

Kasumi knew for a fact she was the best thief in the galaxy. Shepard would not have recruited her if that wasn't the case. She had sneaked her way through the most heavily guarded vaults in the galaxy, bypassed the most sophisticated security systems, and taken from some of the most egotistical criminals and not-so-innocent rich folks in all of Citadel space.

But she had to admit delving into an ancient alien ruin was a new one for her.

As she slid down through the slope of a long-collapsed wall and landed with a small skip to her step, of course, she had to make a quip. "I just need a whip and two pistols."

*"I did suggest you arm yourself better."* The voice of her 'employer' rang in her communicator. *"Though I'm not sure melee weaponry has included whips among its arsenal these days."*

Kasumi rolled her eyes as she kept walking, taking a good look at the architecture of this place. The ceiling had to be around twenty to thirty feet tall, covered in alien hieroglyphs. "It's a joke, Li."

*"Ah, another reference that goes over my head,"* Liara said in realization. *"Has anyone told you you are too fond of ancient Earth media?"*

"The latest Tomb Raider came out last year!"

*"And my compliments to the franchise for being over a hundred and fifty years old, clearly a testament to its popularity."* The asari said in a tone that bordered dangerously close to sarcasm. *"But we have a mission. How's your progress?"*

"Lot of dust, lot of old alien stuff." She muttered as she tried to make out the figure on an old, worn-out wall. Time had not been kind to this place. "They were no prothean, that's for sure."

*"Non-protean alien findings are no less important."* The archeologist insisted. *"Especially if we want to find more assets to use against the Reapers."*

The grim reminder of the ancient death machines made Kasumi frown. The knowledge that they were on a timetable to fight against those *things* made her skin crawl with an existential crisis. Shepard's actions at the Bahak System had bought them time... but they didn't know how long.

Now their best hope for saving the galaxy was under lockdown in the Alliance, instead of actually letting her do her job of *saving the galaxy*.

Kasumi wished she could walk away from it all. She didn't want to relieve the nightmares of the Collector base... but she owed it to Shepard to do her part.

Hence, her work with Liara. The Shadow Broker was leaving no stone unturned. Not only was she using her vast influence as the Shadow Broker to subtly force people to start collaborating and move along with new projects (having blackmail on the entire galaxy bought you a lot in life), she was also looking for any leads on ancient technology that could give them an edge against the Reapers. Particularly if it wasn't based on the Reaper's design for mass effect and mass relay tech.

Her contacts and deep space probes had led her to this planet, Telavor 4. A planet that technically was fitting for most sapient lifeforms in the galaxy, suitable for colonization. If not for the fact that the planet was covered in dense jungles and filled with all manner of dangerous predators. The cost of taming the planet simply did not make colonization efforts worth it.

Whatever species lived here once, they had to have been tough.

Regardless, Liara's assets had found an ancient alien ruin of unknown origin, with traces of an active energy source picked up by her sensors. With Kasumi on hand, she sent the master thief to explore and retrieve whatever lay waiting inside the ruins.

As she stepped over the collapsed pillars in between statues of aliens who looked mostly humanoid, if not for a few head ridges and limb structure a touch too long for the standard human, asari, and batarian type, Kasumi walked toward the deepest parts of the great hall, where she stopped upon spotting something standing between the pillars and statues. "Wow"

In the middle of a circular mosaic floor, cornered by two imposing statues of alien warriors holding long spears, was an obelisk. At least two meters tall, covered in the same hieroglyphs as the rest of the ruins. Kasumi could still make out the detail of the mosaic underneath, that of the alien shrouded in what looked to be blue flames.

She activated the holographic display inside her hood to take readings of the artifact and found faint eezo signatures surging through it. "Hey Li, think I found what you were looking for."

*"Let me take a look," Liara said, and Kasumi opened her channel so asari could take a look through her own optics. "Interesting. There is concentrated eezo there, and some sort of background radiation energy I can't quite make out."*

"Is it dangerous?" Kasumi asked as she took a tentative step forward. Could it be like a sort of prothean beacon? Something that stores vast amounts of information?

*"It appears to be mostly inert. I'll need to study it closer."* Liara replied.

"So was it worth the trip?"

*"Without a cipher for the language, it'll take some time to figure out its function. If it has any."* Kasumi doubted a monument would emanate eezo and radiation just because. *"I'll send a few droids to secure and transport it. Thank you, Kasumi. Your work here is done."*

The black-hooded thief merely stepped closer, brows furrowing under the darkness of her hood as she looked closer at the obelisk. Her instincts, born from a long career, told her there was more than met the eye. This thing... there was something about it that just piqued her interest...

She reached out with a gloved hand and softly touched its surface.

*"Wait"*

Just what was this thing...?

*"I'm picking up an energy spike coming from it. Kasumi, what's happening?"*

"I..." Something was wrong. She needed to let go, but found it difficult to pull back her arm. "I don't know." She let out a ragged breath.

*"The energy levels keep rising! Kasumi, you need to get out of there!"*

The hieroglyphs light up in sequence from top to bottom, the corners of the totem filled with blue light all the way to the tip. The thing seemed to emanate a sort of frequency that assaulted Kasumi's ears and made her body tremble. Tendrils of energy erupted from the obelisk, coursing over its form in repeated arcs.

Kasumi gasped as the energy surged through, emanating from the object with a pulse that slipped through her ballistic leather and seeped into her skin.

Energy. Power. Her body felt like it was being struck by a thunderbolt.

*"Kasumi!"*

At the peak of its power, Kasumi felt the darkness consume her.

X~X~X~X~X

Kasumi slowly woke up to the sounds of beeping machines and bright, blurry lights. She groaned, shifting her body and feeling a thin sheet wrapped around it, touching her skin.

The light slowly dimmed as her vision became clearer; her throbbing gave way to relief at a steady pace as she sat up on the bed. The Japanese woman pinched her nose and stifled the soreness ebbing away from her limbs. With the sheet falling from her upper body, she noticed she was wearing only her underwear, a firm sport-bra and panties. Not even the undersuit she wore under her armor, which was nowhere in sight.

Looking around, she stared at the white walls of a prefab house block, the type used by colonists, with multiple medical machines scattered around. Those at least looked far more high-tech than the rudimentary structure itself.

The door opened with a hiss. "Kasumi, you're awake!" Liara entered swiftly, looking at her with relief. "I was so worried."

"What happened?" She shook her head, clearing the last of the mental cobwebs. "I touched that obelisk and then... then I passed out."

“Yes, I quickly deployed this medical facility to keep you in check and stabilize you,” Liara explained as she took a seat on the chair next to her bed, pulling out a datapad. “That thing sent shocks to your nervous system. I had to act fast.”

“And your response was to pull the hospital room out of your pocket?”

“I’m the Shadow Broker,” Liara said like that explained everything. “I have resources you would not dream of. Right now, I’m having mechs contain the obelisk within a plasma field just in case.”

“What was that thing, Li?” The thief asked. “When I touched it, I... I couldn’t let go. That it had a *hold* on me.”

It had been a disturbing experience. But the energy that it pumped through her? It defied all description; Kasumi didn’t even have the poetic abilities to put it into words... and the scariest thing was that she didn’t even know if she *disliked* it.

The expression on Liara’s face was comforting, either.

“Liara, what happened to me?” She asked, desperate for an answer. She was the Shadow Broker; she knew almost everything. She *had* to know something.

The asari thinned her lips. “Had I not seen it for myself, I wouldn’t believe it. But...” She brought up her omnitool and typed a few keys. A holographic surface of high definition, to the point it could pass for a real-life mirror, manifested on the other side of the room. “I think you should look for yourself.”

Given the asari one last worried look, Kasumi did so. She stepped out of the bed barefoot but found the cold surface of the prefab lab did not bother her much. After the event she had experienced, she thought her movements should feel sluggish, stiff, that her limbs would be sore. But they weren’t, she felt... fine.

More than fine. Like she had taken a cup of coffee after sleeping a full eight hours.

So when she approached the mirror, she expected to find a deformity or some sort of burn scar on her person. But the closer she got, the more those fears lost their strength. Her face was fine, the same features as always, the tame tattooed lip. Without her hood, her face was

completely bare this time, letting her see the short bangs framing her face and the short ponytail she always kept stuffed inside.

It was when her brown eyes traveled downward that she noticed why Liara had been apprehensive.

She had always been an athletic woman. The result of a lifetime of thievery, of crawling, running, climbing, had given her a slim yet toned figure. Functional muscle with the faintest amount of definition.

Kasumi did not remember her abs being *this* cut before.

With her lips slowly parting in awe, Kasumi trailed a hand over the bumps in her stomach. Six in total, highly toned, and very dense. Tapping one was like touching a stone. Her legs possessed even more definition; they were a bit wider than before, with full thighs and shapely calves. She softly gasped when her eyes traveled over her arm, the forearm muscles subtly coiled as she twisted her hand, and a small clench of her fist made a decent-sized bicep jump out.

“Holy shit...”

“Indeed,” Liara muttered as she stood up, walking over to the human. “I ran all sorts of analysis, your body’s metabolism is accelerating at a rate I’ve never seen before on any species. Not even the *vorcha* show this level of adaptability.”

“Adaptability?” Kasumi whirled around, eyes wide in shock. “To what?”

“To... just living, I think?” The scientist looked dumbfounded. “Kasumi, your muscle tissue, your nerves, your bone structure, they’re all several times more efficient and stronger than any baseline human. It’s like your body has undergone several instances of genetic surgery and biological enhancements through some energy field that my equipment can barely make sense of. It’s... mutated your cells, they show the potential to keep improving your body.” The asari stared at her like she was the greatest biological anomaly in the galaxy.

And she probably what.

“So, what?” Kasumi asked, bewildered. “That obelisk gave me abs and turned me superhuman?”

“That is... certainly one way to put it.” She tapped into her datapad. “My readings tell me you should be twice as fast and strong as the average baseline human. Your cells show the capacity to metabolize and strengthen your tissue even further.”

Just how strong...?

Oh, she had to see this.

Acting on impulse, Kasumi walked up to her bed, ignoring Liara’s protests as she crouched, grabbed a firm hold of the underside of the bed, and *lifted*.

She gasped, in strain, but how *effortlessly* she held the bed over her head. She felt like she could keep it up there for *hours* if she wanted.

“Astonishing...” Liara breathed out, utterly marveled at the sight. “That bed must weigh around fifty kilograms.”

“It’s like holding a light grocery bag,” Kasumi replied, equally astonished and more than a little giddy. She felt amazing! “Holy crap, I became a superwoman!”

“Kasumi, please take this more seriously,” Liara stressed with a reproaching frown. “We don’t know the long-term consequences of this. Your cells don’t show any upper limit for their current duplication rate or energy consumption. For all we know, your body will attempt to cannibalize itself if it runs out of energy fast. Humans are not *meant* to possess this type of body alteration. Even the finest genetic engineering in the galaxy can’t produce something like this without some sort of drawback.”

“But I feel great!” She argued, setting the bed down. “That obelisk must have been used to make super soldiers or something. I think this is a boon we’ve been looking for, don’t you?”

“It shouldn’t be tested needlessly!” Liara shot back before looking apprehensive once more. “And... there is something else I haven’t told you.”

She brought up her omnitool again and projected the holographic image of a human nervous system. The data highlighted several blue points spread out equally across its length.

“What’s this?”

“Your nervous system,” Liara replied, her voice low and forlorn. “And *these*.” She made the blue dots display even more data.

Data even Kasumi recognized.

Eezo signatures.

“These are biotic nodes.” Liara finished.

Kasumi was silent.

“An asari born with an average biotic potential has fifteen biotic nodes in their brain. These expand and become stronger as we age into our different development stages. More nodes imply greater potential.” She recited. “The average human biotic is born with around seven nodes of varying quality.”

All those nodes in the display... in *her* body...

“Kasumi, you now have over a hundred biotic nodes spread *through the entirety of your body*.”

The silence that followed was deafening.

In the face of such a revelation, Kasumi could only sum things up in a succinct fashion.

“Fuck...”

“Yes,” Liara elegantly agreed. “Fuck, indeed.”