The Machine God

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Summary

The year is 2191 CE and the future is bright. The legendary hero John Shepard saved the galaxy's many people from extinction a mere 5 years ago, and the formerly genocidal synthetic monsters - Reapers - are helping to rebuild all which was lost, their collective knowledge and power propelling the organic races into heights never before imagined. The people Shepard left behind, his friends, his comrades, the people of the Normandy all mourn him and try to uphold the legacy the man stood for.

All the while, The Illusive Man's favourite assassin Kai Leng rots in a maximum security prison, having found no success at escaping his solitary cell. Until one night, the doors simply open, and he is whisked away by a strange man who calls himself "Knight". It quickly becomes apparent Knight has a personal grudge against the ex-agent, and knows him far too well, while Leng can't recall ever meeting his dubious savior.

A different kind of prison awaits Cerberus' favourite hound, where control, and the lack of it, are the real cage.

Notes

English is not my native language. I will update the tags as the story progresses.

Chapter 1

They called it “The Pit”. A fitting name for the most secure galactic prison in the known universe. Allegedly. Since the end of the War, the rebuilding efforts moved at an unprecedented speed, with the Citadel being nearly fully finished, and even improved with some new perks. Easy to glue things back together when you had the entire Reaper force at your disposal, on top of their collective knowledge and technology. The Pit was one of such additions.

A technological marvel, it was a fortress that could change its layout according to the warden’s wishes. Not a soul was to ever escape this labyrinthine maze; the prison becoming their forever hell. Afterall, only the worst of the worst ended up here, which meant life sentences. They were there to rot, and to be reminded of it every single day.

He lost count some time ago. It could have been a month, or a year. Who knew. The galaxy’s infamous Cerberus assassin was initially moved from prison to prison, as no one could agree on where he belonged, or which prison could hold him with no risk of a possible escape.

Kai Leng had to give it to the Alliance, they seemed adamant on keeping him, humanity’s infamous traitor, and fought long and hard to get him under their jurisdiction. He used to be a N7 agent, after all. A human, the most elite of the elite that humanity could offer, and he still turned to Cerberus. Funny how things turned out. Controlling the Reapers and using them to advance humanity had been the Cerberus agenda seemingly forever, and now others got to enjoy the benefits, while he and his fellow agents who paved the way were regarded as lesser than dirt. If the Alliance had listened to The Illusive Man, they would have been calling the shots, but no, they wanted to play nice, and now they could not even get the hands on their own species’ “greatest betrayer”.

Living one, anyway. They had no one else, no other scapegoat from the actually important Cerberus leaders and agents, so he got the dubious honor of enabling the Council members to pat themselves on the back for serving “justice”.

The former assassin would have preferred being taken by the Alliance. Rather be kept as a caged animal by his own kind, than being incinerated and watched over by a plethora of aliens. For no matter the humans’ outrage and fervor, that was a battle the humanity did not win. The Council had a final say and here he was, in the Pit.

And even then, no matter how atrocious the normal Pit experience was, it paled in comparison to the solitary cells. The bravest, the most battle-hardened and the cruelest criminals became as meek as a sheep, when the threat of being in one of those was even suggested as a punishment.

He got dropped into one soon after his arrival and hadn’t left it since. In a twisted way, he was almost proud of being deemed that dangerous and special. Leng clung to the spite, to the anger, the only things keeping him sane here.

Initially, the man scoffed at the idea of letting it affect him. He used to be the best of the best. He was best of the best. Until Shepard showed up. The man was a freak of nature, an impossibility. Unprecedented. If the Illusive Man or the Reapers could not stop whatever Shepard was, how could he?

Days blurred together. He missed the simplicity of working for the Illusive Man. Clear goals and missions. When the Reaper enhancements got installed into him, it became even simpler. No pesky emotions to get in the way. He was simply a weapon, a tool. Precise and deadly.

Silence, near darkness, solitude, those were his only companions nowadays, with the occasional food drop. No goal or purpose. Before, in his glory days, none of that would have had affected him. Now, he could feel it slowly chipping away at his mind and body. It did not matter; he tried telling himself. He had to remain strong. He would use the time to plan his escape, right from under their noses.

When he made no progress on that front, he turned to mocking the guards. They were so easily baited, it made him laugh while they rained blows upon him. He was ruined and rebuilt before; this was nothing. The augments were missed, however. If only he had them, Leng would have escaped like a ghost ages ago. As it stood, only the legs remained. And of course nothing would change the eerie, machine-like appearance of his eyes. At least they did not leave him crippled, he supposed. Except that time, of course. They took his legs, and the food away for a week, maybe? A definite low point. The ex-Cerberus agent despised them for it, and himself even more for the weakness. How easily they could cow him, because of those damned legs. He stopped with the little rebellions and behaved afterward, all the while gritting his teeth.

Some nights, when sleep would not come, and the darkness loomed more oppressively than usual, Leng almost wished Shepard had killed him during their fight, back in Cerberus' Headquarters. Instead, the Hero of the Galaxy, the Savior of the Citadel declared death to be too good for the likes of him and that they were not finished.

What a joke. The man then died soon after, and Leng was stuck, forgotten. It felt dissatisfying. They were supposed to kill each other, die by the other's hands. He refused to waste away and die of old age, like a pathetic nobody. Thus, he plotted and hoped. His moment would come.

Kai Leng had always been a light sleeper. So, when an out of the ordinary clicking sound briefly interrupted the usual deathly stillness of the night, he took notice. The cell door opened steadily, until it stopped with a soft thud, leaving enough space for a fully grown man to pass through easily. He pushed his overgrown hair away from his face, to get a better look. Cautiously, in utter disbelief, Leng sat up gingerly after a brief moment of deliberation.

Loud, crashing noises erupted near and far. The man started, and quickly got to his feet, swiftly approaching the opened door. Shouts soon mixed in with the mechanical sounds.

Frustration, giddiness, and confusion warred within him. He hadn't left this cell in ages. He didn't know the layout of the prison. This opportunity could be his only chance to get out, but

which way was he supposed to go?

A screen on the nearest wall appeared seemingly out of thin air, disrupting his personal crisis. A single flickering blue arrow pointed somewhere to the left. Leng checked the dark corridor, right and left, and then went the suggested direction. Not like he had a better plan, so might as well see what this was all about. Did some obscure Cerberus agent manage to find him? Did a cell survive?

Another screen appeared, leading him to a wall. Unsure, he stared at the polished white surface, before tapping his fingers against it. With barely a sound, the section slid to the side, revealing a long, narrow passage in its wake.

Fueled by adrenaline, Leng rushed through, even as his muscles and body soon began to scream in protest, consequence of years of disuse. While he did exercise every day and tried to keep himself in top condition, both to be always prepared and to pass time, running was never exactly an option within the confines of his tiny cell.

Whenever he encountered a dead end, another section of the wall would move, and a new way forward revealed itself. Section by section, he was getting… somewhere. He really held onto the hope that this was indeed a genuine attempt to break him out, and not some sick game the warden wanted to play, only to punish him harsher than before for the attempted escape.

One more wall moved, and his lungs drew in fresh air. Leng almost choked, the change unexpected. Frantic, he moved forward and found himself standing on top of a ledge, a thousand, a million of artificial lights as far as eye could see. The Citadel, full of life.

He gripped the ledge hard, seeking to anchor himself. To his horror he felt liquid stream down his face. Furiously, he rubbed at his eyes, all the while taking ragged breaths. Of course, he never stopped believing an escape would be possible, but as time passed, doubts set in. But he got all the way here. He could do this.

Refocusing on the present situation, he looked around. The drop was much too high to try jumping down, unless he wanted to be scraped from the pavement tomorrow. Soft whirring sound interrupted his train of thought, and from the darkness of the night a small, sleek vehicle approached his exact position.

The dark metallic surface of the skycar reflected no light. Similarly, the black, tinted windows allowed no opportunity to discern the identity of the driver. Luckily, Leng did not have to wait long, as the vehicle’s door opened and the brightly lit interior greeted him suddenly, making the former assassin wince.

“Come on, we don’t have much time. Took you longer than I expected. Can’t keep them busy for the entire night,” the driver said with a wink.

Leng’s brow furrowed, scanning the other man’s features, as he tried to place him. The man looked… strong. Dark blue eyes looked right back at the ex-agent. The man’s powerful, clearly muscled arms did not seem to fit well into the leather jacket he was wearing. His blond hair was kept short, and if Leng could trust his instincts, the other man seemed almost

giddy, thrumming his fingers against the skycar's controls, the corners of his mouth twitching slightly. The other was not a Cerberus agent he had ever met before. He would remember someone as imposing.

The driver looked like a handsome and fit man, clearly of military bearing, with an aura of danger about him. A predator. Leng could recognize one at a first glance. He used to be one, after all. In his prime, he would welcome the challenge of testing his own skill against his unexpected savior, later down the line, be it in a friendly match or duel to the death, depending on how events would play out in the future. Those days were in the past, however. It would take him months to get back into shape.

"Who are you? Why are you helping me?" He asked, voice cracking from disuse.

The blond actually smiled then. "Oh, you can call me Knight. Obviously, I know who you are. We have mutual acquaintances."

The man would not break eye contact, steadily staring into Leng's eyes, until the convict wavered first, choosing to look down instead, way below. The chaos of the prison still raged, but for how long?

"We really should go, you know. Unless you prefer the cells that much? All of this took a lot of effort, planning and resources. If you chicken out now, I can't exactly promise to try again soon," Knight mused. "I have a safe house not too far from here. We should be able to lay low, until the heat blows over a bit. I can explain everything to you there."

Leng nodded awkwardly, and climbed into the free seat, still not meeting the other man's gaze, trying to think about the options ahead of him. The door closed, trapping him inside the vehicle. Rigidly, he sat in his seat, looking out the front window, side eyeing the man next to him subtly all the while. Leaving the Citadel as soon as possible and hiding somewhere within the Terminus system seemed the best bet, at least in his view. Probably not on Omega though. After their last attempt to take over the station, Leng did not want to risk running into the Queen of Omega's goons or face her wrath. Hopefully his savior already had some kind of a plan.

Knight finally turned his attention from Leng, thumbed over the controls and the radio blared to life, an electronic beat filling the silence between the two men. The skycar turned toward the city and soon, the prison became a forgotten, dark shape in the distance behind them.

"We are here," said a deep, masculine voice.

Leng jerked awake. Instantly on high alert, he cursed himself for dozing off. The escape must have taken more out of him than he initially realized. Throughout the ride, he kept imagining the different scenario and paths that would be the most plausible for him, and somewhere along the way he must have fallen asleep.

“Put this on, we wouldn’t want to have people asking questions or pay too much attention to you,” Knight continued, presenting a thick, dark visor to Leng. “Your eyes are … striking.”

The brunette did not argue the point and took the visor stiffly. He had no idea what he looked like currently, there were no mirrors in the cell, but the artificially bright blue eyes he obtained as part of his upgrades most definitely remained the same.

“There you go, a completely normal, ordinary man. You could open a store and start selling fish tomorrow, if you wanted to,” the larger man joked, and stepped out of the skycar.

Climbing out as well, Leng checked his surroundings. Graffiti adorned many of the once grey walls, and the local buildings were clearly built from cheap material. The unmistakable feel of the Wards was present; the noise, the filth, the loud music blaring from one of the open windows, all of it. The opulence of the Presidium was a distant dream here.

“I know it’s not the prettiest sight. Easier to stay hidden though, right?” Commented his companion. “Don’t worry, we won’t be out in the streets for long. Not much further.”

Leng wasn’t so sure about the discreetness of their arrival or stay, as already their vehicle was starting to draw attention. The skycar was probably the most expensive thing these people had ever seen. Two men at the end of the street pointed at the sleek machine with no subtlety at all, while clearly having an animated discussion.

Knight summoned his omnitool, typed in a brief command, and the skycar ascended to the air, leaving them stranded on the street. They were too exposed, and Leng felt his skin itch, the noise and chaos of civilization such a stark departure from what his life had been these past few years. A sniper could have taken them out at least a dozen times by now.

“And done. Let’s go,” said Knight, not waiting for Leng’s reply, seemingly oblivious to the brunette’s discomfort. The man’s large frame moved swiftly to one of the nearby alleys. After one more quick sweep of the area, the escaped convict followed.

They passed dubious looking establishments along the way, bright, gauche signs covering much of the walls. Various styles of music played from all directions, all loud and bombastic, mixing into an incomprehensible mess. Leng could feel the incoming headache building up. Some of the local thugs, because that is what they were, large, tattooed, and menacing, gave a curt nod to Knight as they walked by them.

“Friends of yours?” Leng could not help but ask.

The blond shrugged. “I operate in this area, and having local contacts helps. They know only what little information I let slip. Strictly need to know basis. None of them have a clue as to what I have been truly up to lately. Too risky. I am not an idiot. Just keep your head down and stick close to me.”

Only two streets down, the atmosphere changed drastically. Gone was the overwhelming chaos of crowds and overabundance of lights. The place was barely lit up, and aside from one homeless man sleeping under a lump of blankets, the alley seemed deserted.

Leng finally felt like he could breathe a bit. He rubbed a tired hand over his face, before refocusing his attention on Knight. The said man stood in front of a heavy, metallic door, softly tapping on his omnitool. An orange, electronic glow covered the door briefly, before something within the inner mechanisms clicked, and the door opened. The omnitool shut off, and Knight met the brunette's eyes, head tilted toward the entrance.

"Well, welcome to my castle. It's not much, but we should be safe here." Knight disappeared into the depths of the house as he said so.

The escaped convict hesitated briefly, before crossing the threshold as well. The door closed behind him automatically, and a whirring sound confirmed it locked itself.

Leng did not know what to expect from a safe house in a dubious area within the Wards, but his assumption would have been a barebone, strictly functional set up. Instead, luxury oozed out of every inch of the room he found himself in. A penthouse of this quality could have easily been found in the fanciest parts of the presidium. The surfaces were clean, modern. Marble, glass, and slick steel dominated the area, and many paintings hung on the walls. Plants were generously placed around, breathing life to the room, and one of the walls even housed a large aquarium with numerous exotic fish swimming along the fake coral reef built within it.

Lost for words, he turned to Knight, who was watching him silently.

"Pretty, right? Definitely an improvement over your little cell, I'd wager. Though, I could never tell with you Cerberus types. Some of your scientists seemed to have preferred what looked like evil lairs. Lot of cages, force fields. Despair. But I think the Illusive Man would appreciate this. And you were so very loyal to him in particular, no?" Knight's smile was all teeth, his gaze intense.

Cold tendrils of dread began to seep into Leng's body. With a quick glance, he tried to check for a weapon, or an escape route. He had none of his gear, and the years of incineration took a toll on his skills. He was rusty, and out of shape. If this devolved into a fight, odds would not be in his favor.

"Oh, I wouldn't bother. Everything here is directly under my control. I don't think you can comprehend just how literal I am being at this moment, but don't worry. You will understand sooner or later."

"What do you want? Who are you really?" Leng growled. "Alliance, I assume? Wanting to live out your little revenge fantasy, since those big bad aliens took away your chance?"

Knight only shrugged. "I won't lie and pretend those aren't some of the reasons. But only those? That would be much too boring. Too… generic. No, no. See, a long time ago, I would have taken the high road, talked about justice, but somewhere along the way, life has a tendency to change you, make you see how truly rotten the universe is, and you have to adapt to survive," the blond looked almost wistful.

Making the smallest of steps, Leng tried to discreetly put some distance between himself and his opponent. The kitchen was not far, from what he glimpsed. There were bound to be some

knives there. He only had to keep the other man distracted.

“Ah, so no holier than thou speeches coming up? How my powers can be used for good, if only I would be shown the correct path? Shame. Could have used the laugh. What will it be then? Are you going to skewer me like a pig and make me bleed all over your fancy carpets instead?” Asked the former Cerberus agent, teeth bared, looking like a feral animal.

Knight laughed at that. “No, not quite. You see, I am no longer the virtuous hopeful boy scout I used to be, so I can admit this is all very, very personal. Most of the misery in my life can be attributed to your little club. Fortunately for them, they are all dead and gone, beyond my reach. You though… Well, we had something special going on, wouldn’t you say? Seems fitting that it would be just the two of us in the end.”

That made Leng pause for a bit. What in the fuck was the delusional maniac talking about. Again, he was quite sure he would have remembered someone like Knight. He always took note of the dangerous ones. It was the pragmatic way of doing things and surviving in his field of work.

“You don’t recognize me. My, I am hurt. Slightly different appearance, different hair color, and you can’t even take a guess? Organics really are so superficial.” The blonde made a step forward, and Leng immediately bolted, aiming for the kitchen. There, on the counter, laid a knife holder and what a welcome sight it was. He grabbed the biggest knife, sorely mourning the absence of his sword, and he twirled around to face the enemy.

Said man did not seem to be rattled in the slightest. “Oh, fun. I was hoping you wouldn’t make it easy. Say what, I will let you have a shot at taking me down. Afterward, you will have to unfortunately listen to the rest of my monologue, since you see, I worked quite hard on it. And I don’t even like speeches to begin with.”

“Don’t tempt me,” Leng hissed. “Let me out, and this does not have to get ugly.” Under normal circumstances, he would not wish to leave a living witness behind, but in his current condition risking a full-blown fight could cost him dearly.

“Well, that’s new. You, trying out diplomacy instead of going straight for murder. None of your fun little taunts either? Disappointing. I’ll need to get you back into shape. I did notice you lost quite a bit of weight, but I was still hoping… no matter. We have time. All the time in the world, as it stands.” Knight then advanced on him with no hesitation, stride determined.

Leng retreated behind the large kitchen table, keeping it between himself and the taller man, knife clutched tightly in his left hand.

“Look, we don’t have the whole night. Let me tell you what your life is going to be like, starting now. You are going to lie down on the bed I prepared for you, sleep, and then you are going to start your recovery regime. You are going to eat properly, and train as you never had before. I want you in peak condition. And you honestly need a good shave. The scruff on your face doesn’t fit the Kai Leng, Cerberus Assassin look you had going on.”

The ex-assassin wasn't planning on sticking around to play into whatever weird fantasies the clearly deranged man in front of him had, choosing to remain silent, as he tried to calculate in his head if he would be able to throw the knife in a way that would injure the blond from his current position.

Knight's next words made him pause, unexpectedly:" I bet some nights you dreamed about me having killed you instead. Should have taken that silly sword of yours and used it against you, giving you the same death you gave to Thane. Would have been quite poetic, no? I wonder if you even remember him, since you murdered countless others, and probably never spared a single thought for any of them."

Seriously, who the hell was this guy? He spouted the strangest things, some of them too close for comfort. Fuck it, Leng thought and risked it, feigning movement to the right, before dashing to the left instead.

The floor was cold, and hard. Pain exploded in his knees once they crashed against it. Disoriented, the brunette tried to piece together how he got there. He couldn't have been that weak as to crash after a few steps. Knight loomed over him now. What? How? None of it made sense. Messy, loose strands of his dark hair obscured his vision partially. Leng tried to get up, move, speak, anything. Panic and disbelief gripped him, when his legs did not even twitch. Here he was, a prisoner of his own body, yet it had no rational explanation.

The man above him tutted. "All done with your little tantrum? Will you listen now? Not like you have a choice, obviously." Leng's head jerked up, against his own will, gaze firmly locked on the blond.

Said man lowered himself on the floor, right in front of the brunette, a look of barely contained excitement clearly written all over his face. "Sorry, simply enjoying the fruits of my labor. Those Reaper enhancements weren't such a great idea after all, were they? The whole bit regarding control, and all that. You all made yourselves willing puppets. And then forcefully turned those who weren't willing. Not as much fun when used against you, is it?"

All Leng could do was scream and rage internally.

"I had some time to tweak it, as you can see. No sweet whispers, lulling you slowly into doing what I want almost willingly. Your mind will be yours. I want you to know what is happening. As long as you obey my commands, you will have your body autonomy. The moment you try anything funny; those privileges will be gone. And trust me, I will know. I know and see everything these days. So, you can be a good boy and do as I say, which you will hate no doubt, or disobey me, and I will make you do it regardless. Which you will also hate. I am curious to see what you will prefer. You are a spiteful little creature, I am well aware, but I don't see why you would insist on fighting me so hard about having to eat and sleep. It's not entertaining at all, fighting a tired, malnourished man, so until we get you a bit fixed up, you have nothing to fear. After that… well, I am sure both of us would enjoy a rematch. Which you will lose. Again."

Jerkily, like a puppet on strings, Kai Leng stood up. Knight followed soon after, getting almost uncomfortably close to the other man while doing so, his voice lowered to a mere

whisper:” I did tell you death was too good for the likes of you. We were not finished then, and we won’t be, for a very long time.”

A large hand patted Leng’s cheek in a condescending way. “Off to your room now. It was a long day,” Knight said cheerfully. “Follow me.”

And Leng went, powerless to disobey.

Chapter 2

The situation was ridiculous. Leng brooded in the kitchen, while a plate of scrambled eggs prepared just for him rested on the table infuriatingly. He was never as pissed off in his life as he was now, because of a simple breakfast dish. Among other things.

After being dragged to bed as if he was a toddler and given new, clean clothes, he was rudely woken up and then dragged to kitchen to eat. It took him hours to fall asleep, with everything that had happened the previous day to begin with. Obviously, he tried to fight all the bossing around, he would not be told what to do, even if what was asked of him was technically beneficial. Not when it was commanded by some asshole. Who did Knight think he was?

What bothered the former assassin was how did Knight come by all that information. Did someone recover video logs of Shepard's fight in Cerberus' headquarters, to quote precisely what the commander said back then? Fucker was probably messing with him. Shepard was dead. Even the great, big hero was only mortal after all, as evidenced by his first demise at the hands of the Collectors.

Kai Leng played around in his mind with the possibility of the Alliance getting their hands on Cerberus' resurrection technology and the Lazarus project notes. Miranda Lawson, the main figure in bringing Shepard back the first time was still around, from last he heard. But the whole endeavor was done only once, and the costs were astronomical, even for someone like the Illusive Man.

Besides, let's say he would give merit to some of Knight's taunts. Leng's eyes flickered to the blond, who sat inconspicuously at the opposite side of the table, seemingly reading something on his datapad. The man looked nothing like Shepard. The face could be changed, certainly. An extremely easy procedure. Same with the hair color. The commander had been an objectively handsome man; he could admit that to himself. Knight looked like he walked from straight from a modelling photoshoot, his face too perfect, too angular. He had a strong urge to stab that pretty face with his fork. He was getting sidetracked. Back to the point.

On top of all those clear discrepancies, there was the overall fundamentally different build of the man and his bearing. John Shepard was an adept. Fit, certainly, but not this bulked up, and besides, this guy was at least a couple inches taller than the famous commander. What, did the Alliance want their poster boy even more imposing, so they rebuilt him bigger? The eyes were different too. Much darker shade of blue, almost black.

"If you are done staring, I would appreciate you getting started on those eggs," proclaimed the said man, sounding bored.

"Or what? Your attempts at pampering me to death will continue? This is such a stupid revenge plan," Leng sneered. "What was it again? You will force me to eat and sleep and work out, just so you can beat me up. And then nurse me to health again. To beat me up. Will manicure be included as well? In between the beating up sessions?"

“Eat the food. It’s going to happen one way or another, and besides, you do need to eat. Why fight it? I don’t think you appreciate how civil I have been so far.”

“Eat shit.”

Knight simply rolled his eyes, and next thing Leng knew, his hand had utterly betrayed him and grabbed the fork against his will. Unceremoniously, bit by bit, he shoveled cold eggs into his mouth, chewed and swallowed again and again, until the plate was empty.

This was the biggest concern. Did the man simply clean out every bit of important Cerberus intelligence and kept it for himself? They made amazing breakthroughs on Reaper control back on Horizon, sure, but this was different. More precise and targeted. Was Knight the only lucky son of a bitch who somehow got his hands on the technology and had it improved? Was this ability more widespread? He doubted that. If it was so, he would have probably been subjected to it back in prison, he was the prime target to have it tested on.

“Don’t forget your protein shake.”

Unable to respond, his voice cut off, all Leng could do was glare daggers at the infuriating man as he drank the damn shake.

“Go rest in your room. Later, we will start with your training regime. Some light exercise will do you good.” Knight stood up. “Glad we had this talk.” Without further ado, the man simply left the apartment, leaving the baffled ex-agent behind.

Seeing as he had the function of his own limbs back under control, Leng did not feel at all inclined to follow the instructions. For good measure he took the offending emptied plate and threw it on the ground. It crashed with a satisfying sound and splintered, pieces of porcelain flying all over the kitchen.

Adrenaline rushed through him, the feral desire to cause utter chaos and destruction. He barely made a grab for the glass, before his body went rigid in the way that was becoming uncomfortably familiar. He fumed the entire way back to his room.

Of course, the bastard probably had cameras all over the place, he just didn’t expect the man would be monitoring him so closely. Was he going to watch him whole day? Why did he leave then? There had to be some dead zones within the day, when Knight could not keep tabs on him. Furthermore, where did he keep the control device? The Cerberus’ prototype did not have a huge range. Even the Reapers themselves kept their artefacts close to the target zone, to maximize their effects.

He had to get to the bottom of this. There had to be a way to get out, he managed to escape from all manners of sticky situations before. Playing along for a bit, getting back into form should buy him some time. Then, he would strike mercilessly.

Staying in Knight's apartment soon became one of the most boring stakeouts of his entire career, N7 soldier and Cerberus agent both. For long stretches of time, he was simply left to sit around, the only activities expected of him being eating, drinking, and exercising. He made sure to shower twice a day and use as much water as possible, just to be petty.

On the bright side, all thanks to the calendar, he was finally able to find out what year it was. 2191 CE. Whole five years had passed, while he rotted in the Pit. It made him feel more in touch with reality, no longer unmoored from the real world as much as before. Though he could hardly call his current situation living.

Most of the area was off-limits, as he got to experience firsthand. Dire times indeed, when the most exciting form of entertainment was apparently watching fish swim around in an aquarium.

Physically he did feel better though. He could feel some of his old strength returning, despite it being barely two weeks since he arrived in his new little fancy cell. His cheeks definitely looked less gaunt, and he was able to last longer and longer during his exercise sessions.

And every day, without fail, Knight would hover around, not engaging, only silently watching Leng, judging him, forcing him to carry out his commands the moment he hesitated for even a second. Then the man would fuck off to who knows where for the rest of the day.

Annoyingly, the constant push and pull, the fighting, all of it was still the most entertaining part of Kai Leng's day. He wanted to punch the other man's face so badly, his mere sight infuriated him to no end, but at least something was happening. It was fun, trying to think up new, creative ways to get the seemingly stoic man to react. He hadn't had much success on that front. Yet.

The topic of shaving came up again, and Leng immediately refused of course; despite utterly loathing the scruffy beard he was sporting. A cleanly shaved face was part of his identity since he was 16, when he joined the Alliance with a forged ID. On the other hand, he felt an almost primal instinct to contradict the blond on everything.

Knight did not say anything. The only reaction was Leng's body once again moving on its own volition, reaching for the electric shaver and shaving cream. Alright, this was pathetic. He hoped he would at least get a proper razor for this. Not like he would be able to do any damage with it anyway, with Mister Control not allowing him to do anything fun.

Slathering some of the shaving cream on his hands and then spreading it all over his lower face, fury welled up steadily within him. He needed something good, something that would hurt. The man wanted to play at being Shepard? No matter how ridiculous the notion was? Fine. He read the dossiers. If Knight was so invested in Shepard's life, Leng could bite back. Or prove the asshole was lying. Having it out in the open, so they could skip the poor attempts at mind games would be appreciated. He hummed, internally cataloguing his options. He could feel the man standing in the same spot across the room, leaning against the doorframe.

"So… how is that boytoy of yours these days? Alenko, right? Did he still suspect you of being a robot puppet of ours by the time he started fucking you?"

The following silence was deafening. Leng would swear he could almost feel the temperature drop. Nothing to say, huh? Well, there is more where that came from.

Tragically, he did not get to use any of his other genius lines, as Knight crossed the room at an alarming speed, apparently not bothering to punish him at range with one of his little control tricks as was the norm.

Freakishly strong fingers wrapped around his throat like a steel clutch. The blond's face was twisted in rage, barely an inch away from Leng's own. Huh, well look at that. Some reaction this was. His giddiness was mildly set back by the need to fight for air, as he began to choke. Surprisingly, Knight released his control at some point, and Leng clawed at the other man's hands and face, with little to no effect.

"What? Not going to call me slow this time? You really don't learn, do you? As you had experienced first-hand, I did not even need my best to stop you before, and that was with you all juiced up on whatever the hell Cerberus augmented you with." The man's strong hands lifted Leng by the neck, so they were now eye to eye, the former assassin's feet barely being able to touch the ground.

That look of contempt, that pure, unfiltered hatred did something to Leng. In all his years, only one man ever looked at him that way, with such utter loathing. He could see it like it was yesterday, when Shepard loomed over him years ago, with Leng crumpled on the floor, barely able to sit upright, blood oozing from his mouth. The commander looked at him just like this back then, before he knocked him out. The same crease of the brow, the same flaring of nostrils, the gritting of teeth. But primarily, the eyes. The color was different, but somehow the eyes were the same.

A hysterical laugh escaped Leng, reduced to a choked off sound, as the blond's fingers dug into his throat insistently. Dark spots began to swim across his vision, and tears welled up in his eyes involuntarily. It could not stop the irrational swelling of joy. He could feel his own heartbeat in his ears, racing.

Shepard. This was Shepard. It was madness. It was impossible. Yet, it was the truth. He could feel it with every fiber of his being. Shepard was here. That unkillable bastard. His greatest foe, his rival. The man came back from the dead, just to punish him. He did not return to the masses that would be overjoyed at his return. He did not go live out his days with his friends, family, or his lover. The man prioritized plotting out and executing a complicated prison break, just for Leng. Just for this obsessive hatred Leng now knew he and Shepard shared.

It was all too much, he felt hot all over, the excitement over his realization, inability to draw breath, the other man's proximity, and the physical contact… Cut off from oxygen, he could not finish the thought of when was the last time he was this close to another person, when suddenly the hands grasping his throat disappeared just as suddenly as they initially appeared.

Without the blond holding him up, Leng unceremoniously dropped to the ground, nearly splitting his head on the marble floor, which was prevented at the last moment only by his left hand, leg, and hip taking the brunt of the damage as he twisted around while falling. He wheezed, drawing in mouthfuls of air.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!” Yelled Knight. Shepard.

Disoriented, Leng lifted his gaze with some effort to look at the commander. He expected the anger; the disgust was a bit of a surprise. And the disbelief. Why would Shepard be incredulous over Leng’s taunts? He had been nothing but combative since he got here, and taunting the commander used to be one of his favorite pastimes, while the war was happening. And this was not even among the top ten worst things he did directly, or indirectly to the man.

It took him a second or two to reorient himself. His throat felt scratchy. His entire left side hurt like a bitch. He also really needed a haircut. The hair was getting into his eyes and in this specific situation he found it extremely infuriating. Oh, and he was…

He froze. Panicked, he looked at Shepard again. The two men stared at each other, both clearly shocked by the situation, at loss for words. The blond broke the status quo first, fleeing the room, slamming the door behind himself as he left.

Leng was hard. Mortified, he could feel his face redden. That wasn’t… He didn’t… He hadn’t felt these base urges at all, during the last months leading up to his defeat. The augments made sure he would not get distracted by something like this. Then there were the years in the solitary cell, and while the need came sometimes, he quickly took care of it, in a mechanical manner. Just him and his hand. He could not recall the last time he touched another human being, outside of murder and torture.

Dazed, he clumsily stood up. He looked like a mess. Vivid red marks shone almost like a brand against his naturally pale skin. The shaving cream was still slathered across half his face, and the whites of his eyes were reddened. Needing something to do, the brunette shakily reached for the electric shaver, and methodically, bit by bit, shaved his face with manic determination.

Still shell-shocked, the ex-Cerberus agent then entered the shower, pointedly ignored his still very much present erection, turned on the water while making sure it was set to icy cold, and scrubbed himself raw.

Chapter 3

Shepard was actively avoiding him; there was no other way around it. At first, he welcomed the quiet, the space. The first day after the “incident”, he dreaded even leaving his room and coming face to face with the other man, the sheer awkwardness of the situation proving more terrifying than actual lethal threats he had to deal with in the past.

Sex was never something he focused on, if anything, sexual urges were just one of the many pesky needs a human body suffered from. He became a soldier during his teenage years, and he had been one since then. And he was good at it. Violence was his life; his weapons and armor the only companions he could trust. Sex left you vulnerable, intimacy even more so. He had seen it time and time again, how letting your guard down resulted in leaving yourself open to sabotage. It was a weakness; one he tried to purge.

People were messy, chaotic, untrustworthy. Too much trouble to bother himself with. Their only worth was measured by their skills and usefulness to the cause. Once they outlived those, they were dealt with. Leng did not delude himself into thinking he was somehow above those simple rules. If anything, The Illusive Man showed too much leniency toward him, and he knew he lived on borrowed time. He had failed several times in the past, not often, but enough to have someone like the illustrious leader of Cerberus be perfectly within his rights to deem the former assassin unsatisfactory as an asset. It drove Leng to push himself even more. He understood what being useless entailed.

There was only the next mission. The next victory, the next crucial data, the next assassination target. If his body could have functioned without it, he would have passed on the moments of rest in between each assignment. Always more. Harder. Riskier. Faster. He had to prove that the Illusive Man’s expectations were not misplaced. Downtime made him jittery, skittish. How could a weapon know rest? Every minute spent doing nothing was a minute lost, during which the old ghosts of his past failures slowly came to taunt him. He had no hobbies, no friends, no lovers to fill up the void, to distract himself with.

The reaper enhancements were a blessing, pushing his body past the usual mortal limits. He did not need to waste time waiting around for his fragile, slow organic shell to put itself together before he could spring back into action. There was no opportunity for him to gradually go mad as the hours passed, with nothing to do, his own thoughts suffocating him. Those few months before the end, before the fall of Cerberus, were his happiest. Everything was as it should have been. The world made sense, he was at his peak efficiency, all failings of flesh having been stripped away, leaving only a tool ready to bring about the next step in humanity’s evolution. And then Shepard and his colorful band of aliens had to fuck it all up.

The old anger easily crawled back to the surface. Everything was always Shepard’s fault. How could a single individual have this much of an impact? Especially one with such humble origins? The man was just one of the many orphaned no-names scrambling to survive in one of the countless slums on Earth, before joining the military. A street kid. A street rat, with a penchant for biotics.

He sighed in frustration, running a hand through his long hair. “Your owner is an asshole. A meddling nuisance,” he announced to the fish in the aquarium. With no company, and nothing better to do, aside from the daily routine he was forced to follow, he took to watching the colorful, dumb creatures. He even named some of them, which proved his point of how lame his life these days was. Not being one of them creative types, and honestly, already feeling horrified he stooped this low, he simply called some of the more distinct ones by gun names. A fish could be named after a worse thing than the M-55 Argus or the Typhoon, he figured.

The fish swam happily around in their luxurious abode, not a care in the world. A large artificial coral reef housed many of them, and various kinds of seaweed and aquatic flora evoked the feeling of picture-perfect tranquility. An automatic feeder made sure they lived their meaningless existences in abundance, and paired with the tiny cleaning robot, their owner’s presence was not required at all.

Bored, the brunette stood up and approached the huge fishtank. His fingers gently tapped the glass, causing some of the fish to flee and scatter. Was he reduced to the equivalent of a dumb, pet fish? By the time he woke up each day, the apartment was sparkly clean, and meals were left in the fridge for his consumption. He tried staying up longer and longer, at first out of simple curiosity, than out of desperate spite to catch the other man, when he so obviously did not want to be seen.

Somehow, the prison cell was easier to endure. It was predictable. Nothing waited for him out there, and if he had managed to escape on his own, uncertainty awaited him. He had spent the cold, empty years fantasizing about his possible options, but all were vague. Leng needed a structure, a powerful leader he could then devote himself to. With his past, anything legitimate was out of the question, and most illegal operations were a mess. But with Shepard alive… It was as if a new spark had been lit within him. He had an adversary. Someone who saw him as an individual, someone who did not think of him only as of a concept. The Cerberus assassin. No, Shepard hated him, Kai Leng, specifically. It was glorious.

Of course he was still mortified about what happened, but it had been over a week ago. The presence of another human outweighed the embarrassment he still felt. Anything was better than talking to fish and staring at walls. He wanted, needed Shepard’s attention and presence, now that he knew the man was around. Almost wistfully, he observed the angry red marks on his neck, the proof of the other man’s existence and their violent confrontation, fade away as the days passed.

The commander spent five years of his life planning the assassin’s escape, and then he just bailed? Leng just had to make the idiotic Specter understand the whole nonsense was unintentional, and get them to move past this, so they could return to their usual bickering. Didn’t the man claim he was only fixing Leng to fight him? That showed long-term dedication.

The former operative was still not at his best certainly, but he would kill for a good fight. An outlet was needed for all the nervous energy and violence accumulating inside of him, and hitting the punchbag harder during his solo training sessions did not scratch the itch. He tried disobeying more often, tried getting a few hits on the furnishing and equipment within the house, since then at least a reaction would always come. No matter where Shepard was, or

whatever he was doing at the time, he was ready to stop Leng from wreaking havoc. It became almost comforting. Somewhat.

The dreams were a surprise. An unwelcome one. He used to dream of blood, of death, of past assignments. Familiar scenes. These days, he dreamt of strong arms. Of hands circling his throat, squeezing, before cupping his face, and slowly moving upward. Of fingers sliding into his hair. Those same thick fingers then tugging on the long, silky strands to the point of pain. And worse than that, he would unintentionally imagine the familiar hands sliding lower instead, a light, steady pressure moving across his chest, before they drifted down the planes of his stomach, and lower still.

Thankfully, it was not a nightly occurrence, but he still woke up hard and aching, slick with sweat, and utterly mortified on more than one occasion. Worst were the cases when he would blearily wake up rocking against the mattress below him, still not fully aware, disoriented. It felt so good, so warm, and oftentimes, he would be close to finishing too. But then the reality set in. Never before had he resorted to using cold water to shower, when warm one was available, as often as he did here.

He tried to not think about Shepard possibly seeing him like this, with whatever monitoring equipment the other man used in making sure Leng wasn't breaking something or skipping out on his training routine and eating.

Shepard came back with no fanfare, no signs pointing to his return. It had been almost three weeks since the ill-fated shaving incident. The brunette was caught completely off-guard and nearly tripped over his feet when he noticed the shape of the other man on the sofa, sitting there like nothing had happened. The initial overwhelming wave of euphoria that swept over Leng nearly made him vomit. He was horrified. He was ecstatic. Disgusted with himself; giddy at finally having another presence near him. The whiplash of emotions felt paralyzing.

The brunette wanted to prod, to ask, to provoke, now that Shepard was back, but the nauseating fear of chasing the man away accidentally once more kept him subdued. At least looking wasn't forbidden, he hoped. He catalogued every inch of the other man's face and body, trying to discern if anything was different, where the man had been these past few weeks, anything that would point to some sort of a clue about his time away.

Fully ignoring Leng, the blond sat on the sofa without giving a single sign of acknowledgement, his personal datapad already firmly in hand. His clothes were slightly rumpled and dusty, but not out of the ordinary. The usual wear and tear. He must have gotten his doze of nightly sleep elsewhere, as he seemed fresh and alert. The man's impressive muscles visibly moved under the too tight shirt he wore at even the slightest shift of his body. The pants were not exactly well-fitted either, as they fought for survival, clinging obscenely to the man's thick, muscled thighs. To be fair, some of Cerberus' own uniforms were probably also too revealing, too tightly clinging to their own bodies, so he could not exactly

question Shepard’s choice of attire. He could feel his own face heating up, as he did not seem able to tear his eyes away from the blond’s impressive physique.

His not-so-careful examination did not seem to go unnoticed, as the commander grew even tenser with each passing second. Leng was surprised the datapad did not crack under the other man’s crushing grip. Shepard refused to react otherwise and instead continued to resolutely read whatever he was reading, scowling all the while. Leng knew he was possibly being too weird, staring like that, but he could not help himself. Shepard really came back; he was not hallucinating the man into existence.

Unexpectedly, Shepard whipped his head around, and glared at Leng, clearly irritated. Maybe he was expecting another argument, another instance of the brunette lashing out, but his sudden, concentrated attention startled Kai Leng into hastily turning away. The former assassin grabbed the food he originally came into the kitchen for, and with heart beating rapidly in his chest, retreated into his room. He could feel the commander’s confused gaze burning a hole into the back of his skull all the while.

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