

The interrogation room was darkly lit, as it always was. Executor Palin had always justified it by saying that the oppressive atmosphere made suspects nervous, making it easier to get information, but Garrus Vakarian had his doubts as to the effectiveness of this theory. In the grand scheme of things it was far more likely that the simple act of being strapped down into a chair, unable to move or even really look away from the interviewing agents was the deciding factor.

In this case the body strapped down belonged to a salarian going by the name of Gish. The interview notes had something longer but Garrus was damned if he was going to remember the whole damn thing. Gish was small even by salarian standards and looked as if he hadn't eaten in weeks, although with the hyper metabolism salarians were known for, he could have been gorging himself at a Fishdog Food Factory a day previous and he wouldn't know.

Garrus sighed and looked over his notes. "Okay, let's try this again. You worked for Dr. Saleon as a lab assistant, but were dismissed two months ago. Why?"

"I already told you, I was hired as a contractor for a specific series of experiments and once that particular project ended I was terminated." Garrus hated interrogating salarians; their body language was all over the place and their speech patterns were so erratic at the best of times that it was almost impossible to recognize a lie without some serious pre-interview research. Fortunately in this case, he had done so.

"See, that's where I have a problem; I spoke to some of your fellow assistants and they claim that the project was still ongoing at the time of your release. Which of course makes me curious. Care to assuage that curiosity?"

Gish continued to fidget, and now he wasn't even trying to make eye contact. Time to make the kill.

"Okay, not feeling like talking. That's fine, how about I just share my theory and you correct me if I make any mistakes. I think your boss, Dr. Saleon, was doing some under-the-table genetic work for some extra credits. Specifically organ cloning. You didn't know about it at first, because he did all of his less savory work at some off-site location. Thing was, he needed some help. Organs need a lot of time and attention when they're vat grown and Saleon's a busy guy; got all those geneticist dinners and conventions to go to, plus he still has to do all his legal research. I'm thinking Saleon finds out you're down on your luck, maybe had some bad luck at the Quasar or you've got some bills to pay. So he brings you in on his little scheme, shows you the cloning lab and puts you to work overseeing the development."

Gish stared at Garrus, looking positively dyspeptic. Garrus couldn't help but allow himself a sense of self-satisfaction at that; this was the part of the job he enjoyed.

"So everything's fine for a while. Saleon gets his organs and you're getting enough to keep you afloat. Only one day you decide you're not going to play ball with the good doctor anymore. Maybe you wanted more credits, maybe you had an attack of conscience when you discovered that Saleon was cloning organs from unwitting people, breaking so many laws that a black marketeering charge would seem like a slap on the wrist. Doesn't matter what it was, you give him an ultimatum. He laughs in your face and throws you out."

"Wh-why would he do that? If I had information on him wouldn't he want to kill me?"

"See, I thought about that, but Saleon's a smart guy. He wouldn't kill you because that would draw attention to him. So much easier to just scrap the current lab and set up shop somewhere else. That way if you ever talked you'd just look like an angry ex-employee as opposed to a whistle blower."

Garrus walked up to the chair and looked Gish straight in the eyes. The salarian was right on the edge of confessing, he knew it, he just needed one more push.

"Here's the deal, Gish. I know Saleon was giving you extra credits for something, which makes you an accomplice in this. How old are you, 19? 20? If I send you to processing, you won't leave prison alive. On the other hand, if you talk to me we can see about reducing the sentence a little, maybe give you a chance at living some kind of life outside a five by five cell. But I need answers, Gish. I need to

know about the lab.”

Gish stared back at Garrus, obviously terrified, but something deep within him still screamed defiance. “There is no lab.” He muttered. “You said it yourself, Saleon moved it.”

Garrus slammed a hand next to Gish's head, missing by centimeters. “Don't play games with me Gish! If you tell me about the lab, what equipment was being used, what kind of power it was using I can start looking for the new one! Now I'm going to ask you again, and if I don't get an answer I want, I will leave this room and you will NOT want to see the people that replace me. WHERE. IS. THE. LAB?”

If Gish could have moved he would have been on the other side of the room, probably covering in a corner. Instead, all he could do was try to get a few inches away from Garrus' fist. “Th-there is no lab.” As he spoke, a slow trickle of blood began to leak from his mouth.

“Oh hell.” Muttered Garrus, quickly pulling away from Gish and looking over at the cameras imbedded within the walls. Of all the times for a suspect to start bleeding. “I'm going to need someone in here.”

A medic was in the interrogation room within a few minutes, but by then Gish's bleeding had escalated to a full torrent, not only from his mouth but his nose too. The medic, a human that Garrus hadn't had the time or inclination to get to know, rushed over to Gish and began pulling out medical supplies. “Alright sir, just relax. I'm here to help you, I just have to do a quick investigation of the-”

“No!” Gish could barely be understood with all the blood coming out of his mouth, but it was obvious what he'd just said as he desperately tried to get away from the medic. “I-I'm fine, just give me some medi-gel and I'll be okay.”

“Medi-gel isn't going to help here, sir, you might have some kind of internal injury.” As he said this the medic looked over at Garrus accusingly, who held up his hands defensively. “I didn't touch him. He just started bleeding.”

“Just let me go! I'll be fine, I just have to-” As Gish continued struggling he began coughing, sending gobs of dried blood and phlegm across the room, leaving green smears across the dark paneling.

“Maintenance is going to love that.” Muttered Garrus, approaching the interrogation chair gingerly. “Is there anything I can do to help, doc?”

Gish continued to struggle and now the medic had given up trying to be gentle and was now trying to physically restrain him, but the small salarian was disturbingly strong, bucking and writhing in a desperate attempt to be free of his bindings, all the while continuing to bleed even more profusely, staining the cold metal of the chair. “Help me hold him down! If he struggles any more he's going to do even more damage!”

Without needing any further explanation Garrus threw himself onto Gish, using his weight and strength to hold the salarian prone. It only lasted a few seconds however as Gish's knee lifted up just enough to clock Garrus in the jaw, disorienting him for a second. Those few seconds were enough however as the medic had been able to inject Gish with a sedative and almost immediately the salarian fell limp.

“Nicely done, doc.” Garrus groaned, rubbing his jaw gingerly. “Is he going to be okay?”

The medic did a quick once over of Gish, then looked up at Garrus. “No, he's not. He's dead.”

For all the red tape that C-Sec suffered from, the one thing they did quickly was internal investigations. The running joke in the canteen was that Officer Harkin was the driving force behind it, as he'd been suspended so many times that they'd worked the process down to a streamlined art form. Only two days after the Gish incident Garrus was back on duty but medical examinations took time and the examination on Gish's corpse wasn't finished by the time his shift ended. Patience was something Garrus had never cultivated in his time with C-Sec, but there was only so many times one could request an update before someone started getting irritated, so he finally decided to clock out and try to get some

sleep.

Garrus' apartment wasn't exactly what one would call upscale, but it suited his needs well enough and the landlady wasn't too pushy with the rent. The turian aesthetic (or lack of one) was readily apparent, with efficiency taking priority over comfort. *One of these days I'm actually going to get a bed.* Garrus thought to himself as he stepped across the threshold and stared at the thin mattress tucked into a corner of the spartan room. Today wasn't that day however and he walked over to his extranet terminal.

As the screen blinked to life he noticed he had a couple messages and while he waited for the connection queue to cycle through he loaded up the first one. An attractive female turian with a long and pointed fringe appeared on the screen, and almost immediately Garrus moved to delete the message. He was slightly too late however and she began talking.

"Uh, hi Garrus, it's Irana. Look, I get it, you're a really busy guy, out there saving the galaxy and all that, but the least you could do is call me. I mean, it's not a big deal, it was only one date but I thought maybe we had something. I guess not, so have a nice life and all that."

Garrus sighed and deleted the message. Irana's face was quickly replaced by another female turian, although this one was far more welcome.

"Hey Garrus, it's Sol. I'm not exactly surprised you're not there, but I could really talk to someone. Mom's been acting really weird lately; forgetting things and thinking she's somewhere else. I tried talking to dad, but you know what he's like. We're going to the doctor next week, hopefully it's just age catching up to her and they can give her a cognitive booster or something and everything will be fine, but I'd really appreciate it if you called me back. Hope everything's going well on the Citadel."

The message clicked off, leaving behind nothing but the queue notifier, letting him know that he was 27th in line for extranet connection. It didn't really matter, as he hadn't actually planned to do anything on the 'net, he'd already done as much research as he could using the priority channels at C-Sec. It was more just force of habit over anything else, from back when he actually talked to people. Not for the first time he wondered if it had been such a good idea going straight into C-Sec as opposed to following up on the Spectre training; at least then he would have a good excuse as to why he'd separated himself from the world, as opposed to simply not wanting to.

A ding alerted him that he'd been moved up the queue to 10th. Well, that was something. With a quick glance at the clock and some quick math he saw that it was still a reasonable time on Palaven, which meant he had more than enough time to talk to his sister. That was something at least, making contact with somebody who wasn't wearing C-Sec blue or strapped to an interrogation chair. As the queue continued to tick down he stood up and headed for the small fridge in his kitchen to grab something to drink, who knew, maybe even something alcoholic?

Before he opened the fridge however his personal comms went off and before even screening it he activated it. "Vakarian."

"Officer Vakarian? This is Medical Officer Mantrus. We found something you might want to take a look at."

"I'll be right there."

Without missing a beat Garrus was heading out the door, all thoughts of family or relationships or outside contact gone. The only remaining evidence that he'd even been in the apartment was the monitor, pinging him to inform him that he was now connected to the extranet.

The C-Sec medical center was cold and smelled slightly of disinfectant, as one would expect from any location where one dealt with organic tissue. The fact that it was on the Citadel made it feel even more sanitized, what with the spartan bulkheads and recycled air that made up the whole station. The salarian medic that met Garrus, MO Mantrus, was still dressed in medical scrubs when he met him and had a look about him that belied a nervousness that went beyond the usual salarian hyperactivity. "Thank you for meeting me so quickly, officer, there has been an unusual development with your

body.”

“You mentioned. Can you tell me about it?”

“Better I show you, it's just over here.” Mantrus indicated a small room off to the side, apparently one of many autopsy theaters. Without another word the medic started walking and Garrus followed.

As they entered the room Garrus saw the body of Gish, his torso covered by a plain sheet leaving his head exposed. The dried blood had been washed off, but the sight of his pale face, dead eyes staring out into nothingness still made Garrus shiver slightly. He'd seen the dead before, but very rarely did he see them in such clinical surroundings.

“I would have called you sooner, but as I'm sure you're aware we have many examinations to do and only so many hours in the day. Besides, it's not like he's going anywhere.” Mantrus chuckled slightly at his joke, although it was so old hat it was probably more out of habit than any actual humor. At Garrus' lack of response, the medic walked over to the body and pulled away the sheet, revealing the rest of Gish's corpse. As Garrus approached, his sense of revulsion grew immediately as he saw what it was that Mantrus had referred to as a 'sudden development'.

Across the entirety of Gish's body were scars, crisscrossing his torso like some demented turian line artist had a field day on his flesh. Some were older, more simply lines in the skin while others could have been no more than a few months old. The newer ones were far nastier as well, as if whoever had decided to cut Gish up had been in a hurry, without the clean simple cuts of the older ones. “What...what was it?” he asked, staring at the gruesome display in front of him, “Some kind of ritual scarification?”

Mantrus shook his head. “No, these are surgical. Someone repeatedly cut into him and then stitched him back up over the course of at least a year, if not longer. I can have definitive times in the next couple days but I felt you would want to know about this quickly.”

“Why would someone do this?”

“Ah, now that I can tell you definitively.” Mantrus looked almost giddy as he walked over to a diagnostic scanner and pulled up a readout onto the screen. As the holographic generator booted up, Garrus stared in shock as he saw the internal scans of Gith's corpse. Externally, aside from the scars, Gish looked perfectly normal. Internally however was another matter. At first he thought he was looking at massive tumors riddling the dead salarians body, but as he looked closer the tumors became something else, something far more disturbing.

“Organs...he was growing organs...within himself?”

“Not very well, apparently. You see this heart?”

“Which one?”

“The one near his pelvis.”

“That's a heart? I thought it was a liver.”

Mantrus looked at Garrus in a manner that reminded him of his old sniper Sergeant as he chastised him for miscalculating for wind. “No, it is a heart, officer. Or it would be if it had developed the proper number of aorta. In fact every one of these organs has some form of deformity in its development, making them completely useless as anything but cooking supplies.”

Garrus ignored the disturbing imagery that comment conjured up and looked back at Gith. “Why would he be growing dud organs within himself?”

“Ah, well, that's the interesting thing; he wasn't. At least, not intentionally. As you can see, the incisions on his body far outnumber the superfluous organs within him, meaning that he very likely grew many working organs that were harvested at some point. These appear to be the failures. In fact, if you do some basic spacial reconstruction it appears that the...clumsy cuts very likely coincide with the majority of the failed organs you see here.”

Garrus' mind began to race, putting all the pieces together. “There is no lab...”

“No lab? I don't know what you mean, officer, spacial reconstruction is a very easy process, you

can get a program that does it off the extranet.”

“No! I mean, he said there was no lab. I thought he was just stonewalling me, but he was telling the truth! Saleon didn't need a lab to grow the organs, he just used his employees!”

“Living test tubes...a fascinating concept. Unethical to the extremes and far from guaranteed results, but an interesting concept nevertheless...”

“Interesting or not, this is the evidence I need!” Without looking back, Garrus rushed from the medical center, already dialing up C-Sec.

“Sierra one is in position, no sign of target.”

Garrus glanced up at the catwalk above him and silently nodded at the sniper team before readying his pistol. For what the Citadel lacked in conventional cover it lent itself very well for sniper teams, something he'd learned very early on in his C-Sec career. “We sure he's in there?” he asked, looking over at officer Chellick who crouched next to him, his own pistol drawn and armed.

“Went in half an hour ago, hasn't been seen since. Trust me Garrus, the guy's not coming out unless he's in shackles or a body bag.”

Not for the first time, Garrus wished he was up with the snipers instead of on the ground level. Life seemed so much simpler through the lens of a scope as opposed to the chaos and ambiguity of actual investigations. Still, this was what he'd signed up for and he wasn't about to start pining for some other life when he had a scumbag to take down and clearance from his superiors to do so. “Alright everybody, on three we're going in. Try to take Saleon alive, but if he shows resistance don't be afraid to use force. Sierra, you are greenlit.”

“Roger.” came back Sierra's reply, accompanied by the telltale sound of a sniper rifle activating and expanding.

“One...Two...Three!” As he said the last number Garrus charged out of cover, weapon aimed ahead and head on a swivel just as they'd taught him back in basic with Chellick right behind him. Comm chatter reassured him that the other assault teams were en route to their locations to prevent Saleon escaping through a back entrance. With well-honed precision he took cover behind the door frame and slammed a fist onto the door's control panel, opening the door with a mechanical hiss.

“Not quite as effective as kicking it in, but it will do.” Chellick was on the other side of the door from Garrus, ready to move on the order. With a nod, the two of them rolled out, covering each other as they breached the lab, ready for any opposition.

Except there wasn't any. The lab sat empty aside from a few terminals and other scientific equipment that Garrus didn't recognize, but was sure Mantrus would have had a field day with. “Main lab is clear.” he said, continuing his sweep while Chellick split off to search the other side. “Stay frosty, he might be lying in ambush.”

“I've got a corpse here, Garrus.” Chellick's voice crackled over the comms, startling Garrus slightly. “Salarian; gunshot to the head.”

“Is it Saleon?” Garrus couldn't help but hide the excitement in his voice. It wouldn't be as satisfying as pulling the trigger himself but at least the monster would be dead.

“Negative, looks like one of his lab assistants. I've got a couple more here too, looks like there was some sort of struggle.”

The lab was obviously clear, which meant that there was only one place left to check; Saleon's office. With a deep breath, Garrus readied his weapon again and opened the door, hoping his kinetic barriers withstood the first shot he was expecting.

Instead he found the office empty, no Saleon, no hiding assistants, just a plastic desk and terminal. “Chellick, you found anything?”

“Negative Garrus, this side's completely clear, what's this?”

“What is it? You find something?”

“Not something you're going to like. It's an access panel, leads to the maintenance ducts

between wards.”

“What? I thought we had the building covered!”

“So did I. Somebody must have missed the hatch, or maybe Saleon doctored the records.”

Garrus cursed and began heading for Chellick's position. No way in hell was he going to let Saleon get away like this. “Get that hatch open, Chellick, we're going after him.”

“Sounds good to me, let's bring in the other teams to secure the area.”

Garrus was about to do so when he suddenly noticed a blinking light on one of the monitors, indicating it was still online. Stopping, he headed over to the terminal; maybe it had some kind of clue as to where Saleon was going.

As he activated the terminal however, that hope was quickly dashed as he read the status update that the machine had been trying to notify Dr. Saleon about, namely that the lab generator was overclocked and was past the point of bypassing. Any second now the generator would go critical, blowing everything in the lab sky high.

“Chellick! Get in the hatch! Saleon's rigged this place to blow!” Garrus began running, hoping that he'd caught the notification before it was too late.

It seemed like an eternity, but only a few seconds passed as Garrus ran from the lab to where Chellick was waiting for him. Without a pause the two of them wrenched open the hatch and dove inside, the panel falling after them and barely missing Garrus' ankle. For a moment all was quiet, then a thundering explosion rocked the walls around them, throwing them against the bulkheads painfully.

As the smoke cleared, Garrus struggled to his feet. Chellick lay prone, still alive but unconscious or at least stunned. Garrus had no time to check on him, as Saleon already had enough of a head start. “This is Vakarian, Chellick and I are alive, I am proceeding alone after the suspect.” Without waiting for a response he started down the small duct, the sound of his running feet the only company in the oppressive hallways of the Citadel's inner workings.

Garrus was starting to worry that he was lost. Every new duct section looked exactly like the previous one with the only difference being the sounds coming from the various ducts and grilles. Occasionally he even came across a crossroads of ducts that had nearly caused him to stray away from his direct objective, but something kept pushing him to go straight. Onwards he pushed, hoping, praying that he would catch sight of Saleon, but his prayers remained unanswered. Every new turn just turned up more ducts and the one time he tried turning on his visors thermal imaging the background heat of the ducts masked any residual heat Saleon might have left behind.

Still he drove on, no longer sure of where to go, only sure that he had to keep moving, keep hunting. Saleon would pay for his crimes and the dead needed someone to speak for them. As nobody else seemed available, Garrus seemed to be the default choice for their justice. He turned another corner, and once again the complete lack of Saleon was apparent. The duct wasn't empty however; a prone body lay on the ground, a dark red pool forming around its crumpled form. In a morbid sense of triumph Garrus rushed to the body; here was proof he hadn't lost his prey at one of the intersections, the bloodstained lab coat was proof of that. The body was that of a human, clearly dead. This one hadn't given up without a fight however, as evidenced by the multiple rounds that had penetrated his body.

Garrus was about to stand and continue in his hunt when he noticed something else; along with the red blood there was also a small spattering of green blood; salarian blood. He took a closer look, then looked out at the duct floors. Yes. Yes, somebody was bleeding and leaving a trail. Could it have been Saleon? Whoever it was didn't matter, there was a trail to follow now. Garrus readied his weapon and began moving again. The twisted bastard couldn't escape him now.

The trail finally stopped at an access hatchway which hadn't even been locked, much to Garrus' appreciation. It would have been a depressing end to this whole affair if he'd been stymied by a locked door, as opposed to the myriad of other obstacles he'd had to overcome to get this far. Pushing it open

he was shocked to see what awaited him on the other side. Instead of some rundown section of the wards or even an isolated warehouse he found himself on a small catwalk connecting pieces of the ward arm superstructure together. Nobody would come out here except for maintenance workers, as aside from the mass effect fields providing atmosphere and gravity, this area was completely exposed to the void of space. Nobody, that is, except for Dr. Saleon and a desperate group of individuals being loaded onto a short-jump shuttle by the good doctor himself at gunpoint.

Without missing a beat Garrus leaped out onto the catwalk, aiming his gun at Saleon. "Citadel Security! Drop your weapon and give yourself up doctor!"

The doctor froze upon hearing Garrus, then regained his composure and swiftly brought up his own pistol, firing wildly at Garrus as he continued to herd his captives into the shuttle. The rounds bounced harmlessly off of Garrus' kinetic barriers, but the kinetic force knocked him off balance slightly, causing his own shot to go wide and hit the shuttle, leaving a large scorch mark but little more than surface damage.

Garrus steadied himself and tried to draw a bead on Saleon again, but now the salarian had a hostage in front of him, using them as a shield. "Don't even think about it, C-Sec!" He shouted, jamming the barrel of his gun against his captive's head. "You take one more step, I pull the trigger and that's another death on your hands!"

Garrus didn't give a damn anymore, if Saleon's hostages were anything like Gish then they were all dead anyways, it was only a matter of time. Carefully he took aim, letting his visor zoom in for him and give him a solid targeting solution. Finally he had the shot, but just as he prepared to pull the trigger Saleon stepped onto the shuttle and with a cruel little grin pulled the trigger first. The hostage crumpled to the ground as bits of skull and gray matter floated off into the purple haze of the Serpent Nebula, and Garrus could only watch as Saleon closed the shuttle hatch, leaving him safe from any further reprisals from Garrus.

The Citadel on the other hand, they could still do something. As the shuttle began to pull away, Garrus flipped on his comms again. "Citadel Defense, this is Officer Vakarian. There is a rogue shuttle heading towards the mass relay from ward arm 3, I need it disabled immediately!"

"Belay that order, Citadel Defense." The controlled voice of Executor Palin came in over the comms, leaving Garrus speechless. Why was the Executor protecting this monster? "The shuttle has hostages aboard and has minimal shielding; a disabling shot could destroy the whole thing."

"Executor, those hostages are as good as dead as it is! I watched Saleon shoot one of them right in front of me!"

"Forget it Garrus, I won't allow you or anybody under my command to knowingly kill civilians. Let it go."

"Civilians *are* going to die Palin! Those people-"

"Those people would want to know that we tried to save them, officer, and I'm not going to sacrifice them just to kill one man. Stand down."

"I-I...understood sir." Garrus muttered, staring after the shuttle as it sped off into the nebula. "You run, you bastard. I'll find you. And then I'll make you pay for what you've done..."