers had been destroyed, but so had all AI's, including the Geth and EDI. The Galaxy was taking it as a victory, though many were confused as to what had happened. Shepard had then given her report, every inch of it. She wanted Admiral Hackett to know the whole truth so that he and the rest of the galaxy could judge her for her sins. But what was worse, was when Hackett had listened to her words, told her that she had made a difficult decision, but that he was proud of her. Shepard had wanted to scream, to shout and yell that it wasn't alright, that she was no hero, she was a murderer. She tried to rationalise with herself and even to Hackett that there had been no other choice: Controlling the Reapers could have easily failed, and it was too close to the Illusive Man's end goal. Synthesis would take away all the individuality of all the species, and who's to say that the Galaxy would have been any safer with the Reapers still alive. Destroy had been the only option.

Or so she kept telling herself. It really was of little comfort when the nightmares continued to plague her.

One morning, as she shot her eyes open from the most recent nightmare, she looked around and was almost startled out of her bed when she saw an unfamiliar form sitting next to her bed. It took her a couple of seconds before she recognised the tall and athletic frame of Garrus as he sat slumped in the chair next to her, dozing as his eyes were closed and he was breathing deeply but wasn't snoring like she remembered. Looking at the holo-clock, Shepard realised that it was only half eight in the morning, and visiting hours wouldn't begin for another half-hour. Had he slept the entire night? She hadn't seen him since she'd first woken up, mainly because she'd been going in and out of sleep at irregular intervals, despite her best efforts,
and when Hackett had visited her he'd made sure that no one else was allowed in as they'd talked. Besides, she was sure Garrus had other things to do during the day then babysit her and wait for her to open her eyes.

But by god, it was so good to see him.

As if he could feel her eyes on him, the turian slowly opened his eyes as he awoke. He shifted in his seat, stifling a yawn as he looked about the room, until his avian eyes finally settled on Shepard. They stared at each other for a long moment, and Shepard took the time to take in every detail of his face. The scars, the visor, the blue facial tattoos, she still remembered it all as if it were yesterday but it still felt like she hadn't seen him in years. A small smile crept upon her lips, and she saw Garrus's mandibles flare slightly as he returned it, his ice blue eyes filling with warmth.

"Heyâ€¦" he murmured out to her.

"Hey," she tried to respond, though she was surprised at the hoarse choke that came out instead.

Silence fell heavily upon them, neither one moving, neither one saying a thing. Shepard was waiting for him to say something, because only the universe knew she was drawing a blank on what to say. She just stared at Garrus, who stared back at her unblinkingly. As the silence grew, Shepard began to feel slightly uncomfortable, almost nervous, a seed of doubt in her head that Garrus was angry with her, or not â€”

Finally, Garrus moved, impossibly quick, he leaned forward out of his chair until he was kneeling beside her bed and leaning over her. Shepard only had time for a surprised intake of breath as she felt his talons cup her cheeks and slide back into her blonde hair, pulling her head off of the pillow slightly as he brought his head down to hers. The plates of his mouth were then pressed against hers, moving to imitate a kiss as best he could. Shepard was momentarily overwhelmed, but after a second, she gladly surrendered herself. With seemingly heavy arms, she brought her hands up under his fringe and pulled him closer, moving her lips against his mouth plates as she deepened the kiss. Shepard was filled with the metallic yet sweet taste of him as their tongues brushed. Finally, Shepard had to pull away in order to breathe, panting heavily, though she felt marginally disappointed that she had not lasted as long as usual. She blamed it on the tubes still in her nose. Garrus wasn't panting from exertion, but from emotional turmoil, she could feel it as his hands slightly shook as he held her, leaning his forehead gently against hers. They stayed there with his cool plates pressed against her skin, and she revelled in the comforting feel of him, the simple gesture explaining how he was here, and they were together, and there for each other, and nothing would change that. The gesture was such a relief to Shepard's aching heart she thought she might feel the sting of tears in her joy.

"Spirits Shepard, don't you ever fucking do that again." She heard Garrus grumble out, his dual tones rumbling as he slowly leaned back until he was sitting back in his chair, perched on the edge of his seat as he still leaned towards her. The look he then cast at her was
enough to make Shepard feel like a scolded child, which she tried to deflect with a mischievous smirk.

"Hey, I was following your orders, remember?" she croaked out with a soft chuckle. She remembered his words, his 'insubordination' to order her, as her boyfriend, to come back alive. She had listened to him then, the words had rung in her ears when she'd been presented with the choice at the Crucible. But the relieved look she was expecting was not on Garrus's face.

"Only after I had to pull your ass out of the fire. _Again_." He muttered.

"You love it," Shepard tried to joke, tried to shrug off the heavy weight in her stomach, tried to make him laugh and to get that haunted look out of his eyes. But Garrus didn't laugh, didn't rise to the bait, he only stared into her eyes. Shepard gulped, something inside her quivering like she had never known before. She just wanted to get that hurting look out of his eyes, to see her joking, self-assured, cocky, smart-ass Garrus again. Finally Garrus sighed, seeming to give in to whatever was making him so frustrated. He rubbed his hands on his face as if he were exhausted, and Shepard noted that his eyes were dim, as if he hadn't slept in weeks.

"I thought I lost youâ€¦" he whispered as he took his hands away to look at her with old grief and exhaustion.

"But you didn't. As long as I have you, I'm not going anywhere." Shepard murmured back, quick to try and do anything to get that horrid look out of his face. Lifting a heavy hand, she reached out and grasped at one of his hands. His large three fingers fit perfectly with her five, and she slowly brought his hand to her face, where he instinctively opened his hand so that she could make him cup her cheek as she nuzzled his palm. She fixed her blue-green eyes onto him, deadly serious yet also burning with need as she murmured to him softly. "I said I love you, Garrus Vakarian. And I meant it."

"Janeâ€¦ I love you too." Garrus whispered back.

He leaned forward, the relief now clear in his eyes, that emptiness seeming to leave his gaze completely, Shepard thought, at least for now. He leant forward as if he were going to kiss her again, and Shepard welcomed him. When all of a sudden, they heard a very loud knock on the door.

"Ah." Garrus murmured as he froze in place.

"What?" Shepard asked as she glanced from the door to Garrus. "Who is it?"

"That would be your welcome back party." He mumbled as he tried to lean back, but Shepard refused to let him go completely as she gripped his arms with as much force as she could muster to keep him close.

"Party?" She frowned. "Just lock the door."

"I've already hacked it," he shrugged. "But I don't think that will hold back â€“"
"Shepard!" came a sudden squeal as the lock on the door turned green and the doors 'WOOSHED' open to allow an energetic Quarian come barrelling into the room. Garrus leant back fully into his chair as Shepard saw the purple mask and black quarantine-suit come charging towards her, pausing only at her bedside, before throwing her arms around Shepard and pulling her into a fierce hug.

"Tali?" Shepard choked out in surprise. "What are you â€“ ow!"

"Keel'ah!" Tali gasped as she released Shepard from her hold, allowing the woman to lie back down, as the Quarian began to fuss over her in panic. "I'm so sorry! Are you alright?"

"Tali, relax. I'm fineâ€¦ just a little sore is all." Shepard murmured but put on a brave smile for her friend.

"Tali's been this nervous and emotional wreck ever since we picked you up off of the citadel." Garrus muttered.

"And as if you haven't!" Tali snapped at Garrus, but Shepard could hear the slight smile in her voice.

"Well, you can both calm down now. I'm mending." Shepard chuckled.

"Shepard has proven herself to be nigh on immortal," came a melodic and familiar voice from the doorway.

"Liara," Shepard smiled as she saw the asari standing in her doorway, with several other figures behind her that Shepard could not see just yet. Liara smiled, her perfect lips curving to warm her blue features.

"Don't forget the rest of us," said the ones behind Liara, stepping around the Asari as they all filtered into the room. As she recognised each face, Shepard felt her grin become wider and wider as she looked at them all: Kaiden, James, Dr Chakwas, even Javik stood at the back, offering only a respectful nod to Shepard in greeting with a small smile.

"Hey guys, what are you all doing here?" Shepard asked as she looked at them all.

"We came to see our victorious commander rise from the ashes," Dr Chakwas said with a beaming smile that reminded Shepard so much of her mother.

"I would sleep a lot easier if she was never in the ashes to begin with," Garrus commented, and they all chuckled good-naturedly.

"So Kaiden," Shepard said as she broke the silence and turned to her former lieutenant and fellow Spectre. "Hackett tells me you've got control of the Normandy now. Hope you're keeping her in one piece,"

"I'm doing my best Shepard," Kaiden murmured with a smile so warm and filled with emotion that Shepard was sure it would have brought any other human girl to their knees. "Though really I'm just keeping your
"seat warm for you," he reached out and took one of her hands in his, holding it between his own as if she were made of glass. "The ship is waiting for you for when you're ready to come home."

Shepard tried to ignore how Garrus's piercing eyes were locked onto their joined hands, as she carefully extracted herself from Kaiden's grip. She didn't want to hurt Kaiden's feelings, but Shepard had thought she'd made it very clear on numerous occasions that she didn't return his feelings. Ever since their fight against Saren, Kaiden had had a type of crush on the commander, and whilst Shepard looked to him as a very good friend, a confidant, an advisor, someone she could trust, she never saw him like he would want. And after what had happened on Horizon, Shepard thought he'd finally accepted it, but what their recent fight against the reapers had shown her, was that nothing had changed for Kaiden. Even if she was with Garrus. Garrus didn't feel threatened by Kaiden, because Shepard had once asked him if he was, but Garrus was very clear on the fact that he was not the jealous type, Kaiden would only need to do something in order to make him react. As Shepard politely pulled back her hand from Kaiden, she felt Garrus's eyes flicker to her, and a somewhat awkward silence fell over the group as they had all witnessed the exchange.

"Commander," Dr Chakwas said in order to break the tension.

"Karin," Shepard beamed as she felt warmth fill her chest, as if Christmas had come early. "It's good to see you,"

"The last time I saw you, your skin was barely holding you togetherâ€¦" Dr Chakwas said somewhat mournfully as she came to Shepard's other side, grasping her hand. "It's good to see you back in one piece,"

"If your magic fingers were working on me, I'd have already been up and walking about by now,"

"I'm a ship doctor Jane, not a miracle worker!" Dr Chakwas laughed. "But for whenever you get back on your feet, I've got a bottle of Ice-Brandy waiting for us,"

"Good." Shepard grinned. "After what I've been through, I feel like I need a good drink,"

"Hey, maybe we should break you outta here so you can come celebrate victory with us, eh Lola?" Shepard heard the familiar accented voice and turned to see the muscle tank that was James Vega, goofy grin and all.

"James," Shepard smirked, and would have leaned into a hip if she were standing. "If you got me out of this god-forsaken place, I think I might kiss you,"

"Oooooh, you hear that scars?" James grinned. "I think I might be stealing your girl!"

"Not even remotely," Garrus and Shepard said at exactly the same time.

They all laughed.
"Hey Commander!" came a little voice, and everyone turned, the group of visitors parting to reveal a small man hobbling into the room, wearing an old jacket, jeans, and a familiar cap.

"Joker!" Shepard breathed slowly, something inside of her aching at the look of her pilot and friend. He looked horrible, from the bags under his eyes, to how his skin was pale and his cheeks hollowed, and Shepard felt a painful stab of guilt to her heart. She cleared her throat as she hoarsely spoke to the others. "Hey guys, could you give us a minuet, please?"

Everyone gave their mumbles of yes, and all began to quickly file out of the room, knowing all too well the gravity of the conversation about to take place. Joker looked at the floor, not looking any of his comrades in the eye, not wanting to see their pity as they passed him. Garrus was the last to leave, looking back at Shepard as he held her hand, silently asking if she really wanted him to leave. Shepard gave him a reassuring smile and squeezed his hand before letting go. Garrus seemed conflicted, but knew when to relent, and nodded before he exited the room as well, locking the doors behind him as he left. Once they had all left, Joker sat in the seat beside Shepard's bed that Garrus had just been in, not saying a word. A thousand different things to say flew through Jane's mind, each one noted but not enough to take away the guilt she felt, and as she tried to figure out what to say a very heavy silence was strung out between them. Finally, unable to stand the silence a second longer, Shepard spoke.

"Joker! I â€“"

"I read your report." Joker interrupted her flatly.

"Ahâ€¦" Jane murmured, the guilt making her stomach churn as she felt grief flood through her. If Joker had read her report, then he knew of her sins. She didn't ask how he gotten his hands on it, for there were plenty of people aboard the Normandy who could hack their way to the secure files without even breaking a sweat. "Jokerâ€¦ I justâ€¦"

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Shepard tried to say, again, a thousand different things racing through her mind, but in the end, only one thing could cut it: "I'm sorry."

"I know the Reapers had to be killed." Joker spoke, his voice as hoarse as hers, his face lifeless, exhausted. But she could feel the raw emotion inside of him, but it was as if he'd spent all of his tears and now he was left with no way to vent. So Shepard let him. "I know we had to save the galaxy at any cost. I know that the other options were shitty and had many unknown consequences." There was a long pause until Joker looked over at Shepard, his dark eyes seeming to cut her deeper than any knife. "But I never thought you'd sacrifice your own. That's not your style."

"Jokerâ€¦" Shepard whispered, fear and grief flooding through her as she realised that her nightmares were more real then she imagined. "Believe me, I didn't want to. I wanted there to be another wayâ€¦ butâ€¦"

"You still took it." Joker finished for her curtly. "Iâ€¦ I really felt something for EDI. Damn-it! You were the one who encouraged her to be more human! You were the one thatâ€¦ shit." He sighed, trying to regain control of himself. "And then you killed her? You knowingly killed her off?"
"Joker, please, I wish I didn't... God! I wish I had..." Shepard trailed off, tears stinging her eyes, which she fought back with every ounce of will power she possessed. She stopped, knowing that nothing she said would make this any better. Once she thought she had more control of herself, she looked back at Joker, her eyes filled with sorrow and her voice soft as she spoke. "Is there no way to rebuild her? To take the memory drive from the computer on the Normandy and make a new EDI?"

"Some Alliance people are looking into it, though many don't see the point when they can just build new AI's. But it won't be the same. Even if she was brought back, she may have the memories if we gave them to her, but she wouldn't have the emotions; it wouldn't be the same." He said robotically, as if he had said this so many times it was now automatic.

"Joker," Shepard tried. "This may sound really cheap, but... I'm sorry."

"Yeah, I know," the pilot sighed, for once not looking like the young daring man Shepard had once known, now, he looked old. "I want to hate you Shepard. I want to hate you, so badly. I try to give myself a pep-talk at night, giving myself a long list on the reasons why I should hate you." He hissed at her, and Shepard did not flinch, knowing that it would be an insult to both Joker and EDI's memory if she felt even slightly offended by his words. Then, he sighed and looked at her with eyes that spoke only of grief and relief. "But at the end of the day! If you had chosen differently, I still would have lost somebody: My girlfriend... or my best friend."

Shepard felt the tear escape her eye, the shock so great that she was numb to the mind-blowing joy at hearing Joker say those words, at seeing that somewhere within him her favourite pilot was still there. He was damaged, cut, broken and bruised, but he was still in there, somewhere, he just needed time. Shepard wanted to take him in her arms, to hug him like the brother he was, but restrained herself. She knew that no matter Joker's feelings, she had still hurt him, and she would need to earn back the right to be close to him. Joker slowly stood, readjusting his cap as he glanced at her.

"I'm still your pilot Shepard. The Normandy's my baby." He said, some of that old confidence back in him, if only a little. He paused, before looking at her pleadingly. "Just... give me time to figure myself out."

"Take all the time you need." Shepard murmured softly, willing to give him eternity if it meant he could one day forgive her, even if she didn't deserve it. "I'll still be here."

"Yeah," he murmured, before turned and walking out. "Goodbye Shepard."

"Goodbye Joker."

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3:
Everything looked quiet in the dark and vast ocean of space, with starts and the occasional comets being the only light in this tiny corner of the seemingly infinite universe. This wasn't just on the edge of Covenant territory. It was also rumoured to be the edge of the galaxy, the gateway into Dark Space. And seeing how this section of galaxy was so dark, it could have very well been.

Then, the darkness was disturbed. A small explosion-like sound could be heard, and a portal opened itself, glowing in a bright blue and purplish colour. Out of the Slipspace portal, a Covenant Frigate appeared, floating through the portal. The Frigate was about a thousand meters in length, and like all Covenant vessels, it had a curving, bulbous shape. On both sides, large wing-like structures were attached. After a few seconds, the portal behind the frigate shrunk until it imploded and disappeared, leaving the Frigate behind in the new territory.

And Shen 'Kongmengee was in charge of it.

Said Supreme Commander was currently looking out of a large window at the bridge of the Frigate, with Don next to him, looking out at the space in front of him. There seemed to be less stars here, which marked its borders to Dark Space. Shen, however, didn't dare to enter such a vast unknown. They had no known coordinates of those territories and there was nothing there anyway. Why risk your life for a mission with nothing to gain?

"Have we arrived at the right coordinates?" Asked Shen, directing the question to a Sangheili bridge officer who was seated on a chair in front of a holo-panel. The officer looked at his panel and nodded.

"Yes Supreme Commander, we hit it right." He answered.

"Good." Nodded Shen, not looking away from the window.

"What do you suppose we'll find, Shen?" Asked the Field Marshal.

"I do not know, Don." Answered the Commander. "This section of our galaxy is mostly unexplored...Who knows what we may find? It is just like the High Prophet of Conquest said: The possibilities are endless! But I admit...This darkness is unsettling..." He added.

"Oh? Is the great Supreme Commander Shen 'Kongmengee afraid of the dark? How amusing." Snorted Don good-naturedly. Shen glared at him, and was about to say something, when the same officer from before interrupted.

"Commander! We've picked up a signal!" He reported, looking at Shen. Shen looked at Don with a raised eyebrow.

"That was...faster than I expected." He admitted. "How long have we been here? It is too easy..." He told his Field Marshal.

"I thought you would be the last to complain about things being easy, Commander. We have had more than enough hard and impossible missions lately." Commented Don.

"True, trueâ€¦ But still." Answered Shen, before turning to the
"Well? Where is our target?" Asked Shen. The Bridge Officer looked at his panel.

"Not far. Very close in fact... We can be there in a few hours if we go on full speed." He answered.

"So be it." Nodded Shen, as he sat down on his chair, bracing himself as the ship went full speed into Dark Space.

And sure enough, an hour or three later, they had reached the location of the signal... But it was not what they had expected. "What in the name of...?" Gasped Don with dropped mandibles. But Shen didn't answer. He too was too busy staring at the structure before them.

The structure was gigantic, at least fifteen kilometers in length, with long curved metal arms surrounding a set of revolving, gyroscopic rings five-kilometers across, with a strange dark colour. He couldn't tell whether it was a ship or a station... But what Shen did see was that it appeared to be unfinished. Oh, from the looks of it, most of it was finished. But it wasn't detailed and missed some pieces. It was incomplete... Whatever 'it' was. It actually vaguely reminded him of the shape of an Energy Sword.

"I have absolutely no idea... But I suppose that is what gives the signal, yes?" Answered Shen after a minute or so, as he turned to the bridge officer. The Sangheili navigator looked up at the Supreme Commander and nodded.

"Yes, that is indeed what appears to sending out the signal the Hierarchs described." He answered, moving out of the way so that the Supreme Commander and Field Marshal could see the screen. And indeed, the structure appeared to be transmitting a signal in all directions, deep into the fringes of space.

"Get us closer!" Ordered Shen. "Perhaps then we can figure out more... Perhaps we can even land on it, if it is a space station... And if it is a ship, we may be able to take control of it." He said. The bridge officer nodded, as he gave the signal to the creatures that were responsible for the movement of the ship to fly towards the structure.

"Do you think it could be something of the Forerunners?" Questioned Don. Shen shrugged as a sign that he didn't know.

"Not sure... The curves seem right, and its shape overall seems to resemble what the Forerunners build... But the colour... Forerunner structures usually vary from white to silver. This is almost blue... I have no idea what it is." He said, shaking his head.

Don was about to reply, when the bridge officer interrupted. "Commander! Something is happening!" He said, as he looked up from the screen. Shen frowned and jumped out of the chair, making his way towards the panel.

"What is it?" Shen didn't have time to finish, as an alarm was suddenly heard throughout the Frigate. "What is happening?" Demanded Shen.
The officer checked his panels and looked up. "We're in some sort of gravity field! A tractor beam of some sort is dragging us to the structure!" He reported. And with that, something unexpected happened. The centre of the rings suddenly spat out blue electrical currents like lightning and brightened the space around them. Shen's eyes widened and he looked at Don.

"What in the name of..." But before he could speak, the entire ship began to shake violently as the lights went on and off and repeated the rhythm over and over again. At that moment, even the artificial gravity control gave out and the creatures within the ship and their belongings all flew up with startled cries. Shen swatted away a shrieking Unggoy to the side in order to 'fly' forward to the window of the bridge. "Officer! Get us out of here!" He demanded.

The Bridge Officer, who desperately tried to keep a hold to his holopanel, yelped as he floated away. "It's no use Commander! Whatever it is! It is too strong!" He said.

Shen growled loudly and tried to make his way towards the control panels...Which might have worked, if it wasn't for the fact a large weapon box struck against him hard from above, right on his head. The Sangheili, taken by surprise, immediately fell on the ground. Slowly, everything turned black...

And because of that, the Commander didn't notice how the ship eventually reached the core of the structure, where the fire did not destroy them. Instead, it shot them at high speed to Forerunners knows where...

* * *

"Shen...Shen...Wake up!" Called a voice, as said Sangheili felt a slap in his face. Shen grumbled and slowly opened his golden eyes, as his vision became more clear. In front of him, his ever loyal Field Marshal floated. "Are you alright, Shen?" Asked the other Sangheili.

"I...I think so..." Groaned Shen, as he placed a claw on his aching head. "What happened?" He asked, as he looked about his surroundings. They were still at the bridge, with several creatures trying to reach the control panels. The gravity still wasn't working and the lights seemed to have given up as well, as the creatures of the Covenant ship floated around in semi-darkness.

"That...thing, whatever it was...It sucked us in. We suspected it may have been some sort of primitive teleportation device. Instead of opening a Slipspace portal it just...Shot us off to here, I guess." Answered Don.

"And where is 'here', exactly?" Questioned Shen, as he raised himself up.

"We have no idea" Said Don. "While you were out, I talked with one of the Bridge Officers. The coordinates are entirely unknown. We are definitely not in Covenant Space...I am not even sure if we are in our galaxy anymore."

"Not in our...How is that possible? Slipspace isn't suited for safe
intergalactic travel!" Protested Shen.

"This is Forerunner technology: Even their most primitive tools are divine compared to ours. They were capable of intergalactic travel, all creatures of the Covenant know that...Besides, you can hardly call this 'safe'. The structure was damaged."

"Then we need to figure out where we are...But first, let's focus on our current situation. The power and gravity... Have you already sent some Huragok out to fix it?" He asked.

Don nodded. "Three Huragok, accompanied by some Sangheili and Kig-Yar, have been sent to it about a unit or two ago. They should be finished right about..." At that moment, the lights went on again and the gravity control, as was evident by the yelps of startled creatures as they landed hard on the ground. "...Now." Muttered Don as he laid flat on the floor.

Shen groaned and stood up, rubbing his head. He looked out of the bridge window, into space. He could see what one would expect if they looked out of a window in space: Stars, planets, asteroids and more. But while it seemed so familiar, it also seemed...different, somehow. Shen felt like he was an intruder, like he was somewhere he wasn't supposed to be...And he didn't like that feeling one tiny bit.

"Get the panels to work, and send out scouts to see if we can determine where the Forerunner device send us. And try to get in contact with another Covenant ship, doesn't matter what kind. For all I care, its Shipmaster can be an Unggoy." he said, as he turned to Don.

The Field Marshal nodded. "Of course, Commander..."

***

>>p>>Captain Tannor rubbed his tired eyes, groaning as he glanced at the datapad in his hands. He didn't like reports from scouting vessels. They only brought bad news.<p>

Well, considering that the galaxy had been in all-consuming warfare almost a year ago, it wasn't exactly _that_ bad considering. Tannor remembered when he had been active during the Reaper War, how every report had been about casualties in the thousands, how the enemy dominated almost every known sector of the galaxy. It hadn't been pretty, and his ship had not come out lightly because of it.

But damn it if Tannor wasn't happy by the fact that his ship had also been one of the few that had still been space-worthy at the end of the war. His old girl _The Morning-Star_ hadn't even needed to go into the repair shops. The Frigate had been mainly used for troop deployment during the war, but he still considered it a proud achievement that his ship and his crew had managed to somehow make it through.

But that didn't mean the old girl had been untouched. Her thrusters had been clanging, panels had been torn, dents adorned the sides and the ship shuddered whenever she went into FTL drive for too long. No doubt about it, _The Morning Star_ was in need of a tune up now, and Tannor intended to do so as soon as they made port. But they just needed to finish up scouting this sector before they could do
Tannor had been surprised when scouts had told him of a Mass Relay that had just been finished in its restoration. They were at the very edge of the galaxy out here, dark space surrounding them in a very unnerving way as the black expanse seemed to loom around the ship. Tannor would have done a quick sweep and gotten the hell out of the creepy sector, but Alliance Command wanted a full analysis done of all sections of space, to look for survivors adrift or any sign of trouble. Despite the fact that Commander Shepard, the Council and Alliance Command said that the Reapers were destroyed completely, it still didn't hurt to be careful.

"Captain," Came the voice of Tannor's pilot, Mr Fergson, through the speakers lining the Mess Hall. "You're needed on the bridge."

"What is it now?" Tannor snapped grumpily as he sipped his coffee, trying to will the headache behind his eyes to dissipate.

"We've encountered an alien vessel, sir," Fergson's voice was a little worried, but Tannor thought nothing of it as the pilot was one jumpy son of a bitch.

"The galaxy's full of aliens, Fergson." Tannor grumbled. "Could you be more specific?"

"I can't sirâ€¦ It's an unknown vessel." Fergson's words made Tannor stop mid-sip. He slowly placed his mug down, abandoning his reports as he quickly marched out of the Mess Hall and towards the bridge.

"I'm on my way." He stated calmly.

When he reached the bridge, he stood behind the Pilot's chair, the blonde pilot in front of him rapidly hitting buttons on his displays nervously as he allowed them to drift through space. Tannor looked out of the window in front of them, eyes narrowing at what he saw.

A huge ship, sleek and curved lay still just a short distance away from the Mass Relay. It was clearly unknown, as Tannor had never seen its make or design before, nor did he recognise the colours it bore. The ship seemed to be offline as it simply sat without any indication of life. But it was very close to the Mass Relay, implying that there was more direct involvement with the massive artefact then there should have been. Humanity had learned the lesson of not touching Mass Relays the hard way, when the Turians had punished them for it by going to war with them. Tannor could feel the nervous air from his crew, and decided to take action.

"Are our shields operational?" He asked aloud.

"Yes sir." Said Specialist Fowler, their head 'tech geek' as the rest of the crew affectionately called her.

"Good. But let's not appear hostile. Can we establish a line of communication with the ship?" He asked.

"Yes sir, just â€”" But no sooner had Fergson said the words, then the speakers suddenly blared as a voice blasted into the ship.
It was a deep snarling voice, roughly spoken in words that sounded like they were pronounced like Japanese words, but it was as if a monster of some description was saying them. The crew of the _Morning Star_ immediately tensed, some even reaching for their guns at their belts. But no one broke their cool. Tannor had instilled discipline into them far too many times for them to break their cover now. After a while there was a pause, before the voice started again, seeming to repeat the same words, even if Tannor nor anyone else could understand a word they were saying.

This was disturbing on many levels. The translators in their omni-tools were equipped with every dialect of every language in the galaxy, they could even understand the Yarg and their brutal guttural tongue. But thisâ€¦ the translators were utterly scrambled with this.

"Unidentified vessel, this is Captain Tannor of _The Morning Star_ of the Alliance Navy." Captain Tannor spoke with his usual calm and collected voice in what was commonly called his 'ice-king' voice, because he never gave away any emotion in this tone, just strictly disciplined and to the point, and no one knew if they were going to get burned or not in the next moment. "You appear to be interfering with a Mass Relay, breaking Council Space Law. I order you to identify yourselves immediately."

There was a slight pause of silence.

"I repeat: unidentified vessel, this is Captain Tannor of _The Morning Star_ of the Alliance Navy. You are required to back away from the Mass Relay and identify yourselves." Tannor said more forcefully.

And then a voice filled the speakers, different from the first. It was harsh, cruel and sounded utterly ferocious as it snarled through the speakers. It was a voice of powerâ€¦ and danger. Despite the fact that Tannor didn't understand a word that was being said, he knew the threatening tone in the voice as well as the fact that the ship in the distance hadn't moved like he had ordered.

"It sounds like they're threatening usâ€¦" Fergson murmured fearfully.

"Indeed. Prepare to fire." Tannor murmured with narrowed eyes.

"Cannons already ready, sir." Fowler said.

Tannor hoped that he wouldn't need those Reaper-tech weapons upgrades he had denied three weeks back.

"Fire."

* * *

"Commander, we have detected an unknown ship not far from us! Sending the coordinates now!" Reported the bridge officer, typing on one of the few remaining holo-screens. Shen, who had been reading a report about the ship's status, quickly looked up.

"Put it on the holo-tank!" He snapped, laying the datapad down.
The officer nodded and began to rapidly press the buttons on the screen and the holo-tank, which was located in the middle of the room, displayed a hologram of the vessel. It was smaller than his own Frigate, about three hundred meters he thought. Its design was also much different from his own. It didn't have the elegant, almost organic curves most Covenant vessels possessed. Instead, it was flat with a large hump-like structure on it, with a large weapon clearly attached. The ship's front was also split in two, and each tip also had what seemed like a weapon on it. Whatever it was, it wasn't a Covenant vessel.

Shen's eyes widened, the only thing that gave away his excitement as he studied the hologram. They had only been in this new galaxy for a day, yet they had already made contact with an alien vessel! He quickly tried to recall everything he was taught about situations like this. Expect hostility, do not give anything away in case of capture, do not show weakness...That was all he could remember, really. The discovery of a new species hadn't really been covered in detail, and truth be told, he didn't pay much attention when it was told to him. Besides, it had been years ago. But more importantly, Shen simply thought he would never be in a situation like this. The Covenant Empire controlled almost the entire galaxy, and most known sapient species they had discovered were already forced into their ranks. If there were any more species out there that could be a significant threat to the empire, they would have been discovered a long time ago...Then again, the scenario of being flung into an entirely new galaxy by an unknown alien relic was never really covered either.

"Try to make contact with it." Ordered Shen, before the doors opened and Don walked in.

"What is going on?" He asked, walking up to the Commander. Shen quickly briefed the Field Marshal, who had a similar reaction. "Maybe we should inform the Hierarchs." Pondered Don. "I am sure they will be interested with this discovery."

"I agree." Nodded Shen. "But we cannot contact them right now. Everything's jammed. So we're on our own...for now." He said, turning towards the officer. "Have we established contact with the aliens yet?" He asked.

The bridge officer nodded. "Yes, Commander...But I cannot understand a word they're saying." He reported, pressing a button and a voice filled the room. And as the bridge officer had predicted, they had no idea what they were saying. The voice was much lighter than that of a Sangheili or a Jiralhanea, but deeper than that of a Kig-Yar or Unggoy. It actually slightly reminded Shen of a San'Shyuum.

"Link me to their comms." Ordered Shen, and the officer immediately did so. Shen cleared his throat and began to speak. "Aliens, am I Shen 'Kongmengee, Supreme Commander of the Fleet of Justified Vengeance of the Covenant Empire. Surrender now and you will have my word none of you shall be harmed. However, if you choose to fight us I promise we will show no mercy!" He said forcefully. He was aware he was representing the Covenant against this unknown species, and he wanted to be sure they wouldn't think of their empire as weak.
For a while nothing happened...Then, a small explosion could be seen near the ship's cannons and they fired something at the Frigate, and the alarm sounded once again as the ship shook slightly. "How bad is it?" Snapped Shen at Don, who was checking one of the panels.

"It could have been worse. We managed to get our energy shields online, so the damage is minimal. They luckily did not fire at our weak spots... Otherwise, we might have done more than shake a bit." He reported.

"I see... What about our weapons? Are they online?" Asked Shen, not taking his eyes off of the vessel.

Don checked again and nodded. "Yes, but only the Plasma Turrets. The Pulse Lasers are still offline." He answered.

Shen nodded and spoke again through the comms, to the vessel. "So be it then... You have challenged our might and majesty, and you shall now pay the price for it. You're destruction is the will of the Gods... And we are their instruments." He said, before looking at the bridge officer. "Activate the Turrets." He ordered.

The officer nodded and started pressing several buttons on the screen. A few seconds later, the three turrets at the front of the ship started to glow red, like the eyes of an angry monster. From a distance, one could think they actually looked like spikes. "Ready to fire!" said the officer, and looked at Shen.

The Supreme Commander nodded. "Fire." he confirmed, and pressed a button. Immediately, the turrets lit up even more and three red lasers were shot at the alien vessel, all three hitting it precisely. Shen knew from experience that the first hit would most likely overload their shields, if they had those. The second would severely damage them. And the third, if aimed well... would destroy them.

* * *

>>Tannor staggered through the ship, clutching his side from where the pains of his burns made every step agony. He could hear the screams of what was left of his crew as everyone tried to make it to the escape shuttles. But it was no use and Tannor knew it.

He still didn't understand how it all fell apart so fast. He had given the order to open fire, but when the unknown ship retaliated, within those first three blasts, his ship had been in flames and half of it completely destroyed! Tannor didn't know who these aliens were or what they wanted, but he did know that he needed to warn the Alliance and the Council, because this was most certainly a threat to them all.

He half stumbled-half fell to a station and quickly entered his access code to the computer before he hit the sequence of buttons that would send the call for help. He knew help wouldn't arrive in time, but he still needed to send the message straight to Alliance Command. As the camera flickered to life, he quickly looked into the computer screen as he began the recording.

"This is Captain Tannor of the _Morning Star._" He panted as he tried to breathe through the smoke that was filling his ship from the many raging fires. "We were out patrolling on the fridges of known Council
Space, when we encountered an unidentified vessel beside a newly constructed Mass Relay. When negotiations failed, we opened fire. But they decimated us too quickly! Be warned, this ship is a threat â€“ I repeat, this ship is extremely dangerous! Apprehend it before it reaches known homeworlds!"

And with that, he quickly sent the message.

And the ship burst into one blooming explosion.

End
file.