### Fought, Loved, Lost, Hoped

**Summary**

Commander Shepard finds herself lost and alone in a post-Reaper Earth. With her friends and loved ones missing after the Battle of London, Katerina Shepard recalls her life and tries to survive as new threats and old hatreds surface throughout the Galaxy.

**Notes**

I played the Mass Effect Trilogy for the first time a couple of months ago, and I absolutely fell in love with it. So much so that it inspired me to write the story of my main Shepard. This is the first time I’ve ever tried to write a story. Any and all criticisms are welcomed. I hope that you enjoy reading it as much as I am enjoying writing it.
A girl sat on the porch of a house. Winter had already arrived, and snow fell around and over her, leaving white traces on her long, red hair when the snowflakes fell on it. Her emerald green eyes were focused on the heavens, and on the infinite number of stars that were visible throughout the night sky.

She heard as the door of the house behind her opened, and the sound of a mechanical wheelchair broke the silence of the night. The machine and the man operating it stopped next to her.

“Trying to freeze yourself to death, kid?” the man said while he covered himself with a jacket, “There are easier ways to get yourself killed if that’s what you’re looking for”

She grabbed her knees with both hands and spoke “This little winter is what you call cold? You’re getting soft and old, J”

“When your face and fingers start to get blue, we’ll see who’s soft and old”

“You wouldn’t let that happen. The doctor in you would never leave a poor innocent person to freeze” she replied with a smirk look on her face.

“Oh, you know me so well, kid”

After a few minutes in silence, the man started to head towards the door of the house. “Well, it’s getting late, kid. See you tomorrow”

As he opened it, the girl spoke.

“J?”

“Yes?”

“Is life better up there?”

“Up there where kid?”

She lifted her hand and pointed upwards “Up there in the stars”

“You’ve asked me the same question for the past 6 years”

“I know. What can I say? I liked the answer you gave me the first time”

The man stood in silence for a few moments before answering. He looked at the stars, the stars that he himself had visited many years ago, until he finally spoke, giving her the same answer that he had given her year after year.

“Up there is almost the same as down here kid. There are good and bad things, good and bad people, saints and sinners, angels and monsters. You are as likely to find a friend as you are to find someone who wants to kill you. In the end, the choices that you make and the actions that you take will determine on which group you will end and what kind of life you’ll lead”
A satisfied smile crossed her face “Thanks. I guess I needed to hear that one more time”

Jonathan turned the wheelchair around to face her and asked: “So, I guess this comes because you’re really thinking of doing it, aren’t you? You’re truly planning on joining the Alliance?”

“It’s the only thing I can do” she replied in a firm and decisive tone. “I have no future down here. With the Alliance I’ll have food, a bed and a roof. Plus, I’ll be able to visit the Galaxy for free”

“Somehow I knew you would say that. Ever since I’ve met you that’s the only thing that I pictured you doing with your life”

Surprised, she replied “You did? Seriously? I’ve always thought that you expected me to stay down here for the rest of my life, until I got killed or I overdosed on something”

“Kate, you’re no deadbeat junkie, you know it and I know it too” Jonathan said in a reassuring tone “You have aspirations, you actually want to do something with your life” He took a drink from the small flask that he had in his pocket before he continued. “I still remember how your eyes lit up when I told you stories about the adventures of heroes like Grissom and others. I remember when we stayed for hours in the spaceport just because you wanted…”

“To see the spaceships coming and going” she interrupted him as she fondly remembered those trips they took when she was younger.

“Exactly. You always had a thing for space, whether you realized it or not. And you’re experiences here on Earth haven’t been very positive exactly, so…”

“So you figured that I would take the first chance I got to leave this rock”

“Yes. Wasn’t really that hard to figure out”

“Hmm. Maybe you’re not as dumb as you look, old man” Shepard replied in a sarcastic tone.

“I don’t know about that. I’ve been taking care of you for the past 6 years, haven’t I? I think that’s a pretty dumb thing to do”

“I can take care of myself”

“Remember how you were when I met you? I don’t doubt that you can defend yourself, but you still come back here every night, don’t you? Looks like you prefer a roof and warm food to a cardboard box below a highway, or am I wrong?” Jonathan said in accusatory tone.

“Sometimes you can be a real asshole J”

“We’ve got that in common, kid” The man replied as he laughed. “So, what’s your next move?”

“Well, basically all I’ll need is to get an ID. No way I’m showing up to the Alliance Office to register as Jane Doe. So for now, that’s what I’ll focus on. After I get hold of an ID, well, only time will tell”

“Getting a fake ID through the Alliance will be pretty hard. They make the best scanners on the planet, you know?”

“I’m fully aware of that, but I’ll find a way, no matter what it takes. I’ll bust my ass to find one that’s real enough to get me through. This is my future we’re talking about, and I’m not going to lose it because of small shit like a fucking ID”
Jonathan smiled, and after a few moments he pulled out a small envelope from one of the pockets in his jacket “That's what I wanted to hear. Happy Birthday, kid”

Shepard checked the exterior of the envelope while staring at Jonathan with a raised eyebrow “What the hell is this, J ? A Happy Birthday Card is all that you can afford with the Alliance Veteran Salary ?

“Stop being a smartass for a second and open the goddamn envelope, kid” he said in an annoyed tone.

“Alright, fine. Don't get so salty about it”

She tore apart the side of the envelope to see its content. The disappointment in her face was impossible to conceal as she turned around to face Jonathan. “This is just a paper with a code, J. Is this your idea of a prank, old man ?

“Put the code in your omnitool, dumbass”

She inserted the code into her Kassa manufactured omnitool and waited. Suddenly, an image projected itself out of the device, and she couldn't believe what her eyes, which started to fill with tears of joy, were seeing ahead of her. The picture that came from the omnitool showed a citizenship ID for the United North American States.

Name: Shepard, Kate.

Date of Birth: October 28th, 2153.

Age: 18.

“Holy Shit”, Kate said while she continued to stare dumbfounded into the image ahead of her. After a couple minutes, she turned and embraced Jonathan in a tight hug “I can't thank you enough, J”

“Don’t mention it kid”

“How the hell did you do this ?” The shock and surprise were evident as the words left her mouth.

“Called some old friends In the Alliance who owed me some favors. They work directly with the Information Registry Department, so for all intents and purposes this ID is just the same as a real one”

“But, you know I’m really not 18, right ?”

“And I know your real name isn't Kate Shepard either. You're 17, that's close enough. And the only ones who know those facts are you and me, so I suggest that we both keep our mouths shut about them”

“Sounds like a plan”

She stood next to him for several minutes, contemplating the opportunities that now lay ahead of her, and trying to imagine what awaited for her in the future. “I’ll find out soon enough” she thought.

Before she could speak again, Jonathan did. “The Registration Office opens in a few hours, and if everything goes right, you should be a fully registered Alliance soldier and they'll be taking you to
Shepard stood in silence for several moments, before speaking again. “How I’m supposed to repay you for this, J?”

He placed his hand in her shoulder, and staring directly at her eyes, he replied in a firm and reassuring tone: “I’ll only ask one thing of you. Promise me that you’ll do some good out there. The galaxy can be a very dark place, so do what you can to make it a little brighter for everyone.”

“I will Jonathan. I promise you I will”

“Don’t waste this chance. Make me proud, kid”

Shepard woke up. Her eyes looked at the clouds that roamed the sky above her. She quickly wiped the tears that were rolling down her cheeks and started to pull her legs out of the sleeping bag. "You can only fight sleep for so long before your body gives up. I know that better than anyone”, she thought as she stretched and contemplated as the sun started to rise on the horizon, sending the night away to the other side of the world. She cleaned the rocks and dirt from her sleeping bag before rolling it and sealing it inside a plastic bag.

The phrases from her dream, phrases the she had heard and said 16 years ago, still resonated in her mind, as echoes from the past that refused to fade away.

“Is life better up there?”

“Saints and sinners. Angels and monsters”

“Make some good out there”

“Make me proud, kid”

“I promise you I will”

The last phrase was the one that struck her the most. “I promise you I will”.

“You didn't quite kept that promise, did you now? Not the first promise you broke, and it certainly wasn't the last” Shepard said. “How many promises have I made and fail to kept, I wonder?”

“Dozens ? Hundreds ? Thousands ”

“All of them, actually”. Ain't that the truth“

She remembered some of the promises she had made during her life, as they drifted through her mind over and over.

“I'll get you home safe. I promise”

“I'll pull you out of there. I promise”

“You’ll see your family again. I promise”

“I’ll get Kaidan, and then I’m coming back for you Ash. I promise”

“I won’t let your people die. I promise”
“Marriage, old age and a lot of little blue children” “Everyday after” “I’m always coming back”. "I promise"

Liara

Of all the promises that Shepard had made during her life, the ones that she had made to Liara T’Soni hurt the most.

Because she knew she wouldn't keep them from the moment she uttered those words. Not because she didn't want to, because she did. "God, I wanted it more than anything else in the Galaxy” she said in her thoughts. No, it was because she was promising herself and Liara a future.

A future.

A future that she knew she wouldn't be around to be a part of. Because she didn't see herself surviving the Reaper War.

And yet she made the promises. Because she wanted to believe.

“And look at me now. Alive and kicking, and Liara and everyone else are either lost throughout the Galaxy or…”

Dead. She couldn't bring herself to say the word out loud. She couldn’t put Liara and Dead in the same sentence.

In an anguished tone, Shepard said: “I shouldn’t have promised anything to her, or to anyone else for that matter”.

As she began to sob and with a broken voice, the 4 words that she had said to herself countless times left her mouth once more “I miss you, Liara”

Several minutes later, minutes spent with her face buried in her hands, a chilling breeze made her lift her head as the morning cold swept through her body. She opened her tattered backpack to find some more clothing to cover herself with. While she pulled out the remnants of a scarf from one of the pockets, a book came out with it. She rolled her scarf around her neck and picked up the large and big book that had fallen to the ground. She didn't remember when she had picked it up, or from where, but that didn't really matter now. As she opened it and scrolled through it, she was surprised with what she saw.

Empty. Completely empty.

All the pages were completely blank, but the feeling of the paper made her feel strangely relaxed. She remembered the collection of books that she had kept on both the SR-1 and the SR-2. She remembered one of the conversations that she had with Liara about them.

“Wouldn't it be simpler to store this information in digital format, Katerina ? I'm sure that even the simplest of datapads is more than capable of holding the information most of these books carry, and it would allow you to use the physical space here in your cabin more efficiently”

“I know, but I've never been a huge fan of reading stuff virtually. It's weird, I know, especially during these times, but there's something special about them. Feeling a book in my hands and
sensing the smell of their pages somehow makes me feel... happy, alive? I really don't know how to describe it"

“I think I understand. It is more a habit than a necessity, then?”

“Yeah, something like that”

“I probably feel the same way when I'm studying ancient scripts”

As she continued to check the dozens of books that filled Kate’s shelves, Liara spoke with a curious tone: “So, what are you planning to do with them once all this is over?”

Shepard smiled, and in a swift move she grabbed and held Liara tightly from behind, and after giving her a quick kiss on the neck, she said: “I'm planning to take them to wherever you and I go to settle down after this damn war. And I'm planning to read them to you every night, and then...” she spun Liara around and rested her forehead against hers “we’re going to read them to our daughters, every night until they decide that we're a pain in the ass and they tell us to stop”

“Every night? That sounds like a big commitment Commander”

“Every night after. I promise”

With a smile on her face, Liara replied “I'd like that, Katerina. I’d like that very much” and then gave Shepard a deep and long kiss.

Kate opened her eyes and felt the smile that had formed on her mouth. “Losing myself in memories, again”. Shepard thought as she toyed with the book in her hands. “Who can blame me for losing myself in memories, when these memories are all that I have left of you. There was never enough time for the 2 of us, there was always something keeping us from being fully together”

“And now, I have all the time in the world, but I don't have you”

Looking at the book, Shepard said: “Maybe I'll write something here. At least I'll try”

Hey Liara

You know writing has never really been my thing. First, because I didn't had the time, and second, because as you once said to me “You're a woman of action who sometimes remembers that she can use words as well”.

Well, here I am, trying to use words, trying to keep myself sane in an insane world by saving my thoughts in this book.

Everything is not going to be written here. A few months ago I had to make a choice, a choice that affected the lives of every living being in the Galaxy, and the things I've seen since then here on Earth have made me question, more than once, if I made the right one. I promise that when we met I'll tell you the whole story.

I must keep believing that we'll meet again. Otherwise, what was the point in all I did and everything I'm going to do?

I hope that you'll read this someday.
I love you.

Katerina Shepard.
June, 2187

7 Months after the end of the War

Hey Li

I'm in a country called Armenia, here on Earth.

I'm in this ancient Monastery called Khor Virap. It's pretty old and it has a nice view of the surrounding mountains.

I would have probably bored telling you the history of the region, and you would have probably bored me by talking about the estimated age of the ruins and how an ancient culture managed to built it.

We both would have been happily bored with each other.

I'll probably stay here for a few days before moving on.

On a different note, I managed to move the small finger of my left hand yesterday. The hand and the rest of the arm are still a mess (Karin would give me hell if she saw it) but the finger moved and it didn't hurt. I hope that's a sign that it's at least partially recovering.

Anyway, here's a quick rundown of how I became part of the Normandy’s crew. And how that would eventually lead to me becoming a part of your life.

Take care

Katerina Shepard

New Opportunities

July 17th, 2183

Citadel

Katerina Shepard  (or, as she was more commonly known, “Kate” or “Katy”, due to the fact that
very few people knew her real name, and even less used it) stood by the railing of an Alliance port on the Citadel. She watched as technicians and machines loaded equipment and made sure that the dozens of vessels that were currently docked were fully functional and ready for whatever they might find on their travels through the Traverse and the edges of the Terminus Systems.

Her eyes quickly located the ship that was meant to be her new home for the next couple of months: the SSV Jakarta. Shepard knew little about the ship or the crew besides the fact that the Captain of the Frigate had asked for her to be made a part of his crew, and the Alliance High Command had been happy to reassign her. It was good for the reputation of a Captain to say that the “Hero of Elysium” had been a member of his or her crew.

“Do a good job and you'll be able to pick a Commander Shepard for your ship” she said to herself in an irritated tone. She checked her bag to make sure that she had everything she needed, and after contemplating the view for a few moments she started to walk towards the airlock of the cruiser. She hadn't taken more than a few steps when a familiar voice called out to her.

“Shepard, I was looking for you” She turned around and quickly saluted the man who had been her friend and mentor throughout most of her career in the Alliance, David Anderson.

“Captain Anderson, sir!” she said in a strong tone.

“Knock off that bullshit with me, Kate. You keep this formal crap up and I'm going to start calling you Lieutenant Commander Katerina Shepard every time I see you. Would you like that ?”

“Not at all” she rested her hand and gave a quick hug to Anderson. “It's good to see you, David”

“You too, Kate”

After ending the hug, Shepard asked “What are you doing here in the Citadel ? I thought that you were staying at Arcturus”

“I was, until yesterday. I came by to pick up some friends for a “special project”. Speaking of which, can we sit down for a minute? I have a proposition for you”

“Sure thing, David”

They walked to one of the many coffee shops that were near the docks and sat down.

“Before I start, you want some coffee ?”

“Sure. A little caffeine always does good to the body and the spirit”

After getting her cup, Kate sipped it and, with a disgusted look on her face, said “It's more of that artificial “coffee”. It tastes like plastic. God, what I wouldn't do for a cup of real, natural Colombian coffee”

“We have to made do with what we have. And quality, real coffee isn't a priority for the Alliance Supplies Department”

“I don't know what qualifies as priority for them. 90% of what I eat and drink in the Alliance tastes like plastic” Shepard replied while she drank the contents of the cup in one swoop.

“At least it keeps or bellies full”

“Can’t argue with that”
After both cups had been emptied, Anderson picked up his datapad and started to read it. “So, Shepard, tell me, what are your plans for this new tour”

With a smile on her face, Kate spoke in a joyous tone “I plan to spend the next 2 months sniping batarians, mercs, slavers, and pirates. Maybe the Alliance High Command will call me to do some Black Ops stuff. So, you know, the same stuff that I do in every tour. Nothing out of the ordinary”

“Would you be interested in doing something out of the ordinary?” Anderson replied.

“Like what ?”

Anderson placed the datapad down and looked directly at Kate. “For the past 6 months, I have been working at a special project at Arcturus. It's something that is being jointly developed with the Turians…”

“The Turians ? As far as I know, the Turians hated our guts. You should know that better than anyone” Shepard said, alluding to Anderson’s experiences during the First Contact War.

“Relations are pretty cold but the Turians have a great deal of respect for us. Our performance during the war left them impressed. They say that they see our “potential” as a species. That's why the Hierarchy and the Alliance have been working on several secret projects together. The one I'm about to show you it's probably the most important of them all”

Anderson then handed the datapad to Kate. The phrase on top of the screen read “Project Nightwatch”. The image showed what Shepard thought was a frigate, but of a design that was unknown to her, which was odd since she knew all the models of the vessels of the Systems Alliance.

“It looks like a frigate, but I don't recognize the model’

“That's because this a prototype. A top of the line frigate that incorporates the best of Turian and Human engineering, and it's specifically designed to serve as a recon unit that will be able to operate deep inside an enemy system without being detected. It's called 'Normandy' ” Anderson replied while he paid for the drinks from his omnitool.

“It's impressive. It's design is elegant and beautiful. Guess this is what we'll use when invade the Kite’s Nest, huh ?” she replied as she set down the datapad over the table.

“You're one of the few persons I know who is looking forward to a war with the Batarians” he replied with a disapproving tone.

“I've been killing batarians for 11 years. We should just duke it out with the Hegemony and end them for good”

“That won't happen during my lifetime, and hopefully it won't during yours either. But, back to why I brought you here. I know you're meant to be deployed to the Jakarta, but, would you be interested in joining the crew of…”

“Yes !” she interrupted him. “You don't have to ask me twice”

“Good. Grab your things. We leave for Arcturus in a hour”

“And what about the Captain that asked for me to be in his cruiser ? He's gonna be pissed”

“That's one thing you're really good at. Pissing off people, especially if they outrank you” He
looked towards the cruiser and continued “I know the man, so don't worry about him. When he asks I'll tell him that you're doing some “Black Op Stuff” for me. That should shut him up’

“Well, that's good. As long as I don't have to explain myself to him, I'm happy”

“Shall we go now, Lieutenant Commander Shepard, XO of the SSV Normandy?” David said as he pointed his arm towards the exit point of the docks.

“After you, Captain Anderson of the SSV Normandy”

3 Hours Later

Arcturus Station

“Holy shit, David” Shepard exclaimed surprised “It was one thing to look at the pictures, but seeing it in person is a whole other thing. The ship is… is…”

“Magnificent” Anderson interrupted her as they both stared at the Normandy in dock.

“Yeah. I was gonna say that it was a fucking piece of art, but magnificent works too”

After a few moments, Anderson grabbed her shoulder and said “Come on, I want you to meet the crew”.

“I’m already preparing myself for the “Hero of Elysium” attitude that the entire crew is going to take with me”

“I know it's hard for you, but just be nice and friendly. You know, like you are most of the time”

Shepard started laughing, and after a few moments, she finally said “Sure thing David. Nice and Friendly. Got it”

As they entered the frigate, she was in awe as she contemplated the size and design of the interior of the ship. Anderson turned to the left and pointed towards the man sitting in the pilot's chair.

“Shepard, this is the Flight Lieutenant Jeff Moreau. Flight Lieutenant, Commander Shepard”

The man struggled for a few moments before he finally stood up and saluted the Commander. “Jeff Moreau, reporting for duty, ma’am”

“At ease, Lieutenant” Shepard said in a friendly tone.

“I'll leave you 2 to get to know yourselves. You need anything else, I'll be in the mess”

“Understood, sir” As Anderson left, the conversation between Shepard and the pilot resumed.

“So, Flight Lieutenant Moreau…”

“Please, call me Joker, ma’am” he interrupted her “I must say, it's an honor to be serving with you, ma’am. The “Savior of Elysium”, the "Hero of the Blitz”…”

“Oh boy, here we go” she thought as the Lieutenant continued to speak. After several moments,
the Lieutenant finished praising the Commander, which allowed her to finally ask him some questions.

“So Joker, how did you ended piloting the Normandy ?”

The man blushed as he tried to avoid the question “It’s kind of a long story, so…”

“Give me the short version then”

“Ok. So a few days ago, they were doing the first flight test of the Normandy here in Arcturus, and I, uh… let’s just say that I decided to do that test without the authorization of the Alliance brass”

“*1 You stole the ship !?” Shepard exclaimed in a loud tone.

“I didn't 'steal it'. I merely performed the test that they had designed for the ship… while an Alliance fighter patrol tried to shoot me down”

“What !?”

“So, yeah, I completed the test and returned the Normandy to dock in one piece. The Alliance was ready to court martial me and lock me up for the rest of my life, but the Turian General who was overseeing the test was impressed by my performance and said that I should be the pilot. The Alliance had already embarrassed itself enough and they didn't want to “disagree” with the General, and Captain Anderson agreed with the Turian, so that's why I’m here”

Shepard stood in silence for several moments, trying to process what she had just been told. She finally said “I think you’re just the person I want piloting this ship, Joker”

Calming himself, he let out a relaxed gasp “Thank you, ma’am”

"But please, don't pull any stunts like that while I'm aboard, please"

"I'll try to control myself, ma'am"

After several minutes of introducing herself to the rest of the crew, she ran into Navigator Charles Pressly, a fellow veteran of the Blitz, who was also quick to praise her for her actions in Elysium. “If anything, I should be thanking you, Pressly. The SSV Agincourt saved my life by showing up when it did”

“Too late to save everyone else. To soon to let me die with them”. The thought briefly crossed Shepard’s mind before she shook it off and continued her conversation with Pressly.

As she moved down the stairs, she froze for a moment when she saw a heavily armored Turian moving in her direction.

"Commander Shepard, it's good to see you"

"And who might you be ?” she asked.

"My name is Nihlus Kryk. I'm the Spectre sent by the Council to oversee the Normandy's shakedown run"

What the hell is a Spectre doing here ? Katerina thought before answering "This is my first time meeting a Spectre. I'm honored" she said as she shook his hand.
"I have heard many great things about you, Shepard. Hopefully you'll live up to my expectations" he said as he continued towards the bridge, leaving her alone in the stairs.

"I'll try, I guess" she said as she tried to understand what had just happened. After a couple of moments, she continued her tour of the ship.

After meeting with Chief Engineer Adams in the Engineering deck, she came up to the Second Deck. As she introduced herself to the crew, she heard Anderson’s voice calling out to her.

“Shepard, over here”

“What is it, sir?”

Apparently there are some old friends of yours here who want to see you. They’re at the infirmary. Come with me”

As they started to head towards the infirmary, Shepard wondered who might be there. “Old friends? I don’t have many old friends. Who could possibly be…”

As the door opened, there where 3 persons inside. Kate didn’t knew who the young soldier on the bed was, but she immediately recognized the doctor and the man standing next to her. “Dr Chakwas! Kaidan!” she said in an excited tone.

“Good to see you again, Katerina” the Lieutenant said as he shook Shepard’s hands.

“You too Kaidan. You look good. How’s your implant doing these days?”

“Same as always, really. Migraines are not that severe anymore thanks to some therapy I’ve been doing and the meds”

“Good to hear” she said as she let go of his hand and turned to face the Doctor. “I’ve got to say, if I’m going to have a doctor who’s going to be constantly bugging me about my injuries, then I’m glad is you, Karin” Shepard said as she gave the doctor a tight hug.

“I assure you, Commander, that bugging you is going to be my number one priority during this tour. The crew and the Alliance need you in top fighting shape, and I’ll make sure that you are” she said as she pointed towards the medical straps on the sides of the bed “… even if I have to strap you to the bed because you can be more stubborn than a mule”

“I’m not stubborn, Karin. I just know when I’m fit for duty faster than you do”

She then turned to the soldier on the bed and asked “And who might you be, young man?”

“Jenkins, ma’am. Corporal Richard Jenkins” he said nervously as he quickly rose to his feet and snapped a salute in her direction.

“At ease, Corporal” Shepard then noticed the medical patch that the corporal had on his neck and asked “What happened to you, Jenkins?”

“Well, I uh… I said that Lieutenant Alenko’s biotics weren’t as strong as he claimed and I told him that if he could throw me from one end of the deck to the other, I would give him 200 credits”

“Happy to say that those 200 credits are happily resting on my virtual account” Alenko said as he flashed his omnitool towards Jenkins.

"He’s lucky he just lightly injured his neck. I was afraid that he had broken his back, but then he
stood up and yelled "THAT WAS AWESOME" Dr Chakwas spoke while she gave Jenkins a disapproving look.

“So, Shepard, from where did you know Alenko and Dr Chakwas ?” Anderson spoke as he rested against one of the machines in the room.

“I met Kaidan almost 5 years ago. He was giving one of those conferences about Biotic Tolerance and Understanding conferences that the we had to take as part of the education programs. We've been good friends since then” She then turned and faced Karin “As for the Doctor, she was the one who fixed me up and helped me with the therapy programs after…” she paused for a few moments before continuing ”... after the Blitz”

Jenkins excitedly spoke to the Commander “I was in Eden Prime with my family when the attack happened. We remember seeing on TV as they rescued you. We saw the dozens of dead pirates and slavers that lay dead all around you. Your actions that day where what pushed me to join the Alliance, ma’am. I said to myself “I want to be a savior, a role model and a hero, just like Commander Shepard”

“Savior, Role Model, Hero. I'm none of those things ” Memories from Elysium quickly flashed in Shepard’s mind, and she struggled to hide the emotions that she was feeling.

Knowing that the topic of Elysium was very sensitive to Shepard, Anderson prevented Jenkins from dwelling on it by saying “Speaking of Eden Prime, that's where were taking the Normandy for her shakedown run. So everyone, get ready and report to your stations. We leave in 15 minutes” Anderson then turned and left towards his cabin.

“Yes, sir” was heard in unison after the Captain spoke.

“Well, I better get to it. See you around, Kate. Doctor, Jenkins” Kaidan said as he quickly left towards the cockpit. 

After spending a few moments saying goodbye to Karin, Shepard headed towards the bridge with Jenkins. “Why do you think we're heading to Eden Prime, ma’am ? Nothing ever happens there, and I'm itching for some real action” Jenkins exclaimed, the eagerness evident on his voice.

“Maybe that's why we're going there, because there's no risk of danger for the ship or the crew. Don't go looking for fights, Corporal. Let them find you and be ready to face them when they do”

“I understand, ma’am. It's just that I want a chance to prove myself, you know ?”

“All in due time, Corporal. On the bright side, you'll probably get to show to your family that you were handpicked by Captain Anderson to be part of this ultra advanced project of the Alliance. That's got to count for something, right ?”

“Yeah, you're right ma’am. I'll be able to tell my family that I served in missions with the great Commander Shepard. Maybe we'll see my family when we're there. That way they'll believe me”

“Hell, I'll give you my picture and autograph if it'll make them happy. You've got a long road ahead of you, Jenkins. You'll have your fair share of chances to make your people proud”

“Thank you, ma’am. I'm just worried that...”

"Hitting the relay in 30 Seconds. ETA to Eden Prime: 10 minutes" Joker’s voice came over the intercom, interrupting the Corporal before he could finish.
As they reached the bridge, Shepard turned and patted the Corporal in the back “Everything's going to be fine, Jenkins, I promise”

Everything's going to be fine.

I promise.

Chapter End Notes

*1 The full story for this is found in the comic "He Who Laughs Best".
New World, New Challenges.

Unknown Planet, Unknown System

2 Hours after the end of the Reaper War

Anger.
Frustration.
Pain.
Fear.

4 words that perfectly described the mood of the crew of Normandy SR-2 after the frigate crashed in a remote, unknown planet.

Locked inside her cabin, Liara T’ Soni lay motionless over her bed. She had remained there since the Normandy had left the Battle for Earth.

The room was almost completely dark, except for the few monitors that, while they still functioned, only showed completely white and blank screens. Glyph had gone offline when the ship lost its main power sources, and her own generators, which were supposed to maintain the Shadow Broker’s network operating in case of an eventuality such as this, had fried and exploded when the ship crashed.

Not that it mattered much, because all of her operatives had stopped reporting over the course of the last 2 weeks. Either because they were hiding, because the comm buoy network had been completely destroyed or because they were dead, it didn't matter. The Network had gone silent, possibly permanently, and now the Shadow Broker herself was offline.

Liara was curled on the bed, silently crying while she held with one hand the N7 hoodie that Katerina loved to wear. With the other, she tightly pressed Shepard’s dog tags against her chest. The force with which she was pressing made the ring on her finger hurt her skin, but she didn't care about the pain. Right now, she didn't care about anything.

“Keep them with you” Kate said as she placed the dog tags around Liara’s neck. “That way you'll always have a little piece of me with you”

“I don't want just a little piece, Katerina. I want the whole you, with me, always” she said as she rested her head in Shepard’s chest, listening to her heartbeat as it its rhythm relaxed.

Kate gave her a quick kiss in the forehead “I'll always be with you, Li”. She placed one hand in Liara’s chest and said “I'll always be here..” and the other hand on her forehead “...and here. The dog tags are just a little physical reminder of me”.

New World, New Challenges
Liara held her tighter and said “Well, when all this is over, I won’t need your reminders, because I’m going to have you with me everyday”

“I’ll hold you to that, T’Soni. I expect to see you next to me every morning when I wake up, and that’s an order”

“That’s an order I’ll happily obey, Commander” she said before locking her lips with Kate’s in a deep kiss.

A scream outside her cabin brought her back to reality. The crew's anxieties and fears were taking control of them. Those that weren't in a state of despair over the accident were busy fighting one another.

“I don't want to live anymore”. The phrase had repeated itself in Liara's mind over and over since the Normandy left the Sol System towards the edges of dark space.

“Goddess, if your truly gone Shepard, then I want to go to you. I don't want to face what's coming alone” she said as she held the dog tags tightly “I don't want to be in this Galaxy without you”

She turned over and looked at the Biotic waves that were moving through her hand “If I concentrate a small charge against my neck, that should be more than enough to stop the flow of air and…”

Suddenly, she saw herself and Katerina in her mind. Liara was reliving one of the many conversations that they had had. She didn't remember when or where it had happened, but she was crying and Shepard was holding her in her arms.

“My pillar, my fortitude, my strength” Liara thought as the image in her mind warmed her heart. “You were always there for me when I needed you to be. And I wasn't there for you at the moments when you needed me most. I have let you down more times than I can count, Katerina. I truly didn't deserve you”

The memory continued to play on her mind.

Shepard lifted Liara’s face and looked directly at her eyes: “Liara, listen, listen to me. Don't give up. The crew needs you to stay strong… I need you to stay strong”

“It's just so hard Shepard. I'm not like you, I don't have the strength to…”

“Bullshit. You do have the strength. You are one of the strongest persons that I know, and that's one of the things that I love about you. So pull yourself together and get moving”

As the young asari remained immobile, Shepard placed a hand on her shoulder and spoke: “Do it for me Li. Please.”

After a few moments, Liara wiped the tears from her eyes and stood up: “Ok, Kate, let's go”

A grin flashed across Shepard's face before she gave her a quick kiss on the cheek “That's my girl”.
Liara opened her eyes. With a smile on her face, she relaxed before wiping the tears that rolled down her cheek. “I'll do this, Kate. I'll do it for you”

“Stay with me, kid” James Vega said to the marine that he was attempting to patch up over a table in the Mess of the ship.

“I'm applying some more medigel. Jesus Christ, he's losing too much blood. Where the hell is Karin ?” Kaidan Alenko shouted as the blood from the leg of the marine soaked his hands and forearms.

“She's unconscious” Garrus replied as he came out of the infirmary. “She took a heavy hit to the head when we crashed”

“Oh, that's just fucking perfect” Alenko exclaimed in an exasperated tone. “James, he passed out!” Kaidan warned the Lieutenant as he moved towards the soldier with the medigel dispenser.

“Come on. Wake up, wake up you son of a bitch!” Vega said to the now unconscious marine as he performed CPR on him.

After 3 minutes of trying to bring him back, Kaidan finally said: “He's gone, James”

“No, I can still save him, goddammit” Vega said as he shoved Kaidan away and started to open another bag of medigel lotion.

“Don't waste the supplies on the dead, James” Garrus spoke while he attempted to bandage a large wound that he had in his leg.

Seeing that James wasn't stopping, Kaidan pulled the bag from his hands and shouted: “Stand down Lieutenant, and that's an order!

James pushed him back and screamed: “I don't care that you're a Major. Rank doesn't mean shit anymore. As far as we're concerned, the Alliance, Earth, and everything else no longer exist, so you can take your orders and shove them up your ass!”

“We can't afford to waste medical supplies” Kaidan said as he tried to calm the situation. “We don't know what happened to the ship or how long were going to be here, so we must…”

“Where the fuck is here ?” Vega interrupted him. “We have no clue about where we are, we don't know what's the state of the crew and we don't know what the fuck we are going to do!”

“Have any of you asked Joker about where we are ? If anyone on this ship knows that, it's him” Garrus said as he continued to patch up his injured leg.

“He's, uh… not in a very talkative mood right now” Kaidan said as he wiped the blood that was dripping down his forehead from an injury he had in the head.

“That's putting it mildly” said a voice behind them. They turned and saw Engineer Gabriella Daniels picking up several fire extinguishers from a broken container.

“The guy is like a fucking vegetable, just thrown over his chair, weeping and with his arm extended to the side, like he's holding hands with the air”
“Shit” Garrus said in a concerned tone. “EDI…”

“Is gone, and so are most of the electronics of the ship. Greg and Kenneth are putting out fires and trying to fix what they can down in Engineering. I’m headed there now” Daniels said as she left towards the lower level of the ship.

“Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!” James said as he paced around the tables and scratched his hair desperately as he reacted to the news of EDI’s demise.

Garrus tried to calm him “We need to stay focused, James. If we lose our heads now is only going to make things worse”

“Fuck off” was the reply Vega gave him.

Garrus then turned and faced Alenko “Kaidan, listen, we need to review our supplies and the state of the crew. First, we need to…”

“I know what we need to do, Garrus. I’m not some fucking inexperienced Corporal, I’m a Major, for fuck’s sake! Do you want to take command of the ship Garrus, is that it? You want to relieve me of command?” Kaidan said as his face came mere inches from Garrus. The stress and fear from the situation they were in was evident in Kaidan’s face and voice.

“Kaidan, that’s not my intention. I’m merely suggesting…”

“Suggesting what?” James shouted as he focused his anger on the Turian “You’re saying that we humans are too fucking stupid to figure out what to do? That we should let Garrus, the hardass veteran and savior to tell us what we should and shouldn’t do?”

“The Commanding Officer of the vessel is fighting with a Lieutenant while they don’t even know where we are or how the crew is. So yeah, maybe I should start telling both of you idiots what to do” Garrus exclaimed in a tone that showed that he was clearly losing his patience.

“You don’t care about any of us. You never did. You only cared about Shepard and Sparks. You don’t give a single fuck about anyone else” James said as he stepped up to Garrus.

In a sudden move, Garrus sucker punched James. As he fell to the floor, he shouted to the top of his lungs: “I care about every single person aboard this ship, regardless of their species, affiliation or rank! But while you 2 incompetent idiots were busy trying to kill each other, the entire ship has been falling apart! Tali has been unconscious inside that sealed containment area in the infirmary since we got out of London. She and I need Dextro based medicines and food, and I’m not sure how much of those we have currently on board. And I’ll be damned if I’m going to let her die, or anyone else for that matter, in this spirit forsaken planet. So if I have to kill you both to save her and everyone else, I swear I will!”

As Kaidan tried to keep James and Garrus away from each other, they heard a loud scream behind them.

“ENOUGH!” the voice said in a violent tone. Suddenly, the 3 of them suddenly found themselves trapped several meters above the ground in a stasis field. They turned their heads and saw Liara fully glowing with biotics and looking at them with a furious look on her face.

“What’s wrong with all of you? Do you want to finish what the Reapers started?” she said with such a noticeable anger that made the trio shiver. “You should be ashamed of yourselves”

“Liara, we just…”
“I heard everything Lieutenant Vega. There's no need to explain. You 3 were about to kill each other in a time where we should all be working together. Goddess! We stand to lose everything if the infighting doesn't end. We all should have learned that from the war. Why is that so fucking difficult to understand?”

“Liara, we…”

“Do you want to see us all dead? Three of the most able bodied individuals aboard the Normandy are fist fighting each other while half the crew is either dead or injured and the Normandy is stuck in Goddess knows where. Perhaps Javik was right when he called us stupid primitives after all”

She dropped them from the field and hoped that the fall would knock some sense into them. She then looked at the state of the Mess area.

Several dead and injured were laying around, and the interior of the ship had taken significant structural damage.

Liara paused for a moment to collect herself before speaking, but this time, the anger in her voice had been replaced by conviction and steadfastness: “We have a large number of injured people who need immediate attention and a large number of repairs that need to be attended to. We all know the extent of our abilities and in what areas we can give support, so I'm asking you, as your friend and as your shipmate, please, help me. Help me to do this”

They all nodded, quickly agreeing with her words. James then turned towards Garrus and Kaidan and spoke: “Hey, listen you two, I didn't meant what I said, you know, about…”

“Forget about it, James. Panic and stress affect all species, it seems, including this, how did you put it, “hardass veteran and savior” Garrus said as he shook James’s hands.

“And damn! You hit hard, Garrus. We should do some boxing sometime” the Lieutenant said as he rubbed his jaw.

“I apologize for my behavior too. I lost my composure at a critical time. I have failed you and I have failed the crew” Kaidan said with an ashamed look in her face.

“It happens, Kaidan” Liara said as she patted him on the back. “It doesn't matter how strong we are, the stress, fear and nerves affect us just the same” Katerina broke more times than I could count. Liara remembered as she turned to hug James and Garrus.

“Kaidan, I wasn't serious about… killing you. I might have put down James, but considering the number of times I've saved you, it would be a weird turn of fate if you ended up dying by my hand” Garrus said as he and Kaidan gave each other an affectionate hug.

“I've pulled your ass out of the fire more than a few times too, Garrus. Don't forget that” Kaidan replied in a joyful tone.

“We'll remember those occasions later, with a couple of drinks. For now, let's go get this mess sorted out”

“Roger that”

"James, find Traynor and see if she's fit for duty. We should…"

As the three individuals started to help and support the injured crew members and to repair what they could around the area, Liara sat down to recover her strength. The Biotic field she had put up
had consumed more energy than what she had expected. As she relaxed with her eyes closed, a smile appeared on her face as a familiar voice crossed her mind.

“That's my girl”
July 22, 2187

8 Months after the End of the War

“We have one more lead. Matriarch Benezia, the other voice in that recording? She has a daughter, a scientist who specializes on the Protheans. We don’t know if she’s involved but it might be a good idea to try and find her. See what she knows”

“Her name is Liara. Dr Liara T’Soni”.

I still remember as Udina uttered those words in the Alliance docking bay. I remember it as if it had been yesterday. I didn’t know that finding you would change my life and yours forever.

I marked the day we headed out to Therum to find you. July 22nd, 2183.

I've been counting hours and days these past months. It's the only thing I've been doing really, and if my calculations are correct, today would mark the 4th year since I've met you. It's a date that I've always wanted to celebrate with you, but we never got the chance. I'm sitting by a shore in the Caspian Sea and I have a small bottle of rum with me, so I'll drink and celebrate for both of us.

Speaking of drinks, I talked with Ashley last night. She told me that I looked like shit. I'm inclined to believe her. I offered her a drink but she didn't want one. Looks like my only friends right now are dead people. This is what I get for getting so many of them killed. In another time, losing what was left of my sane mind might have caused me concern. Now... now I just don't care. I just hope that at least I'll be able to see you again, even if it's just in hallucinations. At least I'll hear your voice.

So Happy July 22nd, Liara T’Soni, wherever you are, and thank you for coming into my life.

Katerina Shepard

July 22nd, 2183

Therum

“This place fits the definition of hellhole” Katerina said as she wiped the sweat from her forehead

“Why would anyone want to come here?”

As she cleaned her brow, she saw Ashley coming down from one of the nearby hills with her
sniper rifle in hand. “Saw anything, Ash?”

“Rock, lava and a fuckton of Geth. Those ruins must be pretty special if you have to go through all this to see them”

“Maybe they arrived after this Dr T’Soni came here. They may be trying to capture her”

“Or they could be the personal protection detail that her mother sent her. I don’t like this, Skipper”

“We’ll find out soon enough” Kate said as she turned to look towards the Mako “Tali, Garrus, how are those repairs coming?”

“Nearly done, Shepard. That last blast hit the engine hard. We’re lucky it didn’t blow up” Tali said as she worked with her omnitool under the Mako.

“If you could please avoid stopping every rocket and energy blasts the Geth fire at us with the Mako we would be most grateful. Dodging them works just as well and prevents the vehicle’s engines from catching fire” Garrus said as he recalibrated the main cannon and the coaxial gun of the vehicle.

“You know I’m not the kind of person that runs away from danger, Garrus” Shepard replied with a grin on her face.

“No, you’re the kind of person who sits and relaxes while the rest of us work to fix the vehicle you disabled” Garrus replied in annoyed tone.

A few meters ahead, Kaidan was pouring off sweat as he patrolled the area. Wrex came up to him and said: “Is the heat bothering you, human? You looked as if you just heard the roar of a thresher maw right behind you”

Kaidan looked at him and spoke: “It’s because of the implant. Biotics consume more energy than normal humans, and the implant makes us burn calories faster than the average…”

“Bah!” Wrex interrupted him “I am a Biotic too, and I’m not whining like a pyjak because of the heat. You mammals are just too soft, too weak”

“I may be 'soft and weak', but I can still leave you dangling over that pool of lava in stasis field”

Wrex let out a deep, guttural laugh “I’d like to see you try”

“That’s enough you two. I’ll leave both of your asses behind it you keep this up” Shepard shouted behind them.

“Sorry, Commander” Kaidan replied.

Wrex let out an annoyed growl before walking away from Kaidan.

“The Mako is functional. For the moment” Tali said as she crawled out from under the vehicle.

“You heard the lady. Everybody on board. Now. Let’s go find this Asari” Shepard shouted to the crew.

As they continued driving, Katerina spotted a pair of Geth Armatures blocking the entrance to a tunnel. Instead of engaging them from a distance, Shepard started accelerating in their direction.

As the Mako approached the Geth vehicles at tremendous speed, Garrus spoke to Kate: “Shepard,
you're not doing what I think you're doing, right?"

“Yes I am, my young Turian friend. Yes, I am” Shepard said in an excited tone as the Mako’s engines roared and made the vehicle gain even more speed

“Shepard, no!” Tali yelled so that her words could be heard among the engine noises. “You have a Canon and a coaxial gun to kill things from a safe range. You don’t need to ram them, especially not if we’re inside the vehicle”

With a grin on her face, Kate looked to Tali and, with a mischievous tone, she said: “But where's the fun in that?”

Wrex laughed out loud before speaking: “I might be starting to like you Shepard”

Everyone but Wrex shouted in unison “Shepard, stop! SHEPARD!”

Their protests ended as the Mako collided against both Geth Armatures at full speed.

2 hours later

Liara T’Soni stared at the tiles of the roof as she floated inside the Prothean security bubble. She had spent almost 2 days trapped there. The hunger and the thirst were making her lose the struggle of trying to stay awake. But every time her eyes closed and sleep threatened to take her, the Geth troops that stood outside the bubble started to emit their horrible cacophony of computer noises, quickly dissipating from her mind any thoughts of rest.

“You really outdid yourself this time, Liara T’Soni” the young Asari said out loud in a tired tone. “Sure, go and explore the ancient ruins in the volcanic world on your own and with no weapons. Because you hardly have any friends or contact with your family, probably no one knows where you are. And, while running from the Geth and Krogan that are trying to kill you, mess with technology that you're supposed to be an expert about and activate a trap that has laid dormant for millennia”

“Good job Liara. You're making the T’Soni House proud”

She remembered the conversation that she had had with her mother on Armali, back on Thessia, several decades ago when she told her that she was going to study archeology.

“Let the ancient dead rest in peace, Liara. Archeology is not a career worthy of a member of our house” the Matriarch spoke in a calm but firm tone.

“What I want to do with my life should be the only thing that matters, regardless of what 'our house' considers worthy or not” Liara replied while she packed her datapads and instruments in a large suitcase.

“You are still very young, but you are expected to lead the T’Soni House to glory in the future. In a few more decades, you'll discover what career you truly want to pursue. In the meantime, you should…”
“I don't care about what is expected of me. I don't want to waste decades of my life in social meetings and parties with the high class of Armali. I’ll do what I've always wanted to do, and I'm not looking for your approval or permission, Mother”

Benezia started to lose her patience with Liara. She breathed deeply before continuing to speak: “All children rebel against their parents. It is a natural part of our development as individuals. I understand that. But, I will not allow your selfish desires to endanger the more than 35 thousand years of history of the T'Soni family. We are one of the most influential and respected families not only in Armali but on the whole of Thessia, and as my only daughter is your responsibility…”

“My responsibility, Mother, is to finish my studies and pursue the career I have chosen. I will leave the socializing with the hypocrites and liars of the high society to you. You always did seem to get along with them just fine” Liara exclaimed in an accusatory tone while she finished packing.

“How dare you ?” Benezia claimed with evident fury on her voice “Rude, insolent, petulant child! You're just like your …”

The Matriarch stopped talking for several moments as an obviously painful memory crossed her mind. The sorrow that set in her face was evident, and tears were briefly visible in her eyes.

“Mother, are you okay ?” Liara asked as the anger she had felt just moments was replaced by worry.

Benezia quickly wiped the tears and regained her composure before speaking: “If this is what you want, then I won't stop you. I hope that you don't come to regret this. I wish you well, Liara T’Soni” She then turned and left Liara’s room.

“Mother, I didn't mean to…” Benezia was already out of earshot when Liara spoke. “I’m sorry”.

That was the last time she had seen her mother. Almost 50 years had passed since then.

“As usual, Mother, you were right. I am currently regretting this very much” Liara said as she tried to keep her eyes open. “At least now I know what it feels to be attacked by Prothean technology. I wish I had recorded this. Hopefully someone would have found the video and it would have been shown in archeology classes throughout the Galaxy as an example of why you do not fool around with Prothean technology and why you shouldn't activate Prothean traps. At least something useful would have come out of it, unlike my dozen studies about cyclical galactic extinction, which most professors and scholars didn't even fully saw before they threw them in the garbage disposal bins”

Her eyes closed for a moment before computer noises assaulted her senses and jolted her awake once more. “Goddess damned Geth, what are you doing outside the Veil anyway ?” Liara said in the strongest tone she could use, as if that would somehow intimidate the synthetics.

“Speaking of the Goddess, this seems like a good time to start praying. I might not get a chance later. Let's see…” Liara closed her eyes as she tried to remember the Asari prayer for the travel to the Afterlife.

“Oh Athame, merciful and powerful goddess, please guide my soul from this world to the next. Please, generous Athame, send me a guardian to protect me from the perils that lay ahead in my journey. Send me a warrior to fend off the enemies of the spirit. Send me a guide to peacefully travel through…”

A loud shot rang across the ruin. Liara opened her eyes and tried to locate from where it had come
from, but all she saw was as the 2 Geth outside the Prothean bubble exploded into a thousand pieces.

“Goddess!” Liara exclaimed out loud.

“Open your eyes Vakarian. You didn't saw the 2 standing near that field down there?” a voice said in the floor above.

“Powerful, strong voice. Asari ? No, I'm understanding her through the translator. But definitely female. Not Turian or Salarian either. Human, perhaps ? No, no, why would a human come here ?” Liara rapidly thought as she tried to understand the situation.

“I didn't see them, Shepard, because I was dodging the rockets the Geth on the other side were firing at me”

“Ok, that voice is most definitely Turian. That tonality is characteristic of the spec…”

“Keelah, you're a little sensitive about the Geth rockets today, aren’t you Garrus ?”

“Keelah?” A Quarian is here too ? That's odd, why would a…”

“Are you pyjaks done admiring the view ? I want to squash more synthetic bastards”

“Krogan. You have definitely lost your mind Liara. Why would a Turian and a Krogan work together ? With Quarians and Humans, no less. Perhaps this was some repressed desire for intergalactic cooperation that I had and has now manifested near me because I have gone insane. Lovely”

Several individuals dropped from the upper level and walked towards the field. The one leading seemed to be a human female with short red hair and emerald green eyes. “They may not be real, but I may as well try to interact with them” Liara thought before shouting “Can you hear me out there ? I'm trapped, I need help!”

“Are you Liara T'Soni? Dr Liara T'Soni?” the woman asked her.

“My imagination wants to confirm my identity. I'll play along” “Yes, I am Liara T'Soni”

The woman looked at her with a worried look before asking: “Are you feeling OK ? You seem to be a bit… dizzy and pale”

“Listen” Liara spoke in an annoyed tone "I appreciate that Athame sent you, a human spirit, and a very stunning one too, along with several spiritual representatives of other species to guide my journey to the Afterlife, but can we just get on with it, please? I'm really tired and I just want to rest”

Shepard blushed slightly as she replied with a smile on her face "Oh...well, thanks for the compliment”

“Spiritual guide ? What ?” Ashley spoke as she struggled to understand what the Asari had said.

“She's probably delirious, Commander. Who knows how long she has been trapped there” Kaidan said as he analyzed the situation.

“Ok. I'll cut to the chase” Kate said as she turned towards the Asari “Your mother is working with a known terrorist, Saren Arterius. Whose side are you on ?"
“What? I am not on anybody’s side” Liara replied in an outraged tone. “I may be Benezia’s daughter but I am nothing like her. I have not spoken to her in years. Please, don’t judge me for her sins, spirits, just get me out of here, please.”

“Well, in that case, I'm Commander Shepard, I'm a Spectre and we're here to rescue you”

“Oh, Liara, there are no human Spectres” Liara said as she laughed. “I have truly lost my mind”

“Can we trust her, Commander?” Ashley said to Kate while she kept her eyes focused on the trapped Asari.

“I don't think that those Geth were trying to protect her, and she looks quite bad, which means that they weren't being exactly nice to her. So yeah, we trust her. For now”

“Aye aye, ma’am”

“Everyone, go down and find anything we can use to get through” Katerina then turned towards the Asari and spoke before descending to the other floor: “Doctor, you just... stay put. We’ll find some way to get to the other side”

A confused look crossed Liara’s face. “Stay put? Do these spirits not realize that the trap doesn’t allow me to move? They must not understand how this Prothean device work”

After a few moments, the silence was suddenly interrupted by a loud, blasting sound. As the dust settled, the multispecies team appeared behind Liara. “How… how did you get here?” Liara asked the red haired woman.

“We bore through with the mining laser”

The truth suddenly dawned on Liara “Oh, Goddess, you're real, aren’t you? All of you are real!”

“Last time I checked, yeah, we were pretty real. How do we get you down from there?”

Liara nodded towards the side of the room “Operate that console over there. That’s what I used when I trapped myself”

As the containment field dissipated, the young Asari found herself rapidly descending towards the floor. Her free fall was stopped by the red haired woman who caught her in her arms. “Are you OK? Can you walk?” Katerina asked her.

“Yes, yes… I can” Liara said as she looked directly at her eyes. Beautiful, stunning green eyes.

“Do you know how we can leave this place” Tali asked Liara.

Liara stood up before she answered: “We can use the elevator in the back. At least, I think it’s an elevator, come on” the Asari said as she walked towards the control panel. As she reached it, she asked the group: “Why would the Geth come for me? Do you really think Benezia may be involved?”

“Yeah, your mother and her latest Turian mate are working with the Geth to find a Prothean thing”

“Wrex!” Shepard said while she gave the Krogan a chastising look.

“You’re a Prothean expert. Saren probably wants your help to find the Prothean Conduit” Kaidan explained in a more polite manner.
“The Conduit? But I don't know…” She stopped talking as everything around them started to tremble and rocks started to fall around them. “What's happening?”

“Probably the result of firing a mining laser towards an ancient ruin” Tali answered.

“Joker, get the Normandy to our location. We're leaving in a hurry” Katerina spoke over the radio.

“Aye, aye Commander”

As the elevator reached the top of the ruin, they were greeted by a Krogan Battlemaster and several Geth. “Surrender, or don't. That would be more fun” the brute said in a menacing tone.

“Get out of my way if you want to live” Katerina said as she drew her shotgun.

The Krogan let out a short laugh and replied “Hand over the Asari, and I'll make sure you die quickly... Relatively quickly”

“Don't move and I assure that you'll be dead. Very quickly” Garrus said as he aimed his sniper rifle to the head of one of the Geth that stood next to the Battlemaster.

Without taking her eyes off the Krogan, Katerina slightly pushed Liara behind her as she whispered to her: “Get behind me. When the shooting begins, stay down”

As Liara placed herself behind the Commander, Shepard shouted: “Wrex, now!”

Wrex rushed towards the other Krogan and pinned him down. The rest of the team, using tech explosions, biotic attacks and live grenades, quickly dispatched the remaining enemies. After a shotgun blast from Wrex, the other Krogan stopped moving.

As the entire area started to cave in, everybody stated rushing towards the exit of the tunnel. “MOVE, MOVE” Shepard shouted as she stayed behind to make sure that everyone got out. While most were sprinting at a good pace, the young Asari, exhausted and dehydrated, was lagging very far behind the rest. Shepard rushed to her side and picked her up. “Come on. I've been through enough shit on this planet to get to you. I'm not gonna let you die now” she said as she threw her over her shoulder and started to run.

After a few moments, they finally exited the mine.

“Thought that you were going to join the Protheans, Skipper” Ashley said with a grin on her face. “How is she?”

Shepard placed Liara on the ground and saw that she had passed out. “She fainted”

“Weakling asari” Wrex said, giving the fainted asari a dismissive look.

“She’s just a kid, Wrex. Cut her some slack” Shepard said as she caught her breath.

Before Wrex could ask what "cut some slack” meant, they saw the Normandy approaching.

“Let's get her to the ship. I've seen enough of this planet to last me a lifetime”

20 Minutes later
“Is she gonna be okay, Doc?” Shepard asked as Karin inserted an IV line in the hand of Liara, who was sleeping peacefully, probably for the first time in the last days.

“She’s severely dehydrated and it’s likely she hasn’t anything in a while. I would guess that she was trapped around 2 to 3 days. With a few hours of rest and a good meal she should be fine”

“Good. Let me know when she wakes up to bring everyone to the mission debrief. Take care of her Karin” Shepard said as she left the infirmary.

“Sure thing, Commander”
I struggle to breathe. Buried below several centimeters of rubble, with broken ribs punishing me for every breath I take and with blood dripping from my nose every time air passes through it, staying alive is becoming increasingly difficult.

Even the smallest of movements makes every nerve in my body flare up. The pain is unbearable. “You should be dead, Kate, and your body is reminding you that”

I try to smile as a thought crosses my mind “Born amongst garbage and dirt, died amongst garbage and dirt. That's the quick version of the epic story of Commander Shepard”

Darkness is all around me. I don’t know if it is because of a lack of illumination or because my eyes no longer work. The sound of rocks and rubble falling fills the area “At least I can still hear”

An hour passes, or two. Maybe 10, i don't really know. After what felt like an eternity, I hear voices in the distance. Calling out my name.

“Shepard! Commander Shepard!”

“Angels, perhaps ? No, servants of death coming to claim your soul, Kate. Time to go to the dark abyss. Again” I think as i accept the inevitability of my fate.

“Her suit transponder is transmitting just up ahead”

Wait, I know that voice. Soft, sweet and with that robotic touch from her translator. Tali. “Is she truly here ?”

“All I see is piles of rocks everywhere. Are you sure that it’s a suit signal and and not a random broadcast from something else ?” Low, deep Turian voice. Garrus.

“It's definitely Shepard’s suit. She should be just up ahead” Kaidan. My friend.

I see lights around me. A flashlight focuses on my face. “Here. I think she’s here. Beneath this mountain of mierda. Jesus, this rocks are heavy. Help me move this” James. He's here too.

I hear voices above me. Trying to reach me. Struggling to free me. Fighting to save me.

Suddenly, everything becomes blue.

Rocks are thrown in every direction. The rubble that pressed down on my body is gone.

Then I hear a voice.

The voice of an angel.

Her voice.

Liara.

“Katerina!”
She slowly lifts me. She holds me in her arms. I touch her face. “You’re really here?”

“Yes I am, Kate. I’ll always be here”

“What happened? The Reapers… did we?”

“They’re gone, Kate. The war is over. We won”

“It’s over” Tears of joy fill my eyes. “It’s finally over”

She moves me towards my friends. They’re all here. “Not even an ancient weapon of mass destruction is able to bring you down, eh Shepard” Garrus says with a smile on his face.

“It fucked me up good tough. I’m going to be as ugly as you from now on, Garrus”

“You look just perfect, Lola” James says with his usual cheerful tone.

“Uh huh. You’re a terrible liar, James”

Liara carries me as we move through the ruins of the Citadel. The whole team is coming with us.

It should have ended like this. Liara and my friends rescue me from the Citadel, and we all live happily ever after.

All of them deserve a happy ending.

Liara deserves a happy ending.

I didn’t. But happy endings don’t happen in real life.

I speak to Liara in a playful tone “You know Li, it’s not that I don’t enjoy being in your arms, but you should get me to a medical facility” I say as I cup her cheek. I’m not letting go this time. Not again.

“Don’t worry Katerina. We’re nearly there” she replies as she looks at me with her beautiful crystal blue eyes.

“Nearly where?” I ask.

“Where you belong, Kate. Where you belong”

We enter a room. A room filled with familiar people. People that I knew. People that I killed.

“Siha, it is good to see you again” Thane says as his typical smile appears in his face.

“Shepard. Excellent timing. Good to have you here” Mordin is next to him now.

“Good to see you in one piece, Skipper. You know, relatively speaking” Ashley says as she smiles at me.

I speak as panic starts to overcome me. “Oh, no. Liara, we must get out of here”

“There is nowhere else we can go, Kate”. She stops walking and sits in a chair. She no longer looks at me.

“Let’s go home, Liara. Please, I beg you” I try to make her notice me, but she doesn’t. She now stares at the distance, looking at something I can’t see.
“Home? And where would that be, Kate?”

“Wherever you are, Li, but not here. Please”

“The only home that you have known throughout your life is the Alliance. The home that I knew is probably in ruins now, like the rest of Thessia. Because of you”

My eyes widen in shock and tears roll down my cheeks “No, no, no, this is not you. You would never say that to me”

“You do not like being reminded of your failures, Shepard? My people nearly went extinct, because you weren’t good enough to save them”

“I know Liara. I’m... I’m sorry. I know I failed, I know everything that i did wrong, but please, let’s just get out of here”

A voice speaks near me. A synthesized voice. The voice of a friend.

“Shepard Commander, the Geth only acted in self defense after the creators attacked. Do we deserve death?”

“Legion, I...I…”

“The Geth do not wish you harm”

“Just stop. Please, just…”

“You were the first organic to openly cooperate with the Geth since the end of the Morning War. We wish to ensure you are not the last” Legion extends his arm, offering to shake my hand, like we did when we first met.

“Does this unit have a soul?” When I reach for him, he vanishes.

“I’m sorry. God, I’m so sorry”

Another synthesized voice speaks behind me. Another friend. EDI.

“The Illusive Man ordered my construction years ago. Jeff was the one who allowed me to think for myself. But only now do I feel alive. That is your influence”

She stands up and looks at me for several moments, watching me, judging me.

She then places her hands around my neck and starts to choke me.

My heartbeat raises. My eyes frantically move from side to side. It hurts.

I grab Liara’s hands. I manage to utter 3 words as I try to get her attention. 3 words that I had said through my life more times than I could count.

“Liara, help me”

She finally looks at me with those beautiful crystal blue eyes. She cups my cheek and with that smile that I love so much, she enters my mind and simply says: “You just have to breathe, Katerina. Breathe”

“Let me go. Please”
“Breathe, Kate”

“I don’t want to. I want to stay here, with you”

“Breathe”

“No. I can’t”

“Breathe”

“I don’t want to leave you again”

“Breathe”

“I...I...”

“Breathe, Kate. For me”

I start to let go. I relax. “I'll do it. For you”

“Come on. Breathe, breathe!” a voice shouts at me. I jolt awake. After coughing violently for several moments, my head and body feel extremely heavy as I try to sit. My heartbeat starts to slow down as oxygen starts to course through my blood once more. My eyes look briefly towards the star filled night sky as I adjust the bandages in my face before focusing on the figure next to me.

“Holy shit. I didn't think that you were going to make it. It seemed that you were ready to join your ancestors in the eternal dream” The man next to me says. He pants as he wipes the sweat from his head. “Can you understand me ?”

“Yes” I reply coldly. My translator still functions after all “What… What did you do to me?” I ask him in an accusatory tone.

“I just saved your life. You're welcome”

“Why should I believe you ?” I say as I grab my rifle “You could have been choking me as I slept”

“Choking you ?” He chuckles before answering. “If I had wanted to kill you, you'd been long gone by now. And nobody was attacking you. I was passing through the road when I saw you next to it. I thought you were dead, mainly because most of the left side of your body is a charred mess and because you were bluer than the sky. Then you started twitching and I realized you lived, but you weren't breathing”

He lights a cigarette before continuing “It was like someone had told your brain to cease all respiratory functions. I gave you CPR for several moments but you didn't react. Then, just when I'm about to give up, you came back” He points up before saying: “You have a spirit up there watching you, it seems”

A blue guardian angel. “If what you say is true, then thank you”

He smiles as he replies: “I'm a doctor. Saving people is my job after all” He offers me some water. I refuse. I drink from my own bottle.

I relax and put the rifle down. I'll be friendly, for now. I ask him his name.
"Pei Li. You?"

"Katerina"

"No last name?"

"No. Nobody needs to know that the person who carries the name Shepard still lives."

"Ok, then"

I check that all my equipment and supplies are still intact. *It's been awhile since I had an attack like that. I'll need to be more careful with my meds.* After a few moments of silent thinking, I ask:

"Where are you from, doctor?"

"The Chinese People's Federation. Back when the country still existed, I was a medic in the army." He starts to gather branches to start a fire. "What about you? Where are you from?"

"I grew up in several places. Mainly towns and cities in Alaska and the Russian coast. When I turned 18, I joined the Alliance."

"Interesting. Where you on Earth during the War?"

"In the beginning and in the end. I left the planet shortly after the initial invasion. I came back for the Battle of London. That's where I got so...messed up" I say as I point to the burned left side of my body. *A parting gift from the "Harbinger of our perfection"*

*And that's where I saw her for the last time.*

"You're a long way from London. How did you end up here?" He speaks as he lights a small fire and warms himself near it.

_Think quickly Shepard. Make up some bullshit story to tell him._ "When Hackett ordered the fleets to leave, I was on a...a cruiser. We were leaving Earth space when the pulse hit us. We crashed near Turkey. I've been moving East ever since"

"I heard it was a brutal fight there in London. The Final Battle of the War to end all Wars"

"It was massive in scale" I reply as the dark memories from that day fill my mind. "The city became a massive slaughterhouse"

"I can only imagine. I spent much of the War in China. Trying to fight a guerrilla war against the Machines with several other army units. It didn't work out so well for us"

"How bad?" I ask as I put some medigel in my left arm.

"We were 2000 back in November 2186 when fire rained from the sky. A year later, when Commander Shepard saved the Galaxy and the Machines finally collapsed, only 5 remained. Of those five, I'm the only one left"

_"When Commander Shepard saved the Galaxy" Lord forgive them for they do not know what they say._ "This war destroyed us all in one way or another. I'm not sure that were going to be able to fix what's left of the planet"

"The Alliance is doing the best it can" He says as he fans the smoke from his cigar. "I'm heading to Ulaanbaatar right now. The city's got priority in rebuilding because of its surviving population. Figured I might do some good there"
"How many people are there?"

"2 million"

"That's not to much"

"Trust me. In these times, you'll be hard pressed to find a city on Earth that has more than a million people in it. That's why this city got priority. The areas that were the major cities in the continent before the war are ghosts towns now. Cities and towns all along the coast don't have a soul in them anymore. How did those 2 million people stayed alive all this time, I don't know. But they need help, so that's where I'm headed" he pauses to drink before continuing "What about you? Where are you going?"

"Alaska" I reply as I look at the stars above. The question that I asked all those years ago comes back to my mind. "Is life better up there? Up there in the stars"

"You have a long road ahead of you then. Got friends there? Family?" Li speaks and stops my train of thought.

Not anymore. Not there, not anywhere. "Yeah...family. I hope they're still there"

After talking for several hours, the night starts to recede. The Sun is starting to become visible on the Horizon.

Li stands up and starts to pick up his things. He turns to me and says: "Well, it's my time to go. The sunlight makes the travel easier. You really should get that arm and leg of yours checked. Or are you planning to keep going until they fall off?"

"I'll get them checked out. When I get the chance" I reply with a smile on my face.

"There's a field hospital a few kilometers north of here, in a village near the mountains. You could go there" He moves towards the road and looks at me before saying "Good luck, Katerina. I hope you find what you're looking for"

"You too Li. Take care. And thanks again for... for saving me"

He nods and starts walking away. His feet don't make noise as they step on the fallen leaves that filled the road.

I struggle for a few moments to get up. As I step up on my crutch and look ahead, Li is nowhere to be seen. I place the backpack on my back and I start walking.

"I promise to you that I would always come back, and I did, Liara. Now it's your turn to come back to me"
Lost in Peace

Lost In Peace

Log 1

Javik

London, Earth

Human Date: February 6th, 2187 / 2 Months since the Destruction of the Reapers

War.

Violence.

Destruction.

Death.

4 words that defined my life. 4 words that represented the only motives and purposes that I’ve ever had. The first thing I learned as a child was how to wear armor and how to use weapons. The first thing I taught my child was how to wear armor and how to use weapons. War was my way of life.

I remember the last words my father said to me. We were in a spaceport. Soldiers were boarding hundreds of shuttles, getting ready for what was, as the humans say, “a one way trip”. My mother's face was soaked as tears flowed through her cheeks. I grabbed my father's leg and I begged him: “Please do not go”. My father lifted me, and as he held me in his arms he said: “It is our duty to fight, my son. We are struggling for the very existence of our people” He quickly melded with me and passed happy and reassuring thoughts to my mind. “I need you to be strong, my child. For your mother and for yourself. Do not ever lose hope”. He ended the meld and opened his eyes: “You will bring honor to our family. You will make us proud, Javik”

“I will father. I promise”

He put me on the ground and walked towards my mother. He embraced her. He rested his forehead against hers and they stood in silence for several moments. My father then walked away. He nodded at us one final time, a final goodbye, with unshed tears filling his eyes, before he boarded the shuttle that would take him to a cruiser off world. That was the last time I saw him.

Decades passed.

I earned my fair share of scars fighting the Machines and quickly rose among the military ranks. Soon, I was known through our armed forces as one of the best soldiers of the Empire. It was in the army where I met the woman who I would come to love more than anything else in the Galaxy. The war never allowed us or anybody else to have a normal life, but we made do with what time we had. Eventually, we had a child. My family was what kept me fighting. They were my reason to
live. I used my influence with High Command to remain deployed near them, and they were always ready to be evacuated at a moment's notice.

The first cradle song I heard as a child was the horn of the Reapers. The horn that came to symbolize our extinction. The horn that has been heard by countless cycles before mine. The horn was the first cradle song my child and every other child from my time heard.

Everyday new reports came. Each worst than the last. Another planet destroyed, another fleet decimated, another population slaughtered. And despite all this, when my son asked: “Can we win this war, father ?” I always answered “We will win, my child. Have Faith, have faith in the Empire”. His mother looked at me, disbelieving eyes staring at me as I lied to our son. She and I knew the truth, but our son needed hope, so we lied, again and again. Merciful lies.

In the rare nights of peace, where the Machines and their minions didn't push and we had a chance to catch our breath, we went to the fields, my wife, my child and I. The only distraction that children had those days was found in nature. Feeling the pointy grass and the warm breeze, caressing the few animals that still roamed the land, and staring at the stars and planets that illuminated the sky above us, clearly visible now since the electrical networks no longer functioned. Stars and planets that we controlled. Stars and planets that were burning.

My child cradles in my arm and asks: “Will we visit the Citadel someday, Father ?”

“One day, my child. When the war ends, I promise we will” Liar.

“Father, why are the stars shining in bright yellow and orange colors ?”

“They are sending us messages, son. That glow is how they tell us that they support our struggle. They are reminding us that we are not alone in this fight” I lie again. If the populations there are sending a message, is that they are being annihilated, and that why aren't we helping them.

Because we need time to regroup. They must die so that we may have a better fighting chance tomorrow. “It is for the greater good” I tell myself, trying to convince myself that some benefit will come out of letting large numbers of our people to be slaughtered. “It is for the greater good, Javik. Keep telling yourself that and you might believe it someday”

Years passed.

The war didn't end, it just got worse. Sombre feelings developed among the military and the civilians. They stopped believing in victory. Long gone were the days when we chanted battle tunes before fighting “We will prevail, brothers and sisters. We will be victorious. Honor and glory to the Empire”.

Now no one chanted, no one sang. They no longer wanted to win. Now, now they just wanted peace. We all did. But neither I nor my family would live as slaves. I would never surrender. As self doubt and panic grew among us, the Reapers spoke. They offered what we could no longer give to our people: hope for a better tomorrow.

“We are the Harbingers of your ascendance”

“Embrace perfection”
“Sentient beings need never feel pain”

“There is no pain”

“There is no fear”

“Pain. Pain is an illusion”

“Do no resist”

“Your loved ones are safe. Your loved ones are here, waiting for you”

I watched as the civilians left our camp and started marching towards the Reaper processing centers. I ordered my soldiers to not stop them. We let them go. In the past I would have gunned them down myself. Traitors and cowards suffered the worst punishments among my people. But surrendering to the Machines is the worst form of punishment an organic being may suffer.

My soldiers and I left the world in our infiltration ships. I ordered our engineers to activate the propulsors on the asteroids that surrounded the planet. We watched as the colossal rocks entered the atmosphere and crashed towards the cities and the harvesting centers that stood next to them.

I’ve never been a religious person. I have seen nothing during my life that would make me believe in some omnipotent, all seeing and all controlling gods or deities. And yet, I found myself saying a prayer for my people. Praying, hoping, that they may now finally find peace.

Months passed.

I sat in a command center, devising strategies, pretending that we had a chance to win this conflict. How do you defeat an enemy that doesn't need and doesn't have supply lines and centers, an enemy who outnumbers you a 100 to 1, and an enemy whose ground forces are your own people, mutated, turned into monsters who won't hesitate for a second to kill their friends and families if the Machines order them to?

I watched the latest reports of our infiltration units. Our special operations teams had finished disabling and destroying all satellites and monitoring centers around the Turian, Asari and Human homeworlds. We had to make sure that the Reapers ignored them. I envied the primitives. They had a future to look forward to. I wondered how they would evolve, hoping that they would advance quickly enough to understand our beacons. If they didn't, then…

“Commander Javik!” A young messenger interrupted my thoughts. I looked at him. He was just a kid, but the War needed soldiers, so here he stood. Seasoned soldiers like me, who had been fighting the Machines for years, were rare. Now, if you survived your first week on the front you were already considered a veteran.

“What is it?” I said in a firm, harsh tone.

“A priority message, Sir. For you”

I took the information shard from his hands. The message was encrypted. I shoved it towards my assistant.
“Craxek, decrypt it and read it to me”

“Right away, Commander” I watched as he started to manipulate the shard, moving and transferring the sensory panels of the device. I watched as his eyes widened, and after a few moments, he looked at me with a pained expression.

“Commander, is about your… your family”

A lump formed in my throat. Gods, please have mercy. Let them be safe from harm. “What happened?” I said in a loud, impatient tone as I clenched my fist and teeth and paced around the command post.

Craxek stuttered, unable to form a coherent sentence. "They, uh... sir I… Maybe I should confirm the information of the message before… before…”

The anger, the anxiety and fear that had been accumulating inside me finally boiled over. I turned and walked large steps towards my assistant as the soldiers around me moved out of my path. I grabbed Craxek by his chestplate and I pinned him to the wall as I screamed to his face: “ENOUGH ! WHAT HAPPENED TO MY FAMILY !?”

He took a deep breath and looked at me directly in the eyes before speaking; “They are dead sir. Killed yesterday when Reaper forces destroyed the 5th Elactian Fleet in the Xarmuri System”

I dropped him and I stumbled, feeling light headed. Not believing what he told me, I replied “But that can't be. The fleet is composed entirely of stealth ships… and only a few members of High Command were aware of…”

“It is suspected that indoctrinated agents may have revealed the location of the fleet to Reaper forces”

I turned back and stood in silence for several moments. My family was dead. My reason to fight, my reason to live, was gone. Yet, I didn't show any emotion. All my life I've had a single rule: “Never break in front of the men”. The men look at their leader for guidance. If the leader breaks, the men will soon follow.

“You have my deepest sympathies Commander”

“I don't want your sympathies” I replied in a firm and cold tone, hiding the pain from my voice “My family died... for the Empire… I'm proud of them”

A young soldier placed his hand in my shoulder, in a futile attempt to comfort me. “Commander, I'm…”

A horn rang out from the heavens. The symphony of the devils. The Machines had arrived.

I shrugged him off and I grabbed my Particle Rifle.

“Let's go men. We have a war to fight”

Weeks passed.

None of us expected to live another year. Everyone I knew and cared for is long gone by now. Our
Empire, which once controlled most of the known galaxy, now extended only as far as our guns could reach.

I was resting from a heavy fight, tending to my wounds and the wounds of the few who survived the latest enemy push when I got an urgent message from what was left of High Command: “Commander Javik. Take your team and head immediately to the Planet Intorium 1 in the Malaxi System. Operation currently underway there might be the last hope for the Empire and our people”

“Sounds like a good place to die” I thought as me and my men boarded the small crafts that would take us to our destination "One final battle to ensure the existence of our people”

Soon, those illusions vanished. We weren't going to fight a glorious battle to turn the tide of the war. There was no secret super weapon that would annihilate the Reapers.

There was no hope.

High Command had finally accepted the facts. The war was lost. The Operation of Intorium 1 was meant to ensure that our Empire would survive after the Reapers had returned to dark space. Millions of the best scientists, tacticians and soldiers that were still alive would be put in cryogenic stasis until the Reapers left the Galaxy. Then we would rise from the ashes, and our Empire would lead the Primitive races. We would teach and prepare them for their eventual struggle against the Machines.

At least, that was the plan.

“There are pods online. Those soldiers are still alive !” I shouted at the bunker VI, trying to save as many of my people as possible.

“No. The bunkers are falling. There is no other option”

"But the men..."

“Their sacrifice will be honored in the coming Empire” That phrase had become the motto of our forces during the final battles. Every death, every victory and every defeat would be honored in the coming Empire.

Nobody really ever considered the possibility that a new Empire may never come.

"Initiating Neutron purge. Get to your stasis pod"

As i lay inside my stasis pod, my worst fears became a reality. The VI started speaking through the pod's audio device: “Sensors are damaged. Automated reactivation is not an option. You will remain in stasis until a new culture discovers this bunker. This may lead to a power shortage”

“Do not shut off more pods. We need the few that are left !”

“Power needs to be triaged appropriately”

“Then keep the scientists alive. They will be more vital for the war effort in the future”
“You are currently the highest ranking military officer in the Empire. Due to the emergency war decree, you have a higher priority than all other individuals”

The VI paused for a few minutes before uttering the words that I will remember all my life: “You will be the voice of our people”

As the cabin started to freeze, I closed my eyes and, with frustration, pain and anger coursing through my mind, I spoke a single phrase. The last thing I will would say for 50 thousand years.

“I will be more than that"

I fell asleep.

I woke up what for me were a few moments later. There were 3 figures looking at me. My vision was blurry, I couldn't see them clearly. “Indoctrinated forces have discovered my pod. They have interrupted the cryogenic freezing process. How did they survive the neutron purge ?” Thoughts raced through my mind.

With what little energy I could muster, I launched a biotic charge at them. I stumbled out of the pod. But something was wrong. I didn't hear gunfire or explosions. I didn't smell smoke in the air. I didn't hear the screams of the Indoctrinated husks or the Horn of the Machines.

I looked at the distance and i fell to my knees. The cities and the military facilities are gone. Mountains, rivers and trees had replaced roads, bunkers and buildings. Nature swallowed what the Reapers didn't destroy, which wasn't much. Everything that once stood here, everything that we were... gone.

A hand touched my shoulder. I immediately forced the individual into a meld and started acquiring information. Human. Female. Soldier. “No, no, this can't be. How would a human reach this planet ?” I thought. I detected something else. A small but constant presence in her mind. The presence of another primitive. An Asari. And it's not only in her mind. This human reeked of Asari. While I read the human she witnessed my final memories. My final battle.

The human fell to the ground. I turned back to look at her and saw an Asari and a Turian helping her get on her feet. That's the Asari that I sensed and smelled. She had the essence and pheromones of the human all over her.

I remembered how the humans lived in caves and wore the skin of dead animals to protect themselves, how the Asari were merely starting to grow crops with our aid, and how the Turians were starting to build structures and settlements. Yet, these primitives were… advanced. They wore armor, had portable computers in their arms and carried powerful firearms. The truth dawned on me. This were the “new cultures” the VI spoke about. How much time had passed ? Did they even knew that my people existed once ?

“How many others ?” I asked them as I rose to my feet and looked at them.

“Just you” the human replied.

“You will be the voice of our people” The phrase crossed my mind again.

“How much time has passed ?”

“50 thousand years” the Asari next to the human said in a nervous tone. She looked at me in awe,
as if she was seeing a ghost. A relic from the past.

“The Machines have returned ?”

“Yes. We need your help to fight them”

I decided to join them. Aboard the starship “Normandy” we fought against the Machines throughout the Galaxy.

In the beginning, I had hated everyone aboard the ship. And everyone outside the ship as well. Every time that I saw one of these primitives I was constantly reminded of my own people's failure. This primitives could barely count in my cycle, and now they had spaceships. It also reminded me how it should have been Protheans leading this cycle’s war. Yet, they fought this war without our guidance. And had actually won battles against the Reapers. I couldn't remember the last time my people had won a battle against the Machines.

The leading figure of the War was the human that had rescued me, Commander Shepard. She and her crew were the spearhead of the conflict. I grew to respect the woman, and in time, the rest of the crew earned my respect too. But it took time. Specially with the Commander's mate. The Asari, Liara T'Soni.

While the rest of the crew avoided me at first, the Asari constantly got in my way. Asking. Asking about my people. Asking about our myths, our government, our culture. Asking too much. Like my son used to do. Her inquisitive nature reminded me of him, of the family that I once had, the family that I lost. Perhaps that was why I had hated her so much. I took some wicked pleasure in destroying the illusions she had about my people. I smiled as her face failed to hide the feelings of disappointment and pain as I explained how our empire ruled not by understanding, but by force.

On the other hand, I quite enjoyed my chats with the Commander. We understood each other, we were 2 soldiers speaking the truth. And while she didn't fully agree with some of my ideas and behaviors, she never overly bothered me for it. But when eventually the crew, including the Asari, stopped talking to me because of my “superiority complex” as they called it, I thought that I had achieved what I wanted. My only purpose in life was to kill Reapers, and I had no interest in the offerings of friendship that these primitives extended to me. But instead of feeling satisfied with myself, I found myself... missing the interactions that I had with them. Even those that I had with the humans Joker and Vega and their stupid jokes. The Commander helped me reintegrate with the crew.

From hating them, I came to respect them, and eventually I cared for them. They became my friends. They became my family.

And now they are gone.

The Commander, the Asari, the Humans, the Normandy… all gone.

I had promised Doctor T'Soni that i would help her write a book about the Protheans. It would at least help to preserve the legacy of my people to future generations. It was one thing that I was looking forward to do after the war. But destiny had other plans for the Doctor and for me. I'll preserve my memories and all that I know about my people in this rudimentary devices called “datapads”, and hopefully I'll find someone who may find some use for them. She once told me how the elders of her world had dismissed her theories and reports of cyclical extinction. It still amazes me how much warnings the races of this cycle had, from the beacons and from Doctor T'Soni’s research, and they ignored them. She warned them about this 50 years ago, and they ignored her. Perhaps with my writings she will finally get the recognition and respect she didn't have...
during her life.

May the Commander and the rest of the crew find peace, wherever they are.

End Log

Javik turned off the datapad and placed it on a table next to him. He stood with his hands behind him near where there once had been a wall, but now only a hole remained. Being in one of the higher floors of the building, he had a clear vision of most of London. What was left of it anyway. Most of the sky was of a light grey color, as ash filled clouds roamed the heavens, but sunlight was still visible. A chilling morning breeze brushed against him, but it didn't bother him. His mind was focused on the distance, where several Reaper Capital ships and Destroyers lay motionless against the remnants of the skyscrapers that had once filled the city. He smiled and his heart filled with pride. “A war that started eons ago, has finally come to an end. Countless souls, including those of my own people, can finally rest. The Age of the Gods has ended, and the Age of Mortals has begun, where they will finally be free to chart their own future, free from the threat of the Machines, free to turn their guns and arsenals on each other now that the threat that united them is dead” He had heard the reports coming from outside the city. The “Systems Alliance” of the Humans had vowed to restore order and stability on their homeworld and the colonies “at any cost”, and they had the means to do so. Despite being one of the main focus of the Reapers during their invasion, humanity had survived the war with more active military assets, including warships, soldiers and vehicles, than the other races, being only surpassed by the Saliarsans. They were quickly rebuilding both their civilian infrastructure and their military strength, with the latter taking priority. Several towns and small cities that disagreed with the military buildup or had refused to acknowledge the authority of the Alliance had been quickly dealt with, usually through the use of tanks, soldiers and gunships. The choices were simple “Obey or die”. Still, vast areas of the planet, including several dozen major cities, remained outside Alliance control, and they had turned into true no man's lands.

The roar of gunships interrupted his train of thought. Several aircraft passed above him, making the building tremble as they moved. He watched as they drifted through the sky for several minutes before landing a few kilometers ahead, near one of the disabled Reapers. Large metal walls were being erected around the fallen colossus and the structures against which they rested throughout the city, to make sure that they wouldn't fall. Even if only one of the Capital Ships that stood upright collapsed, the seismic movement could trigger a chain event, making every other Reaper fall in a similar fashion. The effects on London’s already weakened structures would be catastrophic.

Javik moved away from the rubble and sat in the middle of the room, doing nothing. He breathed deeply, and closing his eyes, he began to drift in the memories of events that had occurred a couple of weeks ago.

Using his biotic force, he concentrates on the object ahead of him. Burning energy, after a few moments, the large concrete block begins to tremble. Taking a deep breath, he closes his eyes and after one final push, he launches the piece of rubble to the side of the road, leaving it free for transit. The humans cheer and thank him as trucks carrying food and medical supplies began to enter the district, honking their horns at him to show their gratitude and to make sure that the civilians throughout the district know that they had arrived. He had been doing things like this since the Reapers fell silent. Clearing ruins, rescuing trapped injured persons, delivering supplies,
etc. Helping to rebuild. It was the least he could do to honor the Commander's memory. It was the new purpose he had in life.

Until that day.

The crowd splits aside as a squad of heavily armed soldiers escort a short man who Javik assumed to be an Alliance officer due to his uniform. Shoving those who didn't move fast enough out of the way, it was clear that weren't coming for a friendly chat.

“Attention everyone” one of the soldier says through a loudspeaker as he stops the trucks and orders the drivers to get out “Please stand away from the nonhuman. Return to your homes, the delivery of supplies will resume shortly” To make sure everyone understood, the soldiers removed the safety of their Avenger rifles “This is your only warning”

Knowing very well what the Alliance was capable of, the crowd quickly dissolves as they hurriedly return to the empty shells of houses and buildings they called home. After a few seconds, only the soldiers, the officer and Javik remained on the streets. The short man approaches him, and in a monotone, dull voice, he speaks “Javik, right ?”

The Prothean stares directly at him, his four eyes focused on the man and with an expression on his face that makes the soldiers shiver. After a few moments, in a cold, harsh tone, he simply replies “Yes”

“Prothean, huh ? Are you enjoying this new Era ?” he asks with a false smile on his face.

Javik doesn't answer. He continues to stare at him without blinking.

“Hello, did you understand me, Prothean boy ? Or did you forget to update your translator from 50 thousand years ago ?” he laughs at his stupid joke.

“What is your purpose here, human ?”

“ ‘My purpose’, alien mook, is to inform that as of last week and in accordance with the latest set of Alliance regulations, all non human individuals are required to wear this tracking device, for your own protection. We've already had several instances of radical individuals breaking into camps and resettlement centers of members of other species and attacking them, so we need to know you’re location to make sure you’re safe while you remain on Earth”

He could sense the lies coming out of the Human's mouth. Every fiber of his being told him to not trust him.

“So, if you please could insert this subdermal implant on your neck, we would be most grateful” the officer said as he offered him a device that was less than a centimeter long.

“No” the Prothean replied.

“After you've placed it in... wait, what did you say ?” the Human asked with a confused expression.

“I'm not a farm animal for you to tag and track as if I were your property”

“Mr Javik, either you use the implant or we'll be forced to take you to one of our detention centers, for your own safety”

“I can take care of my own safety, human. And I dare you to try to take me anywhere against my
“will” Javik said as he clenched his fists.

In a sudden move, the soldiers raise their rifles and aim them towards the Prothean. The short man smiles, and with a friendly tone, he says in a simple tone “So be it”

A sudden burst of pain appears in his shoulder. From where the shot came and who fired it, Javik didn't knew. It hadn't come from the soldiers in front of him. “Sniper” he quickly deduced. He probably been ordered to take him alive, otherwise the bullet would have been aimed at his head. Kneeling, and turning his pain into anger, he launches a biotic wave that sends the officer and the soldiers flying. Heart raising, he launches himself towards a small bundle of rocks, clenching his wound with his hand. Several loud thuds followed by the sounds of bones breaking made it clear that his attack had at least incapacitated the humans that had faced him on the street. The rocks next to him begin to fly as the sniper continues to fire. With the sounds of sirens approaching, he rushes towards what was once an alley, dodging fire as he disappears in the remnants of the desolate streets. He had spent several decades of his life hunting and hiding from the servants of an hyper advanced machine race. He would have no problem disappearing from these primitives.

His omnitool beeps, making Javik open his eyes. A simple message from the man that used to fly him, the Commander and the other team members into the heart of battle, Steve Cortez.

“Shuttle ready. Need to leave ASAP”

The Prothean rises to his feet, and he casts a final glance at the horizon. In the distance, a loudspeaker orders nonhumans to register at resettlement centers for their own protection.

“Perhaps it was better after all that the Commander and her team died” he says to himself as he prepares to leave the building “They didn't have to see what their planet and their people became”
Shepard stood in front of the Alliance spaceport. Soldiers were saying their farewells to their families, friends and loved ones before heading towards the transport shuttles that would take them to different locations on Earth to start their training to become Alliance Marines. She made sure that she had everything she needed in her duffel bag before closing it and placing the leash over her shoulder. It would be the last time she would be close to actual civilization for several months.

Katerina then turned around and looked at the man next to her. Jonathan was on his wheelchair, looking with a thoughtful expression at the shuttles and the soldiers boarding them. “Penny for your thoughts, J?”

Jonathan, startled, remained silent for a few moments before speaking “Just… dwelling on memories. Thinking about how 18 years ago I was doing the same thing you’re about to do. Just another human looking for a better life in the stars”

“That long ago, huh?”

“That long ago. I hardly believe that so much time has passed”

“Hopefully the stars will be more kind to me than they were to you”

“They damn well better be, but you’ll need to keep your eyes open too” J said as he turned his wheelchair to face her “You better come home with all your limbs intact, you hear me? One crippled in the house is more than enough”

“Is that an order or a request, old man?”

“That’s an order, Private” Jonathan replied in a firm and cold tone.

Shepard mockingly snapped a salute and said in a loud tone: “Sir, yes sir”

“Get used to saying that. You’re in the Army now”

Kate stared at the distance and saw an officer looking at her and pointing at his wrist, indicating her that it was time to leave. She turned to look at J, and after taking several deep breaths, she finally spoke: “So, I guess this is it, isn’t it?”

“This is it”

“In a sudden move, Kate embraced J in a tight hug as tears started to roll down her cheeks.

Jonathan held her tight as he spoke in a warm and comforting tone: “Come on now, stop crying, kid. If you keep crying I’m going to start crying, and we both know I look ugly as hell when I cry”

Shepard let out a short laugh as she released him from her arms: “Sorry. Didn’t mean to cause a scene. It’s just that, you know, being alone again is…”

“Kate, you’re not going to be alone” he claimed as he placed his hands on her shoulder “We’ll
keep in touch through the extranet, and I'm sure that you'll meet a lot of people out there. In some
time, you won't even remember I exist, you'll see”

“Yeah, I don't think that I'm going forget you anytime soon” Katerina said as she wiped the tears
from her cheek “Listen, Johnathan, you've done a great deal for me, and I…”

“Don't mention it, kid. Just remember what you promised me. Do some good out there”

“Yeah, I'll remember. I'll try to come back for Christmas, or whenever I get a long vacation”

“You know where to find me, Kate. Take care”

“You too, J”

Shepard turned and started to walk towards the shuttle. As she stood near the entrance, she waved
a final goodbye at John. He replied with a quick military salute. A single thought crossed her mind
as she entered the shuttle that would take her towards the unknown.

"And so it begins”

Katerina’s eyes opened. She stared at the broken roof above her. The holes in it allowed several
rays of sunlight to enter her room. She sat on the edge of the bed, wiping the sweat from her brow
while her heart returned to its normal rhythm.

“Count to three. Inhale. Count to three. Exhale”

She glanced towards the left side of her body. Her left arm and leg had been slowly recovering.
“That's why I tell myself at least”. The cuts and bruises were still visible and they were more
sensitive than the rest of the skin, but they didn't hurt as much as they had during the first few
weeks after the War.

Katerina grabbed the crutch that rested against a small table next to her bed and placed it beneath
her left arm, wanting to try again what she had already done many times before.

“So, buddies, feel like working today ?” Shepard pondered, looking at her left leg and arm as she
prepared to rise from the bed.

“This is a bad idea, Kate”

Taking a deep breath, she applied pressure on the crutch with her wounded arm and stood. Almost
immediately, an acute feeling of pain exploded over her left side. The nerve endings on her arm
and leg flared up, and her mind went blank for several seconds before she fell to the ground.

As she laid face down on the floor drawing rapid breaths, she said in a hushed tone to herself “Pain
is good. It means you're still alive” What if I don't want to be. Almost immediately, the voices in
her mind began to mock her:

“Told you that it was a bad idea, you stupid fuck. You never listen. Insanity is doing the same
thing over and over and expecting a different result. Perhaps this is the evidence you needed to
prove that you're finally losing what's left of your sane mind. You're never going to use that arm
and leg normally again. Why do you keep trying?”

“Fuck you” Shepard murmured in anger at herself “You don't know that”

“We both know I'm right”

“No you're not”

“Accepting that you have a problem is the first step to recovery”

Shepard pulled herself up with her right arm and spoke in a firm tone “Oh, I know perfectly well that I have a problem. I'm fighting a war against my own goddamn mind. It's not like you weren't bad before, but you have really been insufferable these last couple of years. You're even worse now than how you were after Elysium”

Makes sense. Elysium was a relaxing vacation compared to what came after.

Kate limped towards the sink in the far side of the room. She placed her hand on the back of her head and started to remove the bandages from her face. After pausing for a few moments, she lifted her head and stared at her face in the mirror. Most of her scars still marked her face. The skin in several areas had regained its natural color, but the faint yellow shine still remained beneath the war marks that spread throughout her face and body. She traced a scar that marked her forehead with her finger before stopping to stare at her eyes. Green emerald eyes. The eyes that had drawn Liara’s attention since the first time they met.

Shepard and Liara laid in the bed of the Captain’s cabin facing each other. Katerina traced the small curves and ridges of the crest of the Asari while Liara rubbed and carefully made small knots in the Human’s hair.

Noticing how Liara was staring directly into her eyes, Shepard smiled and asked: “See anything you like, Li?”

Liara’s face brightened with her own smile. She placed her hand in Katerina’s cheek and answered: “Yes, I like everything that I am seeing right now. Specially your eyes”

“Oh, really” Shepard replied as she continued to knead Liara’s crest “What's so special about them”

“It sounds silly, but is that they are so… green. A beautiful, unique tonality of green. Like the gemstones that you showed me on Earth, the Emeralds. I have only met a handful of people whose eyes were of such color. Yours are somehow… special. I could spend all day looking at them”

Katerina smirked, and with a mischievous tone, she replied: “Well, if you like them so much, I could just pop them out, you know? You could place them next to the monitors in your little cavern downstairs. That way you can look at them all day”

Liara’s eyes went wide open as she rapidly sat and looked at Shepard with a panicked expression: “What!! Katerina, I didn't meant it like that. Goddess, you would go blind!. How can you even say something that. It is barbaric, it…”

“ ‘It’…” Kate said as she sat and gave her a quick kiss in the lips “… was a joke”

“Oh, lovely” Liara scoffed at Katerina’s apology as she turned her back on Kate and moved
towards the edge of the bed “It seems that now I have to deal with 2 EDI’s instead of one. Very funny Shepard”. The tone of Liara’s voice made it clear that she wasn’t happy.

“It was a small joke, Li. Don’t get all huffy about it”

“I do not know what ‘huffy’ means, but please do excuse me if I do not find a joke about you gouging your eyes out particularly funny” Liara said as her voice broke and she buried her face in her hands.

With a worried look on her face, Katerina quickly moved towards Liara and placed her hand on the Asari’s shoulder “Liara, are you crying ? Shit, I'm sorry. I wasn’t being serious, I just…”

“I know, Kate. I'm the one who should be sorry” Liara interrupted her as she wiped the tears from her cheeks “I overreacted. Goddess, I'm behaving like a child”

“No, it's my fault. I shouldn’t make jokes like that, specially not in times like these”

Liara turned around and placed her hand on Shepard’s cheek. “Stop. You did nothing wrong. It's just that I can’t stand the thought of you being hurt. Seeing you get injured every time we go on a mission hurts just as much as if I was the one being injured. And then you said that ‘joke’ and I just… this horrible memory crossed my mind. When I… when I looked at your body after I found it…”

Katerina cradled Liara protectively with one arm and rested her head in her neck: “No. It was my fault, Li. I should have known better than to say that. I'm sorry” Kate grabbed and kissed the Asari’s hand, and in a calm and reassuring tone, she said: “Don’t think about that anymore. I'm here now”

“Stop taking the blame for other people’s actions, Kate. I lost my composure and made both of us worry”

“You stop taking the blame for what I did” Shepard said as she gave her a quick kiss on the cheek “Besides, I've gotten used to your sudden mood changes. You've always been the overly sensitive type”

The sad thoughts quickly dissipated as a mischievous grin formed on Liara’s face before she replied in that alluring and seductive tone that Katerina loved so much: “Oh, am I ? she said as she started to trace Kate’s muscular leg with her hand “I may know a thing or two about 'over sensibility', considering that I'm quite familiar with certain parts of you that have that particular characteristic”

“Really ?” Shepard said as she started to move her hand up the Asari’s back “I may also know a thing or two about stimulating certain ‘overly sensitive’ points in your body. Would you like me to show you ?”

“Maybe later, Kate. I really should… Goddess!” Liara exclaimed as Shepard started to rub the back of her neck, where several nerve centers of the Asari concentrated.

“There's no time like the present, Li” Katerina whispered to Liara as she kissed the back of her neck and started to move her other hand towards the Asari’s legs.

“Katerina, please... ahh” Liara said as she gasped, letting out short, quick breaths

“Please more ? Or please don't stop ? I'm happy with either of those” Shepard replied as she started to pull down the zipper of the top of Liara’s suit.
Liara grabbed Shepard’s hand from her legs and placed it on the bed. She turned around and said “Please more…” as she gave Kate a long, deep kiss “… but later. I left several things running in my office that I need to check. This was supposed to be a quick visit”. Liara then stood up and zipped her suit back up.

Shepard looked at her with a dumbfounded expression, and with outrage clearly present in her voice, she exclaimed: “You can't be serious, Li. It’s not healthy to leave humans turned on like that. You can't just warm up the engine if you’re not going to use the vehicle”

“Well, you did made me cry. Consider this your punishment”

“I would prefer another form of punishment” Kate said as she gave Liara a seductive look “A more harsh and severe form of punishment”

“Time to give some discipline lessons to the Commander ?”

“That would be my professional suggestion, yes”

“That can be arranged…” Liara said as she cupped Shepard’s cheek and gave her a quick kiss on the lips “… but later”

Resigned, Shepard dropped back onto the bed and said “Ugh, fine, but I'll hold you to this. If you don't show up, I'll be sure to remind you, and I won't care if you have ultra super duper urgent reports from your operatives to check, understood ?”

“Understood, Commander”

Liara headed towards the door, and before exiting, she blew a kiss to Shepard, a habit that she had acquired from Shepard, and said the phrase that always cheered up Katerina’s day whenever she heard it.

“I love you, Katerina Shepard”

Shepard grabbed the kiss and placed it in her chest, right on top of her heart.

“I love you too, Liara T’Soni”

Shepard splashed cold water on her face, quickly erasing the last remnants of sleepiness from her mind. Once again, the sounds of her mind began to taunt her once more.

“You were always good at making Liara cry. Always hurting her, always breaking her heart. And yet she still loved you. She was always there for you. And then you killed her”

“Shut the fuck up. That isn't true. THAT ISN'T FUCKING TRUE” Kate screamed at herself, trying to drown the voices in her head.

“Are you OK in there, Katerina ?” A voice from outside her room asked in a worried tone.

“Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry about that... I'll be out in a minute”

Who the hell is that ? Kate thought as she rolled the bandages back on her head, grabbed her crutch and moved towards the door. As she placed her hand in the knob, she spoke in a harsh and severe tone to her internal enemy “I've been through enough shit in my life to be brought down my own fucking mind. So, listen well, you bastards, I'm planning to spend the rest of the morning in peace
and calm, and you are going to be decent and you will shut the fuck up for the rest of the day. Understood ?"

The voices in her head laid silent for the moment.

“Good” Shepard said, and, with her crutch under her arm and with a smile on her face, she opened the door and stepped outside.

The sun shined down over several small houses in the area. Cold wind blew gently, and the sensation of the breeze sent a small shiver down Shepard’s back. Dozens of men, women and children moved throughout the small village. Life was normal, almost life if the biggest war in the history of the Galaxy had never happened. The sky had its typical lovely blue tonality. Unlike the grey, ash filled and contaminated sky and clouds that constantly hovered above the ruins of the cities, in the rural areas there was hardly any sign of pollution in the heavens.

With her eyes wide open, and with an confused expression that was hidden beneath her bandages, a single question crossed her mind. "Where am I, and how the fuck did I get here ?"

A woman approached Kate from a small tent that stood next to Kate’s room. “Good Morning, Katerina” the lady said as she offered Kate a glass of water.

“Good Morning” Kate replied as she accepted the glass and drank. She was still thirsty but she wouldn't ask for more. The woman had a family to take care of, and water and food were not available in excessive amounts throughout the area.

"Wait, how does she know me ? And how do I know she has a family ?"

"Sorry, but do we know each other ?" Shepard asked in a confused tone.

The woman looked at her for a few moments before letting out a short laugh. "Of course we know each other, Katerina. I was one of the first persons you met when you got here"

"When did I get here ? Where is here ?"

The smile vanished from the woman's face and with a worried expression, she asked “You sure you're fine ? We were eating when we heard you scream and…”

“I'm fine, really. I just had a…”

“Bad dream ?” The woman interrupted her, almost as if she had read her mind

“Yeah.... something like that”

“We all have those kind of dreams these days. Us adults at least. Maybe that's why you have forgotten all those things you knew. You'll remember them later”

Laughter and shouts made Kate turned her head. Her face beamed with happiness as she watched kids laughing and giggling without a worry in the world as they played with a semi deflated ball a couple of meters away. “At least children can be children now” Shepard thought “They have a future in peace to look forward to”

“Listen, Katerina. I wanted to ask you a favor. I'm going with my husband to check the crops down in the valley. Would you mind watching the children ? We should be back before nightfall”

“Yeah, sure, no problem” It's not like I have anything else to do anyway.
As the woman and her husband left the small village, Shepard sat down in a fallen log, where she could rest while keeping an eye on the children. After a couple of hours of watching the sky, the children and the horizon, Kate started to write small notes in her book. But before long, she noticed that one of the kids was standing directly in front of her.

“Hi” he said in a small voice.

“Hello, little man. Can I help you with something ?”

“Is it true that you were a soldier in the Alliance”

*How does he know that ?* Her head began to throb as a headache started to develop. *There's no harm in telling him. As long as people don't know who I truly am, or rather was, everything will be fine. “It's true. I was a soldier once. A long time ago”*

“Did you ever see the Normandy ?”

*Saw, served, lived… loved and died in the first Normandy. The same thing for the second one, except the dying part. “Yes, I saw the Normandy and her crew once”*

“Did you ever meet the Shepard ?”

Shepard remained silent as she processed the phrase the kid had said. *The Shepard, like if I was some kind of God or mythological hero. A brave warrior who led the fight against the monsters and saved the Galaxy. It hadn't been like that. It had been an army of warriors led by a monster who fought against the monsters and “saved” the Galaxy. She looked at the child and said: “Yes, I knew Commander Shepard. She wouldn't have liked you calling her that, you know ?”*

“Calling her ‘The Shepard’ ?”

“Yeah. She never liked being treated like she was superior and better to everybody else”

“But that's how everyone calls Commander Shepard now”

*You're talking to a child, Shepard. Don't argue with him. “Never mind, it's fine”*

Another child came up to them and with excitement evident in his voice, he asked: “Did you meet the other “Heroes of the Normandy” ?

*It's good that they're calling the crew that. They are the real heroes, not me. “There was a lot of people on the Normandy. Maybe if you tell me some names I'll be able to tell you if I met them or not”*

The kids called out to another child who was nearby.

“Show the lady the image we saw on the extranet” the child said.

“You have access to the extranet ?” Katerina asked in a disbelieving tone.

“Yes, but only a few times a week. We go to the high mountains with our omnitools and we sometimes grab the signal from the few communication satellites that the Alliance has deployed, but we can only use it for a few moments as the satellites pass”

“Oh, interesting” Shepard wasn't sure that she believed that explanation, but she didn't think that they were lying either. They didn't had any reason to.
“Here, I got it” the kid who he others had called out said.

“Let me see”

The kid projected a photo from his omnitool. The image showed a plaza in London. The city looked just as ruined as when Kate had been there, but in the background, several cranes and vehicles were visible, all part of the efforts to rebuild the large metropolis. But the focus of the picture was on a large memorial monument that had been erected in the center of the plaza. The top of the monument read “In honor of the brave heroes of every race and every world who served in the SSV Normandy and gave their life leading the struggle for our survival. May their sacrifices never be forgotten”

“This isn’t happening, none of this is real” Kate said in panic as the pain in her head increased.

When Kate’s eyes saw the monument, she had to hold on to the log to avoid falling over. She suddenly found herself unable to breathe as her head started to throb. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she read the names that filled the memorial. Her name was the largest and most visible one, placed in the center of the monument “Commander Kate Shepard”. Below stood another large plaque, a plaque that carried the name of a man who Shepard immediately thought that it should have been placed above her own plaque. A man whose name truly deserved to be known and honored throughout the Galaxy, unlike hers.

“Admiral David Anderson”

Her pulse started to accelerate.

Suddenly, the kids started to bombard her with questions about the other names on the monument. The names of her brothers and sisters in arms.

“Did you knew Garrus Vakarian ?”

“Did you met, how do you say, Tali’Zorah Vas Normandy ?” The kid said as he laughed and giggled.

“Who was Kaidan Alenko ?”

“Did you ever saw Karin Chakwas ?”

The questions and the names kept crossing her mind as the kids said them and as she read them from the image. She clenched her teeth, fingers and toes as the edges of her vision started to turn black. The children didn't knew or understand, but they were hurting her more than they could possibly imagine.

Almost simultaneously, her eyes read the name in the bottom of the row as a child asked her about it. In an almost inaudible tone, and with her voice breaking between the tears and the need to breathe, Shepard uttered a single word.

“Liara…”

“Did you knew Liara… How do you say that last name, Ti Soni? Ta Soni ?” the child asked, completely oblivious to Shepard’s state.

Katerina looked one final time at the end of the phrase that stood above the monument.

“May their sacrifice never be forgotten”
The voices that haunted her dreams and who now tormented her while she was awake, returned, and they started to accuse her “You can't deny it any longer, Kate. You killed them all. Your friends, your comrades, your crew. You killed them, Shepard”

“I didn't...“

“You promised her that you would always come back, and you did, but you killed her and everyone else in the process. You did what you do best, eh Shepard?”

Suddenly, there was no one around her. Empty fields, empty houses were all around her. Her eyes focused on the semi deflated ball that remained immobile next to her. She was alone. Again.

In the distance, the sound of engines and propellers rang out across the valley. Katerina noticed it, but she didn't care. 2 phrases currently occupied her mind.

“I killed my friends”

“I killed Liara”

Those were the last thoughts that crossed Shepard’s mind before her world turned black and her body crashed against the floor.
Unknown Planet, Unknown System

4 Months after the end of the War

“Alright Joker, do it” Kaidan shouted as he turned off his omnitool and descended from the top of the Normandy.

“Here goes nothing” Joker replied over the intercom.

The Normandy’s thrusters came alive, blue flames roared out of the engines and a heat wave washed over all the crew members who were watching from a safe distance.

“You should keep it going for a few minutes, Joker. We need to make sure that the coupling holds” Tali suggested as she checked the system readings from her omnitool.

In the cabin, Joker frantically pulled levers and pressed several buttons as the Normandy trembled from the power of the thrusters and the engine.

“Come on, baby. Hold together, hold together” Sweat dripped from his forehead as he saw the warnings about the temperature rising and the level of integrity of the rear areas of the ship. This was the third time that they tried to keep the engines running without overheating them and without damaging the thrusters.

The indicator on the panel steadily rose and approached the red zone. For a few moments it stood just below the critical area before it descended and stabilized at a normal level. The engines didn't overheat and the Tantalus drive core was working normally. A quick glance towards another panel indicated that the thrusters were functioning perfectly. The Normandy was spaceworthy once more.

A wide smile formed in Joker’s face as he excitedly said “Holy shit. We did it. We fucking did it” A familiar voice spoke in Joker’s mind “Well done, Jeff” Joker let out a deep breath, and with his eyes focused on the empty copilot chair, he replied in a calmed and pleased tone.

“Thank you, EDI” Opening the intercom panel, he cleared his throat before activating it and speaking to the crew both inside and outside the ship.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your pilot speaking. It is my pleasure to inform you that the engine and thrusters have been successfully repaired and have survived our tests. The luxury frigate SSV
Normandy SR-2 is ready to resume its annual tour of the Milky Way. On behalf of the Systems Alliance Travel Agency we apologize for the 4 Month delay. We’ll try to make the rest of your journey as pleasant as possible. If you have any complaints or suggestions, please leave them with our tour guide, Major Kaidan Alenko. Thank you for your patience and we hope you'll travel with us again.”

Joker hadn't finished giving his victory speech and the crew was already jumping, drinking, kissing and shouting in excitement as the collective happiness overtook them. Greg lifted Karin with his arms and started to give her a series of quick and brief kisses, Gabriella pinned Kenneth to the hull of the ship and whispered in his ear: “Looks like you're going to give me that tour of Scotland after all”

Garrus, overjoyed and over excited, lifted Tali and spun her in the air. After several moments, he placed her down and looking at her with a thoughtful expression, he smiled and rested his forehead against the cover of her helmet.

“Garrus” the young Quarian said as she caressed the Turian’s crest.

“Tali”

He watched in horror as she moved her hands towards the side of her head, trying to remove her mask. His eyes widened, and in a swift move, he stopped her.

“Tali, don't”

“I want to do this, Garrus. For us”

The Turian started to pace around her nervously “But… but you could get sick, and we don't know how your body may react to this new and unfamiliar environment. The filters of your mask may stop functioning when you remove it. I haven't checked today so I'm not sure how many dextro medical supplies we have left, and the top of your suit is the most difficult part of your suit to isolate in case you get an infection, and…”

As Garrus continued to babble about the dozens of possible ways that she may get sick, Tali walked up to him and grabbed his hands. He froze as she lifted his arms, and, with her hands on top of his, she placed them on the side of her mask. With a slight movement, the mask made a hissing sound and soon it was resting on their palms.

Tali felt the soft breeze caressing her skin, she smelled the scent of the plants around her and looked at the object of her affections. As she placed his hands on her cheek, she said: “I don't care if I have to spend the rest of the week in the infirmary. I wanted to share this with you. I love you, Garrus Vakarian”

Garrus’s mandibles started to twitch as he focused on her bright yellow eyes, and with his voice choking up, he was barely able to utter “I love you too, Tali’Zorah” before resting her forehead directly against hers.

“Your skin feels rough and callous, like the rocks of Rannoch. I like it” she claimed as tears of joy rolled down her cheeks

“Yours is so soft and delicate, Tali. Like the… like… I'm sorry, I can't think of anything soft ....”

“Then don't think. Let's just enjoy this moment”
A couple of meters away, Kaidan sat on a rock in silence but with a satisfied smile on his face. His arms rested on his legs as he stared at the horizon. Thoughts race through his head. “The Normandy is space worthy. Good. Now we need to figure out our location so that we can plot a course towards the nearest inhabited system. We may still have a lot of fuel, but we can’t afford to waste it drifting in space if we don’t have a clear destination. We also need to take stock of all the supplies and meds we still have to…”

“Excuse me for the insubordination and for breaking several Alliance regs, Major, but here, have a drink” James Vega, with Samantha Traynor sitting on his shoulders, said as he stopped Kaidan’s train of thought and handed him a medium sized container full of beer.

“Yes, Mr Major, have a single, unique drink” Samantha added in a voice that gave away her inebriated state.

“I thought that you didn't think that the Alliance still existed or that my rank mattered at all, James”

“You can’t still be mad about that, L2. And let’s just say that hearing that the Normandy can fly once again has “reinvigorated” my faith and belief in the principles of the Systems Alliance”

“Defend and... and preserve the preservation of humanity… in infinity and beyond”

“How much did she had, James ?” Kaidan asked as he gave Vega a disapproving look.

“One beer”

“Figures”

Kaidan looked around for a few moments, and with a confused expression on his face, he asked: “Have you seen Liara, James ?”

“She was with us this morning, helping us install the thrusters, but I haven’t seen her since”

“Let’s go inside. Let’s leave our young comm specialist in the med bay and let’s find her. I don’t like leaving her alone”

As they walked towards the crew deck, Samantha spoke once more: “Did you know that a day on Horizon is 38 hours long compared to Earth’s 24 hours ? That means that while someone on Earth is going to sleep, some on Horizon is saying “Bippity, bippity, bub, it's time to wake uuuuppp”

“Thanks for the useful fact, Samantha. We'll keep it in mind the next time we go there”

As James gently placed Samantha on one the infirmary’s beds, he turned to Kaidan and asked: “So, what now boss ? How soon can we leave ?”

“First we need to figure out our precise location. I don’t want to risk burning fuel without good reason”

“Makes sense, but we should get to it right away. I’ve had enough of this planet. I'll be happy if I never see a jungle again in my life”

“We too, James. Me too”

As they approached Liara’s room, they saw the bright red circle on the door that indicated that it was closed.

James knocked on the door several times as he asked: “Doc, Doc, are you OK ? Listen, we got the
Normandy working again, isn't that exciting? We're going home soon, all of us. We didn't see you out there with us, so we... uh, wanted to know if you wanted a drink and... just to know if you were fine. So, uh, are you OK?"

No one answered.

“James, move” Kaidan said as he shoved Vega to the side and started to manipulate the lock of the door with his omnitool “Bring Karin, Garrus and Tali, now!”

“Right away” James replied as he ran towards the elevator.

After trying without success for several moments, Kaidan turned off his omnitool and took a few steps back.

“She's the Shadow Broker, Kaidan. Of course you're not gonna get through that lock”

He looked around for a few moments, and realizing that there was no way to open the door, he took a few steps back as determined look set on his face.

“Well, then we use brute force” Alenko said in his mind as his entire body became covered in biotic energy. Concentrating on the door, he launched a powerful charge towards it and started to pull. After a few seconds, the hinges made a horrendous scratching sound and, shortly after, the entire door came apart.

Kaidan moved to avoid the pieces of the door that fell around him and focused his attention on the inside of the room.

“Oh, God”

5 minutes earlier

“Thank you for your patience and we hope that you'll travel with us again” Joker’s voice sounded over the intercom.

Liara lowered her gaze and stared at the floor. “It's done. The crew is safe. They're going home”

She stood up and walked towards the small desk next to her bed. Sitting down, she grabbed her semi functional omnitool, placed it on her arm and turned it on. The device came to life, but its lights flickered on and off, signaling that it wouldn't work for much longer. When the Normandy had crashed in this remote world, the machine had been sent flying through the air, receiving several hits as it bounced between the walls and he roof. Those impacts had left it on its current state.

Liara started to browse through the files of the device. Buried beneath several of her Shadow Broker programs, there were several personal files that she kept there. Files of her and Katerina. Files that were all she had left of her.

She played one of the videos.

The projection showed the Citadel almost 4 years ago. "The good old days" as Katerina used to say "Before the Galaxy and our lives turned to absolute shit"
The trees and the lake of the Presidium were visible, as well as several skycars that roamed the sky.

“What are you doing?”

The omnitool camera focused on the origin of the voice. Shepard was resting on one of the railings, looking at her with a confused look.

“Just… recording. Preserving this moment for posterity”

“Oh, really? Dr T’Soni is making sure the future generations know what a boring person Commander Shepard was, and how she spent her free time looking at lakes and trees?”

“Maybe I am. Or maybe I'm just doing it to remember how you were before you turned old and wrinkly”

‘Old and wrinkly’ Ouch Liara. You’re saying I'm getting too senior for your tastes?”

“You're going to be 30 soon, so maybe I am. You should prove me wrong if you disagree with my assessment”

Shepard stood up and walked up to Liara. In a swift move, she picked up Liara in her arms and started to run down the Presidium.

“I may be getting old, Liara, but I can still ‘drop and give you 20’ anytime and anywhere”

“I can see that. Perhaps my scientific assessment was not so accurate after all” the Asari replied, her face beaming with joy.

After a couple of minutes, Kate finally stopped to catch her breath and placed Liara back on the ground. “Wow” Shepard exclaimed as she wiped the sweat from her brow “I think you should exercise a bit more, you know, Li? Maybe cut down the number of chocolates you eat everyday”

"You did not imply what I think you just implied, right?" Liara asked in an outraged tone as she looked at Kate with a vexed expression.

"No, no, not all, babe I'm just giving you some friendly health tips, that's all" Kate replied as she winked at Liara.

"Uh huh" Liara replied in a disbelieving tone as she crossed her arms. "I'm sure there were no other intentions hidden in what you just said"

Looking at the light that was coming out of Liara's omnitool, Shepard asked “Are you still recording?”

“Yes I am”

“Then record this for posterity” Katerina said as she turned to the camera: “I'm Commander Shepard, and Liara T’Soni is my favorite Asari in the whole Citadel”

“Only on the Citadel, Commander?”

Kate turned once more to the camera and said: “I'm Commander Shepard, and Liara T'Soni is my favorite Asari, my favorite living being, my favorite everything in the entire Galaxy. And I love her
with all my heart"

“Katerina…”

Shepard silenced as she gave her a long and profound kiss.

“Now shut that thing off. Let's go find something to eat. I'm starving”

The recording ended.

“I did what you asked of me, Kate. I was strong for them when they needed me. They're safe now. I can finally go with you”

Liara then walked up to the door and locked it. Sitting down on the bed, she watched as the omnitool which showed an image of Shepard holding her began to flicker. Feeling Katerina’s dog tags press against her chest and with the familiar sensation of the ring on her finger, she closed her eyes and started to charge a Biotic pulse in her hand.

“I'm coming, my love. I'll be with you soon. You won't be alone again”

Someone started knocking her door.

“Doc, Doc, are you OK ? Listen, we got the Normandy working again, isn't that exciting ?. We're going home soon, all of us. We didn't see you out there with us, so we… uh, wanted to know if you wanted a drink and… just to know if you were fine. So, uh, are you OK ?”

She didn't answer him. She just continued charging her biotics.

The sound of metal being ripped apart made her jump. She opened her eyes and saw Kaidan tearing the door down with his biotics. He then lifted his head and stared directly at her in horror.

“Oh, God”

“Kaidan, listen to me. If you ever considered me your friend... or had any level of respect for Katerina, I want you to get away from me. Let me do this, please”

“Liara, you listen to me. I know you're hurting, about Shepard and everything else. But the Normandy’s working again. We will find a way back, all of us, to our families, our homes, our…”

“I don't have anything to return to, Kaidan”

“Liara, that isn't true”

“Most of my family is dead, my home on Thessia is a ruin now, and…” she stopped as tears started to roll down her cheeks, soaking her face. With her voice breaking between sobs, she continued “... and the person that I cared for and loved with everything I had is gone. So no, Kaidan, I don't have anything to return to”

“We don’t know that Shepard is gone, Liara. For all we know she could be on Earth, recovering and...” Kaidan argued, trying to buy time for Karin, Garrus and Tali to arrive.

“Stop with the bullshit” Liara replied with one of the human expressions she had learned from Kate “You and I saw very well what was happening above Earth when we left. I deluded myself for some time, but it's time to face the truth”
“Kate wouldn't want you to give up, Liara”

“Then she shouldn't have died”

Suddenly 4 familiar faces appeared behind Kaidan. Besides James, the other 3 were some of her oldest friends. Friends she had met aboard the SR-1. Friends that had become her family.

“Keelah…” Tali said as she watched in panic at the scene before her.

“Liara. Liara, darling, listen to me” This was Karin speaking, approaching her slowly as she tried to calm her down. “I need you to stay calm. Breathe deeply and…”

“Stay away, please. I'm sorry that you have to see this, but I promised her that I would never leave her alone again, and I won't break that promise. Thank you, for everything. Goodbye”

As Liara lifted her arm to fire the Biotic pulse towards her head, a concussive shot fired by Garrus impacted her hand. At the same time, Kaidan tried to suspend her in an stasis field. They merely succeeded in deviating the course of the deadly pulse.

A blue explosion of light filled the room. The shockwave sent Kaidan and the others flying backwards. The lights on the roof and directly outside the room shattered, and for a brief moment, darkness consumed the area.

Tali stood up and rushed inside with her omnitool flashlight, and quickly located where Liara had fallen. She started checking for vital signs with the device.

James hurriedly approached Tali. “Is she… Ay Dios, ay Dios, please tell me she's not…”

Tali looked back at him.

“She's alive”

Liara felt nothing. No pain, no sorrow, no relief. No sensations coursed her body.

She couldn’t open her eyes. The darkness had become her world.

“Did I die? Is this… where we all go?”

“There's... nothing. An empty void. I need to find her. She must be terrified of being alone here”

She heard voices. Not from this place, but outside her head. “I failed. I still live. I'm sorry, Katerina”

The voices outside continued to speak.

“... you shot her, Garrus? Are you fucking insane...”

“She was going to blow her head! I did what I had to…”

“... the medbay, now…”

“... severe head trauma...”
“get Traynor out of here…”
“… told you she wasn't getting better…”
“… did you even leave her alone in the first place…”
“…. have to keep her sedated. Might need to…”
“…round up the crew…. we're leaving…”
“… Joker to get us in the airborne ASAP…”
“… everybody out, right now…”
“I don't know if you can hear me, child, but I need you to hang on… come too far to give up now… Think of what she would have told you…”
“... stay strong… do it for me… Please, Liara…” She recognized that voice. This one was coming from inside her mind. Shepard.
“I'm here, Kate. I can't see you. I failed you. Again”
“...stay strong… for me…”

“Not again, please”
“...for me…”
Shepard’s voice was replaced by one outside her head.
“... medical Log 67... patient is Liara T'Soni... releasing sedatives through the IV line…”

“I'm in the medbay, Kate” Liara said in her mind “Like the one on the SR-1. The place where we truly met for the first time… I'm sorry”

The voices started to fade. And shortly after, there was only silence

July 23rd, 2183

SSV Normandy

Liara opened her eyes slowly. A bright white light directly above her blinded her for a few moments as her vision adjusted to her surroundings. She started to look around trying to figure out where she was.

“Medigel dispenser on the wall. Various medical instruments. 5 beds. I'm in a medical facility of sorts” Liara said in her thoughts as her eyes continue to drift through the room.
Suddenly, a door in the back of the room opened and a human woman entered the infirmary.

“Greetings, Dr T’Soni. How are you feeling ?” Dr Chakwas asked the young Asari as she typed in her omnitool and sent a message to the Commander”: “Newest guest has awakened. Come give her the “welcome aboard” speech”

“I am feeling well, thank you. Maybe a little hungry”

“I'll make sure that someone brings you some food. My name is Karin Chakwas by the way, although almost everyone here calls me Doc or Karin” she said in a calm tone before typing a new message: “Bring large meal”.

“I don't know what Asari drink or eat!!!” Shepard replied.

“They can eat and drink the same things as us humans, Shepard. You've been with the Alliance for 12 years, you should know this, for Christ's sake”

“Sorry. Too busy dodging bullets and explosions to learn about Asari eating habits. On my way to your little dungeon”

Breaking the silence, Liara asked: “Can you tell me what happened to me ? I remember that I was running from the collapsing ruin and…”

As everyone sprints ahead, the red haired human woman rushes to my side. “Come on. I've been through enough shit on this planet to get to you. I'm not gonna let you die now” she says as she throws me over her shoulder and starts to run. My mind fades to black shortly after.

“You fainted as you escaped the ruins on Therum” Karin explained. “The Commander rescued you and brought you on board”

“Aboard where, if I may ask ?”

Before Chakwas could answer, the door to the infirmary opened and Katerina Shepard entered carrying a tray full of Alliance MRE’s and a large glass of orange juice.

“You're aboard the Systems Alliance Space Vehicle Normandy Stealth Reconnaissance, or simply the Normandy if you don't want to learn the technical name, Dr T’Soni. Welcome aboard”

As she placed the tray and the glass next to Liara, Kate spoke to her: “I don't know if you remember me very well, but me and my team rescued you from the ruin. I'm…”

“Commander Shepard. Yes, I do remember you” Liara said as she stared at her. Beautiful, green eyes. Goddess Liara, behave. “ I am very grateful for what you and your team did for me, Commander”

“Don't mention it, doc. I am sorry, however for this “meal” that you're about to eat. Have you tried human food before ?”

“I can't say I have, Commander. I have had almost no interaction with your species”

“Then I'm sorry that this is how you're introduced to the culinary “arts” of my people. I assure that not all of our food is as bad as this” Shepard said as Liara picked up the tray and started to eat.

“It tastes just fine, Commander” Liara said, trying to avoid insulting the hospitality of its hosts.

Karin laughed at Liara’s comments: “We eat that everyday, dear. You're not going to embarrass us
by saying how it truly tastes”

“You don’t have to lie to make us feel good” Shepard said with a smile on her face “It tastes like plastic”

Liara continued in denial: “No, no, it really tastes good. It is fine, I assure you” Goddess have mercy on these humans if they truly do have to eat this everyday.

Kate chuckled and spoke: “Well, if you truly like it, then good for you, Doc. Besides the Dextro supplies, that's the only food we have on board anyway, so I think you're going to enjoy your time here”.

Liara lowered her gaze as she tried to hide her smile and spoke: “I'm sure I will”.

Shepard then stood up and said “When you're ready, head upstairs to the Com Room. We’re about to start the Mission Debrief about Therum, and you'll personally meet the rest of the team, Dr T'Soni” Shepard said as she turned to leave the infirmary.

“Please, call me Liara, Commander”

Kate stopped, and as her eyes met Liara’s, she answered: “Ok, but only if you call me Kate. I get tired of being called Commander and Shepard all the time”

“I can do that, Kate”

“See you upstairs, Liara” Katerina said as she exited the room and the door closed.
After several minutes of eating and small talk in which Doctor Chakwas and Liara got to know more of each other, the young Asari was finally ready to leave the infirmary.

Before she left, Karin placed a hand on her shoulder and, in a cautionary tone, warned her: “Liara, listen. Despite the warm greeting that the Commander gave you, the rest of the crew might be… less welcoming, to say the least. So I suggest that you stick to simple greetings with them. And if anyone attempts to hurt you in any way, you let me or the Commander know right away, understood ?”

Liara looked at her with a worried expression on her face: “I do not intend to cause problems for anyone. Why would they be hostile to me ?”

“Some don’t trust you because of your Mother’s alliance with Saren, and others… well, let’s just say that they don’t think that an Asari should be aboard an Alliance ship”

Concerned, Liara asked “And what do you think, Doctor ?”

“I think that they’re a bunch of paranoid racist morons. I haven't known you very long, but you seem like a good person Liara. I don't think you're some enemy spy or sleeper agent that we shouldn't trust”

The Asari smiled “Thank you Dr Chakwas. That means a great deal to me”

Liara stepped out of the infirmary and into the Mess. She immediately noticed how the crew members who were present in the mess stopped talking among each other and stared at her in silence. Cold, distrusting eyes followed every step she took.

With fear coursing through her body, she quickly made her way to the upper level and swiftly entered the com room. “Note to self: Avoid contact with the crew” Liara said in her thoughts.

In the room there were 8 chairs, but only 3 were occupied at the moment. The Turian, the Quarian and the Human Male, members of the team that has rescued her on Therum, quickly stood up and walked towards her to introduce themselves.

The first was the Quarian. She shook Liara’s hand and said: “Tali’ Zorah Nar Rayya, or as you called me on Therum, “Spiritual Representative of the Quarian People”

Liara blushed in embarrassment as she remembered what she had uttered while she was trapped in the bubble “Oh, Goddess. My apologies. I had been trapped for so long… I just didn't knew what was real and…”

“I understand” Tali replied in a cordial tone “If I had been stuck in that bubble for several days, I would have blabbered nonsensical things too. Actually, no, if I had been trapped for several days, I would have been dead. Anyway, welcome aboard”

“Thank you”

The Turian was the next to approach her. He shook her hand as he said in a loud and confident tone: “Garrus Vakarian, former C Sec officer and now independent special agent working under
Commander Shepard to save the Galaxy from an interstellar threat. Also, as you called me on Therum, spiritual representative of the Turian peopl…”

“The joke was funny once, Garrus. Not anymore” Tali reprimanded him from her seat.

“But I… I...” Garrus lowered his gaze to the floor. Embarrassed, he stood silent for a few moments before looking back at Liara and continuing: “Anyway, it's good to have you on the team, Doctor T'Soni”

“Please, call me Liara”

“Very well, Liara” Garrus replied.

Next came the human male. “Kaidan Alenko, Glad to see you're Ok, Liara. If there's anything I can do to help you while you remain aboard, I'll be happy to do so”

“Thank you”

As they all sat down, Liara’s eyes started to study the room. Unfamiliar with most, if not all the equipment and devices she was seeing, she asked Kaidan about the room they were currently in.

“Well, this is the Communications Room. Here the Commander communicates directly with the Council through those devices” he said as he pointed towards the 3 projectors that lay in the far end of the room. “We also gather here after every major mission to analyze what we encountered, discovered and what things we did good or wrong. After, we begin to plan our next move”

“I see” the Asari replied in a more relaxed tone “So, when the rest of the team arrives, you'll talk about your mission on Therum, right”

“That is correct” Kaidan added “And we'll also talk…”

“About you, Liara” Tali interrupted him ”When the rest of the team arrives, we'll decide your fate”

Liara’s eyes widened “My fate, but what… I don't understand”

“We'll decide if we keep you with us, or if we throw you out the airlock” Garrus explained with a mischievous tone.

The Asari flustered “Throw me out of the airlock !? Why would you do that? What do you want from me ? You said that you had gone to Therum to rescue me. I haven't done anything to any of your people. I am a simple archeologist that…”

“They weren't serious, Liara. They were joking” Kaidan explained in a reassuring tone, trying to calm her down.

“Joking, of course” Congratulations, Liara T'Soni. You just made a fool of yourself less than 5 minutes after meeting these individuals. This is why you work in solitary ruins and try to avoid interacting people. Your social skills are nonexistent “My apologies. I didn't recognize the joke. I don't usually…”

The door to the Com Room opened, interrupting Liara with its mechanical noise before she could finish.

2 figures stepped inside. Both were from the team from Therum. The other Human female and the Krogan she had seen on the ruins were talking as they entered the room.
“250 ?” the woman queried her companion.

“Not even close” the Krogan replied with a deep, guttural voice that made Liara shiver a little “She looks far too young. I don't think she has even reached her second century yet”

“I bet you one hundred credits that she's around 80”

“Deal taken. Easy credits. She's young but not that young”

“And what was she even doing down there on Therum, I wonder. A young Asari like that studying Protheans ruins ? Not likely. She was probably on her way to shake her ass in some run down bar somewhere when she got lost and…”

They both stopped talking when they noticed the unfamiliar face that stood out among their other team members.

Liara did her best to ignore the comments as she stood up and walked towards the pair

As she extended her hand towards the woman, the Krogan walked by her and sat without acknowledging her presence.

“Hello. My name is Liara…”

“T'Soni. I know” the woman cut her short as she spoke with a cold, threatening tone “I'm Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams. As long as you remain in this vessel, you are under the jurisdiction of the Systems Alliance, understood ?

“Yes, that's very clear. I didn't mean to…”

“That means that myself, Lieutenant Alenko, Commander Shepard and most of the other human crew members are directly your superiors, so you will obey any directive that they give you, are we clear ?

“Of course. It was never my intention to…”

“Ashley, knock it off” Kaidan warned Ashley from his seat “I'm sure that she understands…”

“And finally, try to keep your urges in check. I know that you Asari are the “screw everything that moves” type, but you will not do that while you're aboard…”

“That's enough, Chief. Stand down!” Kaidan reprimanded her in a firm and strong tone.

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir” Ashley said as she moved away from Liara and sat down with an embarrassed look on her face.

Distressed, the Asari hurried back to her seat. She began to process what had just happened. “Who do they think I am ? Half the crew thinks I'm their enemy and the other half thinks I want to… Goddess , how did I got myself into this ? At least the Lieutenant, the Quarian and the Turian seem friendly”

“So, did we came here to look at each other's pretty faces ? Where the hell is Shepard” the Krogan asked in an annoyed tone.

“Settle down, Wrex. She should join us shortly” Garrus answered.
Same time

Captain's Quarters

Katerina stood in front of the mirror in her room. Her red hair, which she usually kept tied in a bun to adhere to the Alliance’s standards, now laid free and rested over her shoulders. She was staring at her reflection, breathing deeply as she tried to calm down the throbbing headache she was having. Ever since, she had interacted with the Beacon on Eden Prime, the visions of death and destruction would start flashing in her mind at random times during the day. This made her head feel like it was ready to explode.

She traced the long scar that sat above her nose with her finger, a quirk she did whenever she was nervous or tried to release tension. Rubbing the war mark, a reminder of the bloodbath of Elysium, helped her relax every time she had a bad nightmare or was stressed. But with the images from the beacon still crossing her mind, nothing she did helped her calm down.

“As if my mind wasn't messed up enough already. Now I have to deal with the collective nightmares of a species that went extinct thousands of years ago” Shepard said as splashed cold water in her face, trying to reduce the temperature in her head.

She lifted her head and looked at the mirror. She tightened her grip on the sides of the sink as the throbbing in her head became more intense.

“Keep it together, Katerina”

“The team is waiting for you on the Com Room, Commander”

Joker hadn't finished speaking when Shepard was already tying her hair and leaving her quarters.

She entered the com room and saw the entire team in their respective seats, just waiting for her.

“About damn time” Wrex growled at Kate.

“Fell asleep, Skipper ?” Ashley said with a grin on her face.

“Sorry for the delay” the Commander said as she moved towards the center of the room “I assume that you've all met Doctor T'So… Liara”

The entire team nodded.

“She remembered to use my first name” Liara thought as a half smile developed in her face.

“We can begin, then. The first topic to discuss is what are we going to do with you, Liara”

“What do you mean, Commander ?”

“Well, our job was to rescue you and to find out if you knew anything about your mother's connection with Saren. On Therum, you said that it had been years since you had any contact with your mother, correct ?” Shepard said as she sat down.

“Yes, that's right. The last time I spoke with my mother was almost 50 years ago, around the same time that I began my studies on the Protheans”

Kate raised an eyebrow in surprise as she heard Liara’s statement “50 years ? How old are you
“You owe me a 100 credits, Williams” Wrex said at Ashley while pointing at his omnitool.

“Whatsoever” Ashley snorted as she relaxed back into her chair “So, T'Soni, where do you want us to drop you off?”

“Excuse me?” the Asari replied in a confused tone.

“I mean, we rescued you, but you don't expect us to babysit you until this business with Saren and your mother has been dealt with, right? You must have family on Thessia or somewhere that can…”

“Actually, Shepard” Tali spoke in a confident tone as she looked towards Liara “I think that we should keep Liara on the team. Her expertise on the Protheans might be very useful in our search for the Conduit”

“I agree with Tali” Kaidan said “Who better to help us search for Prothean object than someone who's been looking at Prothean objects for the past half century”

“And her biotics will come in handy when the shooting begins” Wrex added as he nodded towards Liara, acknowledging her presence for the first time.

“I was thinking the same thing” Katerina said as she moved towards Liara “However, this is only if you want to stay. If you don't feel comfortable or want to go somewhere else, we can drop you off in the Citadel the next time we…”

“That won’t be necessary, Kate. I want to stay and be a part of your team. I'll try to make myself as useful as possible” Liara affirmed in a confident tone.

“Kate?” Ashley said in a loud tone “You two on in a first name basis already?”

Katerina let out a deep sigh as she turned towards Ashley before speaking “I'm on in a first name basis with everyone on this room, Ashley” Shepard asserted in an aggressive tone as she looked at the entire squad “Any of you can call me Kate if you want, I wouldn't mind if you did, but since you and everyone else have a weird fixation with calling me Commander, Shepard or Commander Shepard every single damn time that we talk, I'm guessing that's not going to happen”

The room fell silent.

“Sorry, ma'am. Didn't mean to upset you” Ashley said as she tried to hide the embarrassment in her face.

Kate closed her eyes and started to rub her scar “I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped like that. A minor headache has been bugging me all day long and I'm not in a very good mood. I apologize, to all of you”

“Returning to the Protheans” Garrus said as he changed the topic “Liara might help you understand the visions from the beacon, Shepard”

Liara turned her head and looked at Kate “What visions from what beacon, if I may ask?”

“The Normandy went to Eden Prime a few days ago to secure a Prothean beacon that had been
recovered there” Shepard explained.

Liara's eyes widened “Yes, I remember hearing about the discovery on the extranet. I tried to go there to examine the dig site but all my requests were denied, fortunately for me I guess, otherwise I may have ended as another victim of the Geth. It's a true shame that the beacon was destroyed during the attack. Did you manage to see the beacon, or at least what was left of it? Any information on it could be very useful to my studies”

“Yeah, we saw the beacon, alright” Kaidan said as he rubbed the back of his neck.

“Kaidan, Ashley and myself discovered the beacon still active near the spaceport after dealing with the Geth” Katerina explained.

“Intact? But I don't understand? Then how was it destroyed?”

“Shepard blew it up” Ashley said with a smug grin on her face.

“You did what !?” the Asari exclaimed in an outraged tone.

“When we discovered the beacon, I was careless and got to close to it. Suddenly I started to get pulled towards it. The Commander rushed to push me out of the way. Then she became trapped by it. It lifted her and after a few seconds it exploded” Kaidan explained as he mimicked a detonation with his hands.

“Oh, I see. You're still “joking” with me” Liara replied as she let out a short laugh.

“Ehm, no. That's actually what happened” Shepard replied.

“That's simply not possible, Commander. No one has ever touched an active Prothean beacon without specialized equipment and survived. The energy currents overpower the nervous system. It burns the brain inside the skull”

“Damn, Skipper. Guess you took the definition of “thick head” to a whole new level” Ashley said in a mocking tone.

“Well, I touched it, and I'm still here. My mind didn't fry as far as I can tell” You can't break what's already broken, I guess.

“Only a few dozen active beacons have been discovered in the past few thousand years, and every time that someone has interacted directly with them, they have perished. If what you say is true, then you are the first to survive direct contact with one of them. But whatever you have seen would have been confusing, unclear, given that the Beacons were designed to be understood by Prothean minds. If you allow me, Commander, I could meld my consciousness to yours to try to help you analyze and understand the information you received” This is where she will refuse and they will realize that their joke has failed. A human surviving a direct energy burst from a Prothean beacon? Impossible.

“Geez, at least buy her dinner first” Ashley said as she gave Liara a dismissive look.

“That’s enough, Ashley!” Shepard then turned and looked at Liara “So, you think this meld will actually help us in understanding something of what I saw ?”

“I can not guarantee it will, but it wouldn't hurt to try” “She sounds very confident about this. Oh Goddess, what if she wasn’t lying. You should have kept your mouth shut, T'Soni. Always saying things that have bad repercussions. Should have stayed quiet” Liara thought as she tried to hide the
panic that was coursing through her mind.

“Okay, then sure” Kate said as she stood up next to Liara “I must warn you, though, I’ve never done this before, so… go easy on me”

The Asari stood up from her seat and placed herself in front of Katerina. Looking directly into her eyes, she took a deep breath, and after a few moments, she spoke: “Relax, Commander. Embrace Eternity”

The Asari’s mind became one with Shepard’s. She found herself drifting through darkness, as Kate’s subconscious actively blocked and prevented her from seeing the thousands of memories that filled her mind. Only one was clearly visible, and like an insect drawn towards light, Liara entered it and started seeing it as if she was watching a video.

Several flashes appeared before her as fragments of memories made themselves visible.

Kate sat in front of a monitor and typed a message: Hey J. Sorry I haven’t answered your messages, I’ve been real busy. I know you want me to explain how the fuck I ended up becoming the first human Spectre. It's too long to tell you over this but let me know when you’re free to talk in a video call. I'll give you the quick version. Anderson picked me to be part of his crew in a new prototype stealth frigate. I was on Eden Prime when the Geth attacked it, a Prothean beacon nearly destroyed my mind and now I'm the Captain of the Frigate, leading a team of humans, a Quarian, a Turian and a Krogan and we're hunting a rogue Spectre through the Attican Traverse. Real fun stuff. Yes, I've got a Turian and Krogan working together. No, I'm not paying then.

I know it's hard to believe, but I swear that's what happened. Anyway let me know when you're free to talk and I'll explain everything.

Take care, J.

The memories move forward.

“What the hell is that?” Kate says in a loud tone as her eyes stare in disbelief at the massive, multi legged ship that appears on the screen.

“I've never seen anything like that in my entire military career” Anderson says as he gets closer to the screen.

“Neither have I. No known race has vessels like that. This is something complete new” Nihlus says as his mandibles twitch, an involuntary Turian biological reaction to fear or stress.

“Tell Alenko and Jenkins to suit up. You're going in, Shepard”

The memory continues.

Shepard, Jenkins and Alenko land on Eden Prime. Both Alenko and Jenkins begin to cough and
gag due to the stench of burnt flesh in the air. Kate doesn't even flinch. “That's a smell I'm too familiar with” she thinks before ordering her with her squad to move ahead.

Suddenly, 2 small bots appear over a nearby crest. The soldiers, acting instinctively, throw themselves behind some cover and open fire on the Machines.

Seeing how the drones were mainly focused on her, Shepard makes a hand signal to Kaidan, ordering him to flank and strike them from behind. Jenkins thinks the Commander is signaling him to attack, so he launches himself forward with his assault rifle focused on the Machines.

"Jenkins, no!" Kate shouts as she watches in horror as the machines focus their concentrated fire on the Corporal, making quick work of his shields before punching holes in his armor and torso. She listens the sound of flesh being pierced as she rushes forward with her rifle, being hit by several rounds as she opens fire at near point blank range, quickly destroying the Machines.

Ignoring her own injuries, she sprints towards the fallen soldier.

“Stay with me, Jenkins” Shepard shouts as she applies medigel lotion on the wounds of the injured soldier. Her eyes are focused on the dozens of holes that are spread through the corporal's body. She knows that he's not going to live, but she keeps trying.

Jenkin's body trembles as shock began to set in. He lifts his head and his eyes focus on Shepard’s. He opens his mouth and, in the brief moments when blood doesn't come out of his mouth, he utters his final words: “You... you promised...” He gives her a blank stare, he stops breathing. He's dead.

“Sherpa”

Katerina keeps applying medigel, keeps trying to find a pulse.

“Sherpa, he’s gone” Kaidan says as he shakes her shoulder lightly.

She drops her hand to her side. Her eyes close, breathing deeply as she tries to hold back the tears.

“He was just a kid” The thought crosses her mind over and over. “Another kid you've got killed, Katerina. Another life cut short because of your failures. How many more lives will you take before it's your time to go ?”

“We need to keep moving, Commander”

Kate stands up, takes a deep breath and looks at the Lieutenant. “Mark the location, make sure that they know where the body is”

“Yes, ma’am” They both move on.

More images flash in her head.

A woman joins them, Ashley Williams.

The Geth, the horrible robots Liara had seen on Therum impale dozens of people impaled in large mechanical spikes...
The bodies descend, by they are alive. Mutated, transformed into organic machine hybrids...

“Of all the things I expected to face during my military career, space zombies was not among them” Shepard thinks as she guns them down.

A monstrous ship lifts itself from the ground. Its multiple legs move as the gargantuan vessel emits a loud piercing noise, which makes the Commander and her squad cover their ears to try to shield themselves from it. Shepard stares directly at the the Machine, watching it ascend and disappear in the clouds.

Finally, what Liara has been waiting to see shows up.

The Prothean beacon, still active and functional, stands before Kate and her team. It’s the first time Liara has seen a beacon intact. “Goddess” she utters in her mind as the memory continues to unfold.

Kaidan begins to be pulled towards the device. Shepard rushes to his side, and in a swift move, she grabs and tosses him aside, only to be trapped herself by the beacon. She is lifted from the ground.

Suddenly, a torrent of images bombard Kate and Liara’s minds. Giant Machines tear cities apart, shouts of horror fill the air, flesh being split apart, organic paste flowing through tubes, mechanical implants being inserted into living tissue, screams, explosions, destruction.... death.

The meld ends suddenly. Without realizing it, Liara has been holding onto Shepard’s arms. The grip she has on them is enough to cause a small amount of pain to Kate. While the Asari gasps for air, tears fill her eyes and a small stream of purple blood dripped from her nose. A single thought crosses her mind.

“How did she survive this ?”

Katerina is looking towards the roof, inhaling and exhaling, trying to keep herself from bursting into tears in front of the squad. “Never break in front of the men”. That was the motto that she had carried throughout her time in the Alliance. If she broke, the entire team will follow, and they would all end up dead. “Stay calm, it’s over. Inhale and exhale. I’ll need to ask Kaidan for some of his pills for the migraines”.

She lowered her gaze and looked at Liara.

“Are you Ok ?” She asked in a near panicked tone “Oh God, you're bleeding. I’m sorry. I'm so sorry, i didn't know that it would affect you like this, I shouldn’t have..”

“It's fine, Commander. It was my idea, after all” Liara said as she lifted her head and wiped her nose with the sleeve of her medical suit “But... Goddess, you did touch the Beacon. This is an
extremely important event. You are the first one to survive such direct contact. I must record this, the possibilities that this represents could aid immensely in our understanding of Prothean history, culture and…”

“Did you actually understood anything from the visions ?” Garrus asked, voicing what the entire team was thinking at the moment.

Liara pauses for a few moments, and, lowering her head, she responds “Unfortunately, no. Only the same images of Machines bringing death and chaos that the Commander had already seen were clear”

"We think those Machines were responsible for the extermination of the Protheans. Saren calls them 'Reapers' We believe he's trying to bring them back"

After discussing for several moments what they knew about this Machines, Liara stumbled a little as the energy drain from the meld became evident.

“Looks like I made you suffer through that for nothing. Again, I’m sorry. Dr Chakwas should take another look at you” Kate said in a guilt filled tone.

“That's probably a good idea. If you excuse me, I shall return to the medbay” You meld with someone for less than 2 minutes and you start bleeding, like a child. And you were expected to lead the T’Soni House. Maybe just stop interacting with people, Liara, both for their and your sake. Liara thought with an embarrassed expression as she left towards the infirmary.

Shepard watched as the door to the Com Room closed. You’ve met her for less than a day and you already hurt her. The Shepard effect is in full swing once more. I'll check how she is later. She then turned and looked at her team members. “So, if Liara is going to stay with us, she’s going to need training, both with her biotics and using guns. Kaidan, you’re the only biotic here, so I’ll leave that part to you”

“Of course, Shepard. I'll be good to have a fellow biotic to talk to” he said with a smile on his face.

“And now, who wants to train the Doctor in using guns ?” Shepard said as her eyes drifted through the room.

No one answered.

“Jeez, not everyone at the same time. I appreciate your enthusiasm, but really, one of you is more than enough.” Shepard said in a sarcastic tone as she crossed her arms.

“My expertise is more on the mechanical and engineering. I wouldn’t be a good instructor” Tali said as she avoided Shepard’s eyes.

“I only use sniper rifles, and I don’t think thats the type of weapon she should use” Garrus said as he looked towards the floor.

“I'd probably just scare her. I noticed how she trembled when I spoke” Wrex said as he laughed.

“I’m going to be real busy with my maintenance duties, Skipper, so I'm probably not going to have a lot of time available to work as an instructor. Besides, I don't know why I get the impression that she doesn’t really like me” Ashley said with a grin on her face.
“I’ve already said that I would help her with her biotics. Someone else should handle the firearms.’ Kaidan added.

Almost simultaneously, everyone’s eyes focused on Katerina.

“Oh, you can’t be serious” she exclaimed in a disbelieving tone.

“Why don’t you train her, Shepard?” Tali said “You’ve been using firearms longer than most of us. Besides, I’m sure she will really appreciate you taking the time to ’instruct her’ ”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kate said while she raised her brow.

“Nothing, nothing” Tali said as she waved her hands dismissively. “Just that she looks at you like you’re some sort of divine entity, that’s all” Tali claimed in her thoughts.

*Do what you do best, Shepard. Instruct another person in the art of killing.* Shepard rolled her eyes, and in a resigned tone, she spoke: “Fine, I’ll train her then. Get back to your posts. Crew dismissed”
Chapter 10

Liara sat on her computer in the storage room of the Medbay, like she did almost everyday since she had come aboard the Normandy. She rarely left the small compartment, mainly because she wanted to avoid being near the crew as much as possible and because Dr Chakwas usually took care of bringing food and drink to her “small cell” as she would say.

“You should get out there sometime, Liara. This self imprisonment is not doing you any good” Karin repeated to her almost everyday.

But Liara was just happy to spend most of her time in her “small cell”. Despite the friendly attitude of some of her team members, the overall feeling that one half of the crew disliked her and the other half outright hated her was pretty evident to her. She hadn't told to either Dr Chakwas or Shepard about the times she had been harassed and insulted whenever she had the misfortune of running into a member of the crew on the few occasions she had left the medbay.

“Shepard” Liara said to herself as she leaned back on her chair and tangled her fingers while she stared reflectively at the roof. She had never met someone like the Commander before. Even the most experienced and battle hardened Commandos that used to protect her and her family back on Thessia didn't provoke feelings of admiration and reverence on her as Shepard did. The decisiveness and firmness with which she carried herself and the level of respect that she had from all the crew was truly impressive.

“The fact that she survived direct contact with a Prothean beacon is awe inspiring as well” The Asari asserted as she played with her fingers while she continued looking above her. Kate had stopped by the previous day to check on her, and they've had a brief but pleasant chat. But one thing that slightly distressed Liara was the darkness that she had sensed on Kate's mind during the brief meld they had shared in the com room. What secrets, stories and experiences lay there, buried deep beneath the walls of her subconscious, Liara wondered. With her curiosity, both scientific and personal, boiling over, she moved forward, closed the 2 tabs she had opened on her browser about Prothean facts and myths and typed in a search engine: “Commander Shepard”

The results appeared almost instantly, due to the fact that the Normandy had a privileged extranet access due to its great importance both to the Alliance and the Council. The first thing visible was a large picture of Kate’s face, which showed her smiling and made her green eyes, which Liara found so alluring, stand out from the rest of the pic. The large scar that the Commander had above her nose was clearly absent, which indicated that she had acquired it after the portrait was taken.

Her eyes moved downwards towards a small text about the Commander.

“Kate Shepard, more commonly known as Commander Shepard, is a Lieutenant Commander in the Systems Alliance Marines and a graduate from the N7 program. Born on Earth in 2154, little is known about the Commander’s childhood and upbringing. Earning her N7 designation when she was just 20 years old, she is one of the youngest graduates from the N7 program and is one of the most successful Infiltrators to have ever served in the SA. She became widely known for her actions during the Skyllian Blitz of 2176, which led to her becoming the youngest recipient of the Star of Terra in the history of the Systems Alliance”

“Skyllian Blitz” The 2 words grabbed Liara's attention. She had never heard of this “Blitz”, and while she didn't precisely pay extremely close attention to Galactic news, it seemed that this event was quite important for the humans, and she found it quite strange that she hadn't seen anyone talk about it in the multitude of news networks from all races that were available throughout the Milky
She clicked on the suggested link and a new page appeared.

**Skyllian Blitz**

The Skyllian Blitz, also known as “The Siege of Illyria” and “The Elysium Bloodbath” was a battle fought in May 2176 on the planet of Elysium, mainly in and around the capital city of Illyria between Systems Alliance Marines and armed civilians against pirates, mercenaries and slavers funded and armed by the Batarian Hegemony who attempted to destroy the colony.

Cut off from reinforcements and supplies, the Alliance forces held their ground for 2 days with the aid of anti air cannons and automated turrets against constant waves of attacks by the terrorist forces.

The battle ended when a relief force led by the SSV Agincourt destroyed the large majority of the pirate fleet above the planet, which forced the remaining forces both groundside and in orbit to either flee or surrender.

Commander Kate Shepard, the sole survivor of the joint civilian-Marine defense force, was awarded the Star of Terra for singlehandedly defending the spaceport of the city after her unit was wiped out, which prevented the enemy forces from landing on the planet in significant numbers during the battle.

Despite the fact that large numbers of the civilian casualties in the conflict were non humans, mainly Salarian, Volus, Turian and Asari, the Skyllian Blitz is not widely known among other species, and its generally seen among them as a small skirmish, part of the Alliance pirate suppression campaigns in the region.

“The only survivor” Goddess, if I felt her anger, despair and fear when she lost a single soldier on Eden Prime, I can't even imagine how she felt after this” Liara’s eyes then focused on the statistics from the battle. She let out a small gasp as she read the numbers.

**Civilian population of Illyria at the time:** 8 Million

**Alliance Forces**

1710 Marines (including 18 N7 specialists)

2500 Armed Civilians, part of the local defense forces

**Terrorist Forces**

Estimated 5000 to 6000 Mercenaries, Pirates and Slavers, and an undetermined number of small transport and attack vessels

**Casualties**
Alliance Forces

130 thousand civilians on Illyria

1709 Marines

2500 civilians of the local defense forces.

Terrorist Forces

Only 413 terrorists were captured on the planet, and given the large presence of Alliance ships in orbit, only a few vessels of the batarian backed groups managed to escape. It is estimated that over 95% of the attacking terrorist group was destroyed both by forces planet side and by the ships above the planet.

Liara closed the tab and returned to the results of the “Commander Shepard” search.

“‘Elysium Bloodbath’, quite a fitting name for that massacre. The horrors she must have seen” Liara thought with a sad expression on her face “Nobody deserves to experience that. Nobody deserves to suffer like that”

A suggested video appeared on the side of the page: Commander Shepard being awarded the Star of Terra.

Liara played the video.

A big stage appeared. Thousands of humans were all around, and hundreds of flashes illuminated the area. A man which Liara assumed was an Alliance Admiral was giving a speech.

Liara started to skip several parts of the video until she found what she was looking for. The man on the video said in a loud voice:

“... Now we bring the woman, the hero, the savior of Elysium and the reason why we still have a colony on the planet. Lieutenant Kate Shepard”

A thunderous round of applauses filled the air as a figure appeared from one of the sides of the stage.

“Goddess” Liara uttered as she covered her mouth with her hand as she watched the state in which Kate was in. It was almost as if they had dragged her out of the hospital bed, placed her dress blues on and sent her to the ceremony.

She was walking, barely. Her left arm was wrapped in what she assumed was a medical cast, which indicated that it was broken, and her right hand was twitching involuntarily. As she faced the camera, several parts of her face had bandages on it. One of her eyes was closed and it appeared inflamed. A large medical sticker was placed just above her nose. “That must be where she got her scar. During the ‘Blitz’ “ Liara claimed.

Probably instructed to do so by the Alliance propagandists, Liara noticed how Kate was forcing a smile.

Shepard moved towards the center of the stage and waited as the man finished his speech and turned to face her and placed the medal around her neck. Kate looked like she was ready to cry.
Whether from joy or from sorrow, Liara couldn't tell for sure, but she guessed that happiness was not what Kate was feeling at that moment.

“Would you like to say a few words, Lieutenant Shepard?” he said as he signaled towards the microphone.

Kate remained immobile for several moments. After taking a deep breath, she moved forward, leaned on the microphone and let out a single phrase in a tone so filled with pain and sadness and so contrasting to her usual strong and firm voice that that it almost made Liara cry when she heard it: “Remember the ones who made the ultimate sacrifice, and honor their memories. They're the real heroes, not me”

The room and the audience became completely silent.

After that, she turned her back on the Admiral and walked towards the side of the stage, where she quickly disappeared from view.

Liara closed the video.

Liara was at a loss for words. What could she say? She didn't do anything for several moments, as her mind struggled to comprehend how the energetic, cheerful, passionate and friendly individual who had rescued her and was one of her few friends she had on the ship was the same broken shell of a person she had seen in the video.

"Everybody has their breaking point, I guess. At least she looks much better now"

After a while, she looked at another video that stood out.

(Mature Audiences only) Defenders of the Final Frontier: Day to Day Life with the Soldiers of the Alliance (includes interview with Commander Shepard)

She clicked on it and started to watch.

The voice of the narrator spoke in an overly dramatic tone: "The Skyllian Verge, a region that’s just below the Terminus Systems in terms of danger and violence"

"The Alliance is fighting a war against batarian backed criminals and pirates in the area, but what do we really know about this conflict, and the men and women who are fighting it?"

"Join Alliance News Network reporter Joanna Zerlinger as she reveals how the soldiers of the SA go through their day by day, and how we sleep soundly in our homes because they are fighting for our safety out here"

A little annotation appear in the corner of the screen: Click here to skip to the part with Commander Shepard.

Liara clicked it. The planet seen was arid and desert like, and had several mountains that decorated the landscape. The camera then moved and showed a small group of soldiers who were resting next to a small bunker, covering themselves from the sun with the shadow of the structure. The reporter spoke to whom Liara assumed was the Commanding officer, who answered her questions with an annoyed tone on her voice. She then turned and called 2 persons who were doing target practice in the distance. One of them was throwing bottles and other small objects in the air and the other shot them down with a rifle.

“Alejandro, Kate, get your asses over here”
The 2 figures started to walk towards them.

The recording made a jump cut and now the 2 individuals, a male and a female, were sitting in front of the reporter. Liara immediately recognized Shepard, but she looked much younger. She checked the date of the video. November 2175. Almost 8 years ago.

The reporter started to speak: “I am here with 1st Lieutenant Kate Shepard and 2nd Lieutenant Alejandro Ramos, did I pronounce it right ?”

“Yes, you did” the man replied in an apathetic tone.

“Where were you 2 born ?”

“Gran Colombia” the man said.

Shepard looked to the floor and remained silent for a few moments before answering: “I grew up in the Russian Commonwealth and Alaska in the UNAS. Not sure where I was born tough”

The reporter looked away momentarily, clearly embarrassed for being unaware that the childhood pf the Commander was a sensitive topic.

She drank water from a small canteen she carried before continuing the interview.

“Most of the soldiers with whom you serve are from Earth too ?”

“It may surprising to you, but no. Only a few of us are from the homeworld” Alejandro explained.

“Most of our unit is composed from colony kids. Hell, we've even got a couple of idiots who were born on the Citadel. Maybe that’s why they are the way they are” Kate said out loud.

“Ha, Ha, fuck you too, Shepard” a couple of soldiers shouted from a distance.

“Why do you think this happens ?” the reporter queried the couple “Why do people from the colonies tend to join the Alliance more than people from Earth and the other planets of the Sol System ?”

“It's fairly obvious” Ramos asserted as he wiped the sweat from his forehead “People from the colonies have much more at stake than the people from the Sol system. They are literally fighting because their homes and families are at the front lines in this conflict”

“Pirates and slavers don't attack Earth, Luna or Mars. They attack Ferris Fields, Shanxi and Amaterasu” Shepard explained. She then pointed to a single pilot who was smoking next to a parked fighter jet. “See that girl ? Her name's Jennifer Buchanan. She’s one of the best fighter pilots the Alliance has. She was born and raised in Mindoir. We all know what happened on Mindoir. 70% of the colony killed or abducted by slavers because the Alliance quick reaction units had their heads up their asses and didn't got to the colony in time” Kate paused for a moment to catch her breath “I’m not in the Alliance to fight for a paycheck, or for the fame or glory. I’m here to try to make sure that no else has to go through what Valentina went through. I’m here to make sure that the normal ordinary people who are trying to live their lives in peace don’t get fucked over by some pirate or slaver who decided that they were an easy target. I’m fighting to make sure that our people here in the stars have a future in peace”

“Well, damn” Alejandro said in a mocking tone as he patted her back “You sure you don't want to work in the Public Affairs Department ? You could get rich by writing speeches”
“That was a truly remarkable answer, Lieutenant Shepard” the reporter remarked. “Changing the topic a bit, how would you describe your day to day activities here on the planets of the Verge?”

Ramos spoke as he checked his sniper rifle: “Nothing truly remarkable, really. We go to a planet, check if there are any unauthorized bases or anchorages in it, we destroy them, kill a few pirates or slavers, patrol some more and then we leave. Then we get shore on a planet or the Citadel and then the routine starts again. They say that we’re going to be able to get R and R in Elysium next year. We’re looking forward that”

The reporter was taken aback by her comments: “That seems remarkable enough to me. How often does that happen?”

“Only when we're lucky. Most of the time we spend days looking at rocks and sand” Shepard replied as he checked the hour on his omnitool.

After several minutes of almost incessant questioning of the 2 soldiers, the reporter said: “Ok. Now to my final question. You both are N7 Operatives, right?”

The 2 soldiers stood in silence for a few moments. Kate then looked at her Commanding Officer, looking for approval to continue speaking, and she nodded in her direction.

“Sorry about that. We gotta ask the boss about what we're allowed to talk about. If we say something we shouldn't they might send us to the reeducation camps, you know?” Shepard explained in a mocking tone.

“There are no ‘reeducation camps’ in the Alliance, Kate” Alejandro asserted.

“That's what they want us to believe” Shepard said in an almost imperceptible tone and with a smile on her face. “But, to answer your question, Yes, we are both N7 Operatives”

“Isn’t it wasteful to have the best of the best operatives of the Alliance doing jobs better suited for common grunts?” the reporter asked as she throw dismissive looks to the group of soldiers that were several meters away from them.

Kate looked offended as she heard the question and anger was clearly notable in her tone as she answered: “Before we were N7s, we were and still are those “common grunts” to which you refer with such disdain, like they’re pieces of shit that are less valuable than us”

“I didn’t mean to imply…”

“Oh, that was just what you were implying, bitch” Shepard said as she struggled to stop herself from rising up and slapping the reporter in the face.

Alejandro set his hand on her shoulder, reminding her that she was not alone, and also preventing her from doing something she would regret.

“The interview is over” he said as he gave her a cold stare as he and Kate, who looked like she was ready to tear Joanna’s head off, stood up and left.

As they started to walk away, the Commander came out of a small prefab that served as a communication base and shouted: “Listen up everyone, the satellites spotted a big concentration of structures and ships some 2000 klicks north of here. They’re not colonists and they’re not from the Alliance. That means one thing, pirates. Grab your stuff, were paying those bastards a visit”

He turned and looked at Kate “Shepard, take the reporter with you. Show her some real action”
“Yes, ma'am” she said as she tried her best to hide the anger in her voice. As soon as the CO was out of earshot, Kate let out a single phrase “Oh, that’s just great. Fucking press”

Ramos shove her lightly as he said in a sarcastic tone: “Us escorting civvies through war zones because the brass needs everyone to see how “cool and fun” war is to increase the number of people joining the service. Just like old times, eh ?”

She replied in a cold tone “Just like old times”

“Hey, come on, change that face. Tell you what, you get more batarians than me today and I’ll buy the drinks. How about that ?”

A smile appeared on her face: “Challenge accepted, Ramos. Let’s get on with it”

After a small cut, the video now showed Shepard, Ramos and several other soldiers inside a shuttle that trembled as it flew towards their destination. All Along the Watchtower was playing over the radio. Several other shuttles were flying next to the one the soldiers and the reporter were in. To avoid crowding the shuttle, the reporter held the recording drone in her hands.

“So, Lieutenant Shepard, if you don’t mind me asking…”

“Shut up. Just shut up” was the only response Kate gave her.

After a few moments, the song stopped playing and the pilot spoke over the intercom: “There it is. Get ready, boys and girls”

As a group of structures and small ships was visible in the projectors inside the shuttle, the roar of fighters made the entire shuttle shake violently. The small vessels quickly passed by the shuttles and started to release their deadly ordnance on their targets. Large explosions engulfed everything around the pirate center.

“Hell yeah” the soldiers shouted in unison.

Suddenly, the hiss of missiles and explosions missile began to sound outside.

“What the bloody hell was that ?” the reporter asked.

“AA fire. Get us down, now” Katerina shouted at the pilot.

Katerina closed her eyes as the shuttle trembled even more and the shrapnel from the anti air fire began to fall over the vessel like hail during a storm.

The sound of a rocket outside was consumed by the noise of a large explosion and the metal being torn apart. Shepard knew very well what that meant. A shuttle had been hit, and everyone inside was dead.

As the shuttles landed, Alejandro placed her hand on Kate's shoulder, who looked back at him and gave him a reassuring nod. The doors of the shuttle opened and the soldiers sprinted out into the dust and smoke and started to fire at the enemies. The reporter set the drone to fly and send it out while she remained inside the shuttle.

Liara was still glued to the screen, watching in horror the carnage of the battle that was unfolding in the video, when a voice spoke behind her.
“Enjoying the war vids, Liara?”

5 minutes earlier

Normandy's Mess

Katerina, Tali, Garrus, and Kaidan sat on a table. They were chatting and laughing as they all shared stories and got to know more about each other. Ashley and Wrex sat on another table next to them.

“So one day, my great grandfather came back to the house from his daily walk in the woods and shouted to the top of his lungs ‘The land is sinking!’” Kaidan said as he ate a mix of vat grown meat and vegetables.

“Why would he say that?” Tali questioned him in a curious tone.

“Well, it turns out that he found out that a tree where he said that he used to play as a child was almost completely submerged by seawater. The tree was a few kilometers away from the house, but he was quite old by that time, so nobody took him seriously”

“Was he right?”

“Today, the house has a beach in front of it. The sea levels were indeed rising, and the water swallowed all the forest that once stood in front of it. We were lucky that the sea stopped before it reached the structure. The old man was right after all”

"I've never seen an ocean" Tali said as she lowered her gaze and stared at her hands "I've heard they're quite beautiful"

"Maybe after this is over we can visit one" Garrus claimed as he looked at Tali

"You're going to take me on a beach trip to Palaven, Vakarian?" Tali told the Turian, with her smile hidden beneath her helmet.

Garrus's mandibles twitched and he look towards the floor to hide the Turian version of blushing: "All of us, I meant" he said nervously "The entire team, not just the two of us, that would be..."

"It would be what, Garrus?" Tali said, trying to force the words out of Garrus.

The Turian looked at her for a few moments, and he was about to reply when Wrex patted him strongly in the back as he spoke in a loud tone: "You want to take me on a beach trip to Palaven? How nice of you, Garrus. I think it might be a bit difficult, considering that Krogans are not allowed on any of the planets that your people control"

"Well, Wrex, the last time your people came near one of our planets you dropped asteroids on them. Maybe that's why we don't let you near our worlds"

"We dropped asteroids on you after you flattened more than a dozen of our own colonies"

"That you had illegally stolen from the other races"

"Because they didn't agree to give us..."
"Alright, that's enough" Shepard dictated in an authoritative as she stepped between Wrex and Garrus. "I don't want a reenactment of the Krogan Rebellions inside my ship. If you can't control yourselves, you both get off the next time we go to the Citadel, understood?"

"Of course, Commander" Garrus replied.

"Don't worry, Shepard, I wouldn't harm Tali's other half" Wrex declared loudly as he smiled.

"He's not my 'other half' We're just colleagues, that's it" Tali claimed in an outraged tone. He's from a respected family on Palaven, they would probably disown him if they find he's mingling with Quarians. He may be friendly to me, but a relationship between us would never work... would it?

"Not yet anyway" the Krogan replied.

"Tali and I are just coworkers and friends" Garrus said loudly. Just friends, obviously. I mean, she says these things just to tease me, right? Why would she even be interested in a Turian like me?

Shepard listened with a confused expression as the Tali and Garrus continued to denied what Wrex was claiming. "Garrus with Tali? Nah, I would have noticed if it were true. Or maybe not. What do I know about relationships?

Seeing how Kaidan was staring silently at the discussion, Kate spoke: "Anyway, going back to Kaidan's story. His grandfather was right after all. That's why they say 'With age comes wisdom'"

"I'm not so sure about that" Garrus said in an almost imperceptible as he casted side glances at Wrex.

“You’re one to talk about age and wisdom, Kate. Maybe you should listen to your own advice and stop fighting me every time i patch you up and tell you that you have to rest” Dr Chakwas said as she approached her from behind.

“Ah, come on, Karin. I just know when I’m fit for duty sooner than you do”

“Sure thing, Dr Shepard. Perhaps you should stay in the infirmary then, and put your wondrous self diagnosing skills to good use for the benefit of the crew” Karin spoke in a mocking tone.

“As much as I would like to help the crew, I wouldn’t be able to do it. I just hate hospitals, and clinics, and medbays… and doctors” Shepard said as she winked at Karin.

“I’ll remember your dislike for medical facilities and their personnel the next time that you come crying into my medbay because half a dozen slugs punched through your armor and broke a couple of your bones.

"Listen, I need to ask you a favor, in private” the doctor said as she moved towards the elevator. Shepard stood up from the table and followed her.

As they were near the doors, Chakwas turned towards Kate and spoke: “Listen, I’m going down to Engineering to have a chat with Greg and …”

“Uh huh. I know what kind of “chats” you have with Greg” Shepard spoke as she laughed.

“I do not know what you’re insinuating, Commander, my relationship with Engineer Adams is strictly professional” the doctor claimed with a cold tone.

“I don’t have to give you a lecture about the Alliance fraternization rules, do I, Doc?” Kate said in
"You can if you want, Commander. And then I'll be more than happy to give you the lecture about the Alliance rules that forbid Commanding Officers from having more than a dozen liquor bottles in their personal quarters for personal consumption" the doctor replied with a grin on her face.

"I'm just messing with you, doc. Don't worry, your secret is safe with me. But what favor do you need of me ?"

“Please make sure that our young Asari guest in the medbay eats. Bring her a tray with some meals to the storage room”

Shepard shook her head in confusion “Make sure she eats ? Why, she isn’t eating ? And why should I bring her food ? She’s no longer bedridden, she can come to the Mess and eat here with everyone else”

“That’s the point. She doesn’t want to be around everyone else, and most of the crew is happy with her being confined to that room in her self imposed imprisonment. And sometimes she doesn’t eat all. So bring her some food, will you ?”

Katerina let out a deep sigh before answering: “Sure.. I’m the Commander and the waiter of the SSV Normandy, it seems”

“You’ll enjoy eating with her. She’s a pleasure to talk with” Karin said as she stepped in the elevator and descended towards engineering.

“I’m sure” Shepard mumbled as she returned to the Mess and started to fill a tray.

“Hey Shepard. Going for another round ? I thought that you hated vat grown food” Kaidan said as he continued to eat.

“Oh trust me, Kaidan, I hate it with all my heart. But this isn’t for me, this is for Liara” Shepard said as she continued to place more food in the tray.

“Is she still sick ? Or is she still recovering from the effects of the meld ?” Garrus asked with a concerned tone.

“No, she’s fine. But apparently she doesn’t like to eat out here with everybody, and she forgets to eat because... well, i don’t know why, but she forgets to eat”

“I don’t blame Liara for not wanting to interact with your crew, Shepard. Most of them share Chief’s Williams opinions about her” Tali explained.

“But do they now ?” Katerina said as she paused for a moment, slightly annoyed with herself. You’re the Commander. You’re supposed to be on top of shit like this. You’ve got a little hate mob harassing one of your team members and you hadn’t noticed. “I might need to chat with Ashley and the rest of the crew later. Let me go give this meal to our Asari guest. I’ll be right back”

As Shepard entered the medbay, a loud sound coming from the storage bay invaded her ears. She immediately recognized the noises. Gunfire, explosions, missiles, shouts. The symphony of war. What was Liara watching ? Shepard wondered.

The sound of the door hissing open was drowned from the noises in the room. Kate, who entered the room with a mischievous smile, ready to scare the young Asari as she was sure that she hadn’t
heard her coming in, noticed that Liara was mere inches away from the screen, completely immersed in the conflict she was witnessing on the monitor.

The smile quickly disappeared from Kate's face as it didn’t take her long to recognize that Liara was watching footage from one of the anti pirate operations from the Verge in which she had been involved. Many of the faces that appeared on the video were from people she knew, people she had cared about, people that were gone.

After watching for several moments, the toes on her feet clench involuntarily, a sign that stress was building up in her as she became increasingly uncomfortable with the memories that the video was bringing back. In a knee jerk reaction, she uttered the first phrase that crossed her mind.

“Enjoying the war vids, Liara ?”

“Goddess!” Liara shouted as she stood up, knocking down her chair, her books and almost throwing the computer off the table too. She hastily shut off the video and turned to face the person that had spoken to her.

“Commander… Shepard...Kate, sorry, I did not hear you entering the room” she claimed in an anxious tone as she gasped for air.

Oh Athame, just come and take me to the afterlife right now. How long was she watching ? Did she saw that I was researching her ? Oh Goddess, she will think that I’m some sort of twisted stalker.

“Shit, my bad, Liara. I didn’t mean to startle you. I’m sorry” Kate apologized as she quickly placed the tray on a shelf and started to help the Asari pick up her things.

“What were you watching ?” Shepard asked, even though she knew perfectly well what Liara had been seeing.

“A new advertisement for an Asari movie about… eh… about Commandos fighting during the Rachni War” Liara babbled, praying in her mind that the Commander would believe her.

“Oh, cool. It looked good” Kate replied, deciding not to push the subject.

After cleaning up the little mess that they had involuntarily created, only a few books remained on the floor. They crouched and began to pick them from different directions, and when they both reached for the only one that remained, their hands met. For a brief moment, Shepard's hand laid atop of Liara's, her soft skin brushing slightly against the dorsum of the Asari's hand. Liara's world froze for a few seconds, as her eyes focused on all the small details in the Commander's hand, the lines on her fingers, the tiny hairs that grew there, her scars that crossed...

”Sorry” Kate said as she picked up the book, stood up and offered her hand to Liara.

The Asari snapped out of her train of thought and focused on the object on top of the nearby shelf “Is that for me ?” Liara queried as she eyeballed the food tray and her stomach made a low rumble. Goddess, when was the last time I ate ?

“Yeah. Dr Chakwas said that you didn’t like eating out in the Mess, and that you sometimes don’t eat at all, so she asked me to bring you this and to make sure that you don’t die of starvation while you’re aboard the Normandy”

“Oh, Goddess. You shouldn’t have, Commander” Liara explained as she failed to hide the embarrassment on her face and voice “It’s not your responsibility to make sure I’m fed. And I told Dr Chakwas that I’m getting my required daily dose of nutrients. We Asari just have to eat less often than humans, that’s all”
“I’m no expert in Asari biology, Liara, but I know that isn’t true. If anything, you need to eat more often and in larger quantities than us due to your high energy consumption because of your biotics. Karin explained to me that the crew has some issues with you, and that you prefer to avoid contact with them, is that true?”

“Well… they just have their own opinions, that’s all, Shepard. I do not want to cause trouble for anybody. And I’m more than happy to spend as much time as possible on my own. I’m not really good at interacting with people”

“I’m not going to force you to be around them, but if they step out of line, you let me know. And Liara…” Kate said as she placed her hand on her shoulder and spoke in a reassuring tone “Not everyone out there is your enemy. You have Garrus, Tali, Kaidan and you have me. You’re not alone here”

“Thank you, Shepard. It means a lot to me to hear you say that” Liara said as she tried to hide the slight blush that was appearing on her cheeks.

Kate stood up and moved to left the room. As the door opened, she turned around and said to Liara “Listen, I’m usually awake after-hours. If you’d like, we could have dinner together, we could talk and get to know more of each other”

"I would like that very much, Commander' Liara replied with a smile on her face.

"Good. Ping my omnitool when you're ready. See you later” Kate said as she left the storage room.
Chapter 11

July, 2187

8 Months after the End of the War

A single figure sat inside a semi destroyed bar in London that stood next to what had been one of the main avenues of the city before the war. The entire structure trembled as a caravan of dozens of vehicles, both civilian and military, passed outside as they moved through to help with the rebuilding of the city. The smell of fuel, smoke and fire permeated the air. London had been one of the first cities on Earth that had been declared pollution free early in the 22nd Century, as the discovery of element zero and the giant leaps technology took after the discovery of the Mars ruins had completely eliminated the need for fossil fuels. The war had returned the London environment to the days of the Industrial Revolution, as clouds of ash from the skyscrapers and other structures the Reapers had destroyed, mixed with the reappearance of vehicles dependant on gasoline and gasoil and the smoke from the thousands of fires that people lit up to warm themselves during the freezing nights made the atmosphere fill up with smog.

Sitting in one of the few intact stools that remained in the bar, Miranda Lawson drank a small cup of whisky. She savored the dry, sweet orangey taste of the beverage, enjoying it as much as she could, since she knew it was unlikely that she would find good, quality whisky again for some time. She had never been a big fan of alcohol, but lately, liquor had become her way of dealing with stress. “Looks like I picked a habit of the boss” she thought as she remembered how the Illusive Man used to drink like a fish, consuming several dozen bottles of all types of liquors every week. And here she was now, doing the same thing. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

She had been dismissed from an Alliance field hospital a couple of weeks earlier because the recovery process from her injuries had been fairly quickly. The doctors had called it surprising, Miranda knew that it was the result of her genes and cells being designed to be superior and more effective than that of the average person. Superior genes and medical treatment, however, could not fix the large vertical scar that went from her forehead all the way to her left cheek. A nurse had told her that if the cut had been a few millimeters deeper, she would have lost her eye. The scar would be with her for the rest of her life, but that didn't concern Miranda. The “war mark” as Shepard would call her own scars, made her feel… more human. As she traced it with her finger, “So much for perfection” crossed her mind. Yet, instead of feeling sadness or disappointment, she felt at peace.

It also gave her a serious look that mixed perfectly with her mysterious personality. As Jack, in her usual friendly and loving personality, had told her a few days ago: “Now you look like a whore who’s been through some shit”

Her eyes moved towards a television that hanged in a part of the wall that had not been reduced to rubble. The device was showing a report from the Alliance News Network, the only source of information that people on Earth had since the end of the war, because the Alliance High Command had decided not to reinstate other pre war news networks “to make sure that our citizens have access to reliable information and to avoid the dissemination of false reports and rumours that may harm the rebuilding process” Miranda knew what they really meant. “Our truth is the only truth, you shall accept it and not question it. You will see what we want you to see”. The News
Network was a propaganda tool.

The reporter on the vid spoke in an overly dramatic tone as images of firefights and explosions from Talat, the capital of Sur'Kesh, appeared on the screen. “... with the latest developments coming from Salarian space. Though the initial reports suggested that a major shakedown had occurred among the Salarian leadership, with suggestions that there may have been internal displacements and removals among the civilian government, we now have confirmation that a military coup has taken place. The move was led by a large part of the members of the Special Tasks Group, and was supported by a significant part of the armed forces. A spokesman of the newly formed “Emergency Transitional Committee” claimed that the Dalatrasses had failed in their sworn duty to protect the Salarian people during the war, and that the Committee promised a swift rebuilding of everything they had lost during the conflict, to ensure that the Salarians would be able to reclaim their rightful place in the Galaxy. Several Dalatrasses managed to avoid imprisonment after being evacuated to Mannovai by loyalist elements of the STG. They have called for citizens and the loyalist soldiers, airmen and sailors to oppose the criminals who have usurped power by any means necessary so that there may be a swift return to the civilian government. Geopolitical analysts fear that we may be witnessing the initial stages of a civil war.

Admiral Hans-Jurgen Hoffmann, the current head of the Alliance’s Third Fleet, claimed that the events on Salarian space are proof of why the rebuilding of the armed forces must be a priority for mankind. He said that Humanity must be ready to stand on its own to defend itself from any external aggression and that the Alliance would take any measures it considers necessary to make sure that Human Galactic interests are defended.

“So much for “the Galaxy United” Miranda thought before downing what was left of the drink in one shot.

She heard the sound of rocks and dirt being stepped on as footsteps became more audible, and they were drawing closer to her with each passing second.

Discreetly, and pretending she hadn't noticed-no normal human should have heard anything other than the rumble of the vehicles outside, but her enhanced auditory implants allowed her to pick up a wider range of sounds- she moved her hand towards the side of her belt, carefully unlocking the cloaked holster where she hid her M6-Carnifex. She knew that if things turned violent, she would almost certainly kill the person behind her, but it was likely that she would end up dead as well.

“Are you looking for the gatekeeper ? He no longer walks among us” Miranda said in a loud tone, anxiously waiting for a response.

The figure stopped a few meters away from Lawson, and after a few moments, he uttered in a confident tone: “Even if he fell, power will always find a place to rest upon”

Accepting the countersing, she signaled the figure to approach her.

She said “You replied too slowly. A few more seconds and I would have emptied a clip on you” as the man sat next to her

“My bad, I assumed that you haven't noticed me”

“Assumptions are dangerous, specially during these times” she replied as she passed a hand through her hair, removing the small pieces of concrete that had fallen on it from the holes in the roof “Is everything ready ?”

“Yes. We are free to go whenever you want. I recommend that we depart before he curfew starts”
After speaking, he turned on his omnitool and showed her a picture “This is some of the information we received from one of our agents in the Satellite rebuilding program”

The picture showed several places around Earth marked where it was believed that large pieces of the Citadel had fallen after the war. A few were in oceans while others were deep inland. Less than a dozen were in Alliance controlled territories. The vast majority were in the “no man's land” that large portions of Earth had turned to.

“Are our operatives already with the Alliance salvage teams that are working on this ?” she queried as she pointed towards the chunks of the Citadel that had fallen in the hands of the Alliance.

“Yes. Per your instructions we “vacated” several positions in the crews of the Alliance recovery teams and made sure that our people were chosen as substitutes. They should start sending us information soon”

“Good” she replied. After a few moments, she took a deep breath, and lowering her gaze, she asked “How is she ?”

“Still in the induced coma. She's in the shuttle, you can see her when we go there”

“Let's go now. Tell everyone to get everything set up in the space station. If we leave now what's our ETA ?” She asked as she and the man sat up and started to head outside.

“6 hours after hitting the Relay”

“Good. The sooner we leave the better”

As they left the building, Miranda looked towards the sky. The mangled remnants of what had once been the center of Galactic power, culture, politics and commerce-and one of the Reaper’s greatest weapons- lay clearly visible in the sky, hovering statically above Earth. Only the ring of the Presidium and the Citadel Tower remained relatively “intact”. The Wards, where over 98% of the inhabitants of the station used to live, where in different levels of destruction. 2 of them remained attached to the Presidium ring, another lay in several pieces next to the Citadel, and the other 3 were simply gone, destroyed during the final battle of the war. Their remains had rained over Earth in the days after the fight, and since they were made from ultra resistant materials that only the Reapers knew what they were, the race was on to get as much of those as possible.

However minimal the possibilities may be, the chance to gain a technological edge over its rivals was something that several factions were interested in.

Although they couldn't be seen from Earth, dozens of ships of all species were working round the clock, under the watchful eye of the Alliance dreadnoughts, to save what they could and to try to rebuild the Citadel as much as possible.

Lawson and the man walked out of sight, taking several abandoned backroads that led them towards the outskirts of the city. After encountering and boarding the shuttle, Miranda kneeled next to the medium sized medical pod that was inside it. The person inside it was hooked to several IV lines, her body was covered in bandages and she was breathing through a respirator. The doctors had told her that she would recover, and she was inclined to believe them. Compared to how she had been in the first weeks after the war, Oriana looked much better now, but she would remain in the induced coma until the full extent of her injuries could be detected and healed. Miranda had already poured vast financial and medical resources of the organization into her sister's recovery. She would spare no expenses expense to help and protect the only family she had left. Shortly after, Miranda stood up and sat in the copilot seat. The engines of the vehicle roared alive, and shortly after they left the homeworld of humanity, avoiding the Alliance patrols in orbit.
as they headed towards a destination in the edges of the Galaxy.

July, 2187

Near the former borders of the now non existent Russian Commonwealth and Chinese People's Federation.

Pei Li sat near the open door of a helicopter, the vehicle that was the grandfather of modern shuttles, watching the mountains that decorated the landscape as the vessel flew between them. He held a small transponder in his hand, and every few seconds he gave quick glances to the device to see if it had picked up a signal. Down below, a convoy of tanks, trucks and other vehicles traveled in hastily built roads under the clear sky.

The sound of the engines, propellers, and a song that played over the vehicle’s speakers from a CD player were the only noises that broke the silence of the valley.

“Would you please, for the love of God, turn on the radio? We've been listening to the same songs since we left the camp” someone shouted from the rear of the vehicle.

Li turned to look at the origin of the voice. It was a young soldier, no older than 17, carrying a gun that was bigger than him. This was probably his first patrol “Figures” he thought “Only someone that young would say something so stupid”

“We're not turning on the radio” the pilot replied in a cold, dismissive tone.

“Why the hell not ?” the soldier shouted at the top of his lungs, trying to sound intimidating over the rumble of the engines.

“Sir, could you explain to the fucking kid why we don't turn on the goddamn radio” the pilot asked Li.

He focused on the soldier's eyes, after clearing his throat, he began to speak in a threatening tone: “What's your name ?”

“Howard, sir. Thomas Howard” the soldier answered nervously.

“Listen, idiot, I know that you probably just learned to tie your shoelaces, and that you probably spent the War holed up in a warm, comfortable bunker with your mommy and daddy. But, most of us…” he said as he pointed towards the soldiers in the chopper and the large column of vehicles that traveled below “... weren't so lucky, and while you hid, we were out fighting. So let me ask you something, what happens when you turn on a light in the dark ?”

The soldier remained silent for a few minutes before answering: “It attracts insects towards it”

"That's right. Now during the war, a radio that was on was a light, and the insects it attracted were 2 kilometer long monstrosities from outer space that were very interested in either killing us or turning into a genetic paste. We learned to keep the radios off the hard way" he said as he focused on the horizon.

"I see. But the Reapers are dead now" the young soldier replied.
"But the Alliance is not, and they've got spotters checking the radio signals. They're still out there, looking for us. So unless you want to be the dumbass responsible for bringing enemy fighter bombers down on us, we keep the radio off. Understood?"

The soldier lowered his gaze, simply replying "Yes, sir" before turning his face away to try to hide his embarrassment.

After a few minutes, the device on Li’s hand started beeping.

“I've got a signal, but it appears to be bouncing off structures” he said to the pilots “What's the nearest town or village around here?”

The copilot turned on a datapad and started browsing through it. After a few moments he spoke: “Got it. Just one village around here, and it's 2 klicks to the east. Had a population of a thousand people before the war. Got flattened by Destroyers on the first week of the conflict. Satellites haven't picked anyone there since. There's no way people could sustain life there”

“Not humans no, but I’m not sure that our target is a human. Not anymore” he focused on the hills nearby as he spoke “Take us there now. Tell the convoy that were landing on a nearby village due to a small mechanical failure, and that we'll catch up with them in a few hours”

“Yes, Sir” the pilots answered in unison.

Several minutes later, their objective appeared in sight. The remnants of the small and tightly packed houses and small buildings were in the foothill of a mountain. As expected, not a single living being was seen on in the village.

Pie began shouting orders “Howard, take the top of the village. You, with me” he said to the copilot “We'll meet in the middle”

“What exactly are we looking for, sir?” Howard queried, as he had been brought here without any knowledge of their mission.

“A person. A very valuable person. Or her corpse. She is a female, red hair, face covered in bandages and has severe burns in the left side of her body. She also has several "unusual" scars. If she's alive and conscious, don't engage and don't let her see you. Hopefully, she'll be focused on the helicopter. Just ping us on the omnitool and we'll deal with her. If she's dead, then just signal us to retrieve the corpse. Understood?”

“Perfectly, sir”

The chopper dropped Thomas off in the north side and it then moved towards the lower side of the town. He began to move among what had once been a village full of life, full of people and stories. Now, it was just a big graveyard. From what the travelers and the occasional report that came from the extranet told, most cities and towns around the planet were like this. He had a hard time imagining the great cities of Earth being as eerily silent and dead as this place. He passed most of the houses by, not even bothering to look for anything valuable inside them since almost all of them were charred piles of rubble.

Eventually, he got to what seemed to had been a makeshift soccer field. Like the ones where I played outside Nottingham. He saw a semi deflated ball near a fallen log. As he approached it, he screamed as he saw a body behind it.

He remembered the description he had heard on the chopper. This person—or corpse—was it. “I found her” he shouted over the intercom of his omnitool as he rushed to her side and tried to find a
pulse. It was almost imperceptible, but her heart was still beating. As he propped her up, he noticed the small backpack that had been next to her. After a quick search, the only thing he found out of the ordinary was a small tattered book. He took it and hid it in his backpack just as Li and the chopper arrived.

As they carefully placed her in the helicopter, Li ordered with the pilot to tune the radio to a secure frequency.

“This is Operative 12. Target secured. Taking her to Outpost Echo”

He then turned to the pilot and said: “Tell the convoy we won't be rejoining them”

“Who is she?” Thomas queried his superior as he focused on the woman, tracking her vitals with his omnitools.

Pei turned and looked at him. The grin on his face made the scars on his cheeks stand out. “Death incarnate, my young friend. That’s who she is”

“‘Butcher of the Traverse’ it’s more known and it sounds better. ‘Death incarnate’ is a bit over dramatic, don’t you think?” a voice said, and they had to hold themselves tightly to avoid jumping from the shock. The woman they had just picked up was awake and talking.

“Where are you taking me?” she asked in an apathetic tone.

“An Alliance Medical facility. To make sure that you heal properly from your wounds” Li explained as he looked directly at Howard, silently instructing him to go along with the lie.

She stared at them with a blank expression on her face, her green eyes barely open “An Alliance facility? Good. What's been happening lately?”

“We’re won the war. The Reapers are dead” Thomas replied.

“Ha. I'm sure they will arrive someday, but the Council and the Alliance keep denying that they exist. Hell, a Reaper flew into the Citadel, attacked it and they still don't believe me. They're probably making their way from dark space as we speak”

"She's confused, probable memory loss due to trauma. From what I gather, she believes she's back in 2183" Li thought as he discreetly filled a small syringe with a chemical.

Katerina looked around the interior of the chopper, and with a confused expression, she queried the men inside about why were they flying a helicopter.

“You know the Colonies always tend to have slightly less advanced equipment and vehicles. We are still waiting for the shuttles, in the meantime, Alliance Command gave us this helicopters to patrol the colony” he answered in a reassuring tone. Make her feel safe and secure, keep her calm. Don't let her find out the truth.

Kate then moved her head carefully, trying not to harm her neck and looked directly at a shivering, pale Thomas “What’s the matter, kid? You look like you've seen a ghost”

He didn't reply. He was too busy sweating and shivering.

She then looked at the other man and asked “Listen, do you have a communicator at this facility? I need to contact Dr Liara T'Soni. Oh man, she’s gonna be so pissed that I haven’t written her in so long. Did you recover the rest of the crew after they launched in the evac shuttles? Most of the
crew managed to escape, I believe. We were out looking for Geth when a ship attacked us, I don't know what it was or..."

A small pinch on her neck made her jump. After a few seconds, the figures and the inside of the helicopter started to become blurry. She felt her heartbeat getting slower and slower, and her head suddenly felt extremely light.

“Oh yes, Commander” Li answered in an over friendly tone as he smiled “We recovered them all, and they’re being treated in the same facility we’re taking you. And you’ll see Dr T’Soni soon enough”

He then uttered 2 phrases that made her snap out of her stupor, made her realize she had been lied to, that these were no Alliance soldiers and that they weren’t taking her to an Alliance facility. Unfortunately, the drug in her blood stopped her from doing anything, and she was only able to heard the words that made her realize her mistake as her world slowly faded to black.

Don't worry, Commander. Everything is going to be fine.

I promise.
Chapter 12

Katerina woke up at the sound of voices. Not that she had been getting much sleep anyway, but what was left of her senses allowed her to realize she wasn't alone wherever they were keeping her.

She had been laying on what she assumed was a medical bed since they - whoever “they” were - had brought her to her current location. How long ago had that been? Days? Weeks? Months? She couldn’t tell. The number of drugs they had pumped into her had compromised her ability to track the time.

“How is she?” someone who Kate couldn’t see asked.

A shadowy figure appeared in front of her. She couldn’t distinguish any features from the individual besides the fact that he appeared to be human. But was he?

“Right now, you could put a Salarian and a Yahg in front of me and I wouldn’t be able to tell one from another” Shepard thought. She tried to smile, but her mouth didn’t even twitch. Whatever was currently coursing through her blood didn’t allowed her to move a single muscle in her body.

“Hell, I'm not even strapped or cuffed to the bed. I'm just doped out of my mind. A fairly common state for you, eh Shep?”

The “person” placed his or her hand on her left eyelid and forced it open. It then turned on a flashlight and shone it directly in front of it. The beam of light passed in front of her eyes a few times before it disappeared as the device was turned off.

“Well, she's alive, at least for now” a voice replied “The sedatives are working. But I'm a little concerned. She shouldn't be so... out of it”

“What do you mean?”

The 2 figures who were speaking moved directly to the front of the bed. Katerina tried to launch herself forward to kick them, maybe leave them knocked out long enough for her to grab their security codes or whatever they carried and escape. She tried to gather strength, trying to build enough impulse to throw a strong, powerful attack, but when she tried to hurl herself at them, the only response her body gave her was an almost imperceptible movement of the little finger on her right foot.

“The sedatives are strong and all, but they shouldn’t have left her like this. She's catatonic. Maybe Li gave her a little too much when he found her”

“It was necessary. Can you imagine what would have happened if she had become fully aware while she was on the chopper? The team was extremely lucky that she was so drowsy when they found her”

One of the individuals walked to her side, and with a forceful movement, it grabbed and turned Kate’s head to the left side.

“What have the scans showed?” it asked while it traced Shepard's glowing scars with its hand.

“What we already suspected. There's a lot of... “implants” in her. Not just below her skin, but fused directly into several major organs and part of the bone structure. Honestly, I'm a little taken aback. In all my years as a doctor I've never seen anything like this. This technology it's light years ahead of the implants and upgrades the Alliance gave to their soldiers before the war”
The other figure moved and lifted Kate’s left arm. Normally, that would have made her world turn black as every nerve in her left side flared up. Fortunately, the drugs didn’t let her feel anything.

“Look at this charred mess” it said in a shocked tone “How can anyone go on for months with a wound like this? It hasn’t been treated or anything. Any normal person would have already lost both the leg and the arm, and they would be dying from the gangrene”

“But our guest is anything but normal” the other one replied “Even before she became this synthetic mess, she was an N7, ‘The Saviour of Elysium’, ‘The Butcher of the Verge and the Traverse’, ‘the Hero of the Citadel’. Then she died and returned to life after 2 years. I don’t need to tell you everything she did after that”

In her mind, Shepard cringed as she heard all the titles she had been given in the “before death and resurrection” part of her military career. She had never liked being praised as a hero or role model. She especially hated the fact that she was the one getting constantly praised, while her sisters and brothers in arms who had died in battle were turned into mere statistics and never mentioned again. Everyone knew Commander Shepard, nobody cared about the soldiers who died while giving her covering fire, or the doctor that died after rushing to her side and giving her an emergency application of medigel, or the fellow Infiltrators who died after taking a bullet that was meant for her, just because she had been careless and exposed herself and hadn’t noticed the enemy sniper in the distance. Her fallen comrades were the real heroes, not her.

“Do you think she knows we’re here?” the figure asked.

“Maybe, or maybe not. Honestly, at this point I don’t know anymore about her state than you do”

A beep sounded next to Shepard’s head. She didn’t know what it was, but she assumed it was from some medical device.

“The VI is ready. Set it up, I’m plugging Shepard in”

“You sure about this?”

“Of course. Anything goes wrong, several officers have kill switches on standby. Although by now…” the figure said as it looked at Kate’s burnt left side “…I’m sure she would prefer to be dead”

“Set up complete. Put it in the log. We will perform 2 sessions per day. We’re going from the beginning to the very end, until we find the information that were looking for. After our sessions, medical specialists can come and study her implants”

The figure placed something on Katerina’s arms. She couldn’t see because her head wouldn’t turn, but she didn’t care.

“It is right. I would prefer to be dead. Again. Permanently, this time. Maybe, I could see everyone wherever it is we go after death. I would see all my friends from the N program, the soldiers who served with me in the Verge, the crew of the Normandy, including… Liara … Liara… I’m sorry”

“Hey, look” one of the figures said “She’s crying”

A single tear rolled down Shepard’s cheek. “I’m sorry, Liara. It’ll be with you soon”

In the depths of her mind, Katerina could heard fragments of Liara’s voice still in her head, bits and pieces of memories that still roamed in there.
“Don’t cry, my love. Don’t cry no more” one of Liara’s memories said, but unlike the voices of the figures outside, she didn’t hear them distorted. Liara spoke in that sweet and reassuring tone Kate loved, and she could hear her perfectly in her mind.

Another beep sounded in the room. Only that this time it became a series of beeps sounding one after the other, each one faster than the last.

“Heartbeat is raising. Sedatives aren’t calming her” one of the figures shouted.

“I'm plugging her now” the other replied “I'll put her to sleep”

A large monitor was placed directly in front of Kate's head. She didn't notice anything unusual until she saw that the screen was slowly but constantly becoming more and more brighter. After a few minutes, the device was fully charged, the light in it so powerful that Shepard’s tear filled eyes moved in several directions trying to avoid direct contact with it.

One of the individuals placed itself to the left of the monitor and pushed some buttons. Then, it moved the device even closer to Kate's face before speaking.

“Goodnight, Commander Shepard”

A flash of light crossed her eyes for a few seconds. After that, her world turned black.

Shepard was sitting in a table in the Mess, finishing some reports on several datapads as she waited for Liara. The area was empty, with one half of the crew sleeping and the other half deployed in their respective posts. Katerina loved the peace and quietness this late hours aboard the ship had. It allowed her to work outside her office calmly and to have the occasional chat with the members of her team who were awake at the time. These were also the hours where was supposed to be getting her eight hours of rest, but she hadn’t slept much or well for a long time.

Leaning back on her chair and with a glass of juice mixed with vodka on one hand, while she finished filling the customary reports she opened another window on one of the devices to check her messages. Most of them were interview requests, which she promptly deleted, and directors asking her permission to make documentaries about her, which she always denied. The hero worship thing most of these people had with her made her feel sick. Opening the new tab, she checked her private network where she received her messages from the Alliance.

As soon as the new window opened and she gave a quick glance at the screen, Shepard closed her eyes and let out an exasperated sigh.

“For fuck’s sake”

“You have 397 new messages” appeared on the top of the screen. Besides the usual “Remember to take you meds” messages from Karin, Shepard knew about what most of these messages were about. The fact that the most advanced frigate ever created by the Systems Alliance had several non human members aboard had ruffled some feathers with the Alliance brass. They had sent her messages and warnings regarding each alien she had on board, depending on the level of “risk” they gave to each. They were worried about, as they had told her, “the possibility that information and military secrets of the highest level regarding Alliance tactics, strategies and ship design may be leaked to elements and factions hostile to humanity in the Galaxy”. Kate didn't blame them for wanting to make sure that Human secrets were protected, but she knew her team, and she knew that
Alliance Command was severely overestimating the level of “risk” they posed to human interests. There hadn’t been a lot of complaints about Wrex. There was no unified Krogan Military High Command that might be interested in the tech specifications of the Normandy, and even if he tried to sold them to someone, Krogan Merchs were not seen as reliable sources of military tech. And Wrex wasn’t interested in any of that anyway. He had made it pretty clear that he was in this mission to take Saren down, and then go on his own way.

Garrus was almost not mentioned at all, given the fact that the Normandy had been co developed with the Turians. They knew everything there was to know about the ship.

Tali had been cause for major concern among the Alliance brass. Katerina had received at least 30 warnings to keep the Quarian away from key systems and engines, and, if possible, to remove her from the ship at the first available opportunity. Kate had promptly deleted all those messages. Tali was a friend, a valuable team member and she had earned the trust of most of the crew. Even Ashley had grown to like her.

But what had really created this tsunami of emails that currently swarmed her inbox was Liara. After it became clear that Liara was staying in the ship for the long run, a large part of the crew had promptly reported this to the brass. And the Alliance was throwing the hissy fit they always did when it came to the Asari.

Since first contact, human galactic relations with the Asari republics appeared friendly, at least on the surface. But in truth, both races were equally distrusting of the other. Several incidents of valuable political, economic and military information about the Alliance finding its way to Asari archives after the “seduction” of several important human figures and the several reports of technology being stolen from Asari space only to appear in the hands of the Alliance, together with the unconfirmed rumours of Asari being kidnapped and experimented on by humans to further understand biotics had made both races extremely wary of each other. High ranking operatives like Katerina were outright forbidden from having any sort of fraternization with Asari. One of the first things that had been drilled into Shepard’s mind since she was merely a recruit in N school was “Do not trust the Asari”

As Katerina deleted all the messages, she heard the hiss of the infirmary door. Shortly after, Liara peeked her head out, looking nervously in every direction to make sure that there weren't any crew members around.

Katerina signaled her with her hand, and after Liara saw her, she hurriedly walked towards the table and sat down.

“Relax, Liara. No nasty humans around here to harass you now” Kate said in a playful tone and with a smile on her face.

Liara’s eyes widened and a panicked expression set on her face “Oh no, Commander, I never meant to imply that… I have no ill will towards humans, it's just that the attitude of some of the members of your crew fits the stereotypes that my people have about humanity… Oh, Goddess, that's so offensive…” The Asari rubbed her head nervously “I don't…”

Shepard gave her a slight pat on the shoulder “It’s ok, Liara. We all have our biases and preconceptions. And some of those stereotypes you mentioned are fairly accurate. We have more than our fair share of bad apples” Kate claimed as she stood up and walked towards the kitchen. Too many bad apples. And I’m among the worst “What do you want to eat, Liara ?”

“Shepard, please. You don't have to act as my caretaker. I'm capable of…”
“First, I told you to please avoid calling me Shepard all the time if you can. Second, I'm not saying that you're incapable of feeding yourself, it's just that you seem “unwilling” to feed yourself, and until I'm sure that you're getting the amount of food you need each day, you're stuck with this caretaker. Now, what do you want to eat?”

Looking slightly embarrassed, Liara queried Kate “What do you have available?”

Letting out a short laugh, Shepard turns around and starts browsing the monitor next to the food compartments “I don't think you're going to know what most of these foods are, but I'll tell them to you anyway. We have rice that tastes like plastic, we have vegetables that taste like plastic, we have vat grown meat and chicken that don't taste like anything, we have pasta, beans and several other dozen types of meals that vary between the plastic and tasteless flavors” Walking towards the other monitor, Shepard continued “We have some cereal that tastes OK but the milk isn't that good, and for drinks we have water and several types of juices and beverages that are basically water with colorant and lots of sugar” Turning around to face Liara, Shepard clapped her hands and grinned “So, what can I get you?”

The Asari smiled “I guess I'll have whatever you’re having”

After settling for some meat, rice and juice, Shepard picked up her datapad and placed it on the table.

“Liara, if you don't mind, I've got to ask you a few questions to know a little bit more about yourself. It's a common procedure with new team members, and I've already done it with Tali, Wrex and Garrus, but the Alliance is being extremely ‘pushy’ about you specifically” Kate explained as she picked and swallowed a chunk of meat “They want to make sure that you're not going to ‘coerce us’ into stealing the Normandy and defecting to Thessia. That was a joke by the way”

Liara paused eating for a few moments to answer “Of course. And there's no problem at all, Kate. It's completely understandable that they would feel threatened by my presence on the ship, given the current state of the political relations of our peoples”

“Yeah, I hate the political bullshit. You have no idea in how much red tape I'm swimming right now. The Alliance is ready to string me up from the nearest lamppost for having the ‘audacity of bringing non humans aboard without asking for their permission’ “

“Why would they string you up from a lamppost ? I don't understand. I'm not quite sure what a lamppost is either”

“It's just a... an old human expression, and a lamppost is…” Kate shaked her head “Ah, nevermind. Let's just get started, shall we ?”

“Of course”

“So, when and where were you born, Liara ?” Kate asked as leaned back into the chair.

“Armali, on Thessia in 2077”

“2077. Wow. That's one thing that still amazes me about you Asari” Shepard said as she sipped from her glass “Living for over a thousand years is something I have a hard time wrapping my head around”

“It is one of the main distinguishing characteristic about our species. Some see it as a blessing, and that we should be thankful for having such a long lifespan” Liara lowered her gaze, her face
suddenly shadowed by a sad expression “But I'm not so sure that witnessing so many deaths, watching so many friends, loved ones, people that you care about leave this life and ascend to the afterlife before you, is something I'm thankful for”

Closing her eyes, Liara let out a deep breath as she continued “For example, let's assume, and I pray to the Goddess that we do, that we complete our mission and get to live the rest of our lives in peace. Kaidan, Garrus, Tali, Karin, Wrex and… and you are the only friends I've made in the past 30 years. I'll have to see you all depart from this plain of existence long before is my time to go, and that's something… Oh, Goddess, I must be ruining your meal with all these depressing thoughts. I apologize, Kate”

Katerina shook her head “Not at all, Liara. Yes it's sad to think about it but this is the first time I've ever got to hear about an Asari’s perspective on life and loss. You may not have much experience in dealing with humans, but I don't got much experience in dealing with Asari either”

Letting out a short laugh, Liara answered “Well, it seems that we are both equally inexperienced and uneducated about each other's peoples”

“We can fix that. Who knows how long we'll be after Saren ? I say that we'll get plenty of time to talk and find out more about our cultures and each other. If you want to, of course”

Liara lifted her gaze, and her crystal blue eyes met Shepard’s. The green in her eyes was so impressive, so enticing that for a few moments, the Asari silently contemplated them for a few moments. Goddess, why do I find her so… captivating. Snapping out of her daze, Liara finally replied in a warm tone “I would like that, Kate. Very much. Anyways, as I was saying, loss is an inescapable part of an Asari’s life, and we are taught from a young age to accept it, but it's something I haven't got used to. I don't think I'll ever get used to it”

She’s got some pretty blue eyes. I haven't seen an Asari with eyes like that before. Not that I’ve looked at too many Asari before anyway, and when I did, I wasn't precisely looking at their eyes” Shepard briefly thought before answering “I completely understand that” Katerina said replied before swallowing a spoonful of rice “I've been in the Alliance Military for 12 years now. Loss is something that one should accept in a line of work such as mine, but I just can't. Specially when soldiers died under my command. I think it’s something that I’ll never get used to either”

“Yes. I remember sensing your pain and distress when that young soldier died on Eden Prime. We share that dismal way of thinking, unfortunately” the Asari replied.

“Yes we do. Now, Liara, do you have any form of military experience, or have you interacted with an intelligence service of the Asari republics ?” Shepard lowered the datapad momentarily as she softly scratched the scar above her nose “This questions are fucking stupid, Liara, I’m sorry that you even have to hear them”

“It’s alright, Kate” Liara answered in a calm tone “To the first question, I can use a gun, albeit very clumsily. The commandos back home always tried to get me to learn to use weapons properly, but I was never too fond of them, or violence for that matter. That was until Saren decided that it was better to see me dead, of course. Now I'll have to learn whether I like it or not”

“Well, I was gonna mention that because we should be arriving to Feros in 2 days, that I plan to spend them training and getting the team ready. Specially you, Liara”

“Of course, Shepard” Specially me ? That means she… No, no, she will probably order one of the team members to train me. The Commander of the ship wouldn’t train me herself, right ?” And to your second question, no I’ve never had any contact with any of the intelligence services of my
people, neither in Armali nor in Serrice, where I studied”

“Good” Shepard said as she tapped the screen a few times before turning off the datapad “The interrogation is over, doctor”

Liara looked at Kate with a confused expression “That’s it ? Honestly, I was expecting far more questions”

Shepard downed the rest of the contents of her glass in one swoop and laughed “Oh, there were a lot more, believe me. If I had asked you all of them, we would be landing in Feros by the time we finished. I just sent them the ones that I thought were the most important” Picking her and Liara’s empty food trays and taking them to the dishwasher, she said “If the Admirals don’t like it, well... fuck’em”

“You’re not very fond of your superiors in the Alliance, are you Kate ?” Liara said as she laughed.

“Most of them are just a bunch of paper pushers who haven’t seen any real action, and they have the gall to come to my face and tell me how I should do my job or who I can or can not have on my ship. Some of them, like Admiral Hackett and a few others, have fully earned my respect. They have impressive service records and know about what they’re talking about, but they’re in the minority among the Alliance brass”

Liara smiled as she answered her “I see. Perhaps with your impressive service record, you’ll get to be an Admiral yourself someday. And you will be able to change what you don’t like about the Alliance Command” The smile quickly faded from Liara’s face as she realized what she had just said. “ Oh Goddess. I mentioned her service record. She’ll realize that I looked into her past. Oh, no, no, no”

Shepard stopped washing the trays as she heard Liara speak. “My impressive service record. She must have looked into my history on the extranet. That’s why she was watching that vid about one of my combat operations” Letting out a deep breath, several thoughts crossed Kate’s mind “I just hope she didn’t saw the bad parts. If she found out about what I did... she’ll be terrified of me, disgusted, or both. I don’t want to lose another friend”

For a few brief seconds, images flashed in her mind. Images of her past. Images she hoped she would never have to see again, but that she knew that they would haunt her for as long as she lived.

As a small but ever increasing headache began to make itself felt, Shepard clench her fists and teeth and began to breath deeply. This is why you should take your meds, dumbass. Karin didn't give them to you just to screw around. You take the pills or you begin to flip out, you stupid fuck.

Liara, still sitting, noticed how Kate had stopped moving and began to clench her fists. Worried, she stood up and walked cautiously towards her “Kate, are you Ok ?” She must be furious that I looked into her past. Oh Liara, what have you done ?

Momentarily snapping out of her stupor, Shepard turned around and faced Liara. Smiling as best she could, she spoke “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. Just remembering some... things. About the Admiral stuff, it would be cool to be remembered as ‘Admiral Shepard’ but I bump heads too often with the Alliance Admirals, so I don’t think that’s gonna happen”

Closing her eyes again, Shepard remained silent for a few moments, feeling very uncomfortable “Hey Liara, listen, I gotta do some stuff... some stuff in my cabin, so I should be going, if that’s OK with you”
Liara nodded “Of course, Kate. But… are you sure you are fine?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. It’s just the tiredness and the… the urgency about the stuff I got to do bothers me a little, that’s all” Flashing a quick smile towards the Asari, Shepard spoke as she began to walk back to her cabin “See you tomorrow, Liara. Remember to wake up early for the training. Good night”

“Good night to you too, Shepard” Liara replied as she began to walk towards the infirmary. *Well done, Liara T’Soni. You made her feel so uncomfortable she left almost sprinting back to her cabin. Perhaps she just felt insulted that I looked into her past. Goddess, why do I seem unable to have a normal conversation with people before turning everything into a big mess.*

Entering her cabin and locking the door, Shepard quickly opened all the drawers on the desk. Not remembering where she had left the pills, and with the throbbing headache in her head increasing in intensity, she hurriedly began to throw the contents of the drawers on the floor.

After a few seconds, she spotted the small container that had the capsules that Karin had given her. Opening it in a rush, she opened it and placed several of them in her hand, swallowing all of them shortly after with the contents of one of the opened small bottles of liquor she had on the top of her desk.

Feeling her heartbeat slowing down, she threw herself on top of the bed. As the pills anesthetics began to make effect, Shepard began to relax, and began to process the events of a few minutes ago, minutes that had happened in a flash to her

“Ah, shit. Liara must be feeling like crap right now. I must have insulted her in all the possible ways Asari can get insulted with my behavior. Shit”

As her eyes closed and she began to drift to sleep, a final thought crossed Shepard’s mind.

“God, I’m such a fucking mess”
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

First of all, I wanted to thank a good friend of mine (yes, you, you know who you are) for basically "kicking my ass" and getting me motivated to continue updating this story.

I have rewritten some minor stuff in the previous chapters. Nothing vital to the plot, but I wanted to let you all know.

And finally, I wanted to thank everyone of you for reading this story, and I hope you enjoy it.

The door of the storage room opened, and Liara, still yawning and stretching, walked into the infirmary.

“Good morning, Karin”

“Good morning, Liara, though by Earth hours, it is almost midday. Had a fun time last night with Shepard?” Karin said as she brought a tray full of food and a drink and placed it in the desk next to the Asari.

Lowering her gaze towards the floor, Liara replied in a weak, almost inaudible tone “Yes, it was… fun”

“As fun as a kick from a mule, by the looks of it. Are you OK, Liara? Did something happen?” Karin queried, noticing the mixture of sadness and embarrassment on the Asari’s face.

The Asari let out a deep sigh. Lifting her gaze and meeting Karin’s eyes, she answered “I… I think I offended her, Karin”

“I have a hard time picturing you offending someone, especially someone you care about. What did you do that makes you so sure that you did that?”

“I… Before we had dinner, I looked into her history. A mere overview of where she was born and details of her military career” Liara explained as she scratched the back of her neck.

“Nothing wrong with that. I imagine that most of the crew has done the same at one point. They all want to find out if the stories about Shepard are true”

“But I'm sure they haven't done what I did” Liara replied “We were eating, and it was all going well. She was laughing and I was laughing, and we talked about several topics, but then she complained about the Alliance Admiralty, and I said that she could one day become an Admiral herself because of her…”

“You mentioned her service record, didn't you?” Karin interrupted her, having already understood what had happened.

“Yes, then she became… altered, uncomfortable and excused herself back to her cabin in a rush.”
I’m assuming she got offended that I researched her past and…”

Karin stood up and patted her shoulder “Kate doesn’t like talking about her past, that’s all. Unless she brings it up, it’s best not to mention it, darling. And if she flipped out like that…” Chakwas closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose “it means she hasn’t been taking her meds. Oh, bloody hell. Shepard, you big, dumb, stubborn woman”

“Is Kate medicated? Why?” Liara asked, the concern and worry clearly evident both in her face and voice.

Karin let out a deep sigh “I’m going to tell you, but don't bring it up to Katerina. Ever. Understood?”

“Katerina?” Liara asked with a confused look.

“Yeah, that's her real name. She didn't tell you?”

“No, she did not”

“Oh, Christ. There I go with my big mouth again” Karin replied as she let out a short laugh “If she doesn't tell it to you, then don't call her by it either. She only tells it to people she really trusts. Which are basically Kaidan, Captain Anderson and me”

“I understand” There you have it, Liara. Another potential tool for you to embarrass yourself even more.

“So, people who have been through some really bad experiences in life, like for example, soldiers who have seen a lot of action, they develop a ‘mental disorder’ of sorts. We humans call it ‘Post Traumatic Stress Disorder’ or PTSD, to make it short”

“Ok” Liara’s mind was focused on Karin, and she listened to what the Doctor was saying, but in the back of her mind her scientific curiosity was already peaking, and she made several mental notes to herself to find out as much as possible about this disorder from which Kate apparently suffered.

“This disorder manifests itself in several ways, sometimes through severe and very intense nightmares that often lead to sleep deprivation, sudden tensing of the muscles, uncontrollable shaking, the feeling that they’re constantly about to be attacked, among others. It varies from person to person, and it can range from very mild to extremely severe”

“And Katerina suffers from this disorder? How bad is her case?” Liara queried the Doctor.

“Yes, this is what Katerina has, among other things. And about the severity of her case…” Karin lowered her gaze towards the floor “…Katerina is one of the worst cases I have ever seen”

“Goddess” Liara replied, a worried expression set on her face.

“The Ptsd she has from all the crap she has done and seen on her military career, specially the Blitz and her time in the Wolfpacks, mixed with all the unresolved traumas she must have from her childhood, which i have no knowledge about, and a total lack of self care are creating a perfect time bomb in her mind. I'm afraid it's only a matter of time before it goes off”

The Asari’s face flared with outrage “What!? And why isn't anyone helping her? Why aren't you or the other Alliance psychiatrists working with her? Are you all waiting for her to go insane to…”
"Liara" Karin interrupted her "I've known Kate for over 7 years now. I was part of the medical team that found and recovered what was left of her on Elysium, a person that was merely breathing and already had one foot in the grave. I've been taking care of her, or trying to at least, ever since" Karin let out an exasperated sigh as she scratched her forehead in frustration "I have moved heaven and earth for her. Kaidan and Captain Anderson assisted me in our efforts to help her. I've signed her onto recovery programs, I've tried to talk to her, I've tried to get her help outside of the Alliance. And nothing has worked. You know why ?" Chakwas leaned back in her chair and pointed in the direction of Shepard's cabin "Because she doesn't want to be helped. She thinks that by drinking like a Krogan every day and by having carefree sex while on shore leave, that she's dealing with her issues. She thinks that she can handle it on her own, and if anyone tries to lend her a hand, all we get is the typical 'I'm fine' 'I'm fine' The day Katerina Shepard says that she's not fine, that means the end of the world is coming. But it's also depressing in a way you know ? It's like watching a person walking towards a cliff. You try by all means to get them to turn back, you shout at them, you pull them, you try to get them to change their path…"

"But it's like fighting against sea currents, isn't it ?" Liara spoke, making sure that the anger and pain she was feeling didn't appear on her voice "For all the good it might do, you might as well not try at all"

Karin nodded "A depressing but accurate analogy, child. I got tired of trying to pull her away from the edge of the cliff. And the day she takes the jump and her mind finally snaps, we are all going to suffer for it"

Before Liara could answer, Karin stood up and picked up the food tray that rested on the desk "But enough with the depressing ramblings. Why don't you go have breakfast with her ? She's already up but she hasn't eaten, as usual. And try to get her to talk. Who knows, maybe all she needs is a friend that she can vent to"

"I'll do my best, Karin" Liara replied with a smile as she stood up and exited the infirmary, with several thoughts drifting through her mind, remembering in particular something that her mother had told her once.

Sometimes all we need is a friendly someone that listens to our griefs and sorrows.

Sometimes we just need to be reminded that we're cared for.

Sometimes… Sometimes we just need to know that we are loved.

"48… 49… 50"

Katerina stretched her arms and dropped to the floor, having finished her pushup set. Sweat soaked her face and body. The sweat darkened even more the black tank top she wore. Her heart beat rang in her ears, and she sat with her eyes closed, inhaling and exhaling deeply for a few moments, trying to relax her heartbeat before repeating the routine.

After taking a quick sip from a nearby water bottle, she began to stretch her arms and fingers. She felt a slight pain as she performed the movements, but she ignored it as she always did. With only her thoughts to keep her company, she laid down and continued doing the routine as her mind began to think about the past.
Katerina fell face down on the mud, her screams drowned by the wet earth that had entered her mouth. She spat it out, but the awful taste remained all over her tongue and palate. She grabbed her swollen ankle with one hand, caressing it as softly she could over her soaked sock, as if that could somehow reduce the pain. With the other hand she cleaned the dirt from her eyes and the rest of head. For once the heavy and merciless rain that fell all over her helped her, making it easier to wash away the filth.

Less than a minute had passed when a modified army transport vehicle pulled up next to her. The sound of the engine was clearly distinguishable from the thunders that rang in the sky above. The door lifted to reveal the training officer inside.

Kate felt as the heat from the vehicle’s calefaction washed over her, helping her forget the blistering cold she was feeling for a few brief but sweet moments. She wanted to do nothing more but throw herself inside the vehicle and return to the base, where she could get patched up in the medbay and return to the barracks, where a blanket and a warm bed awaited her. But she knew that the officer hadn’t come to give her a lift precisely.

“Taking a break, Shepard ? Got a little tired, needed to catch your breath ?” the woman asked in a mocking tone and with a perverse grin on her face.

“I think I... I sprained my ankle, ma’am” Shepard answered, doing her best to prevent the pain she felt from appearing in her voice.

“I see” the woman replied, watching as the wind violently shook the palm trees around them “So why did you stop ?”

“Ma’am ?” Katerina replied, with a confused look on her face “I said that I sprained my ankle”

“And according to my log here, your objective is 2 km ahead, on the top of that hill. So, I ask you again, Private, why the fuck did you stop ?”

“I cannot stand up, ma’am. I cannot walk. My feet feels like it's about to fall off” Shepard shouted, trying to make herself heard over the sounds of the wind and the rain.

The officer's attitude remain the same, as if she hadn't heard what Shepard said or because she didn't care. Kate knew which of those was most likely.

““I think you just need some motivation, Shepard” the woman said as she paced around the injured Private “Let me give you some” Clearing her throat, the officer pointed towards the hill on the distance “On the top of that hill there's a big fat stash of booze and red sand, just waiting for your alcoholic and drug addicted ass to get there to drink and sneeze it all. Doesn’t that excite you, Shepard ?”

“Go to hell” was the only reply Kate gave her.

“Let me think of another one. Hmm, let’s see… Oh, oh, I got it. This one's really good. You're gonna love it“ the woman’s face and voice dripped happiness. Pointing once more towards the hill, the woman uttered a phrase in the most condescending tone that Kate had ever heard anyone use.

“On the top of that hill, sitting above the stash of booze and drugs, are 2 loving parents, I hear they are really nice. They’re called mamma and poppa Shep”

The officer struggled to hide her fear when she noticed the stare that Kate was giving her. The private’s fist were clenched and a vein was throbbing in her neck, the pain in the ankle drowned
out by the rage she was feeling.

“They are waiting for you to get there so that they can explain why they left their precious little baby daughter inside a stinking, disgusting, piece of shit dumpster. If that doesn't motivate you…”

Katerina lurched forward, trying her best to grab the woman by the neck. The officer took a simple step back and watch as the soldier slammed face down into the ground once more.

“So predictable. Like a wild animal, you just have to poke them and wait for a reaction. Now, it seemed to me that you just tried to assault a superior officer”

As Shepard struggled to lift herself from the dirt, the woman walked behind her and spoke “That could potentially end your young military career if it became known. But I'm not going to report you. There's potential in you, Shepard, we just need to develop it. However…” the woman placed her feet over Kate's swollen ankle and pressed, ignoring Shepard’s cries of pain “I'll give you a little...reprimand, to make sure you don't do anything like that again”

The pressure in her ankle disappeared.

“Maybe it's just a note in the service file” Katerina thought “A reduction of salary or something. She wouldn't…”

Her vision went blank and her thoughts were interrupted as the officer slammed her foot against Kate's ankle.

The thunder above drowned her screams.

The buzzing sound that came from the door, meaning that someone was requesting permission to come in, made her jump.

Standing up, she shared her head and rapidly walked to the door, giving it a slight side punch to the center.

The door hissed opened to reveal Liara standing there, carrying and carefully looking at the 2 food trays and the 2 glasses on them.

“Good Morning, Kate. Karin told me that you were awake but that you hadn't eaten, so I thought that we could…”

As Liara lifted her gaze, she froze as she stared at Shepard. Her eyes gave quick and furtive glances at her body.

Oh Goddess, her arms are so… tonified and... her legs and... and her face. She has so many scars. What's the story behind each of them ? How many stories do you have to tell ? What do the tattoos on your arms mean ? And her red hair, tied up in, how far does it go... and her chest…”

“Good Morning to you too. Ehrm… You Ok, Liara ?” Worried by the dumbfounded expression on Liara's face, Katerina placed a hand on her shoulder.

Liara clenched the toes in her feet the moment she felt Shepard's touch. Please don't move your hand… No, no, no, behave. You're acting like a fool. Shaking her head and snapping out of her stupor, she managed to speak again “Yes, yes, I'm fine. I just… I just lost myself in my thoughts for a few moments, that's all. Karin told me you hadn't eaten, so I thought we could have
'breakfast', I think that's how you humans call it, together before going down to the storage area. Chief Williams and the most of the team are already there practicing.”

“Yeah, sure” Shepard replied “I lost track of time working out. Forgot I haven't eaten. Come, let's go to the Mess”

As they walked to the tables, several thoughts drifted in Shepard's mind. Was she … She was totally checking me out, wasn't she? She froze while looking at me so… Oh, God do I smell bad? Oh fuck, that's probably why she reacted like that. And maybe I'm just too desperate for someone to look at me… to look at me like that, and I'm just seeing what I want to see... You just need to get laid, Shepard. ASAP.

Sitting down, the hunger that Shepard had been repressing became evident, as she devoured most of the contents of the tray in less than 2 minutes.

“Looks like I’m the one with the role of caretaker” Liara said with a laugh “You ate like there was no tomorrow”

“Yeah, I should have eaten a couple of hours ago. I said “I’ll do a quick set of pushups and I’ll go eat”, but I got carried away. Got stuck… thinking”

“Kate…” the Asari spoke in the most confident tone she could muster “If you ever need to talk to someone, or as you humans say, ‘vent’, I want you to know you can come to me, OK?” That actually came out good. Managed to say a full phrase without embarrassing myself. Making progress developing those social interaction skills, Liara.

“That’s… very kind of you, Liara. Thank you” Shepard replied with a smile “The same goes for you. Ever need to ‘vent’ to anyone, you can talk to me. And, listen…” Shepard paused for a moment, taking a deep breath before continuing “I wanted to apologize about last night”

“You don’t have to, Shepard. It was my mistake. It was rude and inappropriate of me to mention that topic. I apologize to you”

“No, you're the one that doesn't have to apologize” Shepard replied in a firm tone “I was the one whose behavior was rude and inappropriate, rushing to my cabin and leaving you alone like that. I apologize”

“Shepard, you don't have to…”

“Just say that I'm forgiven and we'll close the topic. How about that? Help me clear my guilty conscience a little”

Liara smiled at Shepard. “Fine, but only if you accept my apologies first”

“What?”

“Or we could just stay here all day arguing over whose behavior was the rudest”

“Fine. You are forgiven, Liara T'Soni” Shepard spoke in a decisive voice.

“And you are forgiven too, Kate Shepard”

“That wasn't so hard now, was it?” They both chuckled as they stood up and placed the trays on
the kitchen sink and started to move in the direction of the elevator.

Katerina patted Liara's shoulder “Let's go, Doctor. Time to show you how to kick some ass” Don't sugarcoat it. Train her how to kill, that's what you're going to do, Shepard.

As they left the Mess, they didn't saw as a pair of crewmen who were standing on the opposite side of the room turned off their omni tools.

“Did you got the vid ?”

“Yes. Both of them are clearly visible and should be easily picked up by any advanced facial recognition system”

“Transmit it back to HQ. The Intelligence department is gonna love this shit”

“And then, we you spot your enemy, you shoot as you rush into him” Wrex mimicked a running motion “You should also scream, to put the fear in them”

Tali shook her head “Yeah… that might work for you, but I don't think that tactic would be precisely ‘useful’ for me”

“Why not ? I have been using it for centuries, and it hasn't failed me once”

“Because I'm not a 200 kilo hulking, oversized Krogan, for starters. You may be able to swallow dozens of bullets as you ‘rush and shoot’, but most of us tend to die it we try that”

The Krogan rolled his eyes and let out an exasperated sigh “Weaklings, all of you”

“Is Wrex bothering you, Tali ?” Garrus said as he approached them.

“No, Garrus, it's fine, really” Tali spoke as she placed herself between him and Wrex “Our Krogan friend here was just giving some rather useless shotgun tactics”

“Useless for frail pushovers only” Wrex replied.

“What did you call her ?” Garrus spoke in a threatening tone as he leveled his eyes with the Krogan’s.

“Garrus, please…” Tali begged as she tried to softly push him away.

“You planning to do something… violent, Turian ?” Wrex moved closer to the Turian.

“Maybe I am… Krogan” Garrus replied, his face now mere inches away from Wrex’s.

“Keelah, stop it you two” Tali said as she shoved Garrus away, knowing that she would be unable to even move Wrex of she tried.

The sound of the safety of an assault rifle being lowered made the three of them pause, their instincts reacting to the potential threat.

“Are these two idiots bothering you, Tali ?” Ashley queried as she approached the trio, an M8 Avenger resting on her hands.
“No, Ashley. It's fine, really” Tali replied “We just had a… a minor disagreement, that's all”

“Good thing you're here to defend your mate, Tali. Who knows what he'll do without you”

Tali turned and faced him, the outrage on her eyes was evident even through the helmet “He's not my…”

“Show her some respect, 'Krogan’ “ Garrus replied in a furious tone.

“Alright, get away from each other. The 3 of you, now” Ashley said in a commanding tone.

“You're gonna need more than a rifle to get me to obey you, Williams” Wrex retorted.

“Maybe a couple dozen slugs in your brain would help you understand your situation better, Wrex”

“Give it your best ‘shot’, human”

Suddenly, all of them found themselves trapped in an stasis field. Unable to move, they were only able to turn their heads enough to see Kaidan enveloped in biotic waves.

“Normally, I wouldn't do this, but my implants gave me a bad night. I don't have patience for this bullshit today”

“Neither do I” Katerina’s voice was loud enough to be heard in the entirety of the lower deck “Can someone explain me what the fuck is going on here ?” Actually… don’t. I think that it's the same bullshit that's always happening with you” Katerina took hurried steps towards the group, her fists clench and fury evident on her voice and expression. Liara followed nervously behind. As they reached the group and Katerina let out all the fury she had inside as she shouted at them, Liara placed herself beside Kaidan.

“Do you need assistance with the Biotic field ?”

Kaidan gave her a surprised look “You think you can handle it, Liara ?”

“I think so… I mean, I haven't tried it in some time, but I think I can”

“Ok, then. Remember, breathe deeply and concentrate on your target. Don't push forward or backward, you don't want to throw or pull them. Keep your hand steady and…”

The Biotic wave that flowed out of the Asari’s quickly joined with the field summoned by Kaidan, the energy pulses mixing and intertwining with each other.

“Impressive, Liara. Not feeling too much pressure on your head or any abnormal pain in your arms ?”

“A slight discomfort on the head, as it usually happens when I do this, but otherwise I'm perfectly fine” Giving a quick glance at Kate, who was still berating and screaming at her trapped teammates, Liara asked “Does she always… scream so much when she's angry ?”

Kaidan let out a short laugh “Oh, no, right now she's not angry, she's just annoyed that our fellow teammates seem unable to coexist under the same roof… or hull. When she's truly angry, you'll know. Best thing to do when that happens is to hide”

“Is her anger that bad ?”

“It's worse than you think. Now, think you can handle the field on your own, Liara ?” Kaidan
queried.

“I… I think so, yes” Liara replied nervously.

“Focus, concentrate all your attention into the target. If you feel a sudden spike of pain, don't continue to hold them, just let them go to avoid getting some nasty head injuries. Ready ?” The Asari nodded. Kaidan’s biotic energy disappeared as he lowered his hands and took a few steps back.

With the full pressure of the field now relying on her, Liara placed one knee on the floor as she felt the tension beginning to build up throughout her body. The Biotic pulses made sparks fly when they touched the metallic ground. Liara closed her eyes, and for a moment, time faded and Liara ignored all the noises around her, her mind completely centered on her target.

Katerina didn't know for how long she stood there, just shouting and screaming. The situation of hostility in which she had found her team had given her an outlet to just let out all the frustration and anger she felt within. As she paused for a moment to catch her breath, she turned and saw Liara holding the stasis field.

She had seen plenty biotic displays both before and after joining the military, but always done by humans. More often than not she had found herself on the receiving end of biotic attacks, and she thought that they were among the most painful things one could go through. Seeing Liara made her wonder if she could even survive an attack launched by her. Probably not.

If she had been asked to define “raw power”, the first thing that would come to her mind would have been Liara's biotics. The waves of energy enveloped her, the blue glow emanating from her body gave her an unnatural, almost mystical look, and the pulses that flowed both towards the stasis field and the ones that fell on the ground looked extremely dangerous, and at the same time, so stable, so… peaceful.

“What would it feel to touch them ?” Katerina thought “To feel that energy when it's not being used to harm, to let it envelope and flow over you and just... let go ?”

As she looked at Liara's face, panic suddenly overtook her as she noticed a small stream of purple blood dripping from the Asari’s nose.

Moving hurriedly to her side, but afraid to touch her, Kate leaned forward as much as she could and whispered in the most reassuring and calming tone she could use near the cavity that functioned as the Asari auditory organ.

“Liara, you're doing an excellent job, but your pushing yourself too hard. You're hurting yourself. Please, just stop, let them go and… relax”

The Asari listened to Shepard’s words, her eyes still closed “She says I'm doing fine. Maybe… Maybe I'm impressing her. If I just hold it a little longer…” Her thoughts stopped as she felt the pressure continuing to grow in her head, the pain increasing with it.

Determined to continue, Liara ignored it as best she could.

“You don't have to prove anything to anyone, Liara. We all know how valuable you are and how much potential you have. Please, I… I don't want to see you get hurt”
The pleading tone in which Shepard spoke made Liara open her eyes, lifting her gaze to stare directly at Shepard. “Please, Liara” Shepard said again.

The field dissipated, and everyone in it fell to the ground with a loud thud. Liara struggled to stood up, feeling light headed and dizzy. She took a single step before she fell forward, directly into Kate's arms.

Liara rested her head on Shepard’s shoulder breathing heavily as she tried to relax her heartbeat. “I'm sorry, Kate… I just… I need a moment to collect myself”

“Take as long as you need. That was extremely impressive Liara, and I meant what I said. You don't have to prove anything to anyone. All of us, especially me, know what you're capable of”

Liara smiled “It means alot to hear you say that, Shepard… Thank you” I wish I could stay forever like this… If only our peoples didn't hate each other, if only the Galaxy could mind the important things and leave people alone… Goddess damned politicians, and rules and regulations. Who are they to deny us what I'm feeling... and what I think she's feeling too.

“Take as long as you need, Liara” Shepard said as she patted the Asari's back "I'm not going anywhere”

“Holy crap, Shepard, did you see that ?” Kaidan's face beamed with joy “She held that field that long all by herself, and she gave a can of whoop ass to this whole bunch” he said as he pointed at the rest of the team, who was still recovering from the fall "Maybe she should be training me instead" Noticing Liara's heavy breathing, a worried expression set on his face “Is she ok ? Oh fuck, did she got hurt ?”

Kate moved Liara in front of her “She's fine, ready to kick all their asses again. Isn't that right, Liara” Katerina spoke with a smile as she cleaned the blood from Liara's face, letting her fingers rest on her face for a few seconds. She noticed how almost unconsciously, the Asari leaned into the touch. The sensation was electrifying for both of them. "I'm fine, Shepard"

“Well, I think it's best if we leave the gun lesson for tomorrow. What do you think, Liara ? I think that with your biotics you're more than able to defend yourself, weapons taking a more secondary role for you”

“I think it would be for the best” the Asari laughed “For a so-called ‘training day' we didn't do an whole lot of training, did we ?”

“That's true, though when one is as naturally good and impressive as you, training may not be so urgent after all” Wow, easy there, Shepard. You're not at a bar, calm down.

The Asari swallowed hard and smiled, trying to hide the tinge of purple that was appearing on her cheeks as she blushed.

Giving a quick glance at the rest of the team, Shepard spoke loudly “This is the second warning I'm giving you, and there won't be a third. You do some shit like this again, you all get off and stay in the Citadel the next time we dock there, am I clear ?”

Ashley stood firm “Yes, ma'am” The rest of the team nodded in agreement.

Turning back to Liara, Shepard asked “How are you feeling? Need me to get you to the medbay ?”

Liara shaked her head “I'm fine, Kate. A little nosebleed while using biotics is more common than you might think. Though all that exercise did left me hungry again. Would you care to join me…”
“Don’t have to ask me twice. Screaming at our squad like a Banshee out of hell opened up my appetite too” Turning around before entering the elevator, Kate asked “Kaidan, think you can keep this fun bunch in line?”

Kaidan grinned as he flared biotics in his hand “Oh, don’t worry, Shep. I’ll keep them in line”

“I thought we were friends, Kaidan” Tali spoke in an resentful tone.

“It’s not my fault that you can keep your Turian boyfriend in line” the lieutenant replied as he winked at Tali.

Shepard pressed the button and closed the elevator door before Tali’s and Garrus’s screams could be heard.

As the elevator ascended, Shepard and Liara smiled as they threw furtive glances and each other, both of them trying to hide their smiles and to pretend they weren’t looking at each other.

Kate lowered her gaze for a moment, staring at the floor as she let out a deep sigh.

Maybe I'm just...over thinking what I think you're feeling, maybe I'm just truly imagining things... but this cannot happen, Liara. Trust me, I wish it could” Shepard closed her eyes “If things were different, If I wasn't an N7, if you weren't an Asari, if the Alliance didn't have all those stupid regulations forbidding this and my people weren't a bunch of xenophobic mooks, then maybe...” Katerina sighed “Maybe it's for the best. You don’t... you don't deserve someone as fucked up as me... Goddammit, I hate my life”

“Are you OK, Kate?” Liara asked with a worried tone as the elevator doors opened into the Mess.

Katerina lifted her face and scratched the scar above her nose “Yeah, yeah, it’s nothing, really” Placing her hand on Liara’s shoulder, Shepard shoved her lightly as they moved forward “Let’s eat some quality tasteless food, Doctor”

“Anything useful this time?” the shadowy figure next to her asked.

“She’s still thinking about events of 2183, still stuck in the first Normandy” a voice whose origin she couldn’t see replied “I don’t know how we’re supposed to get results at this rate”

“We’re dealing with someone’s mind. It’s not a movie, we can’t just fast forward it and go where we need to go”

Kate looked with her semi open eye as the figure pressed more buttons in the monitor next to her.

‘We knew this was gonna be a tedious process. But we have all the time in the world. Remember...’

The figure leaned forward, and Kate felt something pinch into her neck. She thanked the numbness she was feeling once more. At least she wasn’t in pain.

“... as far as the rest of the Galaxy is concerned, Commander Shepard died a long time ago”
“I’m putting her to sleep. We’ll continue tomorrow”

As her mind began to drift into unconsciousness once more, Katerina only managed to think “Wish you assholes would put me to sleep permanently” before her head slumped backward into the bed, her mind at peace, at least now.
Chapter 14

The door of the infirmary hissed open, and an exhausted Garrus entered the Mess. Kaidan, who was leaning on the wall in front of the room, approached him with a worried expression.

“How is she? Any changes?”

“She's still out cold” Garrus replied as he scratched his brow “Dr Chakwas says that most of her injuries are still healing, but… she's not waking up. She doesn't know how long she'll stay that way, or if she'll even...”

“Shit” Kaidan looked at the end of the Mess, not focusing on anything in particular “After what she said that day, when she tried to… I'm not sure she would even want to”

“Makes me wish that we all had redundant organs and nervous systems like the Krogan, we could take injuries like that and recover in a few moments. Makes me think of Wrex. Hope the old fool is still alive and kicking” The Turian paced uncomfortably around the Mess, careful not to rip the bandages on his leg “But, if she ever wakes up…”

“ ‘When’ she wakes up, Garrus. We can’t lose hope” Kaidan interrupted him.

“Ever the optimist, eh Kaidan?” Garrus let out a short laugh “ ‘When’ she wakes up, what are we going to tell her? That everything will be fine, that the Galaxy has abandoned all their old hatreds and is working together for the rebuilding process… and that Shepard will be waiting for her when we reach Earth? I'm sorry Kaidan, but not even you can look at her in the eyes and tell her that with a straight face”

Kaidan let out a deep breath “But I don't want her to kill herself either, Garrus. I don't want anyone else to die, and if that means I'll have to feed her a ton of optimistic lies to keep her going, I'll do it”

“Liara's my friend too, and of course that I want nothing but the best for her. But…” the Turian stopped moving and stood in a firm posture, almost like a military stand “…I'm not sure that optimism will be enough this time. Honestly I have no idea how we're supposed to “make her believe” again”

Kaidan lowered his gaze “Yeah… I don't think so either, but what else can we do?”

“Not much” Garrus walked towards the elevator “I'll check on Joker, make sure he's Ok, and to find out about where we are”

“I'll come with you” Kaidan stood from his chair and walked in the same direction, with Garrus’s words and more thoughts drifting through his mind. “Liara’s story doesn’t deserve to end like this… and neither did yours, Shepard. I hope you found peace, wherever you are” Kaidan thought as the elevator doors closed.

Few crewmen were around the CIC. With a good part of the equipment aboard rendered useless after crashing, a good part of the crew had been relocated to engineering and the cargo deck, where they helped around as much as they could.

Reaching the cockpit, Garrus and Kaidan saw Joker half heartedly operating the several dimly lit monitors and panels in the area.

“Hey, Joker”
“Hey” the pilot replied in an apathetic tone without facing them.

“How, eh... how are you doing?” Garrus queried.

“I’m just great, Garrus. Do you need something?”

“We came by to see where we were” Kaidan said as he leaned against a nearby wall.

“The intercom still works. You could have asked from anywhere on the ship” Joker answered coldly.

“We also came to see how you where” Garrus replied.

“I have not killed myself and I’m not planning to, if that’s what you want to know. We’re currently crossing Silean Nebula and should be hitting the relay in a couple of days. From there we hit the Athena Nebula and then we should be back at Sol in a few weeks” Joker turned and looked at them “Anything else?”

Kaidan immediately noticed the large eye bags and the uncared for beard Joker had. He didn't smell precisely nice either.

Deciding not to push the subject, Kaidan asked “Have you got any transmissions from... from anywhere?”

“No. Most of this planets were sparsely populated, they usually only had scientific stations or helium 3 refineries, and the Reapers took care of those” Tapping the monitor, holograms of 2 planets projected themselves through the screen “The largest things around here are Nevos, the Asari colony, and Dekunna, the elcor homeworld, and both of them are... dead”

“What do you mean ‘dead’?” Garrus moved closer with a concerned expression on his face.

“Here” Joker handed him and Kaidan a pair of headphones.

Placing them on, the only thing they heard... was silence. Not static, no desperate cries of help or anger, no sound of engines, just silence.

“The radio is on and working, before you ask” Joker said.

“But... there were hundreds of millions of people on Nevos, and over 2 billion on Dekunna” Kaidan spoke with a dumbfounded expression.

“Either all their radios stopped working or they are all dead. Not that we could do much if we did get any transmissions, our own broadcasting system is dead. Now, do you need anything else?” The tone with which Joker spoke said more than his words.

The 2 of them handed the headphones back before turning to leave. “Thanks Joker. Take it easy, alright?”

The only reply Joker gave them was closing the door as soon as the pair had left the cabin.

Dr Chakwas fixed a few files and checked her computer before turning back and leaning into her chair, staring at the patient in the bed. She had known Liara for over 4 years now. Even when they were apart they usually kept in touch through the extranet, by messages and the occasional vidcall.
Except for those 2 years after Shepard died, where not much was known about Liara, Karin had never seen Liara so… empty, broken. “How can she not be?” Karin thought “Losing her twice… Christ, I don't know what to do with you, Liara. What…?

Karin scratched her hair, letting out an exasperated sigh before bringing out a bottle from one of the cabinets next to her.

“Maybe you’ll give me some ideas” Karin opened the Serrice Ice Brandy bottle and took a large drink before setting it down on the table.

“Good stuff”

A beep made her turn her head towards the bed. After waiting for a few moments, she turned back to the bottle “Maybe the alcohol is hitting me already”

When the other beep rang, Chakwas jumped from her chair and rushed to Liara's side. The medical machines began to beep incessantly, and biotic waves started to course the Asari’s twitching body.

Frightened at what uncontrolled biotics may do, but unwilling to leave her, Chakwas spoke as she released more sedatives through the IV line.

“Liara, Liara, I don't know if you can hear me, but I need you to calm down, before you hurt yourself or anyone else”

Locking Liara's hands with a biotic suppressant cuff, Karin continued checking the machines and monitors around the Asari.

“Get in here, James. Now!”

“**Shepard, I... I can't**”

“**Stop calling me Shepard, for fuck’s sake**” Shepard grabbed her hair, pulling it in frustration as she focused on the Asari “Can you, for the first time since I got here, have the fucking decency of calling me by my first name ?!

Liara breathed heavily, tears rolled through her cheeks, but she spoke in a strong and firm tone “I can't deal with this right now. It's too much and…”

“**Then… let's end this, Liara**” Shepard replied in a cold tone “**Tell me to go**”

“**What ?**”

**Shepard pointed at the door, her bloodshot eyes filled with tears and the anger in her voice replaced by pain and fear** “**Look at me in the eyes, say my name and tell me to go, and I swear to you, Liara T'Soni, that you will never see me again**” Kate buried her face in her hands, letting out short and quick gasps for air “**Please don't tell me to go… You're all I have left**”

Liara’s heartbeat rang in her ears, her head throbbed and felt extremely heavy. Tears streamed unceasingly from her close eyelids down her cheeks, and it was getting harder to breathe. The convoluted mix of emotions made her feel like she was ready to explode. She just wanted it to stop.

“**She's not real. She can't be… People don't come back from the dead… They don't...**”

Liara's thoughts were interrupted by the feeling of Shepard's hands on her own. The soft and
delicate sensation and the feeling of their skins touching each other, where it had once felt as the greatest thing in the Galaxy, now it felt... toxic, poisonous even.

“Please go” Liara said almost unconsciously, her voice almost inaudible, as if she was scared of it being heard, of it being the final push that would send the person she had loved so much over the edge. But the pain was too much, and she just wanted it to stop.

The Asari didn't dare to open her eyes, and for a few moments, nothing was heard in the room. Not even the cacophony of noises emanating from the streets of Illium entered the office. It was almost like if she had entered into a meld, where the world outside seemed to vanish, leaving only the peace and serenity of 2 minds becoming one. But she wasn't in a meld right now, and the reality of her situation made itself evident when Shepard gave Liara a hug. It wasn't as the ones they had used to give each other, the “bear hugs” as Kate called them, where the furor, the ecstasy and the joy of being near your loved one made itself felt as they shared the emotions through physical touch.

The hug Shepard gave Liara felt empty, void of feeling, and the way Shepard held the Asari was almost as if Liara was a delicate porcelain doll, who would break if too much pressure was applied.

Liara’s eyes opened when she felt Kate’s lips pressing against her cheek. A kiss so deep, so powerful... and so empty. It said what Shepard wouldn't say out loud. It said goodbye.

“I... I will always love you, Liara. Always” Katerina whispered in Liara's ear, teardrops falling on the Asari’s neck.

Liara wanted to return the hug, wanted to make her feel as safe as she had all those times when she had been the one breaking down and Shepard had been there to hold her. “Please stay...Don’t go” the words rested on Liara's tongue, ready to be said, ready to give Kate even the slightest glimmer of hope that she had a reason to keep fighting, a reason... to live.

But they were never spoken. The arms didn't wrap themselves around Katerina. Despite the fact that it seemed that Kate seemed to be waiting for just that, for the love of her life to pull her back from the edge of the abyss, Liara froze. Because of the fear, of the pain, of the love she felt, she didn't know, but not a single muscle in her body moved.

Kate ended the hug, tumbling backwards as a drunk leaving a bar. Her face was of a bright red color, almost like the red of her hair. She reached the door, and turned to look at Liara, for one last time. The bright emerald green eyes had almost been completely swallowed by the bloodshot red. They met Liara's crystal blue ones for a few brief moments.

Kate hit the side of the door, opening and sprinting towards the street outside, disappearing among the crowds of the city.

Liara collapsed to the floor.

“NO” Liara bolted upright in the bed, the force and suddenness of the movement ripping the bandages on her head, letting small drops of purple blood fall on her face and the bed. “DON'T GO. NO”

“Liara, darling, it's me, Karin. I need you to calm down. You're safe, no one is going to hurt you” the doctor spoke in the most reassuring tone she could.
“STOP HER. DON’T LET HER GO. I’M SORRY” Liara's eyes were focused on the door of the infirmary. Ignoring the doctor, her body twitched and jumped up and down the bed as if it was in a trance.

“Hold her down, James” Karin shouted.

“Calm down, Doc” Vega said as he pinned Liara to the bed, careful to avoid her from hurting herself. “No one will hurt you. Is me, James”

The Lieutenant’s eyes focused on Liara's hands “Karin, the cuffs!”

The device, which had been designed to avoid biotics from hurting themselves or others during medical emergencies by funneling and trapping the Biotic energy, was begging to flicker and throw sparks.

“I WON’T LET YOU GO AGAIN” Liara shouted.

A slight and sudden pinch snapped Liara out of her stupor. Liara looked to her side and saw Dr Chakwas beside her with an empty needle.

“Looked at me. child” Karin said as she grabbed Liara’s head and wiped the tears and the blood drops from her cheeks. “It’s ok. It’s over now”


The Asari wrapped her arms tightly around Karin. Chakwas just patted her back in return as she felt more tears falling on her.

“I told her to go, Karin” Liara sobbed, but more calmed and relaxed than before “I told her to go”

“It’s ok, child. Don’t think anymore about it” Karin felt like she was consoling her daughter, a daughter that she never had. A daughter that had lost everything she knew.

“I want… We must find her. Give her a proper burial” Liara whispered as the effects of the sedative began to make themselves felt “It’s the least she deserves’

‘Everyone aboard agrees with you, Liara. But you’ll have to wait till we reach the Sol System in a few weeks” James said nervously.

“How long ?”

“A few weeks” Karin replied.

“So were just going to leave her to rot ?! How can you… how can any of you…”

“Relax” Karin said as she carefully placed the Asari back on the bed “Nobody will leave anybody to rot. Maybe… maybe she’s still…”

“Don’t say it, Karin” Liara answered coldly “You may have drugged me, but please do not insult my intelligence”

“I… I understand” the doctor lowered her gaze, embarrassment clear visible on her face.

“Let her rest” Liara said as her breathing slowed down “Do not waste what you have left of life… chasing ghosts… my ghosts… Katerina...”
The Asari closed her eyes, and before long she was sound asleep.

Waiting for a few moments, making sure that she was truly asleep, James spoke “Well, she woke up, though not how we expected”

“Yeah” Karin let out a deep breath “She seems more than willing to accept that Shepard’s gone. Unfortunately for us”

“Why, Karin ?”

“Do you know any other reason that she might have to stay alive right now, James ? Do you think she has a reason to walk out this infirmary, wait till we reach Earth and then continue living ?”
Karin walked to her desk and took a large gulp of brandy “Even if she pretends to be “fine and normal”, she would just wait until we're are all settled, fine and living normal lives before disappearing, never to be seen again. Just… fuck, I need to save this kid and I don’t know how”

“Maybe she’ll find someone else, doc” James replied, his usual humour completely absent from his words.

“Right” Karin gave him an incredulous look “If you truly think that she can find someone who can come even close to what Shepard was, then perhaps you aren’t as smart as I thought you were”

“And if you truly believe the she’d just stop living because Shepard is gone…”

“Again, and permanently this time” Karin cut him cold “The picture isn’t looking pretty at all, Lieutenant. This boy, however…” she lifted the bottle “might help us find some answers. Care to join me Lieutenant ?”

James sighed “Sure. But, Karin, believe me when I say this, you can always find reasons to keep living”

“Maybe you’re right my friend, and I’m just a cynical pessimistic old fool’ Karin replied. Or maybe I’m right. “Let’s just… drink and think about something else for a while”

“Sure thing, Doc”
Chapter 15

The door of a broken down warehouse opened, the sound of the rusted hinges filling the area near it. 3 figures and a dog stepped out, walking into the streets of Vladivostok under the cover of the night.

Katerina cleaned the bloodied knife on her dirty and ragged clothes before placing it back on one of the pockets of her jacket. Her expression was silent, thoughtful.

That night she had done the same thing that she had done a dozen times before. Another person who messed with things that they shouldn’t have, another person who had unpaid debts, or simply another person the bosses wanted gone. She didn’t know what the man had done, and she didn’t care. It was her job, it was what she was known for, it's the only thing she was good at, and she will do it all over again. The bosses gave her food once a day (twice if she had done a good job) red sand and a dirty, stained and broken mattress for her to sleep. It was all she wanted in life. It was all she had ever known in life.

But that night, something had been different. Something hadn't felt right. Something… had changed inside her.

As she plunged the shiv in and out the young man's body, letting streams of blood splash on the floor as the blade ripped the flesh and tore apart organs, she had stared directly into the man's eyes. She always looked at people's eyes as she killed them, it was a requisite placed by the gang to prove that you were tough, that you had in you what was needed to become a murderer.

But as she watched the life drift away from the man, his eyes didn't show anger, hate or fear, as person's eyes usually did when she “offed them”. The man's eyes were filled with… forgiveness. His eyes didn't judge Katerina, didn't reprimand her, they just had this silent aura of compassion. She could almost imagine the man's voice, she imagined what he would be saying if his mouth wasn't filled with blood.

“It's not your fault, kid. It's not your fault”

As she checked his omnitool and transferred the 112 credits the man had on it to one of the accounts the gang used to launder money, she came across a picture. The photograph showed the man which she had just killed with a large group of people. “Family reunited, Christmas 2164” the descriptions read. The phrase remained in Katerina’s mind as she walked through the empty streets. Family. A dad, a mom, sisters, brothers, uncles, cousins, grandparents. People that care about you. Something she had never known “And I just killed their loved one… for 112 credits” she thought.

“The dude had a family” she said to one of the men in front of her, no longer able to keep quiet about what she had done.

“Everyone has a family. Everyone but you, anyway” he replied in a cold, distant tone without turning to look back at her “Best not to think about it”

His words felt like a punch to her empty stomach. It was nothing new, as long as she remembered she had been on her own in this world. So why did being reminded of this hurt so much ? Why did she felt so… alone ?

As the dark thoughts threatened to overtake her, she felt the humid nose of the dog pressing against
her hand, his way of reminding her that he was with her.

She looked at the Saint Bernard and smiled as she caressed the top of the large dog's head. “You're my family, Sartan. You're the only one that cares about me” she thought as the dog leaned into her, giving her some peace of mind as they walked.

After a few minutes, they ordered her to wait outside a building while they went to do some shit she wasn't supposed to know about. She didn't care either.

As she sat down in the sidewalk with Sartan, she looked up to the roof of one of the darkened buildings on the street. A billboard with shifting images and text sat on top of it. She had seen the ad countless times before, but now, it caught her attention even more.

Help Keep Earth Safe

Join the Alliance’s Armed Forces

Are you a healthy citizen between the ages of 18 and 80? Have you always wanted to take action but you don't know how?

Do you want to be a hero?

Well, now is your chance. Enlist in the Alliance Armed Forces today. You'll travel the Galaxy, see wondrous, exciting planets, cities and cultures and play a part in securing Humanity's future in the stars.

With the ever increasing number of threats from Outer Space, mankind needs strong healthy volunteers to reinforce our Galactic borders, maintain the peace and to reassure Humanity that our intergalactic interests are defended.

So, what are you waiting for? Sign up today.

She lowered her gaze and looked at the dog resting in her legs.

“What do you think, Sartan? Think I should sign up when I'm old enough”

The dog barked in response.

“I mean… I would still be killing people, the birdmans, the blue squids, the 4 eyed freaks,
whatever they ordered me to, but... at least I’d be killing for good, right?"

“There's no such thing as killing for good. Killing is killing” the voice of her subconscious replied.

“But it would be for the greater good. “Helping secure humanity's future in the stars” sounds nice, doesn't it, Sartan?” she spoke as she rubbed the dog's head “You don't have to say anything. I know I'm trying to make myself believe that the bullshit in that ad is true. But, as bad as things may be out there, in the dark ocean, compared to this...”

She looked at the deserted streets, the abandoned houses and the crumbling buildings no one had bothered to repair after they had been damaged in the Third World War that had ravaged Earth almost 80 years ago.

“... It can't be worse than this, can it?” her voice carried an air of hopelessness, because she already knew the answer to her question. One thing she had learned very early on her life, was that things could always be and get worse.

The dog remained silent, giving her a thoughtful look. She wondered what it would be saying to her if it could speak.

“Besides...” she gave a quick kiss to the dog's head as she smiled and looked at the ad again “... being a hero sounds nice. Who wouldn't want to be a hero?”

Who wouldn't want to be a hero?

Shepard.

Shepard!

“SHEPARD!” Wrex shouted. Katerina shook her head, snapping out of her stupor as she stopped looking at the phrase in the Feros Colonial Office Ad, which was currently filled with bullet holes.

“Do you want to be a hero?”

“What... what happened?” Shepard replied, watching how the bullets chipped away the cover more and more with every impact.

“There's too many of them out here, and I'm not comfortable with the idea of all of us going down that hole in case it's a dead end” the Krogan replied as he blasted a couple of Thorian creepers with his shotgun. The mindwashed colonist fired heavily on them, but Shepard had given orders not to harm them unless it was absolutely necessary. Having quickly exhausted the anti Thorian gas supplies, the only hope now for saving the colonists and Zhu’s Hope itself laid in neutralizing the Thorian.

“Right. I'll take Garrus and Liara and head down. The rest can stay here. Keep them safe, Wrex”
Shepard looked around and saw the rest of the squad doing their best to hold back the incoming hordes. Her eyes focused on Liara. Her full biotic potential on display as she tore apart wave after wave of the Thorian’s minions, while also covering her squadmates when needed.

“Garrus, Liara!” Katerina shouted as she motioned them to approach her.

The Turian turned and moved quickly towards the Commander while Ashley gave him covering fire.

The Asari didn't see Kate's hand motion. Shepard’s words broke Liara’s focus on the enemies as she stopped throwing warps at the creepers. “She needs help” was the first thing that crossed Liara’s mind. “Move now before anything happens to her. Do something right for once”

Liara immediately stood up and rushed towards Shepard. She froze unconsciously as she approached her. “She's not hurt. Then what…”

Her mind went blank as she watched an expression of horror appear on Katerina’s face, her mouth moving to shout something, moments before Liara felt the impact of a shot in her chest.

The Asari had been on the ground for less than 10 seconds when Shepard reached her.

“Liara. Liara, can you hear me? LIARA!” Shepard’s voice dripped panic, her hands quickly looking for a pulse in the Asari’s neck, praying that the Asari had anything remotely similar to the carotid artery.

Liara opened her eyes, slowly. The world slowly began to regain its form and colors as her eyes adjusted to reality once more. As her vision stabilized, a dumb smile appeared on her face as she looked at Katerina. She wondered how dumb her expression must look.

“You are so beautiful”

“What?” Kate asked, dumbfounded “Can you hear me, are you OK?”

“Oh, Goddess, did I say that out loud? Oh no, no, no…” Liara thought as the smile gave way to a concerned expression, her cheeks turning a light shade of purple as she blushed.

“Fuck, talk to me, Liara. Are you in pain? Can you breathe? Just fucking say something!” Kate shouted, trying to make her voice heard over the cacophony of the battle around them.

“Yes...yes, I’m fine” Liara answered as she sat next to a wall, Kate kneeling next to her. She looked down at where she had been hit. The armor was charred on the impact area, but the slug hadn’t gone through “The armor must have deflected the shot”

Before she could react, Katerina had wrapped her arms around her, holding her as tightly as she could.

“Are you sure you're fine? You nearly gave me a heart attack” Katerina queried with worried tone.

I'm more than fine. I'm... I'm where I want to be. Always. “Yes, Kate, I'm sure. It looked worse than it really was. I'm so sorry that I…”

“It's my fucking fault” Shepard interrupted her “I should have… I'm a fucking idiot, Liara. I'm so sorry” You nearly got her killed, you stupid dumbass. Incompetent. Or are you still applying your Wolfpack motto, “Survival is your responsibility”? 
“Shepard, I won't let you blame yourself for…”

“We can talk about it later, alright? Let's go deal with this Thorian first” Shepard said with a smile as she clean some of the dirt from Liara's face. The Asari fought the urge to lean into the touch.

“Ok, let's go” Liara said as they carefully moved towards the hole that led underground Garrus was already inside taking point.

“Here's the plan. We go in, kill this fucking thing as quickly as possible and we get the fuck out this tunnel ASAP. Understood?”

“What's ASAP?” Garrus and Liara asked in unison.

“As soon as possible” Shepard replied as she watched the end of the tunnel through the scope of her rifle, ready to neutralize whatever might come rushing at them.

“Meaning that I want to get out of here as quick as we can. Got it?” Her 2 companions nodded.

“We shouldn't have much of a problem. I don't think this thing will be… will be…” Shepard stopped talking and swallowed hard, as her eyes observed the colossal plant that lay above them. The center of the being began to twitch, and shortly after, an Asari dropped from it, her cold, calculating sight focused on the team.

“Why was she in… and why's she green? There are no green Asari, right? At least I don't think there are” Shepard thought as the mutated Asari spoke, demanding them to be in awe of the behemoth from which she had just spawned.

“I don't know what Saren wanted with you, but after all you've done, I just want you dead” “Your blood will feed the ground and the new growth!” was the last thing Katerina heard before the biotic pulse thrown by the Asari slammed her against the wall. Shepard could feel the warm droplets of blood rolling down her neck as she let out an exasperated sigh.

“Well… fuck”

Half an hour later, the trio reached the top level near where they had shot the last root of the ancient plant. Covered in slime, sweat and blood, all of them were panting from exhaustion.

“Well, that wasn't so bad” Garrus said as he laughed, dropping pieces of dead creepers that had stuck in his armor “And you did quite well, Liara”

“I really could have done much more” the Asari replied while she cleaned some of the green slime from her “If I had paid more attention I could have stopped more of the creatures from reaching you”

“For being the first time you used biotics against a hostile force, I'd say you did more than well”

“But I could have…”

“Hey” Katerina patted Liara’s shoulder “You did great. I'm proud of you”
The Asari lowered her gaze, hiding her blush and the semi smile that had appeared on her face, replying “Thank you, Shepard” in an almost inaudible tone.

“Now we just have to…”

Shepard stopped talking as one of the cocoons on the wall began to twitch, making a revolting sound as it trembled.

“Be ready” Katerina ordered as they pointed their guns in the direction of the growth in the wall.

After a few moments, the sack bursted open, and an Asari dropped from it. As it lifted it's sight and focused on the trio, Liara lowered her gun, her mouth open in shock and awe as she spoke.

“Shi… Shiala ?”

“Liara ? Is it… truly you ?”

“Goddess” As Liara moved in its direction, Shepard stopped her with a brusque movement

“You know who this is ?”

“Yes, of course. Shiala is one oldest serving acolytes of the T’Soni house. I have known her all my life” Liara replied as tears of joy filled her eyes.

“Care to explain why your old friend appeared to have cloned herself and was trying to kill us ?” Garrus spoke as he kept his rifle aimed directly at Shiala.

Liara stuttered “I… I don't…”

“Goddess, Liara” Shiala spoke as she took a few measured steps towards the group “I… I don't even know how long it's been since I last saw you. I…”

“Don't move another inch” Katerina spoke in a threatening tone as she carefully pushed Liara behind her “Answer the question”

“Very well”

Shiala proceeded to explain everything that had happened. From Benezia’s alliance with Saren all the way to the Geth and Sovereign. Explaining what they had done on Feros, she spoke of how Saren had acquired the ancient knowledge of the very essence of the Protheans by making a trade with the Thorian, and how Shiala had been willingly given to the ancient life form to be consumed.

“And why did Saren need the ‘very essence of the Protheans’ ? Shepard queried “Why did he…”

“To understand the beacon, Kate” Liara answered “He must have seen the same convoluted visions as you, but he needs the knowledge of the Protheans themselves to understand it. Goddess, the fact that were talking about acquiring the knowledge of the the Protheans is truly amazing. This is the first time something like this has ever been done. It's …”

“And did Saren get it ? The whatever of the Protheans that the plant had ?” Shepard asked Shiala, interrupting Liara’s scientific curiosity.

“He did. I melded with the creature and then with him to transfer the information. I'm afraid that with the Thorian dead, only Saren and I are the only ones in possession of that knowledge”

“And Saren is not really an option, now is he ? So, what do we do now ?” Katerina holstered her
gun and took off her helmet, already imagining what the only way to acquire the knowledge was.

“Well, I could meld with you like I did with Saren, and…”

“Ok, let's do it” Kate said as she approached the Asari.

“Shepard, are you sure about this?” Garrus asked in a worried tone “From what Kaidan and Ashley say, you got pretty badly injured after you did this on Eden Prime”

“And if we don't get this information, Saren gets whatever it is he's looking for and we're all dead” Shepard gave her helmet to the Turian “I'll be fine, Garrus. Trust me”

“We'll be here, Kate” Liara said as she stood beside him, eager to watch how the historical event in front of her would unfold.

Shiala stood in front of Shepard and closed her eyes.

“Relax, Commander. Embrace eternity”

Shepard stared into the eyes of the Asari, which had turned as black as onyx, before her mind descended into a spiral of bloodshed and chaos.

_Giant Machines tear cities apart, shouts of horror fill the air, flesh being split apart, organic paste flowing through tubes, mechanical implants being inserted into living tissue, screams, explosions, destruction..., death._

_A Planet, torn apart, in ruins, surrounded in darkness. From shadows, the Machines advance, covering the galaxy in a wave like a swarm of locusts._

_You cannot stop us! they shout before a massive horn like noise snaps her out of the meld._

Katerina falls to her knees.

“I apologize if I injured you, Commander, it wasn’t my intention. But the meld was the only way to give you the information” Shiala speaks, maintaining her distance from the group

“Shepard !” Liara shouts as she rushes to lift her up “Are you alright ?”

“Yeah, yeah… I’m fine” Shepard stands up aided by Liara, shaking her head to adjust herself back to reality “I just… really need to stop letting Prothean stuff in my head”

“Hopefully, you won’t have to do it again” Garrus said “Shepard, you look a little… pale”

“It’s nothing” as she removes Liara’s arms and starts to walk on her own “We should get back to the Normandy. We should… we should...”

Kate stopped moving, and stopped talking. Not because she wanted to, but her body had stopped responding to her commands. Her limbs felt like a jelly, a cold metallic chill began to make itself
felt through her spine.

The throbbing in her head that she had felt before returns, 10 times stronger. Her heartbeat rang in her ears, and blood began to drip out of her nose.

She tried to cough, to clear the ever growing pain on her throat, but only muted gags came out.

She lifted her head and looked at Liara, the pleading look on her eyes saying more than words could. She watched as Liara’s expression turned to horror, shouting something at Garrus shortly after. They both lifted her, but she felt nothing, and saw nothing. The last words she heard where Liara shouting her name in despair, moments before her eyes closed.

“SHEPARD !”

“Spirits! I warned her. I warned her. Sure, Shepard. Just transfer a torrent of millenia old information directly to your brain, what could possibly go wrong?”, Garrus growled in frustration as he rushed the Commander to the infirmary

The door hissed open. The doctor turned around to see them, dropping the datapad in her hand as she processed what she was seeing.

“What the hell happened!?” Karin exclaimed in horror as a Garrus and Liara rushed into the infirmary carrying Shepard’s bloodied and twitching body. The Commander's eyes were rolled into the back of her head, and foam was dripping from her mouth.

“She interacted with something similar to a Prothean beacon” Liara hurriedly said in a panicked tone, not wanting to waste time explaining in full detail what had happened “She must have received too much information, or something… I don’t know…” You encouraged her. You were more interested in the Prothean information than her. And you might have just killed her.

“Fucking hell” Chakwas said in a frustrated voice as she began to plug IV lines to Shepard’s arms. While she pulled a wire from behind the Commander, she noticed a small pool of blood behind her head. Lifting it, she saw a large crack on the back of the skull, which was releasing small but constant streams of blood.

“Jesus, her head is cracked open!” Karin turned and looked at Liara “I can treat her wounds, but if this is like you said, I will need you to meld with her”

“To what!?” The Asari replied dumbfounded.

“She had been having trouble with the headaches before Eden Prime. You melded with her when you came aboard, and they reduced in intensity. I’m no expert at dealing with Prothean related mind shocks, and so far that’s the only thing that seem to have worked, so hurry up because I don’t know how long she can stay like this” Karin spoke as she applied medigel on the injury, sealing it to prevent further blood loss.

Liara just stood there, frozen, unable to react

“DO IT” Karin shouted in a tone that Liara had never heard before from the usually calm and
collected doctor.

The Asari moved and placed her head as close as she could to Shepard's. Closing her eyes, she began to feel as she slowly transcended into another plain, the physical barriers that separated them dissolving, her mind becoming one with Katerina’s.

Liara opened her eyes, and found herself enveloped in a pitch black darkness. Nothing was seen or heard around her. Complete and total nothingness.

Suddenly, the sound of a deafening horn filled the void, and flashes of images began to pass all around her.

Soldiers marching behind flaming cities.

Starships exploding, the screams of those inside silenced as they are swallowed by the void of space.

Civilians running as gunmen mow them down.

Children running through a deserted street as shots are fired towards them.

Massive machines descending from the heavens, the worlds below them being swallowed by flames.

Liara’s face.

The Asari stood there, stunned. In the middle of all the carnage and violence that the memories showed, her face was among them, a lighthouse of calm and serenity in the ocean of darkness that was Shepard’s mind.

“What are you doing here?” a soft voice behind her says.

The Asari turns around to see a little child with red hair and bright green eyes staring at her. She wears dirty and ragged clothes, her face covered in dirt. It doesn’t take long for Liara to figure out who she is.

“Shepard?”

“You shouldn’t be here. She doesn’t let anyone in here. No one must see this” the children replies, her eyes looking at the memories pass by.

Liara kneels, her face now at same level as the kid’s “Kate, listen, you are injured. I need you to wake up. Take my hand”

“No” the children answers in a cold tone.

“Shepard, please. I…”
"She's tired. She wants to rest. There's nothing out there for her"

"Think of your friends, your crew. They need you"

"They don't, and they shouldn't. You haven't known her long enough to understand how toxic she is to the people around her"

"That isn't true" Liara shouted angrily "Everyone out there cares deeply for her. They consider family even, and I'm sure she thinks about most of them that way too"

"Why do you care ?"

"Because…” Liara lowers her sight, letting out a deep breath “Because I need her too"

"If you care for her, you should let her rest. All she wants is peace. She's tired of fighting"

"She won't have to fight anymore soon. Please, just … take my hand"

"Liar. She will never stop fighting” the children answers as she continues looking to the void “But it seems you convinced her. Convinced her to remain in a life of suffering and pain”

The children moves closer to the Asari and grabs her hand tightly, with an almost unnatural strength “Now… wake up”

Liara eyes open. She's panting heavily and holding onto the bed with one hand to keep herself from falling. As her sight adjusts itself, she sees Shepard wide awake, also panting and with tears in her eyes, answering Karin’s questions as best she cans.

As Liara tries to walk away from the bed, she's softly pulled back towards it. As she looks to her other hand, she sees that it's being tightly held by Shepard, her skin giving a warmth sensation to the Asari's palm.

"Please don't go" Shepard’s voice speaks, but inside her mind. Lingering traces of the meld still holding traces of the connection between them “Stay for a while, if it's not too much too ask”

"I'm not going anywhere, Shepard” the Asari replies as she smiles when she notices Shepard doing the same, looking at her with a sweet grin on her face “I'll be here for as long as you want me to”

Katerina slightly tightens her grip on the Asari's hand, reassuring herself that she's not alone anymore. Liara smiles and places her other hand on top of Shepard's, fighting back the tears of joy as she hears the words Shepard utters through the meld.

"I want you to be here with me. Always"

Dr Chakwas looked at the two of them and smiled "You should avoid doing that, considering she just had an overload of brain activity"

"Doing what, Doc ?" Kate answers in playful tone, not letting go of Liara's hand.

"Oh, nothing. Just me imagining things" Karin replies sarcastically while she picks up the datapad
that she had dropped "Half the crew is waiting outside, wondering if you were going to live. I say that you are, for now"

"Thank you, Karin"

"And now the good news. You're suspended from any further activity for the next 4 days, and I'll keep under constant checkup"

"But Karin..."

"No goddamn "buts", Shepard. After what just happened I'm keeping you on this infirmary until I'm sure you're fully functional again"

Kate replied with an annoyed growl.

"I'm gonna go deal with the crowds outside. I would suggest that Liara remains here keeping you company, if you 2 are Ok with that"

"More than Ok, Doc"

"I'm happy to, Karin" Liara answers with a smile on her face.

"Very well. Get some rest then, Shepard" Karin said with a grin on her face as she left the infirmary.

As the door closed, Katerina turned and faced the Asari "Liara, listen... we need to talk"

"Yes, we do, Kate" Liara said as she let go of Shepard's hand "But not today, you've been through enough, and you must rest"

"Hey, don't be like Karin. I'm..."

"No, you're not "fine' yet, Shepard. Get some rest, and tomorrow we'll talk about... about everything, Kate. I promise" the Asari speaks as she walked back towards the storage room, her blush too evident to conceal and smiling like Shepard had never seen her before "Goodnight, I believe is the expressions you humans use ?"

Katerina fought the urge to tell her to bunk with her, despite that she was almost certain that she would refuse for a number of reasons. Or maybe she wouldn't. Liara was a mystery to Shepard, and she just wanted to know more. "Yeah, it is. Goodnight, Liara" Shepard closed her eyes, thinking about what had just happened. Her exahustion put her to sleep quickly, and she spent the night with a smile on her face.
“Get down!”

The soldiers ducked as the missile flew above them and exploded into a nearby building. Their commanding officer crawled next to them, making sure they hadn't been hit. Her armor was broken in several parts, blood pouring out in small drops from several small cuts on her tattooed skin.

“Goddamnit. When I say ‘Stay behind the tanks’, I fucking mean it” Jack, or as she was more commonly known these days, Lieutenant Nought, lifted her men up and placed them back in formation.

The Mako’s engines rumbled as the vehicles moved through the ruined streets, doing their best to avoid the mines, anti tank guns and other nasty surprises that filled the city. The soldiers who followed them had been fighting for almost 3 days as the Alliance made its push to reclaim the territory. The wear and tear was visible on everyone.

The helmets they wore allowed them to see through the smoke from all the burning remnants of buildings near them. A vital element in this hostile environment.

“Ma'am, how much further?” Private Rodriguez shouted over the intercom, trying to make her voice heard over the thunderous sounds of the Mako’s canon.

“Ehm… We're close to the river, I think” Jack claimed while she checked the satelital image from her omnitool “We should link up with the rest of the Alliance forces coming from the South as soon as we cross the dead Reaper body that now serves as a bridge. If we don't run into any…”

A wave of heat washed over the squad, the dry wind forcing the soldiers to duck and shield themselves as best they could. Jack looked up just in time to see the 2 Makos that had been accompanying them crash back into the ground enveloped in a fireball.

“I'm not sure I'm liking this spot were on, ma'am” one of the biotic soldiers said as he threw a pulse to the defenders on the other shore of the river.

“We're very fucked if we stay here. And we're fucked if we try to leave with those gunners and canons still firing on us” After throwing a quick glance at the area around them, Jack spotted a dead Blue Suns Merc with a radio a few meters away from him. Another proof that the Alliance claim that all the aliens on Earth had been contained in London wasn't entirely accurate.

“Prangley! Check the radio on that Turian and try to contact some air support. We need help to keep moving”

“Yes, ma'am” the soldier replied as he enveloped himself in a biotic shield and rushed towards the equipment next to the fallen Merc and, after rolling back to cover, started to fiddle with the device.

“Get this asshole off me, Lima 6!” Jennifer Buchanan shouted as she evaded the rounds fired by the hostile fighter jet. The brrt sound emitted by the main canon of the enemy plane sounded too close for comfort.

“Alert! Enemy lock” the VI in the plane said in a calmed and relaxed tone which did not suit the
current situation very well. The constant and ever growing beeping wasn't helping either.

When silence fell over the cabin, the Lieutenant closed her eyes. Waiting the hear the hiss of the enemy missile at any second, she smiled and closed her eyes. Letting out deep breaths, she relaxed her grip on the stick and leaned her head back onto her seat.

“This is it. Mommy is coming home, son”

The rumble of an explosion and the hail like sound of metal pieces raining over her jet jolted her out of her daze.

“I'm not supposed to hear that. The explosion should have vaporized me”

“Down you go, you son of a bitch” a fellow pilot exclaimed over the intercom, his young voice dripping with pride.

“Thanks for assist, Manny. Thought I was a goner for sure” Jennifer said.

“Happy to assist, ma'am”

The Lieutenant kept her eyes focused on the diverse panels and indicators that flashed and blinked on her jet’s monitors. The aircraft had taken some fire, but nothing critical enough to force her to return to base. At her side, the rest of the 16th AAF fighter squadron followed her lead as they roamed the skies over Eastern Europe.

“Manny, what's the status of my wing ?” the pilot asked

“That fighter just scratched your paint. Nothing too serious, Ma'am” the young Lieutenant answered. He had just been recently integrated into the squad. The Alliance’s desperate need for manpower had forced them to place inside a cockpit whoever had even the most basic notions of flying. Still, the kid had proven more than able to hold his own during the few training lessons that he had had.

This was his first combat run.

“Sure about that ? My monitor's are going haywire”

“I… I'm looking at it from here, and I don't see anything… Maybe if we… I could try to…”

“Calm down, kid. Just pulling your hair” Jennifer replied, a grin hidden beneath her helmet.

“Roger that, Commander” the young pilot's words gave away the nervousness he was trying to hide from the Commander's teasing.

Buchanan threw a glimpse at the scenery below her. Warsaw was burning. Plumes of smoke rose to the heavens as fire devoured much of the ruins of city that sat on the Vistula river.

From the sky she could see the flashes of artillery guns firing and its shells exploding around what used to be the downtown area.

Jennifer felt a cold shiver run down her spine as she looked at the area near where the shells were
falling. Leaning against the few skyscrapers that hadn't collapsed, and visible only for a few moments behind the smoke, were the empty shells of the colossal machines that had nearly wiped out all life in the Galaxy, their wires hanging loose from their torn bodies.

Even though the Machines had long since fallen silent, a part of her mind still expected to hear the deafening roar that they emitted, the horn like sound that had been responsible for leaving millions deaf on Earth and elsewhere throughout the Galaxy. The sound that had marked the end of an era.

The Commander turned her gaze away from them, not wanting to give more fuel to the nightmares that already haunted her nights.

“Enjoying the view, Lima 7 ?” one of the pilots asked to another member of the squad.

“You know me. I just love when antiaircraft fire and burning buildings light the night”

“How many times in history has this city been torn to pieces ?” the pilot replied, his gaze focused on one of the burning skyscrapers.

“Too many” the wingman answered “Hopefully this'll be the last time”

“Ha! I bet that's what they thought the last time, and the time before, and the time before that…”

“Cut the chatter. Got an incoming transmission” Jennifer bellowed over the intercom before accepting the incoming comm “This is the 16th AAF”

“This is the Third Biotic Squad” a young voice dripping with fear shouted. The words he spoke were barely audible among the cacophony of gunfire and explosions around him “Requesting an airstrike at coordinates 0-16/8-9…”

“Invalid coordinates. We do not have clearance in that sector. Send again”

“Goddamnit. Requesting an airstrike on coordinates 1-17/9-10…”

“Invalid coordinates” the frustration was evident in her voice “Give us proper coordinates or find someone who can”

“Shit, shit, shit” the voice on the other end said in a mixture of panic and anger as explosions grew nearer and nearer.

“Prangley! What the fuck are you doing ? Where's our air support ?” a female voice on the other shouted. “This barrier ain't gonna hold up forever”

“I'm asking, but the fucking pilots keep saying 'Invalid coordinates' “

“I can still hear you, asshole” Buchanan replied “Unless you want a rain of T-bombs and missiles right on top of your head, give me proper fucking coordinates!”

“Gimme that piece of shit” After the sounds of a forceful movement, the female voice spoke “This is Lieutenant Nought. Requesting airstrike at the following coordinates”

A series of numbers and letters appeared on her monitor as the incoming signal was decoded by the jet’s equipment. She quickly transmitted it to the rest of her squad.

“Coordinates received. Keep your heads low, we're coming in danger close”

“Thank you. And Prangley, be thankful that I'm not tossing your ass out this barrier right this
second. What the fuck were you doing dictating the fucking coordinates? Are you playing a radio operator from 2 centuries ago, dumbass?"

Buchanan closed the transmission and after confirming the position of the Alliance forces, she spoke to her squad “Everyone, we've got our coordinates. Move low and arm your CBU’s. Flatten everything on the shore ahead of the friendly squads”

“Roger that”

As the jets descended from the skies in a beautifully executed maneuver, the tracers and the rocket tracers began to swirl around them as dozens of Anti aircraft batteries concentrated on their newfound targets. The rounds that popped sounded like haze falling on a car during winter.

The Lieutenant placed her breather mask on, her eyes shifting her attention from the monitors to the approaching city and back.

“Relax, breathe deeply and yank the stick back with all you have as soon as you feel the bombs drop. The heartbeat in your ears will stop ringing as soon as your suit readjusts itself” Steve Cortez, her friend and former pilot had told her once, one of the many advises he had given her during the couple of years they had served together on the Verge. He had gone on to fly none other than Commander Kate Shepard during the war, she had heard.

He was still missing in action.

“Hope you found peace wherever you are now, Steve” Buchanan thought before her squad spoke on the radio, interrupting her train of thought.

“Targets locked” the squad spoke in unison.

“Fire when ready” Jennifer replied as she closed her eyes and pressed the trigger.

“Bombs away”

Even though the jet’s engines had already placed the aircraft well outside the blast radius, the thermobaric explosions sent a series of violent vibrations that made Buchanan fear for a few moments that the aircraft might come apart. The heat wave from the inferno they had just unleashed showered over her, drying her eyes and dangerously rising the temperature inside the cockpit.

As soon as they were back in the sky, Jennifer spoke to the radio “Everyone alright?” she asked in a worried tone, since the smoke didn't let her make visual contact with her squad.

After a few seconds of silence, familiar voices confirmed that they were still there. The pilots were shaken, but they were alive.

“Not bad for a first run, hey Manny?” Jennifer chuckled while she pulled off her breather mask, breathing deeply to stabilize her heartbeat “Manny? Did anyone see Manny come up?”

“Negative, ma'am” the companions answered “He's… Lima 6 is gone”

Buchanan shook her head to regain focus. Another kid gone. She had lost count of how many had already fallen since the end of the Reaper war and the start of this… “Planetary Civil War” or, as some called it, “The First Human Unification War”. The first and the last, she hoped.
“Third Biotic Squad, you still there?” the Lieutenant asked, trying to hide the pain and anger from being evident in her voice.

“We're here. Thanks for the assist” the Lieutenant replied “Fucking hell, that was awesome”

An emergency beeping made her switch the frequency of the radio. It was a priority signal, incoming from Alliance Command.

“To all Alliance forces in the immediate vicinity and outskirts of Warsaw. Use any and all means of force necessary to neutralize the retreating separatists convoys by any means necessary”

Jennifer turned her head and looked towards the dust clouds on the edge of the city. The so called “separatists” were leaving the city. The long rows of vehicles desperately trying to get away, rushing to avoid being captured by Alliance forces. And normally, the Alliance would have let them go. But not today.

“We've got our orders. Move to intercept” the Commander spoke to her squad.

“But ma'am, Admiral Hackett forbade us from…”

“We have our orders” the Commander interrupted her pilot “This came directly from Alliance Command. Looks like the old man is losing his grip on things”

The jets quickly cut the distance between them and the convoys. They were joined by other squadrons. On the ground, Alliance armor was already converging near the retreating separatists”

“Got our targets lined up” the pilots spoke.

“Fire at will. Let’s show these bastards we give as good as we get”

As the sound of jets and fighter bombers faded, Jack marched through the remnants of the convoy, her students following behind. While her former pupils and now subordinates coughed and gagged, her expression was cold and steady. The smell of burnt flesh wasn't anything new to her. The smoldering wrecks littered the landscape. In the distance, screams and gunfire gave a clear indication on how the soldiers who had surrendered.

There were few military vehicles in the area. Most of what had been destroyed were civilian skyscars, civilian transports… and civilians.

“This is fucked up”

The Lieutenant turned to face the young soldier that had spoken “You have something to say…” she paused as she eyed the name tag on his chest “... deer Vaart ?”

“What the fuck did we just do ?” the young soldier gripped his hair and covered his mouth with one hand as he eyed the piled of charred corpses of all sizes that was laid nearby. If it was because of the shock or because of the smell, Jack couldn’t tell. Probably a combination of the two.

“We did what we were told to do. This is war. People die”

“I came here to fight ‘radical insurrectionists’. What the fuck did these people have of radical !? The fucking broomsticks they carry, or…”
The Private gagged as earth filled his mouth as he hit the ground, his stomach void of air after receiving a punch from his instructor.

“Unless you want the rats of the Intelligence Department to drag you off in the middle of the night, you will keep your opinions to yourself, under-fucking-stood !? Jack shouted in his direction. A panicked nod made it clear he had gotten the message. Turning around to face the rest of her squad, Jack climbed atop one of the until recently active civilian vehicles “If anyone else has decided to grow a conscience, let me make something clear to all you. These people were given more than enough chances to come back to the Alliance. God knows Hackett bent over to help them. But they refused to listen” the Lieutenant closed her eyes and let out a deep breath. “Complete bullshit. Well the Hackett part is true, but you have to Make them believe this propagandistic shit, Jack. It’s the only way they’ll stay alive”

“So now we have to speed things up, and that will mean that there are some rough times coming. The sooner we reclaim the territory, the faster we’ll be able to start rebuilding, and we’ll all be able to live normal and decent lives. Am I clear, or do you need a more in depth lesson like the one Mr Der Vaart just got ?”

“Perfectly clear, ma’am” her soldiers spoke in unison.

“Alright. Someone pick up Vaart and let’s move back to the camp. If we’ve received some alcohol-and I pray to fucking God that we have-drinks are on me. You all did good today”

The somber mood lifted as the promise of free alcohol cheered up the spirits. A few laughs were even heard. There’ll be a lot more laughing if the bar was stocked when they returned back to base.

As they continued marching, Jack froze for a moment as she observed a burned and overturned truck, one of the models of the early 2120s that were, or had still been in use in certain regions of the world before the war started. She crawled and gulped as focused on the remains of what had once been a stuffed animal. The little hand that still held onto it was as black as the truck and the night sky above them. Nought’s stomach emptied its few contents on the ground as she turned away in disgust. Making sure her subordinates were distant enough to not see or hear her, she looked towards the starless sky, the clouds of ash letting only a few rays of moonlight hit the earth.

“What was it that you said to me, Shep, a while back ? ‘I think military life suits you’. Good thing that you’re dead, otherwise I would…” she choked up as tears started rolling down her cheeks “… I would find you and kick your ass for making me believe that shit. Fuck, I wish that I had your skill to give those fucking speeches that you gave. Maybe it would be easier to… to convince these kids that this is for the greater good”

Laughing between her sobs, Jack stood up and resumed her march to catch up to her squad.

“Oh, that’s right. You also said “Fighting for the greater good is a bitch”. I agree with you on that one. Fuck the greater good, and fuck all these bullshit” Jack said to herself as she reached her soldiers, quickly wiping the tears from her eyes “At least you’re resting now. You’d probably be mad to know that you died for all this to get even more fucked”
The conference room of the dreadnought was cold, the constant humming of the air conditioning machines meant that the air in it was constantly being rotated. The noise of the devices however, was drowned by the activity coming from the people in the room.

The Alliance Admirals looked at several large monitors and displays while their assistants and other soldiers explained and discussed with them several topics. Phrases were flying around the conference room.

“... with Warsaw secured we'll be able to advance through the rest of Europe. Only the separatist strongholds in Moscow and Helsinki remain in the way to…”

“... progress extracting materials from the Kite’s Nest. Our first teams have begun deploying in Khar’shan, Camala and…”

“... prolonged sieges will be most effective at ensuring a quick collapse of the areas they now hold. If we keep up the promises of food and medicine that are most enticing to even the most hardcore of their soldiers, we should see massive numbers of deserters reaching out to us. Ideals don't last while you're sick and starving”

“... ship building facilities in Bonn are operating at nearly 100% full capacity. We should be rolling out new vessels for our fleets in the next 2 to 3 months. Vast numbers of civilians joining either the industrial or the military effort has also allowed us to…”

The sound of the metallic doors hissing open and heavy steps made everyone in the room fell silent as they watched the man who had just entered the room.

Hackett bursted into the room, his usual stoic expression replaced by an enraged look that gave his face a reddish tone.

“I gave explicit orders that the retreating convoys were not to be attacked and that there would be no firing squads. What the hell happened?”, Hackett shouted at the Admiralty board as he watched in horror and disgust the images displaying from his omnitool. Videos from Warsaw, the latest city to be “liberated” by Alliance forces.

“Steven, please, calm down. You’re gonna give yourself a heart attack. Have a seat” Admiral Hoffman spoke in a condescending tone as he pointed to one of the empty chairs in the room.

“Who gave you authorization to overturn my...?”

“We acted as the situation developed. You were too busy dealing with the food riots, and we didn’t want to… “over concern” you with matters we could control” Admiral Singh explained with a smug grin on her face “At your age, too much stress can be very dangerous, you know ?”

Mikhailovich and the other Admirals remained in silence, not even trying to hide the sense of satisfaction that they got from watching the most revered and honored Admiral in the Alliance get riled up. Their expressions just fueled the anger that coursed through Hackett.

“You will watch your tone when referring to me! We all agreed that we wouldn’t target the civilians, and you can’t just…”
“Steven…” Admiral Tadeus Ahern spoke as he placed a hand on Hackett’s shoulder “I’m sure there was some sort of “miscommunication” between us and the forces on the ground. Yet, this unfortunate event has sped up the pacification of the whole region”

“I find it hard to see the correlation of a wholesale slaughter of civilians the pacification of…”

“Steven…”

“You talk to me in that condescending tone again, Ahern, and I’ll be the last conversation that you’ll have for a while”

“We must remember that we are currently threading a mighty thin line. We are standing on the brink of the abyss, and it’s up to us to pull humanity back and try to recover what we once were, or to let this world and our entire race collapse into a total and unrecoverable state of anarchy” Ahern spoke like he was giving a speech, a leader trying to convince his troops of the noble goals of a military campaign. Except that now his “troops” were Admirals who were very convinced of their “just” goals “We’ve all seen the reports about the current state of Thessia. We don’t want Earth to end like Thessia, do we, Hackett?”

Hackett let out an exasperated sigh as he lowered his head. Never before he had felt so despised, so insulted, so… betrayed by the men and women who were supposed to be his brothers and sisters in arms.

“Look. This whole situation is extremely taxing and stressful on all of us, but especially you who have been working like a machine these past months. Why don’t you take a few days off ? Relax for awhile, clear your head and then you come back with renewed energies. How does that sound ?”

A short smile appeared on Hackett’s face “You may be right. Maybe I’ve been... worrying too much. Micromanaging too much. Force of habit, I guess” Hackett rubbed his forehead, the calmness and stoicism for which he was known appearing once again in his expression and tone. The smile he forced would have looked convincing, if it had been anyone but Hackett.

"We all have our moments" Ahern chuckled "Why don't you head down to Argentina ? Check on your family's villa, and after a while, you can see for yourself the rebuilding process in that corner of the world. South America has been relatively quiet compared to other places"

"Relatively quiet because there's hardly anyone left. No one's gonna put much of a fight if you lost 90% of your population during the war” Hackett thought, clenching his fist and teeth as his despise for the men and women in the room intensified.

"Yeah... I'll do that. The climate of the Pampas always did me good"

"Good for the heart, good for the soul. Cold is always good" Hoffman, the Admiral native from the Alps spoke.

"Sure" Steven turned off his omnitool and picked up his hat, carefully walking back towards the door "I'll be going now. Ladies, gentlemen"

He did a small bow. The admirals returned the gesture.

"Take care, Hacket" Mikhailovich uttered the words in a mocking tone, a sadistic expression on his face which made Steven look away, a shiver running down his spine.
Exiting the conference room, the Admiral fought the urge to sprint back to his shuttle. Controlling his fight or flight instinct, he threw quick salutes at all the soldiers that crossed in his path, his accelerated walk not leaving time for anything else.

Reaching the docking area, he looked at Berlin. Despite the darkness of the night that swallowed the countryside around, the city that had once been the capital of the now non existent European Union was lit up in a way very similar to how it had looked before the war, with dozens of generators and electrical plants working constantly to illuminate the tents and the buildings that were still relatively intact.

The skyscrapers that had once filled it were long gone, having fallen victim to the Reapers in the first hours of the war.

The colossal machines themselves, or what was left of them, laid covered inside massive metallic coffins that the Alliance had built around them. No one knew how to properly dispose of the machines, and this was the temporary move until a more permanent solution could be found.

“Recover what we once were” Steven laughed as he recalled Ahern’s words “We’ll never be what we once were. Ever” The distant gunfire coming from the city served almost as confirmation of his words.

Reaching his shuttle, his young personal pilot awaited for him “How was the meeting, sir ?”

As he sat on the copilot seat, Hackett breathed deeply as he looked through the window “It’s a new war we’re fighting… Times have changed, and I’m not sure I fit in anymore”

“Sir ?” the man replied, a confused expression set on his face.

“Nevermind. I’ll need you to do me a favor and find out when the next transport leaves to South America, Argentina in particular. I might need to leave these lands for a while”

“Will do, sir. Is everything Ok ?”

Hackett removed his hat, scratching his forehead as he tried to release some of the tension in his head “Yeah, everything’s fine. I’ll just need to be more careful from now on”

After a few minutes, and as the shuttle flew towards the latest residence of the Admiral, the SSV Orizaba, Steven leaned back into the seat, closing his eyes and letting out a deep sigh. He unclenched his fists, smiled and relaxed his posture, pretending for a moment that sound of rotor blades wasn’t growing louder and that it wasn’t coming closer with each passing second.

“I’ll just… need to be more careful from now on. Funny. Can’t think of anything inspirational right now”

The gunships opened fire.

Shadowy figures moved near her. She couldn’t hear much, but from their moments, she could tell they were anxious, scared.
The few phrases she managed to pick up didn't make much sense to her.

"... Warsaw front has collapsed. They'll arrive soon if we..."

"...timetable needs to be accelerated. We'll have to intensify our efforts with her"

"...unplug her. Put her to sleep before we leave. Remember to..."

As the familiar feeling of the drugs coursing through her blood made her world start to distort, she managed to smile and let a single tear roll down her cheeks. This was the part she always looked forward to. Because when the narcotics did their work, she could see her, even if just for a few moments.

The crystal blue eyes.

Her beautiful smile.

The soft, delicate crests from which the freckles that dotted her came from.

Before her world dissipated, her skin shivered as the soft, delicate hand wiped the tear from her face, the touch sending electric waves through her. She wasn't really there, she probably never would be again, but that didn't stop Katerina from passing out with the memory of having seen the one person who had meant everything to her again.

Even if it was just for a few seconds, to Shepard, as usual, it lasted for an eternity.
“Wakey, wakey”

“In a minute… or 20” Shepard grunted, rolling on the bed, refusing to open her eyes.

“I think you should get up now” the voice said.

“I think you should fuck off”

“On your feet, soldier!”

Shepard sprung up on the bed, her eyes wide open scanning the room before seeing the uniformed figure sitting at the end of the bed.

“That always worked on you” the man laughed. "Long time no see, Mrs K"

“Alejandro. What the hell are you doing here ?” Katerina spoke as she rubbed her eyes, wiping away the slight itchiness she felt.

“Nice to see you too. Don't get so overjoyed, you may have a heart attack.” the man replied as he adjusted a rubber band in his wrist.

"No, I don't mean… It's been a long time since you showed up. I was starting to worry, thinking maybe you got lost or something" Katerina answered as she smiled.

"Me getting lost ? Nah, never. 'N7s lead the way', remember ? We can't afford to get lost"

“God, it's been years since I heard that one. The Alliance propagandists stopped using a while ago, after the Bi…” Lowering her gaze towards the floor, Shepard remained silent for a few moments, letting out a deep breath before looking back at her companion “So, what brings you here, Al ? To what do I owe the 'pleasure’ ?” Shepard let out a small laugh as she straightened herself against the wall, the medical gown she wore making a dragging noise as it rubbed against the sheet of the bed.

"I heard about your more recent exploits, K. I leave you alone for a little while and you get your own ship, get mindfucked by Prothean beacons and Asari and you become the first human Spectre ? I didn't believe it. Guess I needed to confirm it with you personally”

“I hardly believe it myself. It's all been happening so fast. Like… a movie being played and I'm a mere spectator enjoying the show. A grim, nasty horror show” Much like my whole life.

“Come on, it's not that bad. You've got your own little band of human and alien ragtags that are willing to go through hell with you and consider you a friend” He smirked as he looked towards the door of the storage room of the medbay "And... perhaps a little more than friendship, eh ?"

“Don’t start. It’s not what you think”

“I think it is just what I’m thinking. She doesn't deserve this, you know? ”

“Shut up”

“She seems like a nice girl, this Liara. Too nice for you, certainly. And she trusts you completely. That tends to be the downfall of those who get close you” Ramos stood in a swift move and started pacing around the bed, his hands locked behind his back.

“Listen, Al, I'm not in the mood for this today, ok ?” Kate replied as she traced the scar above her nose “I'm sure you have better things to do than…”

Post-Feros
“How's Jonathan? Do you even talk with him anymore?”

The phrase filled the room with an eerie silence. Shepard’s eyes were cold, directly focused on her brother in arms, her fists clenched as her breathing became heavier. “He’s fine. And he’s none of your fucking business”

“You think that he will like Liara if he meets her? I mean, he’d probably disown you on the spot if he…”

“Shut the fuck up” Katerina answered in cold, sharp tone.

“This won’t end well, for you or her”

"Tell me something I don't know" Shepard scratched her hair, an annoyed expression set on her face as the usual headache began pounding inside her head once more.

“I don’t know her very well, but I think that we can both agree that she shouldn’t be a part of your sick, twisted game. A small part of you must know how fucked up this is. Then again, you’ve never been one to really care about who gets hurt as long as you and your bosses get what they want. ‘Victory at any cost’, right?”

Grabbing the first thing she could, a datapad flew for a few seconds, crossing the short distance between Shepard and Alejandro, who ducked just in time to avoid the hit and watch as the device broke into several pieces as it crashed against the window.

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!" Shepard shouted, anger pouring through her as the beeping of the medical equipment plugged to her and the alarm lights they displayed filled the room "You know, Al, this is why I don't like talking to you anymore. You start all friendly and shit, and then you start saying all these things that are of no fucking concern to you. Whatever happens between me and Liara is..."

"Speaking of the devil" Alejandro said with a smug grin “Or Lilith. I think it's more accurate here. The female devil. You know, cause she's… They're not women, nevermind”

“What ?”
Shepard turned her head in confusion to look at the hissing noise coming from the door at the end of the room.
"Hello... Shepard"

A few minutes earlier

The storage room was dimly lit by the monitor of Liara's computer. An empty food tray sat on top of the desk, growing colder with each passing minute.

Liara watched one of the tabs she had open on her computer, which displayed a live session from the Alliance Parliament at Arcturus Station. A women in a blue suit, with the Eden Prime colonial insignia pinned on her chest, spoke behind a podium in a loud, reverberating tone.

“... this brutal attack on our colony, which has caused thousands of both civilian and military casualties, along with massive infrastructural damages which is estimated that they surpass the 1 billion credits mark, along with the recent reports of the attack on Feros, is another proof of how the Alliance Armed Forces have proved themselves incapable of defending human possessions in the Traverse. Mixed with the total indifference of the Council, whose own past acts of negligence are the reason why the Geth are a threat in the first place, are just the latest proof of how isolated and unimportant human colonies are to the rest of the Galaxy”
The hall erupted into a massive uproar, as half the Parliament seemed to agree with the Ambassador, mainly the Colonial representatives of Terra Nova and the smaller colonies, and the other half shouted accusations of ungratefulness, threats and a whole series of thinly veiled insults. This was the half composed of the representatives of Earth, Elysium and the colonies that were closer to the Sol System.

The representative of the Alliance Navy, a man whose medals and ribbons filled most of his chest, displaying them with the same pomposity of the Asari politicians did and that Liara had always disliked, stood from his chair, and started shouting to the top of his lungs, his face reddened and veins pulsing in his neck.

“How fucking dare you ? You owe your lives to us. If it wasn't for those ‘incapable armed forces’ you're talking about saving your asses over the years, the Batarians would have hung you, your family and friends using your own intestines, or you would be toiling away on Camala’s mines with neural implants giving you shocks if you dare to sneeze without your master's permission. So think twice before...”

Liara closed the tab. “Goddess, are human politics always so... violent ? I mean, as much as I hated the Armali politics, at least they were respectful and calm while debating. Hypocritical, deceiving and backstabbing, but respectful”

“And this is on the good days. There have been several times were they had to call security and suspend the session. You should keep more in touch with human culture and politics, now that you're mostly surrounded by them”

The voice came from the image of a person being displayed from the monitor, which showed a figure of an Asari that had been a key figure in Liara's life.

“I will. At least it's more entertaining than Asari politics, and the Turian, Quarian and Krogan I'm travelling with aren't too keen of talking about politics” Liara played and traced with her fingers the small Prothean monolith that adorned her necklace, a gift she had received long ago. A gift that brought memories of days gone by.

"Are you sure you I can't convince you to return to Armali, Shiala ? From what you're telling me it sounds like I could really use your help there"

“I... I would like to, Liara, I really would, but I need some time. I need to try to undo some of the pain and damage I caused here” Behind Shiala, Liara could see the colonists throwing the remnants of the Thorian creepers and Geth into a large pire, the walls and floor of the buildings cracked and riddled with bullet holes from the recent battle that had raged through the colony “Besides, your mother's sister has largely kept things running there since your mother left Thessia almost 8 years ago. But...Liara...” Shiala paused for a moment, her eyes closing for a few moments before looking back at Liara with the cold, determined look of a commando finding a target “Whatever happens with your mother, you will need to be strong. Not only for yourself, but for the T'Soni House, and for Armali. Your aunt may be reasonable, but you can be sure that if need be, she won't think twice before bringing the house to the full control of the Tevura republics. I'm sure you can foresee the consequences from Armali if that happens”

Voices coming from the medbay caught Liara’s attention “Shepard has woken up. I need to check on her. I'll contact you later, Shiala”

Nodding, Liara let out a single phrase “Farewell, and watch yourself around that human, Liara. Do not trust her. I sensed tremendous darkness in her mind”

“You always see enemies and hidden plots in everything, Shiala” Liara replied with a smile.

“And you've always been one to trust too easily, Liara. May the Goddess be with you”
“And with you as well”

Closing the connection, Liara stood up and fixed the wrinkles in her suit, wanting to look as presentable as possible, before walking towards the door and unlocking it, entering the medbay shortly after.

"How are you feeling? Are you... well?" The Asari moved slowly into the room, her eyes drifting from the shattered datapad to Katerina. Covered in a cold sweat and panting, Shepard watched her shaking hands briefly, before looking back at Liara "Yeah... yeah, I'm fine. How are you? Did Karin check you up?"
"She did. She checked all the team actually, after we got back. Most had flesh wounds, no one was seriously hurt. No one... but you"
"I really need to stop messing around with Prothean stuff" Shepard chuckled as she wiped the sweat from her forehead, doing her best to keep her trembling hands under control "Sorry, Liara, you're gonna have to find another source of Prothean info. If I keep doing this I'm really gonna get hurt one of these days"

Letting out a short, barely believable laugh, the Asari moved closer to the bed "I heard you speaking, before. I assumed you were talking to Karin, but..."
"I haven't seen Karin today, though I'm sure she'll be here any minute now"
"Then with who were you... Nevermind"
Shepard looked at the other end of the room, only medical devices, metal walls and floors were there, no sign of the individual she had just entertained conversation with.

"With no one. Just... just talking to myself"
Throwing a quick glimpse at the datapad she had just thrown, which now laid shattered near the window, Kate scratched her hair in frustration for a short moment before burying her face on her trembling hands, heavy breathing followed by short phrase she uttered in a broken, pain filled tone "Oh, fuck"

“Hey, don't worry. Please, don't get like this” Liara said as she rushed to Shepard's side, her hands cupping the Commander's face and wiping away the tears from her face “Please, stop crying, Kate. Stop crying or I will start crying and... I don't look nice at all when I cry”

The comment made Shepard let out a short but genuine laugh “I don't think it's possible for you to not look beautiful at anytime. But I don't want to see you cry. I'll take your word for it”

Katerina let herself lean into the Asari's touch, unconsciously smiling as she saw Liara's skin turned to a lovely shade of purple as she blushed and failed to hide it.

After a few moments spent in comfortable silence, Liara looked up at Kate “I'm sorry that i mentioned... I apologize if I somehow offended you”

“Don't worry about it, Liara. It's my fault, I shouldn't have reacted like that”
Kate placed her hands on Liara's lips, stopping the Asari from uttering her protest “And don't say it wasn't, because it was”

The thoughts of protesting Shepard's usual self deprecation were the last thing on Liara's mind, her thoughts having gone completely blank as she felt Shepard’s rough, calloused yet delicate fingers set themselves on her lips.
“Stay quiet, Liara… Don’t say words now because your mind it’s not where it should be” The Asari's eyes moved from Shepard's hands and scanned the full length of her extended arm, her sight carefully studying all the details of the scarred, muscular member which was fully visible in the sleeveless medical gown she wore “Goddess… she's so strong… so powerful…” Liara remembered how she had felt when Shepard had held her during Feros, and she wondered how an embrace like that would feel now that they were both out of armour. The thought made Liara clench her fists, tightly grabbing fistfuls of the sheet as she did.

Placing her hand on Liara’s lips had been a spontaneous move by Kate. The moment Liara blamed herself for what had occurred earlier, Shepard's mind acted instinctively. “The fault is mine. Always is, and always will be”, she said to herself, and having learned over the course of all the small chats she had had with Liara how stubborn the Asari could be, Shepard had silenced her before she could dispute her claims over who was truly at fault. And now they had spent a couple of minutes in utter silence, with Shepard's fingers on Liara's lips.

“Well, this is inappropriate... and awkward... and wrong... But she hasn't pushed me away, and I'm not sure I want to... what the hell do I want ?”

Katerina watched as Liara's eyes moved from her hand to her arm, her sight moving slowly as if they were trying to memorize the location of every scar and curve of her arm's musculature. There was something alluring about being admired like this, about being desired. Shepard's unconsciously traced a finger across Liara's upper lip, and her eyes met Liara's as she felt the Asari's breathing increasing, the exhaled air feeling electric against her skin, and the blush making the skin on her face turn into a deep shade of purple. As they unconsciously, or consciously, leaned forward into each other, the infirmary door hissed open.

Liara bolted from the bed in the blink of an eye, doing her best to hide her blushing, and failing, as Chakwas entered the room. Before she hurriedly closed the door, the level of noise coming from outside the room made her remember the session of the Alliance Parliament.

Nodding quickly to Liara, Karin turned her attention back to Shepard “Glad to see you're feeling ok. Thanks for looking after her, Liara”

“My… pleasure, Karin” the Asari as she took slow, deliberate steps away from the bed.

“I'm sure it is. For both of you”

“Karin, it's not…”

“Shepard, don't play coy with me, I know what I saw. Pray that the crowd outside didn't saw it too. More unrest is the last thing we need”

Making several scans with the omnitool, Karin plugged the several medical devices back into Shepard. As she did, a spark near the window brought her attention towards the shattered datapad.

“You got unplugged from the machines, your heartbeat is accelerated-though I think that might be for reasons unrelated to your current predicament, and a datapad is shattered on the floor, and I doubt it just threw itself across the room. Care to explain what happened, Shepard ?”

“Karin, I…” Pausing for a moment, Shepard motioned Chakwas to come closer. Practically whispering, she spoke “Karin, I saw him again”

The doctor stood up and straightened herself, looking at Shepard with cold, calculating eyes “When
“Was the last time… this happened?”

“A couple of months ago”

“And that’s why you threw datapad, and got disconnected from the scanners?”

“Yes”

“Ok, this is… unexpected” the doctor looked back at Liara “Had you told her about our current destination, or what happened last night?”

The Asari, who had moved herself towards a corner of the room, cleared her throat before replying “No. Shepard was… altered when I saw her. I didn't want to further upset her, so I just tried to calm her down”

“That's an interesting way to calm someone down, Liara”

As the Asari lowered her gaze and retreated further back into the room, Shepard spoke.

“I assume our current destination is the Citadel to get some R&R before heading to Noveria, as I have clearly expressed to the command crew, right? And what happened last night?”

“We are not headed to the Citadel, Shepard. We are headed to Arcturus”

“Arcturus!? But what are we…”

“Listen to me, Katerina Shepard” Karin interrupted Shepard’s rant “Last night you spent several minutes having seizures and thrashing about while you were unconscious. You… flatlined for a few seconds. So like it or not, I'm having you checked over with proper specialists once we reach Arcturus” Tapping her omnitool, Chakwas displayed a message with the Alliance logo on it “Also, the Alliance brass said they wanted to see you. In person”

“Oh, just fucking great” Shepard rubbed her forehead and exhaled in frustration “Karin, Saren and his robot minions are out there doing some nasty shit against the Galaxy. We simply don't have the time to…”

“The crew can get their R&R while we're on the station, though I think I'd be best if Wrex, Tali, Liara and Garrus remained on the ship. Things are not precisely too friendly with the crew right now”

The doctor looked at the Asari “Liara, I'd be best if you come with me. We don't want more of the ‘blatantly false’ rumours going around. And, Shepard, get some rest. We should be at Arcturus this time tomorrow. I'll come check on you later”

The longing, pain filled look Liara gave her as she walked out of the room left a sunken feeling on Katerina’s stomach. She pretended she didn't saw Alejandro walking behind the pair, a smug grin on his face as he uttered a single phrase.

“We'll come check on you when you're feeling better, Mrs K. Get some rest”
Liara paced back and forth through the infirmary, her hands behind her back as she threw quick glances at the holographic clock in the infirmary. In less than an hour, the Normandy would hit the Arcturus Relay, and shortly after it would dock on the Station that was the heart and brains of humanity's expansion throughout the stars.

Katerina sat on the bed, the same bed where she had been confined to since the ‘incident’ at Feros. She did her best to hide how uncomfortable she felt in the Alliance dress blues uniform. Not because it didn't suit her, but because of how it made her feel. The Alliance’s poster girl, the best of the N7, the hero of the Blitz. The dress blues reminded her of how much she was just a tool to clean up the Alliance’s messes, and a trophy to be paraded by the Admirals in front of the cameras. The headache that sent waves of intermittent pain throughout her body didn't do much to help her situation. She traced the scar above her nose, trying to release as much tension as she could.

But now she was focused on a particular Asari who nervously walked around the room.

“You look so cute when you're nervous”, Shepard said, a warm smile set on her face.

“What !?” Liara looked at her, her train of thoughts interrupted by the Commander.

“I said you look very cute when you're nervous”

“Shepard, please. I am not ‘cute’ “

“Oh, yes you are, Doctor. And when you do this…” Shepard mimicked the motion Liara tended to do when she was thinking, nervous, or both, of scratching the back of her neck, just where the crests began to form “…uff, you look so lovely. It warms my heart”

Shepard smiled as the face on the Asari's skin turned into a deep shade of purple “You are too kind”

“Come here” Katerina patted the empty space on the bed next to her. “What's bothering you ?”

“What's bothering me !?” the Asari said in an outraged tone as she sat “What’s bothering me is that we're going to Arcturus Station because the Admirals are concerned about your behavior towards me, that your crew is rather upset with you because of me, that I don't know what the Alliance High Command is going to do to you because of my actions, and... Goddess, Shepard, stop smiling. This is serious!”

Shepard let out a short laugh as she wrapped an arm around Liara, prompting the Asari to rest her head on her shoulder “You look cute when you're angry”

“Shepard! Goddess, I swear that…”

“You haven't done anything wrong, Liara” Katerina interrupted the Asari “Don't worry about the crew, I'll take care of them. And I’m almost sure the brass just wants to talk about how they can use me being a Spectre as a way for me to do more of their dirty work without it being connected back to the Alliance. Basically the same shit I've been doing for the past 11 years, only that now they can say I was acting outside their jurisdiction”
“But you can refuse them now. You're a Spectre. You don't have to listen to them”

“As much as I complain, that dirty work is what keeps humanity safe, and it is what I signed up for. I was a human long before I was a Spectre”

Liara let out a deep sigh “I just don't want anything to happen to you”

Shepard smiled, a single thought crossing her mind “*When was the last time someone cared so much about you?*”

Giving her omnitools a few taps, Shepard spoke “I know something that will cheer you up, get those bad thoughts out of your head”

An image of the pyramids of Giza displayed from the omnitool.

Liara’s eyes lit up, her voice dripped with excitement. Shepard had to suppress a laugh as she saw her reaction.

“What are these structures, Shepard? They look ancient”

“These are called the Pyramids of Giza. They're back on Earth. And yes, they're very old”

Liara kept her eyes focused on the display “They look very complex to built. For you humans, at least, since you didn't have biotics and you've only had dedicated machinery for a few centuries and…Oh, Goddess, Shepard, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to say it like that. I didn't mean to imply…”

Katerina let out a deep, genuine laugh “Don't worry about it. But yes, it was very difficult for us inferior, weakling humans to build them”

The Asari was now more purple than blue “Shepard, I'm sorry. I'm such an insensitive, blabbering fool”

“Stop it, I'm messing with you. Anyway, you know the Protheans had a research outpost on Mars”

“Yes”

“And as you said, this seemed a little too complicated for us humans to build, right?”

“Katerina Shepard, you are not seriously suggesting what I…”

“Do you think the Protheans could have built them?” Shepard said with a smug grin on her face.

“Goddess, Shepard, how can you even suggest that? Have you seen Prothean pyramids?” Liara spoke in a serious tone as she displayed several images of Prothean Pyramids from her omnitool “Not even the structures of the first period are so rudimentary. There are key differences, and they are evident everywhere. For example, look here…”

Shepard held her tighter and gave a quick glance. Liara continued talking excitedly, and Katerina was happy that her silly suggestion had distracted her for the time being.

As she listened to the Asari talking, a phrase kept crossing her mind.

*She looks so cute. Always*
Tali was glued to the window, her eyes drifting from one ship to another as she contemplated the full might of the Alliance’s Fifth Fleet.

“If you think this is impressive, you should see our shipyards in Cipritine. They’re far larger than this, and they produce more dreadnoughts each year” Garrus said as he moved next to her.

“So I’ve heard. One of the largest in the Galaxy. My father talked about them all the time”

“Maybe one day you’ll visit them”

Tali let out a short laugh “Maybe one day. One day when your people are more tolerant of mine”

The Turian looked towards the floor, the shame evident in his usual stoic expression. Suddenly, his arm was held tightly by the Quarian as she leaned against him, both of them smiling in each other's direction before continuing to look at the massive station through the window.

“But I appreciate the offer, Garrus”

“How long do you think we’ll be here ?” Ash asked Kaidan, as they both watched the Normandy entered the dock.

“A day. 2 at most. This is more of a ‘The brass wants to reign in Shepard in person’ than an actual shore leave. And given that…”

“Kaidan!” “Ash!”

As the docking clamps secured the Normandy to Arcturus, the Lieutenant and the Gunnery Chief turned and saw Shepard approaching them.

“Everything alright, Skipper ?”, Ashley queried as she tried to fix the few wrinkles on her uniform, trying to look as presentable as possible for the Admirals who'd soon be onboard.

“Yeah, yeah, everything's fine. Getting ready to hear the litany of things the brass thinks I could do better” Katerina’s comments got a few chuckles from the 2 soldiers “But there's something I need to ask of you. You're the only ones I really trust for this”

“Sure thing, Shepard. What do you need ?” Kaidan asked.

“Karin is going to take me to a medical center after I talk to the brass, Garrus is busy trying to convince his embassy to allow him to take Tali there, and Wrex and Joker… let's just say that I don't trust them enough for this” The Commander let out a deep breath as she fixed the seams of her dress blues “I… I need you to take care of Liara while were here on the Station”

“I think she can take care of herself pretty well, Kate. Her biotics are no joke.” Williams replied, an annoyed frown set on her face.

“That's not what I mean, Ash”

“Why don't you tell the Asari embassy to pick her up ?” Kaidan asked “I'm sure since she's a T'Soni they would happily…”

“She asked me not to contact them. She doesn't want her presence with us to be known to so many
people. Look…”

Shepard pulled the two closer to the door, giving them a slightly more private place to talk “I need you to make sure she's not treated to the wrong kind of human hospitality. Just make sure she's not harassed by anyone, please. We're the only thing that girl has in her life right now, so please, I ask you as a friend…” Katerina placed a hand on Ashley’s shoulder, the tone of her voice making the Chief to have a longing feeling as memories of herself protecting her sister Sarah briefly crossed her mind “…Keep her safe”

“We can handle this. Right, Ash?” Kaidan said as he gave her a soft pat in the back.

Williams smiled at Shepard, and gave her a reassuring look “Don't worry, Skipper. We'll take care of her”

“Thank you. That's a huge weight off my mind”

Katerina listened as the airlock hissed open, and watched as several uniformed individuals entered the Normandy.

Shepard let out an exasperated sigh “Here we go”

Kaidan and Ash did their best to hide the sinking feeling on their stomach when they saw Liara’s longing, pain filled expression as Katerina was marched away by the Admirals after giving them the tour of the Normandy.

“She's going to be fine, Doctor. The Admirals are just going to give her an ear pulling and that'll be the end of it”

The Asari gave Ashley a dumbfounded look.

“So besides punishing her they're going to pull her ear as well ? Is it some sort of tradition for your Admirals to do that ?”

“It's not a literal ear pulling, It's a human saying that means they're going to reprimand her a bit, tell her what to do, and that's it. Nothing to worry about” Kaidan said as the trio walked out of the ship.

As they entered the station, Liara had to pause to appreciate the sheer magnitude of the place.

“This is… impressive” the Asari said as she kept looking at all the details of the area.

“Yeah, a true wonder of human engineering. It only took us 12 years to make it” Ashley replied as they moved deeper into the facility.

“My mother came here several times, but her descriptions don't make justice to it”

“Why did your mother come here?” the Lieutenant queried as they entered a food fair, the scent of which made them remember how hungry they all were.

“She came to oversee the establishment of the embassies of the Asari Republics” Liara paused for a moment and looked towards the floor. Ashley thought she saw a tinge of shame on the Asari’s face “She used to send me messages from her trips. Pictures, videos. Sometimes she asked me to have a vidcall with her. I never did, me being the selfish, stupid kid I was, and still am”
“Hey, don't beat yourself over it. We all have our rebellious moments against our family” Ashley patted the Asari's back “I don't know how many times my dad and I were at each other's throats. Not literally” the Chief clarified when she saw the concerned expression on Liara's face.

“We all make mistakes. Best we can do is move on and learn from them. I'm sure you'll get the chance to see your mother again” Alenko said as they sat down in one of the empty tables, as far as possible from the crowds that were throwing less than friendly looks in their direction.

“I hope you are right, Kaidan. I really do”

Thinking of ways to cheer up the Asari, an idea flashed in Williams mind. She whispered something in Kaidan's ear, who then stood up and marched towards one of the food stands. Before the Asari could ask about what happened, Ashley spoke “So, Liara, do you mind if I call you that ?”

Liara let out a short laugh “I would prefer if you would call me that. I-I told you a few weeks ago, Chief Williams, but I don't blame you for not remembering, considering that we… haven't precisely gotten along too well”

“Listen, I'm sorry for all the crap I gave you, and I apologize on behalf of the crew. I… Well, I wasn't…”

“Your suspicion is perfectly understandable. My mother was… is a hostile element, and you weren't sure if you could trust me. I don't blame you or your fellow crew members for anything”

“Regardless, I apologize for what I said to you, Liara. You're not what I expected, and I mean that in a good way. And please, call me Ashley”

“Ok, Ashley”

Shortly after, Kaidan returned with a tray and 3 drinks. A circular meal with a yellowish color emanated a pleasant smell.

“Have you ever had pizza, Liara ?” Kaidan queried with a smile on his face.

“I have not. The only human foods I've had are the food rations aboard the Normandy”

Ashley chuckled as she handed her a portion of the food “Well, this is what a real, proper human meal tastes like. Enjoy”

Katerina sat in one of the chairs in the large conference room, absentmindedly listening to the Admirals rant, nodding, accepting blame and agreeing with almost everything the Admirals said, from how her position as a Spectre could be used to benefit humanity, how to deal with the crew's concern and how she should have a more professional attitude regarding the non human members of her team.

“And what role does the Asari play on your team that's so important? Couldn't she be removed and replaced with someone else ? A human, preferably” Admiral Boris Mikhailovich spoke in an smug tone, his sight coldly focused on Shepard.

“That 'Asari’ as you so dismissively refer to her has a name. Doctor Liara T'Soni is first and foremost a tremendously intelligent Prothean expert, who has been investigating and researching their culture, history and the reasons for their extinction before we even discovered the ruins on
Mars. Her knowledge has proved invaluable in deciphering and understanding all the Prothean elements we've discovered in our mission so far” Katerina snarled back at the Admiral, speaking in a firm, borderline threatening tone “I very much doubt that any of our scientists have the level of experience that she has, so no, Admiral, we cannot replace her”

“Looks like I pulled a string” Boris said as he chuckled “You certainly get defensive whenever someone mentions this Dr T’Soni. Why's that, Commander ?”

The fierce look Shepard gave him made the Admiral swallow hard.

“That's enough, Admiral Mikhailovich” a stern, confident voice said. A voice belonging to the only person Katerina trusted in this room “Commander Shepard knows what’s best for her team and her mission, and it's her prerogative to organize it as see she's fit”

Shepard looked at Hackett and thanked him, happy to know that at least someone was on her side.

After a few more hours, the meeting was over. Kat walked out of the conference room, leaning against the wall in an empty corridor as she rubbed the large scar above her nose in frustration, her headache, worsened by the hours long talk, sent sporadic waves of pain through her body.

“First on Elysium and now here. Looks like Hackett has a tendency to pull your ass out of the fire”

Katerina opened her eyes and saw a woman standing in front of her, black hair tied in a bun, dark brown eyes focused on her, a long, healed scar sitting across her lips.

Shepard’s stoic expression remain unfazed “Humour has never been your strong suit, Fatima. How did you know I was here ?”

The woman chuckled “A little cranky today, aren't we ? After the railing you just got, I don't blame you” the woman paused and pulled from one of her pocket a long cigar, one of the odor and smokeless type the Salarians made, lightning it up with her omnitool and taking a draw of it before continuing “And I already knew you were coming. I was reading the Admiral’s messages as they decided whether to bring you here. I'd knew you'd be summoned a few days ago, so I decided to stop by and say hi”

“Well, hello” Katerina replied in a cold tone “Anything else ?”

“How's the operation going with our Asari friend ?”

Shepard paused for a moment, letting out a deep breath before replying “Fine, for now. Gaining her trust was easier than expected. She's practically eating out of my hand right now”

“When I started getting reports from several of our sources onboard your ship who were more than a little concerned about your “friendly’ behavior towards Liara, I knew you were doing a good job”

“Nice to know a bunch of snitches are constantly watching my back”

“You haven't been precisely subtle. Has she told you anything relevant ? Something we should know ?”

“Not yet. Still working around to discussing politics and some serious stuff with her. In a while, I should know more” Katerina said as she threw a quick glimpse of the window, her eyes focusing on the dozens of ships and lights that illuminated the station before the throbbing in her head forced her to close her eyes.
“You ok? You look a little tense” Fatima asked in a concerned tone.

“Just a headache. Nothing serious. Do you need something else or can I go?” Shepard replied in a frustrated tone as she straightened herself.

“2 more things. This info I'm about to give you is courtesy from some friends”

Katerina chuckled “Well, I hope that your friends have info that's accurate and useful this time, and not the shit you usually give me”

“Don't forget all the times the ‘shit’ we give you has saved the poor excuse of a life you have. And don't forget how easily we can turn it into a living hell”

“Considering how fucked up I already am, there's not a lot you can do to make it worse”

“You don't mean that, Shepard. You, of all people, know very well we can”

Sheward gave her a quick look before focusing on the view outside again. Unpleasant memories flashed through her mind briefly, and her scar throbbed in pain once again.

“Now, for what's important” the woman tapped her omnitool a few times and began transmitting data to Shepard through an encrypted channel “First, head to Terra Nova. We lost contact with a mining Asteroid called X57 near the planet's orbit. The brass seems to think it's just a communication blackout, but we picked up some transmissions from the Kite’s Nest which pointed to some actions taking place near the planet”

“You think the Batarians are involved?”

“It's a possibility. And a very serious one. I wouldn't put chunking an asteroid into our colonies beyond those animals. That's why I need you there to check it out, Batarians being your specialty and all”

“Keep it up with the shitty humour and I might just die here” Katerina said as she briefly looked at the hour on her omnitool “The second thing?”

“Head to Noveria after dealing with Terra Nova. Benezia landed there yesterday, and so far our spy drones haven't picked her or her entourage leaving the planet. And that's it. You're free to go, Commander”

“Oh, and Katerina, about Liara...” Shepard, who was already leaving, stopped shortly before the exit as she heard Fatima's voice “I'm sure I don't need to remind you what's at stake here, so keep your head clear and focused. And I mean that in more ways than one”

The Commander turned around “It's not my first time doing this. Save your speeches for the rookies” ‘And fuck your greater good bullshit. I'm done fighting for greater good’

As she walked through the station on her way to the Normandy, the only good thing Shepard could think of was that she now at least had an excuse to avoid Karin’s medical orders.

Katerina entered the food court after receiving a message from Kaidan, and it didn't took her long to see the trio. She unconsciously smiled as she saw Kaidan, Ash and Liara loudly laughing and talking, a semi eaten pizza sitting on the table. As Shepard approached them, Liara spotted her and, with her hand still covered with trails of melted cheese, she began to wave at her. Kate laughed as her mind began to think of how Liara had made such a mess of herself.
“Shepard. It's so good to see you. Here, taste this” the Asari said as she handed her a piece of the meal.

“I take that you liked it? You got melted cheese all over you”

“Oh, yes, it is quite delicious, although slightly… difficult to eat without the covering getting everywhere”

“Watching Liara eating that pizza was some funny shit, Skipper. You should've seen it” Ashley chuckled as she tapped her omnitool a few times to pay for the food and drinks.

Katerina stretched her hand and wiped a dot of cheese from Liara’s nose, smiling as she let her hand linger a little too long on the Asari’s face. Liara leaned into the touch for a moment before grabbing her hand and moving it under the table, concerned about the many eyes that could see their display of public affection. Once their intertwined hands were out of public sight, she held it as tightly as she could, smiling back at Shepard as their hands locked together.

“How was the meeting?”

“Better than I’d hoped. They did almost everything I expected them to say. We'll stay here for today. Tomorrow, we leave”

“To where?”, Kaidan asked.

“Terra Nova. The Alliance thinks the Batars* might be doing some nasty stuff there. We gotta go and check it out?”

“Batars doing nasty stuff on The Verge? No way” Ashley laughed, sarcasm dripping from her voice “And what about the hundreds of ships they could send there? Why it's gotta be us?”

“Maybe the brass wants to give Shepard another Star of Terra. “Savior of Elysium and Terranova” That's gonna look good on the service record” Kaidan replied with a smile on his face.

“Maybe I should send you two sarcastic geniuses over there, and you can both get your own medals” Katerina answered.

After a while and as the talk continued, the lingering feel of guilt continued to build up inside Shepard every time she saw Liara. The words uttered by Alejandro, or what she thought had been him, crossed her mind over and over.

“She doesn't deserve this”

“Katerina, are you alright?”

“What?”, Shepard looked back at the Asari, her train of thought interrupted.

“You fell silent all of sudden, you seemed lost in your thoughts. Is everything fine?”

“Yeah, yeah, don't worry, Li” Katerina said as she gave a slight, affectionate press to the Asari’s hand “Everything’s gonna be fine”
*Batars is a little headcanon of mine of how the Alliance soldiers and humans on general despectively refer to the Batarians.
Fire over Terra Nova

Republic of Tevura, Thessia.

Military Headquarters. Location classified.

Conference room.

“You're telling me that Benezia's daughter was at Arcturus for a whole day, and we didn't hear about it at all? Looks like our spy friends from Serrice are even more incompetent than I thought” the Matriarch spoke in a firm tone to the Matriarchs who were gathered in the room. Some had traveled over for this meeting, while others were present through holographic displays”

“The Alliance keeps a tight grip on their station, Zelinya. And they aren't precisely forthcoming about who comes and goes there”

“That's precisely the reason you have an embassy there. To have eyes and ears. I'm sure the Salarians knew Liara was going there as soon as the Normandy hit the relay”

“The Salarians know everything about everyone. And they're not ones to share unless it benefits them” one of the Matriarchs that represented Armali replied.

“Thank you for reminding us of the obvious, Enara. Any updates on Benezia?”

“Your sister arrived on Noveria a few days ago. She's still there now”

“And she still hasn't replied to any of our contact requests?”

“No. Neither her or her acolytes have answered to any of our hails. I think it's safe to assume that they aren't planning to return to Asari space anytime soon”

Zelinya lower her gaze towards the floor, closing her eyes for a moment as she let out a deep breath, unconsciously tracing the scar that crossed her face. Goddess damn you, Benezia. What the hell are you doing?

“Esteemed Matriarchs, I think it's time for us to consider the future of the T'Soni house”

The Matriarchs turned and saw the figure at the end of the room, who spoke in a decisive, cold tone. Her factions may have been slightly distorted through the holographic display, but Tevos factions and her cold gaze were still clear enough to send slight shivers down some of the Matriarch’s spines.

“Benezia's absence will not remain a secret to the public for long, and if there were to be internal turmoil in the House for a petty power struggle, the effects would be felt throughout the Armali Republic itself. And we can't afford inner weakness, not with the humans trying to challenge us at every turn”

“I don't think there will even be a power struggle. She may have refused early in her life, but if the need should arise, I'm sure Liara would…”

“A pureblood has not been at the head of an Asari house for millennia, and we must not allow
Benezia's… ‘mistake’ to change that. Adding the fact that she's a human sympathizer, it is imperative we begin to look for possible solutions to this problem at once” the Councilor said to the gathered group, and smiled as all the Matriarchs nodded in agreement.

Zelinya continued absentmindedly listening to the meeting. The things being discussed had always been a possibility. She just had hoped that such contingencies would have not been needed as long as she lived.

But if there was something she had learned during her almost one thousand years of life, is that life and the Galaxy always found ways to surprise her, both for good and for ill.

The Normandy surged through the Arcturus relay, heading to Terra Nova and its asteroid who'd recently gone off the grid. Part of the team was gathered at the vehicle bay. Wrex and Ashley got their armor and weapons ready and moved inside the Mako.

“Back into hell” Wrex chuckled as he sat.

“Can I drive this time, Skipper? For all our sake ?” Ashley replied.

“I'll drive. Stop whining” Katerina said from outside the vehicle.

“So, you're all set ? Armor, weapons, everything?” Liara said as she adjusted Shepard’s armor and ran her hand through the Commander's red hair, trying to comb it as much as she could.

“Yes, Li” Katerina replied with a smile on her face “Don't worry so much. We're probably just go to check on their coms equipment. We'll be back before you know it ?

“I'm sure” Liara spoke in a disbelieving tone as she continued to check the Commander's equipment “Did you grab enough grenades, medigel ? Did you check that your omnitool was working properly? ”

“Yes, Li” Shepard replied in an exasperated tone as she laughed.

“Are you going to be careful?”

Shepard remained silent for a few moments before replying “I'll try”

Liara nodded her head slowly. Shepard thought she saw a tear on the verge of failing from the Asari's eyes.

“I suppose that's all I can ask for” Liara replied, doing her best to hide the fear in her voice as she grabbed Shepard’s helmet and handed it to her.

The Asari leaned forward, grabbed her head and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek “Take care. For my sake” Liara whispered.

Katerina grabbed her and kissed her back on the cheek “I will. I promise”

The Asari held her hands as tightly as she could briefly before letting go.

Shepard placed her helmet on to hide the reddish tinge on her cheeks as Liara rushed back to the elevator.
Shepard gave her a final look as she entered the Mako. Liara smiled at her and nodded as the elevator moved up, her cheeks still colored with that purple tone that made Shepard’s smile.

The Mako dropped onto the rough, dry soil of the Asteroid. None of the trio said anything as they walked out of the vehicle, but the picture of the rock heading ever faster against the planet send shivers down their spines.

“I don't think this is just some comm failure, Shepard” Ashley said as she scanned the area with her sniper rifle.

Walking up to a small prefab on a nearby hill them, it didn't took them long to notice the body outside.

Wrex kneeled next to it, examining the bullet wound it had on the head.

“What can you tell, Wrex ?”

Wrex turned around and looked at Shepard “By the looks of it, the slug was designed to expand on impact, tearing through flesh and bone at a very accelerated rate. This kind of ammo is illegal in Citadel Space, and as far as I know, only the BSA manufactures it”

“What's the BSA ?” Ashley queried.

Katerina removed the safety of her rifle as she looked toward the active fusion torches in the distance “Batarian State Arms. Come on, let's go end the fuckers”

The Mako began to roll over the open terrain in the direction of a fusion torch, the smooth ground of the Asteroid giving the team a relatively smooth ride.

“So, uh… Wrex. You have a lot of experience fighting Batarians ?” Ashley asked as they jumped slightly inside the Mako.

“Enough. They're tougher to kill than you humans, but they still go down easy enough” the Krogan turned and looked at Katerina, who silently drove the Mako, her gaze focused on the horizon. “If you want to know about Batarians, Shepard can tell you a lot more than me. I remember being on Omega a while back, when the first news of the Blitz started to come in. ‘Lone human holds off pirate assault long enough for Alliance reinforcements to arrive and save the colony of Elysium’. There were plenty of pissed off Batarians on Omega back day” Wrex said as she let out a short laugh.

No reply came from the Commander.

“Speaking about that, why don't you ever wear your Star of Terra, Shepard ? You don't even use it when you're wearing your dress blues”

“I don't wear it. Ever” Katerina replied in a cold, threatening tone, which was enough for the Gunnery Chief to stop asking about it.

“Because Shepard is a true warrior, like a Krogan. We don't give ourselves awards or medals like
other races do for petty, insignificant squabbles. Survival is the only reward that matters”

Shepard held the steering wheel of the vehicle tighter, swallowing hard as she felt the usual headache starting to build up at the back of her head.

“I wouldn't call what happened on Elysium a ‘petty squabble’, Wrex” Ashley replied as she checked her rifle.

“Of course it was. A couple thousand dead and a semi destroyed city is nothing. That kind of thing happens on the Terminus everyday” the Krogan said “Besides, there's….”

Ashley and Wrex hit the roof of the vehicle as the Mako ground to a halt.

“What the fuck happened ?” Ashley queried, confusedly looking for any breaches or hits inside the vehicle.

Shepard turned and looked at them, the fierce look in her eyes making both of them feel intimidated by the Commander.

“In case you didn't notice, I don't like talking about the Blitz. I don't ever bring up the Blitz, and I am not in the least interested in discussing what happened there with ANYONE! So the next time you want to talk about Elysium, the ‘petty squabble’ that the Blitz was, or anything related to it, you get very fucking far away from me. UNDERSTOOD?”

Ashley and Wrex nodded silently.

“Good” Katerina let out a deep breath and she straightened herself in the driving seat “Now, let's get to…”

The Mako shaked violently.

“Stop that, Shepard” Ashley said in an annoyed tone.

“That wasn't me” Shepard gave the controls a dumbfounded look “I don't know what…”

An explosion breached the hull of the vehicle. The lights went out and sparks started to fly as loose wires began to let out short bursts of electricity.

“GET OUT” Ashley shouted as she jumped from the vehicle, her sniper rifle in hand, and began to engage a series of turrets in the distance that were responsible for the attack.

Wrex was about to leave when he saw Shepard still sitting in the driver seat, completely unfazed by the events around her.

“Shepard! We have to go! Now!”

Katerina began to mumble as she tried to move the controls and try to activate the holo panels in the vehicle.

“Engine… dead…. Canon… dead… Mobility… impossible”

The Krogan walked up to her, jumping every time another rocket hit the vehicle.

“Shepard!”
Soldiers screamed. The unit. Her unit.

There was blood on the floor of the vehicle. A few severed limbs were scattered across the floor.

Flames were building up inside the Mako, the sparks and the smoke swallowing those who hadn't jumped out yet.

Outside, explosions and gunfire filled the area. The rumble of fighter jets was followed by intermittent massive explosions. Her translator broken, she could hear human soldiers speaking in all sorts of languages. Cries of pain, frustration, anger. She could also listen to the guttural screams and cries of Batarians in the distance.

Katerina sat there, frozen. Pieces of her shattered helmet buried in her skin, her left leg bleeding from cuts and small burns.

Her rifle was out of reach, her omnitool torn to pieces by the explosion.

“I won't burn” Katerina thought as she began to pull out her knife “I won't burn”

“SHEPARD! WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING ? GET OUT!”

She turned and look at the figure. Alejandro stood beside her, pulling soldiers out and shouting into the radio.

Shepard turned her gaze back to the front of the vehicle, watching the smoke began to go over her head.

“This is my fault. My fault... I did this”

Ramos shouted. Him and her were the only ones left inside. The only ones alive, at least.

“It had to end someday” Shepard laughed, pain flaring up her nerves from her broken skin and tears rolling down her eyes.

Her eyes went blank for a moment as she felt a hit on the side of her head.

She dropped like a brick to the ground, and she felt herself getting dragged.

“You're gonna be ok, Shepard”

“You're gonna be ok”

“What the fuck did you do ?” Ashley shouted as she scanned Shepard with her omnitool and fixed the cracks in her helmet. In the distance, the turrets had been turned to smoldering ruins.

“She didn't want to leave the Mako. I made her leave” Wrex smiled as he removed the small burnt patches from his armor.

“By smacking her in the head ? You could have fucking killed her!”

“And if she stayed inside she would have fried” the Krogan looked at the Mako in the distance. The vehicle's ammunition was exploding like fireworks, tearing away more and more parts of the
“I’m ok” Katerina slowly sat upright “I’m ok. Did the reinforcements arrive ?”

“What reinforcements, Shepard ?” Ashley queried with a dumbfounded look on her face.

“The caravan that was headed to Chasca. The Batarians have city under siege. We must hurry if we…”

“It’s 2183, Shepard” the Krogan bellowed “Chasca fell 8 years ago. Snap out of it”

The Commander looked around.


“What happened to the Mako ?” Katerina asked as she stood up and cleaned the burnt from her rifle.

“Turrets. Must be using stealth tech. The Mako’ radar didn't pick them up. I took care of them” Ashley explained as she pointed towards the ruins in the distance.

“Everyone in one piece ? You're all ok ?”

“We should be asking that to you, Shepard. Can you carry on ? You had a little… incident in the Mako” Wrex spoke.

“I'm fine. In case you forgot, we have a mission to do” Shepard said in a cold, commanding tone as she began to walk towards the fusion torch.

“Skipper…”

“I said let's go, Chief”

The team nodded, and silently fell behind the Commander as they marched to their objective.

As they moved away from the now turned off fusion torch, leaving several Batarian corpses to rot inside, the team walked in silence towards their objective. Shepard, as usual, led the way.

Ashley cautiously stood behind her, and spoke in a tone that verged on fearful.

“Hey, Shepard. You sure you're holding out alright ? I mean…”

“I'm fine, Ash” Katerina replied coldly.

“But what you did in there… You were… a little intense”

Katerina pinned down the Batarian who tried to flee.

“Please… I surrender” the Batarian slaver cried out “I'll tell you anything, just… PLEASE, DON'T…”

Katerina smacked him in the head with the butt of her rifle.
And again.

And again.

The Commander watched as the alien's head began to disappear under her blows, everything above his neck turning into a pulpy mass of flesh, blood and bone which was falling all over her.

She felt when the rifle hit the floor, but she carried on. One blow after another.

“ Shepard... Shepard!”

Katerina turned around panting, her helmet and a good part of her armor now reddened and covered in pieces from her victim "What ?"

Wrex looked at Shepard with his typical stoic expression, tough slightly fazed by the scene before him. Ashley had a barely contained expression of shock.

"I said we cleared the building” the Chief explained as she watched the corpse under Shepard

“And I-I think you can ease off on him. He's pretty dead"

Katerina looked back at the mangled corpse next to her. The only way to tell he was a Batarian was by the armor he wore.

"Right. Let's move"

"I don't have any love lost for the Batars, but... Are you sure you're ok, Shep ?”

“Can you believe this, Wrex ? Williams thinks I'm going mad” Shepard let out a short laugh.

“ You humans and the Asari have a tendency to “snap” and “lose” your minds during heavy combat. So no, I don't believe William's concerns about you are completely unjustified” the Krogan replied.

“Oh, fuck me. As far as I know, none of you are fucking shrinks or psychologists. So how about we shut up and…”

Shepard and the team stopped in their tracks as the second fusion torch turned off in the distance.

“What the hell ?” Williams said as she scanned the area under the torch with her rifle.

“Looks like someone is doing our job for us” Wrex exclaimed.

Katerina stood silently as she watched the hills that surrounded the the propelling device. Her gaze stopped at the top of one of them, listening to the distant rumble of the final third torch.

“We're being watched”

“How do you know ?” Wrex queried as he walked up to next to her, eyeing the horizon through his shotgun’s sight.

“I… I don't know. I just feel it”

“Right” the Krogan replied dismissively.

Shepard looked at the timer set on her omnitool. 1 hour, 30 minutes. All that was left before the asteroid reached the point of no return and plunged towards the colony.

“The turrets here are destroyed” Ashley pointed to the area below them, where faint plumes of
smoke billowed from the empty containers that once held the machines “Something or someone took them out. We missed all the fun”

“This is getting… ‘interesting’. Let’s go. Double time it to the final torch”

As the team began their sprint, they felt a slight tremor on the ground.

“What the…”

The area in front of them disappeared into a glowing ball of orange light. Flames consumed the torch and knocked the three of them into the ground just as the searing wave of heat fell over them.

Katerina felt her throat and eyes dry as she was knocked down. She coughed and gasped for air as the smoke enveloped her. She desperately patted the ground around her, trying to feel Ashley, Wrex. Anything.

She felt herself drifting as her mind began to black out. As her eyes closed, the voice rang out in her mind.

“You’re gonna be ok”

An eye watched the smoke rose up to the atmosphere through the sniper scope.

“Well, well, Commander, we meet again’ the guttural voice spoke as the figure stood and watched the distant fusion torch “Sorry for that. Wasn’t expecting company so soon. But this is something the Hegemony must solve on its own”

The figure placed the rifle on its back and began to sprint to the distance “You’ll survive, Shepard. You always do”
Chapter 20

“The light. Move towards the light”

Shepard took a few steps, coughing, her head still spinning from the concussion.

“Ash ?... Wrex ?” she called on the radio.

There was no reply.

“No one left. Just you”

Katerina dropped to the floor, her head feeling like it was about to explode, her nerves flaring up from sudden spikes of pain. As she laid down on the dry rock floor, and with the scar above her nose pounding and with her eyes threatening to close once more, a constant flame in the horizon caught her attention.

The third torch had gone up in flames, but the Engineering Center in the distance had all its lights on. It didn't took her long to guess that that's where the rest of the Batarians were holed up.

“I've got to move” the Commander said as she stood, applying medigel to try to alleviate her discomfort as she got upright, doing her best to ignore the bolts of pain that went through her.

She began to run, her rifle in hand, and an objective on her sight.

“Any sign of her ?” Wrex asked as he searched the pockets of a dead Batarian mercenary.

“Not yet” Ashley said as she scanned the entrance to the Engineering Building through her sniper Mantis’s sights. Shepard being a Spectre had given the squad access to a whole new array of otherwise unobtainable weapons, but Williams prefer to stuck with the Alliance ones she'd used throughout her military life.

“Fuck, fuck,fuck!” Ashley screamed as she hit the rifle, punching the ground a few times before turning back and sitting on the ground. The pain coming from her bleeding leg only added to her frustration.

“What the hell is wrong with you ?” Wrex growled, giving her an annoyed look.

“We should have searched longer” Williams said, her tone filled with rage “Shit! We should go back and confirm her status” Ashley looked at the large cloud of dust and ash that engulfed the area where the other torch had just until recently been “If she's dead…”

“Then you build her a statue, or name a city after her. But unless we can contact the Normandy, we're going to be stuck here for hours until they realize something's wrong. And I am not looking forward to being here with you counting rocks” the krogan spoke as he moved next to the woman.

“Right… ok… pick me up. Let's go” the Chief shook her head briefly, gaining some clarity and clearing her head.

Ashley sat on the Krogan’s shoulders, and kept watch with her rifle as Wrex jogged towards the remaining building.
Katerina entered the structure, passing by the dead soldiers at the entrance. Inside, she could hear the gunfire coming from deeper inside the building.

“Ash and Wrex must be cleaning house” she thought as she applied more medigel and sneak inside.

Covering behind a crate, she saw the dozen batarian mercs firing at something she couldn't see. Following the gunfire, it didn't took her long to see the shadowy figure moving though the lower levels.

Moving like a ghost, the shape rushed past the mercenaries only for them to drop dead shortly after. The one Katerina assumed was the leader shouted furiously and unleashed a couple Varren after it, but they suffered the same fate as the rest of his men.

The lights went out for a few moments. When they came back on, Balak was bloodied and bruised, being held at gunpoint from behind by another Batarian who was looking directly at her.

“Commander Shepard. Long time no see” the Batarian spoke as she cocked her submachine gun “We have to stop meeting like this”

Katerina let out a short laugh as she aimed at the woman “Ocatia. So I suppose you're the one responsible for... blowing me up back there”

“Yes. I was already planning to blow the torches. And since you and your team we're passing through, I took the chance to gain some time. Delay you a little. Nothing personal”

“Blow the torches? I'd have guessed that your bosses sent you here to make sure your terrorist buddies succeeded” Katerina moved slowly towards the center, of the room, her finger resting millimeters away from the trigger as she studied the surroundings of her target.

“You'd be wrong, Shepard. Our Balak friend here pulled this little op on his own. I'm guessing he felt the urge to perform some patriotic duties for the homeland, am I right?” she tightened her grip on the Balak’s throat, making the bloodied men choke for a little before easing the pressure “We will burn this colony someday, Katerina, on that you can rest assured. But we will burn it with our fleets in orbit, and when we're ready. Not when certain “overzealous comrades” decide it's a good time to push our people into war by dropping asteroids on human colonies”

“How very thoughtful of your leadership. So they sent you to put down a loose canon?” the Commander queried.

“I was sent to retrieve Captain Balak to ensure he's re instructed in the values of respecting and obeying the Hegemony's leadership”

“Not gonna happen. I'm taking this bastard in. Too many people died here, and someone's gotta pay. And that someone is your bleeding buddy” Shepard said as she took a few steps forward, closer to the Batarian duo.

“I understand, but unfortunately, it's not going to happen” Ocatia said in a condescending tone as she smiled.

The metal doors on the entrance opened, and shortly after Katerina smiled as she saw Wrex and Ash moving next to her, their weapons pointed at the remaining 2 Batarians up the stairs.
“Took you long enough to get here” Shepard smiled at her squadmates.

“Thought you were dead, Commander. Glad to see we were wrong” Ashley replied.

“Shepard” the Krogan nodded once at the Commander as he moved to her side.

“Wrex” Katerina nodded back “Did you radio the Normandy ?”

Wrex shook his head “Our comms were knocked out in the blast. Came here hoping to find a working radio”

“The Alliance is letting Krogan into their ranks now ? Is morale and recruitment levels so low ?” the Batarian woman chuckled “That's something armies do when they've all but lost, having run out of manpower which forces them to start picking mercenaries from where they can find them”

“Batarians know a thing or two about losing wars” Wrex said in an overconfident tone.

“Who the fuck are you ?” Ashley shouted at the Batarian.

“Oh, where are my manners ? Allow me to introduce myself. Ocatia Bas’Sedrak. Captain, SIU operative and long term ‘acquaintance’ of Commander Shepard” the Batarian woman made a slight bow movement with her head.

“Acquaintance?” Ashley gave a quick look at Katerina.

“I'm not sure if that's proper term. We met during the Blitz and have since had a relatively cooperative ‘business’ relationship”

“And here I thought you humans and Batarians couldn't even look at each other” Wrex laughed as he gave a quick glance at Ashley “Oh, don't look at Shepard like that. I doubt she's the only one doing under the table deals. War is good business’”

“What the fuck is she talking about, Skipper ?” Williams tightened the grip on her rifle.

Katerina answered with silence, her sight focused on her target.

“Anyways, I'd love to stay and chat, but I'd rather leave before your ships arrive. Your fleets have a lousy accuracy, but occasionally they do hit at what they're aiming”

“A couple thousand of your buddies found out on Elysium how “lousy” our aim is. They found out the hard way” Katerina replied.

Ocatia let out a short laugh. She grabbed Balak’s closed hand and forced it open “Well, look at what our friend is holding” she spoke as she showed them the detonator, taking a few steps backwards.

Shepard gave a quick glance to the left and saw all the explosive devices carefully hidden among the building’s internal decor.

“Goodbye, Commander”

As the crew unleashed rounds of gunfire, Ocatia pushed the button. A flash of light appeared before them. And then, darkness.
The Commander’s eyes slowly rolled open, her head feeling groggy and heavy as she tried to move it.

The white lights above blinded for a few moments before her sight adjusted to them. She was in a clinic room, laying on a bed as the equipment to her side beeped in a constant rhythm. On a chair to the left, Karin slept, her arms crossed head leaned against the wall as she let out an occasional snore.

To her left, she smiled as she saw who was there. Liara was sleeping. Sitting on a chair next to the bed, her head was resting on the bed and her hand was softly holding Shepard’s, blue skin protectively covering her own.

Shepard gave a slight squeeze to it and traced it carefully with her thumb, noticing how smooth and delicate it felt, a stark comparison to her own, which was calloused and scarred after decades of constantly receiving injuries.

As she looked out the window, she saw the Presidium ring far off in the distance, the dozens of skyscrapers that filled the Wards being showered by the light coming from the nebula.

“So… we're back in the Citadel” Shepard thought, her sight still focused on the distance. After years of coming to the station, she never got tired of the view.

“Good morning, Katerina. Sleep well?”

She turned her sight and looked at Liara, who was smiling at her, her face still half buried on the bed.

“Hey you” Shepard lifted the Asari’s hands and gave it a quick kiss, smiling as she saw the Asari slightly blushing “You being here was a pleasant sight to wake up to”

“I could say the same, Shepard, though I would prefer if you'd stop waking up in medical facilities” Liara chuckled.

Katerina laughed “I think we can all agree on that one”

The Commander paused, letting out a deep breath before asking “How are Ash Wrex ?”

Liara sat upright, the cheerfulness on her face quickly replaced by the more serious facade she wore around most people “Joker received a transmission from Wrex requesting evac. We notified the Terra Nova government and when we arrived, Wrex was waiting with you and Ash thrown over his shoulders outside of some ruined building. You and Ash… were hurt pretty bad”


“She still hasn't woken up. Wrex said that there were Batarians and that they blew up most of the mining complex”

“He… didn't mention anything else ? About the Batarians, I mean”

“No, not really. Wrex isn't much of a talker, anyhow. Why ? Is there something he should have told us ?” Liara asked as she softly traced one of the scars in Shepard’s hands.

“No, no. Just wanted to make sure if… he knew anything else” Katerina smiled “Why don't you wake up Karin ? I'm sure she'll have a thing or two to say to me”
“Oh, she will, Shepard. We’ll be on the Citadel a couple of days anyway. She wants to keep you under observation”

“She finally got me trapped with no escape” Shepard chuckled “It's not all bad. At least you're here”

“And I'll be here as long as you want me to” Liara lifted Shepard’s hand and and kissed it, and they both smiled as a shade of red set over the Commander's face.

2187

Rays of sunlight pierced the dark clouds that blackened the sky. The ashes and the smoke caused by the war had settled as a darkened layer in the heavens, a constant and grim reminder of the deadliest conflict humanity had fought.

The soldiers that patrolled the outskirts of the city wore old biohazard suits, trying to protect themselves from the smog filled air and the stench that came from downtown. The amount of soldiers that had to take off their masks to vomit said a lot about the quality of the suit filters.

Ganjah, what had once been one of the largest cities in Azerbaijan, was a shell of its former self. The skyscrapers and spaceports that had once dotted its sky were long gone, and had been replaced by the disabled carcasses of the Reaper ships. The decaying stench that filled the air came from the disabled processor ships, inside of which the remnants of thousands of humans decomposed, making the scent of death shower over everything and everyone nearby.

On a nearby hill, several tents were set up around one of the few houses that were still standing, giving the occupants a strategic view of the surrounding area.

Inside the house, the beeping of medical equipment was the only thing that broke the silence.

“Not even death could hold you back, eh, Shepard? Then again, you were always stubborn”

Katerina opened her eyes, trying to find the source of the voice. But the only thing around her was a wave of darkness that was only broken by a dim light in the sky that gave limited illumination.

Her feet didn't touch the ground. She was floating, dangling as she was held in place by an invisible source.

“Always said you were the best. That you had what it took. And in the end, you proved me right”

Shepard looked around, trying to locate the person that the voice belonged to. Her mentor. Her ally. Her friend.

"Anderson, I... I can't see you"
"You were such a pain in the ass, Shepard, but all the hell you put us through was worth it" The Admiral said in a warm, friendly tone.
"I'm... I'm not sure. So little was won. So much was lost" Shepard spoke in a hushed tone, her voice filled with longing and sorrow as she continued talking to the empty void.
"Uncountable lives throughout the Galaxy still exist because of you. You gave us a chance. You gave us a future"
Katerina let out a short, sarcastic laugh "'Future'? What future? David, have you taken a look at how things are here on Earth, and through most of the Galaxy?" Sheppard paused, and looked up towards the fading light in the sky, the only illumination in the sea of darkness "There is no future, David. We just replaced one hell with another"

No one answered.

"David? Anderson? Didn't they teach you in N school that not replying to someone in a conversation is considered rude?" Katerina chuckled briefly before lowering her face, the shadows beginning to cover most of her body "Anderson, please talk to me... Don't leave me alone"

As the light in the heavens dissipated, and the darkness swallowed her body, the words she had uttered so few times during her life but had felt through most of it crossed her mind one more time.

"Don't leave me alone"

She fell, her body descending at tremendous speed through the dark. As heartbeat raised, she felt the tears forming in her eyes as the air swirled violently around her.

"Stop. Please.... Make it stop"

Shepard jolted awake, her heartbeat ringing in her ears as she felt a cold sweat running down her skin. Her right hand were shaking, and she wasn't sure if it was because of the cold of the room or because they were trembling as they usually did. She turned her head slowly to look towards the window, but a sudden flare of pain in the back of her head froze her in place. She looked towards the left side of her body, and saw that it was blocked from her view by a large white vertical cover, which blocked it from her view.

She tried to move her left arm and leg, trying to remember a few of the exercises Karin had taught her years ago. Something about releasing stress from the limbs and relaxing the body.

But she felt nothing. Her arm and leg didn't respond.

It was like if they weren't even there.

She closed her eyes and let out a deep breath.

"You're not going to cry, Katerina" she thought as she held back the tears "Crying isn't going to bring back what you lost. Don't give them the pleasure of seeing you cry"

She heard the door of the room open, the creaking of the door followed shortly after by a series of footsteps that stopped next to her bed.

"I know you're awake, Commander. We get notified by the machines when you get altered or try to move beyond your limits"

She kept her eyes tightly shut, the tears she held inside ready to burst from them if they were given the chance.

"We'll be staying here for a while. The Alliance stopped their offensives after there were outbreaks of tuberculosis and other nasty things behind their lines. Not good to attack if you're people are dying behind you"
After a few clicks and beeps, she felt her heartbeat and breathing slow down after what she assumed was a sedative was pumped into her.

“This won't put you to sleep, but it'll help you relax” the coarse voice of the man said “Don't bother trying to look out the window. Trust me. There's nothing to look at out there”

“Did you took my arm off? And my leg?” Shepard asked, her voice dripping with sadness, anger… and pain.

“No, Commander. We…”

“Stop calling me that. It's been a very long time since I held a rank” Katerina let out a deep breath. *That part of my life is over. Gone for good. Among so many other things.*

“As I was saying, we didn't took anything off you, 'Shepard’. You can't feel them because of the anesthetics” the footsteps moved towards the door “I don't take any pleasure in this, Shepard. Trust me, I wish there was another way. I hope that telling you that all this will be for the greater good gives you some comfort”

The door creaked open, and after a few moments in silence, the man spoke again “You should have died on that last day of the war, Shepard, along with everyone else. After all you've done, that would have been a fitting death”

Katerina, even with her eyes shut, could feel the man's gaze over her mangled body. She wondered whether he was more filled with curiosity or disgust.

“You don't deserve this fate. You really don't”

As the door closed, Shepard sobbed, and felt the hot tears rolling down her cheeks.

This was as good time as any to cry.
Tali and Liara walked through one many shopping centers in the Presidium. They both did the best they could to hide the nervousness that each felt, Liara because of how uncomfortable crowds made her feel, and Tali because she knew that if she got too far from the Asari it wouldn't be long before C-Sec pulled her away for a “chat”.

“Goddess, why is everyone here so loud? I know some races auditory capabilities are rather limited, but it seems like everyone is trying to be louder than the person next to them” Liara said with an uncomfortable expression on her face as she moved through the crowds.

Tali turned and began speaking in a sarcastic tone “‘Oh, I'm an Asari. I can hear spaceships taking off on Thessia from here, and all these inferior aliens talking too loudly harms my auditory sensibilities’”

The Quarian smirked under her helmet as she watched the mortified expression that set on Liara’s face.

“No! No! Tali, I didn't meant what I said like that. I'm not implying that you're inferior in any way, it's just that I'm not fond of crowds, and back in Thessia you'd never hear such loud amounts of noise unless you were at the Parliament or…” the Asari buried her face in her hands “Oh, Goddess, I should stop talking”

“It was a joke, Liara. Relax” the Asari let out a short laugh “Kaidan said to tease you with something if we got the chance. They told us that you being embarrassed was funny and adorable. And They were right”

Liara lowered her hands and gave the Quarian an annoyed look “Glad to see that my lack of social skills makes you laugh. Truly, it pleases me to no end”

“We don't mean no harm. You're our friend, Liara. That's what friends do” Tali patted her shoulder.

Tali’s words crossed Liara’s mind over and over. “Friend”. She never had much friends throughout her life, and those few she had during her childhood and college years had all but disappeared from her life as she started her archeology career. And now, by mere fate, she had found a group of people who not only cared for her, but considered her someone they could trust and share a few laughs with. A friend.

The thought made Liara smile.

“Is something wrong?” Tali asked in a concerned tone.

Liara looked at her and smiled “It's just… nobody has called me a friend in a long time. I... I really didn't have any friends left before I came to the Normandy. Thank you”

“Awww, Liara” Tali gave her a tight hug “You're my friend. A lot of the crew-well, mainly Kaidan, Garrus, Shepard and Ash- consider you a friend, and you can count on us for anything”

“That... means a lot to me, Tali. I appreciate it”

“Come, then. Let's gets something to eat”

After ordering their meals and sitting down in one of the more isolated tables, Tali spoke.
“Garrus says you've been spending a lot of time in the Alliance Hospital”

“You seem to be paying too much attention to Garrus these days” the Asari gave a coy smile to the Quarian as she drank from her glass.

“Don't start” the Quarian said in a cold, cutting tone.

“I have. I've been keeping checks on the Commander and helping Karin as much as I can. The Alliance isn't too happy about it but Katerina has been using her Spectre status like there's no tomorrow” Liara explained as she let out a short laugh.

"So... you and Shepard, huh ?" The Quarian asked.

"Me and Shepard... what ?" Liara replied in an inquisitive tone.

"You're together, right ? Bonded, I think it's how you Asari call it"

The Asari paused for a moment, going over in her head what Tali had said. Liara's relationship with Shepard had been quite unusual. There had never been a spoken declaration of love, no romantic speech or kiss under the moonlight. They hadn't even kissed yet.

It had been something... hasty. Liara had been bedazzled by the incredible person that had saved her from certain death. She had been blown away both by the woman's natural beauty and a good case of hero worship. And as soon as she had shown her first signs of affection for the woman, Shepard had responded and returned those feelings. Maybe she was just as tired of being alone as she herself had been. Maybe they were simply two lost souls looking for something to hold onto, someone with whom to share grief and joy. Someone to love.

"Ground control to Dr Liara T'Soni. Do you copy ? Over ?"

The Asari looked at the Quarian, slightly reeling as her train of thought was interrupted. "What ?"

"I asked you about you and Shepard and you froze and then the silliest smile appeared on your face. Here, look"

The Quarian tapped her omnitool and a picture displayed itself from it "I added a few edits to it" Tali said as she let out a short laugh.

The picture showed Liara with a silly smile on her face, her cheeks adorned with what seemed to be a badly drawn blush and her sight foc used on the glass she held. The words "Thinking about Shepard" were at the bottom of the frame, and several hearts were spread across it.

Liara felt a wave of embarrassment wash over her, her eyes fixed on the image that was displayed.

"Don't ask me what those are” the Quarian pointed at the hearts and the drawn blush as she took a sip of her dextro drink “I searched human romantic symbols and I just added the first things that popped up”

“Put that away now, Tali!” Liara said as she tried to turn off the omnitool.

“It's so romantic, really. The dashing, beautiful human commander rescues the scientist from certain doom, and they both fall in love from the moment they see each other. Just like in the novels” Tali said as she moved just outside the Asari’s reach.

“You are terrible, Tali. And swear to me that you will get rid of that picture”
“I will, I will” Tali chuckled.

“By the way, later I'm stopping by the clinic to check on Shepard. Do you want to come ?”

“Going to check on your good, good friend, eh ? I wish I could, but Garrus wants to show me around where he used to work”

“If that's so, then let's have a toast. To hanging out with “good friends” “ Liara let out a short laugh.

“I'll drink to that” the Quarian said as she raised her glass to meet the Asari’s.

Shepard sat on the edge of the bed, reading a message on her omnitool and fixing her hair from the previous night's rest. She had slept well, mainly due to the sedatives she had gotten. If there was one good thing she could said about hospitals, it was that the drugs they gave her put her to sleep for a decent amount of time.

Placing her black tank top on,she lowered her sight and looked at her legs. Dozens or fresh scars accompanied the old ones, a gift from the Batarian bombs at Terra Nova.

Wrex had told that she managed to grab Shepard and shield her from the worst of the explosion, though the flying rubble had still hit her legs. One of the doctors had told her she had come close to losing them, and how lucky she had been.

“Yeah” Shepard let out a short laugh “Lucky me”

The door of the room hissed open, and a familiar figure carrying a child entered the room.

“You should tell the Alliance to keep a room open for you here. Get a permanent resident pass”

“Well, I'll be damned. Jennifer Buchanan. It's been a while” Shepard smiled.

“And you're still in a hospital bed. Just like the last time. Some things just don't change” the woman smiled as she walked next to her.

“What can I say ? I have a bad case of running into explosions” Shepard chuckled as she pointed at her legs.

The smile faded from Buchanan's face as she looked at the scars on her legs.

“Shit, Kat, are you…”

“They're fine. Almost fully healed” Shepard patted the bed next to her, motioning the empty space on the bed next to her “How did you even know I was here”

“Was here to bring the kid for a checkup. Saw Karin and talked to her. She told me where you were and that she'd be coming up soon, but that I could talk to you for a while.

Shepard looked at the sleeping baby, unconsciously smiling as she watched the boy's puffy cheeks as he rested on his mom’s shoulders.

“How is little Roberto ?”

“As healthy as he can be. The doctor said that the gene therapy has not cause any adverse effects and that there's no sign of his dad’s heart condition developing” the woman said as she softly,
rubbed the baby's back.

“That's amazing. I'm really happy, for both of you” Katerina replied “That's probably the only thing I wouldn't want him getting from his pops”

Jennifer let out a short laugh “I loved Miguel, but he was just as stubborn as you when it came to doctors. Remember that time in Chasca? When he fell off the Mako?”

“How could I forget? 'I'm fine, I'm fine. I just tripped, that's all' as he pretended that his leg wasn't as broken as his pride” Shepard chuckled briefly “Good times”

“The best” Jennifer gave a quick look at the window before turning towards Shepard “Wanna hold him?”

The Commander smiled “Yeah, sure” Katerina cradled the baby in her arms.

“So, what have you been doing? Ordinary tours or your super duper secret stuff you can't talk about?”

“Super duper secret stuff” Shepard replied.

“Figured as much. Don't you ever get tired of it?”

“You've asked me this before, Jen”

“Because a stubborn part of me still hopes that you can come to your senses one day”

Katerina let out a deep sigh “Truthfully, yes. I'm tired and sick of all of this. But… hopefully… it'll be over soon, and I hopefully will be able to walk a different path”

Buchanan gave her a disbelieving look “Uh huh”

“I'm serious, you asshole” Shepard gave the woman a playful shove, careful to not disturb the baby in her arms.

“Well, I have to admit that I have a hard time believing that. I guess time will tell. But, if you're actually serious…” Jennifer grabbed Katerina’s hands, holding it tightly as their fingers intertwined, the scars that covered their skins combining in an almost perfect pattern and serving as a constant reminder of days gone by “Know that you'll always have a place with us. With me”

Shepard softly traced the woman's hands with her thumb as she gave Buchanan a deep thoughtful look “Jen… I… Trust me, I wish that I… I'd want to, but...”

Buchanan nodded, disappointment briefly flashing on her face before lowering her sight “I know”

The door of the room hissing open and Dr Chakwas and Liara entering broke the silence that had befallen upon them.

“Afternoon, Shepard. Jennifer” Karin gave them a courteous nod as she walked beside the bed and stated to check the several devices that there stood, while Liara walked next to Jennifer and extended her hand “I don't think we've met. Dr Liara T’Soni”

Buchanan gave her a cold look as she stood up and softly grabbed her baby from Shepard’s arms “Jennifer Buchanan. And I'm sorry, but I must be going now. I just remembered something I had to do” the woman said as she hurriedly walked out of the room “Farewell, Karin. Liara… Katerina”
The Asari lowered her still stretched arm and gave Shepard a dumbfounded look “I thought this was how you human's greeted each other. Did I do it wrong? Was I being offensive? Is that's why she left like that?”

“No, no, Liara. You did fine. It's just that…”

“Mrs. Buchanan is not too fond of nonhumans” Karin answered without taking her eyes off the medical monitors “She's one of those few cases where I understand why she is like that, given her personal history. I don't agree with it, but I understand”

“I had no idea” Liara replied.

“Don't worry about it” Shepard softly placed her hand on top of the Asari’s, giving her a warm smile.

“Well, all the reports seem to indicate you're normal and stable for now. I think you're good to go walk around as you requested. As long as Liara goes with you” Chakwas explained.

“Yay! Free from the prison. For the moment. And with a lovely company bonus too” Shepard said as she lowered herself from the bed.

“Easy now” Karin said as she kept her eyes fixed in the Commander.

Shepard let out an annoyed sigh as Liara helped her off the bed.

“Now, no intense activities and I want you back here in 4 hours. Understood?”

“Hey Liara, you’ve ever been to Flux?” Shepard smirked “It’s this nice club they opened up in the Wards a couple months ago. Why don’t we check it out and…”

The Asari let out a short laugh as she saw the cold, disapproving gaze Dr Chakwas was giving the Commander.

“Don’t worry, Karin. I’ll make sure she doesn’t end in any nightclubs”

“Thank you, Liara. Good to know the adult here will be keeping you in check” the doctor said as she opened the door to the room.

“Ugh. Why don’t you let me be, mum? And why are you siding with her?” Shepard said in a sarcastic tone as she walked outside, Liara still holding her arm to support her.

“You don’t have to hold me if you don’t want to. I can walk on my own just fine”

"Shepard, I saw how you were after they brought you in. Your legs…” the Asari paused and lowered her sight “I don’t want you to reopen your wounds or get hurt. And I need to make sure you don’t run off. You might enjoy making Karin angry but I don’t” the Asari said with a forced half smile on her face “But if you don’t want to, I…”

Shepard felt a tinge of guilt building up in her stomach. Karin was already used to seeing her return from combat. After all, she had been the one to recover and treat her after the Blitz, when everyone had said that Shepard already had one foot in the great beyond when she was found. But this had probably been the first time Liara had seen first hand what war could do to someone. The small hints of pain she still felt in her legs also gave reason to Liara’s words.

Shepard held the Asari’s arms tighter “No, no, you’re right. And I do like walking around with you holding me. It’s like we’re on a date”
“A... date?” Liara said nervously as she slightly blushed.

“She’s so cute when she’s flustered” Shepard thought before answering “Yeah, a real proper date. I’ve taken you to many exotic locations, but the Thresher Maws, mercenaries and pirates kind of ruin the romantic setting”

“I don’t know. Maybe the danger and the feeling of adventure adds to the experience. Makes the dates more exciting” the Asari said as they moved throughout the halls of the clinic.

“Oh, I don’t need people shooting at me to make things exciting. Trust me” Shepard whispered to the Asari in a low, rough voice, who moved her face slightly to hide the flush of heat in her cheeks.

“I also saw that as you humans get older, you also start having difficulties to move on your own” Liara said, changing the subject of the conversation “So, this way, you can start getting some practice”

Shepard gave Liara an outraged look “Are you calling me old, Dr T’Soni?”

“Well, you’re going to be 30 soon, so…”

“So that means I still have a couple decades ahead of me before I get old, wrinkly and need help to move around. You’re the one who’s 100 and something years old’ Katerina chuckled ”Besides, I think I’m going to have the best support when that time comes. If you’re still going to want be with me when I’m old and wrinkly, that is” the Commander smiled warmly at Liara as she rubbed the skin on the Asari’s hands, noticing how the soft and delicate the scaled skin felt.

Liara gave Katerina a surprised look, almost as if the human didn’t fully understand the implications of what she had just told “You just... say these things”

“No, I’m serious. Imagine this. The grumpy, wrinkly old Commander Shepard talking about how things were better back in her day as Dr T’Soni holds her hand and makes sure that she doesn’t break her hips” Shepard let out a short laugh.

“That sounds... nice” Liara said as she gave Katerina a smile that warmed her heart.

“Yeah. It does” Shepard lowered her sight as a phrase she had heard long ago crossed her mind. *Never plan for the future in this line of work. It never ends well.*

They remained silent until they Shepard suddenly froze in the middle of the hall.

“Is something wrong ?” Liara asked in a concerned tone.

“Ash is in this floor. Isn’t she ?”

“Yes, she is”

“I want to see her”

“Shepard, she’s...”

“Please, Liara”

The Asari paused for a few moments before nodding “Let's go”

They moved towards the end of the hall. Shepard noticed the glances the staff, soldiers and their families gave at Liara who walked in silence, her head lowered as if she was trying to hide from
them. Katerina felt her stomach sink. The Asari knew how she would be treated, and she still had come with her. Despite everything, she still came through.

They reached the last room. Shepard pressed her forehead to the glass and looked inside it.

“Oh, God”

Ashley lay on the hospital bed, her eyes closed. Covered from head to toes in bandages, several medical machines were connected to her.

The sounds of the breather could be heard in the hall were the pair stood.

Shepard tightened her fists, her unblinking sight focused on her friend on the bed.

“Ash, I'm so sorry”

Liara placed a hand on her shoulder, the softness of her touch feeling like a wave of calmness washing over the distressed commander.

“It wasn't your fault, Katerina”

“I should have shot the detonator off Ocatia’s hands” the Commander spoke in a distressed tone “I should have disabled the bombs while they were killing each other. I should have blown the torch from the outside. I should… I should…”

“You acted as best you could, Shepard. Your mission succeeded and an entire colony was saved. Your entire squad came back alive” Liara softly rubbed Katerina’s back “Ash will recover. Don't blame yourself for this”

The Commander smiled and nodded. It was good to hear such words of comfort, even if she didn't believe them.

“Listen, uh, if you want to… go back to your room and rest, I understand. I thought that taking you for a walk might be good for you, but I didn't mean for you to get distressed. I'm sorry” the Asari spoke in a soft tone.

Katerina turned around, a half smile set on her face. She stretched her arm and carefully cupped one of Liara’s cheeks, rubbing her thumb along the soft, scaled skin “Distress is what I live for, Liara. There's nothing you have to apologize for. I'm sorry for making you feel like you have to be sorry” they both let out a short laugh “But I don't want to go back to my room. What do you say if we go get some drinks?”

“Shepard…”

“Soft drinks, Li. Nothing hard. Just to get our minds off things for a while?”

The Asari looked at her for a few moments before chuckling “You are incorrigible, Katerina Shepard”

“So I've been told” the Commander replied, a smug grin set on her face.

“Well, as long as they are soft drinks, I don't think there will be a problem. And I don't think Karin has to find out”

The Commander placed her arm around Liara’s shoulders as they moved towards the stairs “Look at us. Partners in crime and rebels without a cause”
“Well, we do have a cause. ‘Get our mind off things’, right?”

“I guess you're right, Doc” Katerina said before pausing, turning to give Ash a final look. The expression of her face was stoic, cold, determined as usual.

“Katerina, do you want to go back to your…”

“It's fine” the Commander cleared her throat as she tightened her grip on the Asari’s arms and continued moving towards “Let's get those drinks”

Liara could have sworn that she heard Shepard’s voice crack, but she didn't ask Katerina about it.

“So during all those excursions you did with teams on dig sites, did you ever… wanted company ?” Shepard asked before downing her cup filled with coffee in one swoop.

“I had company, Shepard. When I went with teams, there were plenty of people around to interact with” the Asari replied as she sipped her cup of tea.

“I meant a more… intimate sort of…”

“I know what you meant, Shepard. I'm not a child” Liara replied in a firm tone.

“So… did you ?”

Liara replied by giving her a smug look with a half smile set on her lips.

“Ha!” Shepard laughed “So there's more than the blushing cute girl façade you show to everyone”

The Asari finished her tea cup “Maybe”

“So what kind of company did you like ?” the Commander queried, curiousness dripping from her voice “Boys ? Girls ?”

“Remind me later how this conversation turned into an interrogation about my personal life” the Asari said as she stood and gave a quick look at her omnitool “Karin is messaging, telling me to get you back to the clinic”

Shepard let out an exasperated sigh “I feel like a prisoner being taken for walks around the jail”

“Well, you could use your Spectre authority to leave if you wanted” the Asari said as she helped Katerina stand up.

“And having Karin pissed off at me ? It's not worth it” Shepard chuckled “Give me a second, Liara” Katerina said as she let go of the Asari’s arm “I need to go to the bathroom before we go”

Liara glimpsed at the doors at the end of the room “Let me take you there”

“I can go on my own, Li. Thank you” the woman took a few steps, tinges of pain making themselves felt on her leg. The Asari stretched her arm and the Commander held onto it to regain her balance. “I'll be quick. Give me 3 minutes”

“Shepard, what if you fall ? Your legs are still healing. If you get hurt…”
The concern on Liara’s voice made Shepard smile, a warm feeling appearing on her stomach. "She really cares for me.

“If you want to join me in private, at least buy me dinner first, Doctor. Treat a girl right” Katerina said in a sulky voice.

“Goddess, no! I didn't mean it like that. No!” Liara said in an outraged tone, the blush on her face quickly spreading “I don't mean it as an offense. You are very attractive, certainly beautiful, but I...”

Shepard leaned forward and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek “I'll be right out. Why don't you wait for me outside and you can tell me all about how pretty and attractive I am?”

“Ok, ok. Just be safe”

The Asari smiled as she sat near the door to wait, doing the best to hide the fuzzy feelings that she had on her stomach.

Katerina moved quickly through the bar, passing near the stage without looking at anything or anyone, entering the bathroom at the end of the building.

As she entered, she immediately noticed a familiar woman on the sink fixing her makeup.

“What do you want, Fatima ?”

“Good Morning to you too. Wasn't sure you got my message” the woman gave her a quick look by the mirror before continuing to look at herself “You look like shit”

“Well, I am hospitalized, in case you didn't know. I'm out taking a stroll with Liara, and she's not all too happy about me being here, so why did you call me here ?”

“In short, the Asari are onto you. In the last few days, we've heard a lot about how our blue friends on Thessia have been digging everything they can about you. With their esteemed Benezia going dark, they are not at all happy that there's a big chance that the future head of the T'Soni house might be involved with a human who has seen and done so much as you have” the woman grabbed a small pencil from her small purse and began tracing the contour of her eye.

“Let them dig up all the dirt they want. What are they going to do ? Expose me to the galaxy and destroy my reputation and legacy?” Katerina chuckled.

“No. They're mostly searching something that they can use to drive Liara away from you”

Shepard froze as she heard those words. The fact that that hadn't crossed her mind made her feel like an idiot.

“Fortunately for us, our T'Soni friend has always been a sort of rebel in her own ways, often finding herself at odds with the culture and politics of her people”

“I know”

“So what you need to do is to make yourself convincing enough that she will automatically think that what they say about you is just them trying to fuck her life again. You were already going down this path with her. We just need you to speed things up with her”

“Speed things up ?”
“Get serious with her. Take her to dinner, tell her you love her, kiss her neck, smack her ass, whatever it takes. If you think the squid is already head over heels for you, then push it and make it serious. Before her people get in her head” the woman put her hand in her bag and gave Shepard a small pack. It only took her a quick glance to see the red grains that filled it.

“Here’s your dessert. Saved you the trouble from going further into the Wards to get it. Don’t choke up on it”

“Fuck you” Shepard replied.

Fatima gave her a half smile “Do what needs to be done. Farewell, Katerina”

As the woman left the bathroom, the Commander entered the stall and gave the bag a small cut with a small blade.

Holding up a line of red sand on the edge of the knife, she stared at it for a few moments.

“In you I can trust” Shepard said to herself as she smiled. The drug had been a part of her life since she had memory, and every hit of it gave her a sense of comfort.

It felt like coming home.

She inhaled it and left the room shortly after.

As she stepped out of the bar, she smiled as she saw Liara looking at the digital library next to the building.

But as the words from the meeting crossed her mind, she lowered her gaze, closed her eyes and let out a deep breath. After spending a few moments like that, she opened them and noticed that Liara had noticed her and was moving towards her with a smile on her face.

“Let’s do what needs to be done”

Shepard smiled back and moved to meet her.
So, 1 year ago, I posted the firsr chapter of this story. I had never written anything before in my life, but the Mass Effect Universe gave me the inspiration to create my own version of the wonderful story Bioware gave us.

I wasn't expecting this story to be noticed by a lot of people. I sort of expected it to be a story that would fly under the radar. But the reception I received blew me away. I wanted to thank to the bottom of my heart to everyone who has accompanied me on this journey, to everyone who has read, every kudos, every bookmark and every comment. It means the world to me that you have given me the chance and your time to visit this story I've created.

Thank you all so much, and I hope you continue to enjoy :)

“Lift it up a little. Now a little bit to the center”

Liara listened to Kaidan’s instructions through the headset as she sighted down the target in the range. Holding her breath, she held the weapon steady as she aimed towards the middle of the target.

“Fire when you're ready”

The Asari let out a single, and smiled proudly as she saw the hologram indicate that the slug had hit right in the center.

She placed her headset around her neck as she turned and looked at Kaidan, who nodded as he moved next to her.

“That was a very good shot, Liara. Well done”

“That was a very good shot, Liara. Well done”

“Thank you, Kaidan” the Asari replied, unable to hide the excitement in her voice.

“Now, think you're ready to step up the difficulty a little bit ?”

Liara nodded.

“Good. I'm going to make the targets pop up one at the time, and you're going to have to hit them as fast as you can. Understood?”

“Yes”

“If you feel like you're getting overwhelmed or just feel like stopping, signal me and I'll end the simulation. Your safety is of utmost importance, Liara, and I don't want you getting hurt. Shepard would have my head for that” Kaidan chuckled.
“I understand, Kaidan. Thank you. And I'm sure I could convince the Commander to not ‘have your head’ if I got hurt” Liara let out a short laugh.

“I'm sure you could” Kaidan said as he stepped out of the room to activate the simulator “Get ready”

As the lights of the room dimmed, Liara placed her headset back on, let out a deep breath and positioned herself in the middle area of the range.

As the first hologram popped up, sh squeezed the trigger and immediately turned towards the second target, which was still materializing when a round hit it. The Predator on Liara’s hands fired on and on, dissolving the targets as soon as she heard or saw the first blinks of light when they started to appear.

The world around her dissolved, and time seemed to have slowed to a crawl as she moved her weapon from one objective to the next.

When no more targets popped up, she turned and looked at Kaidan in the control cabin, who was looking at her with an awed expression on her face.

“That was… exciting” Liara chuckled, wiping the drops of sweat that ran down her brow.

“Indeed it was. You sure those Commandos your family had, didn't train you? Because that was very impressive” Kaidan said as he tapped his omnitool and the room was illuminated once more.

“A little. Biotics were always my area of focus. I wasn't too fond of weapons or violence when I was younger, but my mother convinced me to take a few lessons with the house’s security. ‘There may be situations where you'll need more than biotics to defend yourself’ she used to say” Liara lowered her sight as she locked her gun and placed it on a nearby table. Kaidan noticed how Liara’s mood changed when she mentioned her mother, a tinge of sadness and regret notable in her voice “And look at me now. Weapons and violence have become an everyday thing to me. The Matriarch’s always know best, as my people say”

“I'm sorry for bringing it up” Kaidan replied.

“It's fine” Liara said in a warm tone “I just wish that we go to Noveria and deal with my mother as soon as we can. I need to understand why she joined forces with Saren and… Sorry, let's… let's talk about something else”

Kaidan nodded “Well, if you think you're up to it, want to take a round against me? See who takes the targets down quicker? And maybe a few biotic tricks in the training area after?” Kaidan spoke “If you're not feeling too tired, that is. I wouldn't want you to overexert yourself”

Liara chuckled as she placed her headset back on and grabbed her gun “Challenge accepted, Kaidan. I'll try not to go too rough on you”

Alenko smiled as he grabbed a Predator and set the timer on his omnitool “Let's do it then”

Shepard finished tying up her boots and stood up from the bed. Straightening her N7 jacket, she walked towards the bathroom and gave herself a quick look in the mirror, making sure she was properly presentable, before moving towards the door of the room. A nurse with an alarmed expression entered and blocked her path.
“Commander! Your equipment went offline, and… you're not allowed to leave. Dr Chakwas was very empathetic that…”

“Spectre Authorization”

The words left her mouth coldly and sharply. It felt… good to have such power.

She passed the dumbfounded nurse and walked out of the clinic, uttering “Spectre authorization” to whoever tried to stop her.

When she stepped outside the building, she took a deep breath of fresh air and looked at the full might of the Presidium, which was in the middle of its day cycle. There were many things she hated about the Citadel, but the fancy rich parts of the Presidium was not one of them.

Checking the map on her omnitool, she smiled and began to walk towards her destination.

Liara tapped her omnitool and entered the apartment, the cold wind of the air refreshers washing over her as she stepped inside.

The entrance room was wide, filled with paintings, statuettes and decorations of all sizes and types, her mother's handiworks over the centuries she had owned the place.

She dropped the armor she had wore in the range near the entrance and moved towards the kitchen, putting some of the Armali tea herself and her mother loved so much to prepare.

It were the little things like that made her feel so uncomfortable in the apartment. Too many memories.

As the Asari was lost in thought, a figure soundlessly moved behind her.

“Boo!”

The Biotic pulse Liara threw behind her sent several small objects and pieces of furniture flying as she tried to hit the suspected attacker, the biotics emerging from her body giving her a supernatural look.

As she sent another wave blindly behind her, a pair of strong arms wrapped themselves around her ams a familiar, sully voice spoke.

“Hey, hey, hey, it's me. It's…”

Liara pushed herself backwards, dropping herself and the Commander to the ground as she continued to struggle.

“Li, Li, calm down! It's Katerina”

“Katerina ?”

Her biotics flashed out almost instantly

“I can think of a few fun things to do with your biotics. Getting thrown against the wall it's not one of them”

“What are you… How did you get in here !? How did you even know about the apartment ?” Liara
queried in disbelief.

“Are we having this conversation with me pinned under you? I'm not complaining, mind you” Katerina chuckled as she slightly tightened her grip around the Asari’s torso.

Liara stood up in a swift movement and brought Shepard up with her.

“No” Liara replied in a demanding tone “We are going to talk while you pick all the things you made me throw around”

“Ugh. Fine”

“You nearly gave me a heart attack, Shepard. What made you think that it was a good idea to sneak in here at a time when there are several people and things in the Galaxy that want me dead ?” Liara replied as she took deep breaths, trying to calm herself by checking the tea in the stove.

“Well, now that you put it like that… it does sound kinda bad, doesn't it ? But I was left out of the clinic and I thought to stop by and visit my favorite Asari” Shepard replied as she began to pick the dozens of objects that were sprawled on the floor.

“You were ‘left out’ or did you leave ?”

“Come on, Li. Don't you trust me ?” Katerina chuckled when she saw the reprimanding look Liara gave her “You were the one that suggested that I should use my Spectre authority”

The Asari pinched the bridge of her nose “Oh, Goddess…”

“And as to how I found this place,well, it's not like it was hidden from the records or anything. All I had to do was search the extranet; breach a few firewalls and find which apartment was owned by the T’Soni family” Shepard laughed. The truth was that the AIS* had given her the location of the place, but she wasn't going to mention that.

As the Commander picked up the things, she saw a photograph that showed a very young Liara and her mother. The young Asari looked chubby, her cheeks slightly purple as she laughed in her mother arms.

“Click the button on the side of the frame. So you can see the holographic display” Liara said as she served herself a cup of tea.

Shepard sat on the couch and did as told, and a vid beamed up from the picture.

“Get down from the rocks, Liara”

Benezia spoke in a warm tone as she focused the lens of the omnitool towards the young Liara, who wore a child sized science outfit as she crawled over large rocks, scanning them with her omnitool.

Ignoring her mother’s warning, the young Asari moved closer to the edge. And slipped.

Before she hit the ground, she was caught in a biotic pull. The kid screamed with joy as her mother pulled her towards her.

“Who's my reckless and brave little wing ?” Benezia said as she pinched the baby’s cheeks.
Liara answered by grabbing her mother's cheeks in return, prompting the Matriarch to let out a short laugh as she hugged Liara tightly.

The recording ended.

“You were so fucking cute and adorable, Li” Shepard said as she looked at Liara.

“Shut up” Liara replied, a half smile set on her face.

“Benezia seemed like… a good mother”

The Asari took a long sip of her cup “She was. At times”

Shepard didn’t push the subject, the Asari’s tone making it clear she didn’t want to talk about it.

“So, if you're already up and about, why haven't we left yet ?” Liara asked as she sat on the couch next to Shepard.

“We’re waiting for Ash. She’s been getting better, and she made swear that we wouldn’t go out to our next target without her”

“Next target ?”

“Virmire. The STG found it while we were here, and they think Saren is there. It’s where will go after Noveria”

“I… I understand” Liara said as she lowered her sight.

Katerina grabbed her arm and rested her head on her shoulder “It will be ok, Li. We’ll find your mom and…”

“You don’t need to tell me anything, Katerina” Liara said as she let out a deep breath “Whatever has to happen will happen. I’m just… hoping for the best but expecting the worst, and I’m trying not to think about it”

“Sorry”

“Don’t be”

A few minutes were spent in silence, with neither of them wanting to break the calm atmosphere.

“You know, Karin is going to blame for you getting out of the clinic” Liara said as she smiled and softly rubbed Katerina’s arms.

“Sorry” Shepard replied in an almost childlike voice.

“But I'm glad you're here”

The Commander smiled “I'm happy to be here. And I'm happy you're happy”

Liara let out a short laugh.

“Katerina… what are we ?”

Shepard sat straight on the couch and looked at the Asari “Well, you're an Asari. A pretty, asari
Shepard. I'm serious” Liara gave her a cold stare “What are we ? I mean, is there even a we ? Because I got the impression that there was, but if not… I just want to know where I stand with you” the Asari let out a deep breath “It's just that everything's been happening so fast, and I don't want to get my hopes up, in case that this is just a thing humans do, and…”

Shepard lifted her hand and cupped one of Liara’s cheeks, smiling as the Asari leaned into the touch.

“I… I care about you, Shepard. I really do, but I don't want to push too far if that's not what you want”

“Li, I don't have more experience in this than you do, believe it or not. I'm not a “relationship” kind of person. In fact, I've only had one sort of relationship in my life, and it was hardly a decent one” the Commander straightened herself on the seat “But… I'm willing, I want to give this, us, a shot. I haven't been this close to anyone in years. I feel that I could tell you anything and you wouldn't judge me, that you can protect me from almost anything”

“Shepard…”

“I know that perhaps it's not the proper term since you're not a woman, and I'll take the opportunity to apologise for all the times I've referred to and all the times I will refer to you as a woman, but… Li, do you want to be my girlfriend?”

The Asari leaned forward, pressing her forehead against Shepard’s. The smile on her face made Shepard’s stomach feel fuzzy. Liara closed her eyes, and then the Asari’s lips met Katerina’s.

The kiss lasted for a few seconds. It wasn't forceful, sexual, or pushing. It was… just perfect.

“That was nice” Shepard said in a warm tone.

“It was” Liara giggled as she looked at Shepard “You're blushing”

“I know. So… want to get down to Chora's Den to celebrate?”

Liara sighed “Katerina…”

“Just a few drinks to celebrate the best thing that's happened to me in the last few years” Shepard said in that tone that was impossible to resist.

“Fine. A few drinks couldn't hurt” Liara said as she stood.

“That's the spirit”

“I like your outfit. It looks really good on you” Liara said as she walked out the door.

“Awww, thanks Li. You say the nicest things. Truth be told, I don't have many normal clothes. So I have to make do” Shepard replied as she walked out the door.

Fatima signaled another officer to keep watch on the apartment. The cameras and microphones Shepard had installed wouldn't transmit much now that the place was empty.

“Do you want to be my girlfriend ? HA” the woman laughed as she took a drag of her cigar
“Shepard, you and your shitty social skills. At least you have the squid bedazzled with you”

Shepard and Liara walked out of the club in a mixture of loud laughs and drunk jokes each of them pretended to understand.

As they pass the entrance of a hall that led to the Wards, a voice spoke.

“Well, well, look at this. Little Katya grew up and turned into a soldier. I'd heard it but I didn't believe it”

Liara turned, and noticed that Shepard had stopped moving. She was frozen in place, an unreadable expression set on her face. The Asari couldn't tell if Shepard was scared or furious. Or both.

“What's the matter, Katya ? Did the aliens eat your tongue ?” the nasally voice said in a teasing tone.

The Commander unclench her fists, let out a deep breath and turned to face the source of the voice.

Liara moved next to her, and saw a human male leaning against the wall. He was half the size of Shepard, his hair colored a light shade of grey. His coat and pants had clearly seen better days.

“Where are your manners, girl? Aren't you going to introduce me to your squid friend ?” the man moved and took a few steps towards Liara, his hand stretched “Allow me to introduce myself. My name is…”

Katerina slapped his hand down as she blocked his path “Don't speak to her. Don't even look at her” she said in a threatening tone.

“Now you speak. Good. And is that anyway to greet and old friend?” the man said in a mocking tone.

“Shepard, we should go” Liara spoke as she placed her hand on the woman's shoulder, clearly distressed by seeing the state Katerina was in.

“Shepard ? HA! From where did you got that name ? A superhero from the a movie in the UNAS* ?” the man chuckled.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Alexander?” the Commander growled at the man.

“Your friends back on Earth miss you, Katya. You've been gone for too long. We must make up for lost time” Alexander pulled out a small cigarette and lit it, blowing the smoke towards the Commander “We say that you became a Spectre, and we know that that rank gives you certain… privileges”

Liara watched with dismay how Shepard, the heroic woman who was a larger than life figure, was shivering as she listened to each word the man said.

“We know you're still fond of red sand, so we thought we could reach a… mutually beneficial agreement. You help us get the product onto the Citadel by making C-Sec turn a blind eye with your Spectre authority, and we will make sure you have a constant supply of the sand, as well as a substantial monetary reward”
Katerina let out a short, nervous laugh “You came all this way… to get me to traffick for them? You must be out of your fucking mind. I am not the… the same person you knew” Shepard said as she tried but fail to sound intimidating.

The man let out a short laugh as he walked forward, moving closer and closer to the Commander. Liara tried to pull Shepard backwards, but the woman didn't move.

“Oh, but I think you're not so different at all, Katya. You may be taller, you may have put up some muscle, got a few more scars and got yourself a place between the armies and the aliens, but look at how you shiver. Look at how you tremble” Alexander said as he took another drag of his cigar “You have the same look on your face as you did when the knife came up. I've seen your record. You still murder, hunt and backstab as you did back then, only that you do it while wearing fancy armor and uniforms and you believe that somehow makes it better. Ah, Katya, my little wolf, you're still the same sandblasted*, broken little shit I pulled out of that hole a couple of decades ago. The only difference is that you no longer have a fucking dog”

Hot tears rolled from Shepard’s reddened eyes, her unblinking sight burrowing into man in front of her.

A biotic pulse hit Alexander, sending him flying towards the wall and slamming him against it. Katerina saw Liara turn into full biotic power, her body almost completely covered in white and blue energy rays that swirled around her, a cold, deadly expression set on her face.

Shepard thought she looked like the angels depicted in the books she read as a child.

“Don't come near her again, or it'll be the last thing you do” Liara said in a cold, sharp tone as she walked towards Katerina and began to move her towards the exit.

As they were almost through, the man spoke again. Shepard froze when she heard him.

“‘Aunque la mona se vista de seda, mona se queda’. Do you remember what that phrase means?” Alexander wiped the blood of his nose and laughed as he stood up “The monkey might wear a silk dress, but she will always be a monkey. I guess that in your case it would be ‘The little wolf might put on a fancy uniform with medals, but she will always a sandblasted little wolf’”

Katerina could hear Liara screaming in the distance, telling her to stop. But it seemed like it was almost in another plain.

Nothing around her mattered anymore. The world had ceased to exist, and all there was was herself. And Alexander’s head, which she was currently slamming against the wall. It was a trance, seeing the flesh turn into a pulp with each hit and tear she gave it. All those times she had dreamed about this as a child, all the built up hatred from years of abuse.

It all burst forth, and it felt good.

A few minutes passed as she remained kneeled on the ground, covered in blood and remains, with dried tears on her cheek as she took deep breaths. After coming to, she saw Liara standing further back, a terrified look on her face. The ecstasy of the kill had passed, and now all that was left was the regret. As usual.

She turned and saw what was left of Alexander, which wasn't much. The Commander stood up and opened the Spectre comm line from her omnitool.

“This is Operative Shepard. Neutralized hostile outside of Chora’s Den. Send cleanup crew”
Closing the line, she moved next to Liara and spoke in a hushed, regretful tone.

“I wish you hadn't seen that. I-I’m... sorry”

Liara nodded. “He was asking for it. Let's go”

As Liara and her moved as discretely as they could back to the apartment, Sheppard gave her bloodied hands a quick glance.

The realization came upon her almost instantly.

She could pretend to be normal for a while, try to do what average people did.

But in the end, she would never belong there.

For more than she wanted, she would never be normal.

Chapter End Notes

*AIS: Alliance Intelligence Services

*UNAS: United North American States
It was the middle of the night shift when Liara stepped out of the infirmary. She gave a quick look around, and was relieved when she saw that the Mess was empty. She walked towards the small electric stove and started to make some tea. She was nervous, and this particular brand of tea, from the smell to the taste, always helped her relax.

She placed a pair of bags in the 2 cups, a hunch telling her that Shepard may be awake and wanting some. If not, well, more tea for herself.

She nearly jumped when she heard a noise next to her. A soldier stood serving himself a large glass of water.

“Good night” she said in the most polite and respectful tone she could muster.

The soldier downed the glass of water and placed it on the empty sink, and then left without acknowledging her presence.

“Well, that could have been worse” Liara thought as she grabbed the cups and moved to the Commander’s room.

Liara gave a slight knock on the door, which hissed open shortly after.

Surely enough, the Commander was awake.

Katerina sat in front of her desk, a small light overhead dimly illuminating the area in front of her. A tiny box rested on top of the furniture, playing a soft sounding melody.

“What are you doing up, Liara ?” Shepard asked as she tapped the monitor a few times.

“How did you know it was me ?”

“Well, I don't think a lot of people in the crew would make tea at this hour and bring some to me. Specially that particular brand of Armali tea” Katerina smiled warmly at the Asari as she turned off the box “Come here”

Liara placed a cup on Shepard’s desk and sat down on the chair next to her.

“You couldn't sleep ?” the Asari queried.

“Yes, but that's not really uncommon for me. Why are you up ?”

“I guess I'm just… nervous, worried, concerned. I had not planned on meeting my mother again like this” the Asari replied as she absentmindedly played with her thumbs.

“It wasn't how I planned to meet my future mother in law either, but I guess we'll have to make do” Shepard replied, using humour to try to change Liara’s mood.

“Shut up” the Asari chuckled as she gave a playful push to the Commander “What were you listening to ?”

Shepard, with a half smile set on her face, lifted her hand and showed her the small device “This is a music box I got when I was a kid. It's one of the few things I own, and it's always helped me relax. Given what happened recently, I…”

Memories
“Do you… want to talk about it ?” the Asari asked nervously.

Katerina lowered her head, letting out a deep breath as she leaned back against the chair.

“They didn't send Alexander to get me to traffick for them. They're not that stupid” the Commander chuckled “They probably wanted to get rid of him, so they sent him here, knowing how much of a proud and stubborn bastard he was, and they knew that I would kill him. Predictably violent, they used to call me”

“Who's they ?” the Asari queried.

Katerina looked into Liara’s eyes for a few moments, her expression filled with hints of pain and longing, as if she was supposed to reveal something she wasn't supposed to.

“A mafia back on Earth” Shepard finally said “The part of them that I was in was called “The Silence”. I 'worked' for them since I can remember”

“Worked in what ?”

“What do you think, Liara ?”

Shepard closed her eyes and let out a deep breath as memories began to cross her mind.

“Cut their throats”

“But… but… they haven't done…”

Shepard heard the other kid’s complains as she kept her eyes fixed on the gagged men and women in front of her, their eyes reddened from crying and from the hits they've received.

“Useless” the man said as he violently shoved the kid into the ground, the impact making a violent noise as he fell.

“Katya, show him how it's done”

“It'll be a pleasure”

She moved quickly towards the people tied to the wall and pulled out her dagger from one of the pockets of her ragged jacket.

She stared directly into the eyes of the woman in front of her for a few moments, before burying the blade into her neck and making a quick but deep slash.

In less than a minute, they were all dead.

She turned to face Alexander, who looked at her with a proud smile that warmed her heart.

Beneath him, the other kid cried, looking at her as if he had seen a ghost.

“Now, show him what we do with traitors”

Without hesitation, she leaned down a made a swift cut. The deep green floor of the crumbling
warehouse made the blood seem like just another stain.

Alexander patted her head softly and spoke in a heartwarming tone as she looked up to him and smiled, drops of blood scattered over her face.

“Well done, little wolf. We might just make a warrior out of you”

“I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked…”

“It's fine, Liara” Shepard paused for a moment before continuing “They picked up early that apparently I had a natural talent for killing. “Katya, the little wolf” they called me. Murder, torture, arson, whatever you can think of. If the job was done well, they gave me good food, booze, red sand”

“And… if it wasn't ?” Liara asked in a dim voice, almost afraid of the answer.

Katerina pulled up her sleeves to her shoulders, showing her the full length of her arms. Beneath the scars that were clearly the work of bullets and shrapnel, there were slightly visible horizontal and vertical marks, almost completely buried under the set of new marks.

“If they didn't how the job turned, they sent Alexander, and then the knife came up. He would throw me against the wall, and…”

*The knife goes up and down*

*The knife goes left and right*

*Not deep enough, not shallow either*

*It draws blood and the skin opens*

*But it will heal*

*It always heals*

*And then it begins again*

*Until the day you stop being clumsy*

*The knife will go up and down*

“Sorry, Li. Let's… let's talk about something else”

“Sure”

The Asari remained silent, and looked up at Shepard with a look that Katerina thought was the most adorable thing she had ever seen.

“Sorry. I'm not very good at… being social”

The Commander stretched out her hand, and softly caressed Liara’s cheek.
“Let's talk about something not very social. The T'Soni house seems to be a very big deal on Armali, from what I've heard”

Liara softly chuckled “A very big deal might be a bit of an understatement”

She let out a soft breath “One of the reasons I “ran away” to become an archeologist is because I simply couldn't see myself handling the pressure, responsibilities and obligations I saw my mother go through. I probably sound like a spoiled child. Athame knows there are worse things to be then an heir of the T'Soni House, and…”

“No, no, I understand. Why don't you tell me about, you know, what your mother did. To understand better, if you want”

“That might be the first time someone has asked me that” Liara let out a short laugh “But ok. First, the T'Soni house manages a very large part of Armali’s imports and exports…”

The Asari talked for a long time. The recorder on the computer set by Shepard recorded all she had to say.

“**Shepard, you got an incoming call from Arcturus. Looks like its from Admiral Hackett**” Joker’s voice rang out through the intercom.

“I'm on my way” Shepard stood up and checked the hour on her omnitool before turning to Liara “Why don't you go get some rest while I go chat with my boss ?”

Liara moved next to her and softly placed her hand on her chest “Is everything all right ?”

Katerina lifted her hand and gave it a quick kiss “Everything's gonna be fine. Trust me. And…” Shepard paused briefly and let out a deep breath “Thank you for coming to talk to me. I don't have a lot of people to talk to these days, and I've never talked about my past with anyone so… Well thank you”

The Asari smile and planted a soft kiss on her cheek “My pleasure”

“**Commander!**” Joker spoke again.

The Commander walked out of her cabin and moved upstairs, a half smile set on her face and her cheeks reddened by the blush.

Liara paused in the middle of the mess, the smile fading from her face and being replaced by a concerned look. She took the stairs towards engineering, sure that Tali was awake and knowing that she may understand her concerns as well.

"With all due respect sir, I don't think…"

"Shepard, you're the only unit I have near that system, and I trust you understand how critical this is” Hackett's hologram spoke. The concern on his voice was evident even in the digital tone "I already have teams en route to dispose of it, but I need you to hold it and secure it until they arrive. Understood ?"

Shepard let out deep sigh as she pinched the bridge of her nose "Yes, Sir" "Hackett out"
Liara and Tali walked towards Shepard, who was checking the inside of the Mako on her own.

“Shepard, what's going on ?”

The Commander turned and looked at Tali with a smile “What's going on with what, dear friend? “

“You told Joker that the Alliance “needs us to restore comms on this system since we're the closest unit here” so we need to stay in orbit in this planet while you “go down on your own and fix an Alliance antenna” Liara replied as she looked at her with an annoyed frown on her face.

“It's a small, quick thing. No need to bother the team. I'll be back before you know it”

Tali chuckled “If you weren't an N7 Operative and a Council Spectre, I might have believed you, Shepard. But you being sent somewhere just to repair an antenna is as believable as the Turians sending their whole fleets to charter unknown worlds”

“I bet you know a whole lot about Turians and their fleets, huh Tali ?” Katerina winked.

The Quarian gave her a soft push. “This is serious. We're coming with you”

“You're not” Shepard answered as she stepped down from the Mako, her imposing posture making her look slightly threatening.

“Why not ? What's the worse that can happen if we're going to repair an antenna? I'm sure you can use my technical expertise for…”

“No”

“You're going to repair the antenna with a sniper rifle and grenades, Katerina ?” Liara spoke, her arms crossed as she moved her sight from the inside of the Mako to the Commander “And the hardened armor you have upfront is to protect you from electrical sparks ?”

The Asari placed herself directly in front of the Commander, the mixture of sadness and concern in her eyes making Katerina’s stomach sink “Don't lie to me. That's all I ask of you”

The Commander lowered her sight, feeling a shiver go up her spine as she heard Liara’s words. Letting out a deep breath, she answered.

“A nuke. I'm going to disable a nuke”

Tali and Liara watched as Shepard remained still, watching with cold eyes as the Batarian spoke throughout the hologram over the bomb.

“So why didn’t your comrades in the Hegemony strung you up once your buddies burned over Elysium ?”

“Because I fled. I had to run towards the Terminus, and remained hidden from the SIU for years. Until I got the tip about the bomb”
“A tip from whom?”

“Someone who doesn't like you very much” the Batarian said as he smiled “I'll see you in hell”

The hologram faded.

Before either of her companions could say anything, the Commander rushed the nuke and started tapping commands from her omnitool while next to it.

The sheer fury in her eyes sent shivers down Liara’s and Tali’s spines.

“Wait here” Shepard growled to her companions as she turned and walked away from the Mako, moving quickly behind some boxes in the now empty mercenary camp. The dozens of pirate corpses were strewn around, their blood mixing with the reddish ground of the planet.

Haliat crawled, bloodied and bruised, trying to get away from the Commander.

A kick to the head stopped his efforts.

“Now...” Shepard wiped some of the blood away from her face before starting to record and broadcast with her omnitool “You're gonna speak loud and clear. You're going to say who you are, and you're going to tell them what you did. Understood?”

The Batarian nodded nervously.

“Begin”

Anderson watched the transmission on his monitor, unblinking as he watched the scene before him. He was sure that the Alliance personal and the embassy and probably in Arcturus and every human colony in the Galaxy was watching it too.

"My names is Bar'sok Haliat. I was born on Talum, Camala on 2125. I was involved in the planning and execution of the attack on the human colony of Elysium on 2176. The attack was sponsored by several businessmen and industrialists who acted as a front for the Hegemony politicians who supported the attack"

The former pirate stopped talking as he coughed some blood "Please... I need..."

Ocatia listened to the sound of bone breaking as Shepard smacked the man's face with her pistol.

The cold and sealed dungeons made the noise from the monitor carry throughout the area. A half smile appeared on the soldier's face as she turned and looked at the bloodied Batarian hanging on the wall.

"See, Balak ?” Bas' Sedrak said as she pointed at the screen "You were lucky that I got you. Look at how your comrade Haliat is being treated by Shepard"

"Traitor" the Batarian said with a broken voice as he looked at her, the 2 eyes on the left side of his face swollen due to the beating he had gotten
"You... you told Haliat about the bomb. You... wanted him to get caught" the indignation on the pirate's voice was evident.
"Those who fail the Hegemony deserve what they get. I only set the bait for Haliat and the Alliance, and sure enough, they both fell for it. This is how you make even with friends in our world" the woman traced the long scar that went across her face as she stood up "I would have liked to deal with Haliat myself- anyone who survived the Blitz would- but the Commander had more reasons to want him dead. Don't worry, you'll join him in the Beyond soon enough, Balak"

Liara listened to the screams. She heard the hits, the kicks, the sound of flesh being torn apart. The awful cacophony that didn't seem to end. The words that her aunt had told her long ago crossed her mind “That is war. An amalgamation of horror and atrocities we make because everyone believes they're right”

The Commander spoke, making sure that the camera was focused on Haliat.
“This is what will happen to all who think that humanity is just a group of weak pushovers. Kick us and back us into a corner, and we'll tear you apart as we die. Remember that”

She ended the broadcast.
“The… the medigel…”

Shepard tossed him a back of the gel, chuckling as she watched him desperately try to open it.

“You're a sadistic fuck, Kat” Alejandro laughed as he patted her shoulder “That's why you were the best of us”

Katerina smiled “High praise coming from you”

“And... oh, yeah” Shepard stretched as she turned and looked at the bloodied Batarian, gripping tightly the sharp dagger in her hand as she walked towards him “This is for Elysium”

She gave him a long cut across the arm, drawing out a long, pained filled scream from him.

“130 thousand people died in the Blitz, but I’ll keep it down to all my soldier brother and sisters you killed. I'm going to give you a cut for all of them. Let's see how long you can hold out”

She lowered herself and swung the knife again “First Lieutenant Alejandro Ramos”

She gave another cut, the blood splashing over her face “Sergeant Miguel Rodriguez! Estefany Thompson! Korravai Gazdar…”

Neither Tali or Liara said a word when Shepard returned to the Mako, her armor and face looking as if she had showered in blood.

Nobody on the ship said a word when she went straight for her room without exchanging a word with anyone except to Joker over the intercom to tell him to resume the course to Noveria.
She locked the cabin door, lowered the lights and moved to the bed, pulling out a small box from under it. She saw how the messenger tray on the computer and her monitor was lighting up, meaning that a swarm of messages from the Alliance, the Council and god knows who else.

"Fuck them" She said as she sat, opened it and pulled out the small needle and a bag of reddish dust. She watched as the sand slowly became liquid as she pulled the small solvent inside.

“Why the fuck are you looking at me like that? Got another of your assholish remarks or something ?” she said as she wrapped the small cord around her arm.

Ramos chuckled “Not at all. You did what we could not. I think you've earned a little high”

“Damn right I have. We won today”

She dropped into the bed and closed her eyes.

“You're not coming back”

Shepard jolted up from the bed. Panting, she felt the cold sweat running down her body, her hands shaking uncontrollably. She tried to stand up but her legs felt like jelly, ready to collapse under her weight.

She tightened her grip on the sides of the bed, letting out long, deep breaths to try to calm herself and to try to reduce the throbbing she felt in her head.

After several minutes she spent relaxing, a flash of light coming from the window caught her attention, making her turn towards it.

Throughout the curtains, she could see flashes of white and orange coming from outside. The room itself was eerily silent, the dimmed lights on the roof providing little illumination.

Carefully, she lowered herself from the bed and began to move towards the window. From what seemed like a longer distance than it should have been, she reached the panel next to the window and tapped it, raising the curtains.

She screamed when she looked through it.

She recognized the Citadel, but it was… different. Filled with structures, designs and patterns she had never seen before.

But these didn't remain for long, as rays of energy began to burn everything in her sight.

A deafening sound made her head feel like it was ready to explode, as a cacophony of explosions, screams and the sound of weapons assaulted her ears.

She saw as a rain of fire and metal began to shower the station, the remnants of ships destroyed around the Citadel.

She felt the hot tears rolling down her cheeks and how her body began to tremble, as she saw tiny figures, people, throughout the station being disintegrated as the red beams fell over them.

And then she saw them.

Descending over the station, saw hundreds, thousands, maybe tens of thousands of the same ship
she had seen on Eden Prime, descending slowly as their vehicle of death charred the ground.

As they landed, everything around her began to turn to black, until only the Machines were visible.

A voice spoke inside her head, but it was not her own.

“We come from the Id. You will learn to fear the void”

She collapsed into the floor, and began to crawl towards the bathroom. Reaching the toilet, her stomach emptied what little she had ate as she felt a growing pain in her abdomen.

Karin rushed into the room. The alert light from her omnitool as she entered the bathroom and saw Shepard slumped over it, gagging and coughing.

“Shepard!” Karin said as she kneeled next to her and straightened her up, wiping her face clean with a small cloth.

“I… I don't feel so good, Karin”

“Breathe girl, breathe and calm down” Karin “What did you see ?”

“More visions. From the beacon” Shepard said as she panted “Must be nice… being able to sleep normally, not worrying what your fucked up mind will show you when you sleep”

Karin looked at the reddish tinge in her eyes and teeth, and could smell the faint scent of eezo in the air. She knew what had happened, but she kept it to herself.

“Would you… stay here a while, Karin, please? At least until I…”

“Of course, child”

Chakwas held the woman softly against her, softly caressing her hair as she tried to make her as comfortable. Katerina stopped crying after a while, but the doctor remained with her while she slept.

Karin thought of the situation. The most decorated soldier in the Alliance, a woman twice her size who didn't hesitate to do what was needed to win, from spending months alone hunting targets to rushing an enemy tank to plant explosives on it.

And here she was, a shattered mixture of trauma, drugs and an ancient technology who had previously killed all who had touched it.

Karin wanted to cry.
Broken Hope

Steve heard the muffled sounds of biotics in the distance as he threw more dried leaves and branches in the fireplace. The nights had become colder on Earth from all the ash and dirt clogging up the atmosphere, and the need to save power for the shuttle had made them use more traditional methods to keep warm.

Cortez looked briefly towards the sky, his gaze focused on the parts of the moon visible through the clouds, its rays giving some illumination in the night. And at some distance in the sky, he saw it. The shattered remains of what had once been the center of galactic politics and power, now a mere broken carcass, a cold grave for 13 million people. The Citadel remained static in orbit, a constant reminder of the dreadful war of extinction humanity had fought and barely survived. He thought he felt the scar on his chest throb as the memories from that dreadful night in London flashed through his mind.

His train of thought was interrupted when he heard the sound of dry leaves cracking and bushes moving. He turned and saw Javik coming out of the grass, carrying 2 large dead deers in both of his hands.

He dropped them loudly in front of the fireplace and proceeded to snap their legs before making deep cuts with his dagger along the belly of the animals, pulling large chunks of flesh from them. Javik let out an annoyed growl as he noticed Steve looking the other way.

“You've been a soldier for 10 years and still get disgusted by the sight of blood ? Pathetic”

“I was a pilot, Javik. A fighter pilot. When I killed people I didn't see them up close” Cortez replied as he leaned against the cold shuttle “The only time I really saw blood was when I picked up Shepard and her squad from missions, because she would always come back all mangled up. Now that I'm thinking about it, why do you think Shepard was usually the one who came back worse for wear ? I've always found it curious”

Loud crunching and tearing noises caught Steve’s attention. Javik finished tearing off the head of one of the deer before replying “The Commander was the only good soldier”

“Ouch. I wonder how the crew would feel hearing you say that” Cortez replied before letting out a short laugh. After a moment in silence, Steve looked towards the sky, watching the endless stars that filled the night “Do you miss them ? The crew, I mean”

“No”

“Really ?” Steve queried “Even after all we went through ?”

“When all you've ever known is war, you learn to detach yourself from people. Everyone will die sooner or later. Cherish the time you spend with them, and be at peace once they're gone”

Steve turned and looked at the empty fields around the shuttle. The emptiness that had become so familiar to them since leaving London looked peaceful and serene. The war that nearly ended the planet left little places so filled with life and beauty in the world.

“Kaidan would have liked this” Steve thought as he felt the cold breeze brushing against him.
“The house will be...here” Kaidan said as he moved around the place “The terrain and the area are safe enough. Plus, with the extra support of...”

Steve walked behind him and holding his waist, he gave a long deep kiss to Kaidan's neck “You know, you're really hot when you talk all professional”

Kaidan smiled as he pressed against him, holding his head softly with one hand “I can tell you're... happy to see me” he let out a soft sigh as Cortez continued to kiss his neck “But I want to know what you think of this. It'll be important, especially after we have the kids and...”

Steve stopped moving and whispered as he chuckled into his neck “Kids? As in plural, lots of kids?”

“Unless you don't want to” Kaidan spoke in a concerned tone. Steve loved getting Alenko like this “If you don’t...”

Steve answered with a kiss “I think our kids will be really lucky to have you as a father. I love you”

Kaidan turned around and pressed his forehead against Steve as he looked into his eyes, losing himself in those deep blue eyes “I think you'd make a great dad too, Mr Cortez. I love you”

Javik watched as Steve remained silent looking at the horizon, watching the distance as he seemed lost in his thoughts.

Javik cooked the animal flesh in silence, not wanting to bring Cortez’s attention.

The Prothean knew better than anyone that memories are all that's left once life has deprived you of everything else.

“Fuck off”

Jack picked up her drink and sipped it, giving an annoyed glare to the soldier standing beside her.

The man forcefully placed his hand on Jack's shoulder “The Lieutenant wants a report on...”

The sound of biotics slamming into something filled the room, though the bartender and the few people that were in the bar didn't pay it much attention. Jack pinned the soldier to the wall by his throat, applying enough pressure to make his face start to turn red “Tell the Lieutenant that he can wait for his fucking report, and if you touch me again, It'll be the last thing you do. Now...” Jack dropped him forcefully to the floor before sitting back on the stool and downing her drink “Fuck off”

The woman who stood by the doorway chuckled as she watched the soldier hurriedly tumble out of the building. She walked to the bar and sat next to Jack, making a silent hand motion to the bartender to get a drink.

“You seem angry” the woman spoke in a mocking tone.

Jack let out an annoyed sigh as she pinched the bridge of her nose “This is just great. Looks like I
hit the jackpot of finding annoying assholes today. Can you leave me to drink alone? Go talk to
the fucking dogs if you want to chat. Shit”

The woman let out a short laugh “If I talk to dogs, it wouldn't be much of a conversation, now,
would it? Besides, you seem much more interesting” she turned slightly on her seat and stretched
her hand “Why don't we start over? My name's Buchanan. Jennifer Buchanan. You?”

Jack chuckled. She stretched the woman's hand before replying “My name is off. Captain Fuck
Off. Now get out of my sight”

Buchanan chuckled as she downed her drink and asked for another one “Shit, you're one of a kind,
aren't you? You must have made lots of friends with that attitude”

“I made enough” Jack looked at the slightly oversized suit the woman was wearing “What's up
with the suit? You work with the fleet?”

“Fighter pilot. Only thing I'm good at” the woman eyeballed Jack's outfit in return “You a soldier?
That jacket and those pants don't look like much armor to me”

Jack lifted her hand and flashed her biotics, the scent of ozone filling the air as the blue and white
energy waves enveloped her arm from her fingers to her elbow “I don't need armor. This bad boys
stop whatever those ragtag piece of shit rebels throw at me”

“Nice. Haven't seen a lot of biotics since the Reapers fell” the woman saw the small sword and
shield sewn into the tattooed woman's jacket “You're with the Grissom squad. You and your kids
earned quite a reputation during the war”

Jack downed her drink in a single swoop before letting out a deep breath. Grissom.

The word brought a lot of memories rushing forth, aided in no small part due to the alcohol
flowing through her vein.

*Jack watched the stars through the window as she felt the soft fingers kneading her head. She
cuddled further into Kahlee, losing herself in the woman's body heat.*

“You smell so good”

*Kahlee smiled as she continued watching the datapad “I'm one of the few things on this station that
doesn't smell like eezo all the time. Unlike a certain someone who not only smells but tastes like
ozone”*

“I didn't know that you didn't like my taste” Jack reply in a coyish tone as she sucked into Kahlee’s
earlobe, drawing out a soft sigh from the woman.

“I didn't say I didn't liked it. I like it. I like it a lot” Kahlee said as she continued typing out reports.

*Jack moved from the woman's ear to her neck, licking and planting deep kisses through it.*

“Feeling impatient, are we?” Kahlee replied as Jack shoved the datapad off her hand and moved
her down the bed, straddling her as she lifted her legs.

“What can I say? I want what I want…” Jack rocked her hips forward, drawing out moans from
both of them “... and I want it know”
Kahlee smiled. In a swift move, she grabbed Jack and switched their positions. Now she stood over the tattooed woman, grabbing her legs and placing them around her waist.

"Goddamnit, Sanders. Stop topping me all the time. I want..."

Kahlee silenced her with a quick kiss "You're beautiful"

Jack gave her a slight shove "Don't think that with nice words..."

Another kiss interrupted her "I love you"

Jack stop resisting and grabbed the back of the woman's head, melting into her touch.

"I love you too"

"Sorry"

Jack snapped back to reality, shaking her head as she looked towards Buchanan "What?"

"What I said clearly made you remember something emotional. You were quiet just sitting there with your eyes closed for awhile. Sorry about that"

"Don't worry about it. What about you? By the look on your face you seem to be hurting after someone too"

Buchanan moved the locket that had the face of the smiling children between her fingers "I think we all lost something, didn't we?"

"That we did" Jack replied before downing her drink in one swoop "That we did"

_I hope you're in a better place, Kahlee. Wherever you are._

Miranda tapped the monitor in front of her, bringing out a large holographic display of several places on Earth deemed “relevant” by the shackled AI that ran the computer.

Most of Europe, North Africa and several places along the shorelines of Asia and America, alongside a few scattered points inside those continents, were painted in the color blue, symbolizing that they were fully under the Alliance control.

The rest and much larger areas of the planet, were tinted by a light grey color.

"So, I'm guessing the blue stands for the Alliance. And the grey?" a female voice asked behind Lawson.

"No man's lands” Miranda replied “There you're as likely to find an army of gunmen serving the local self declared ruler or warlord as you are to find nothing. Vast areas where the Reapers where particularly efficient in their work”

“Hmm. There's far more grey than blue”

Miranda turned her head to look at the woman standing beside her. Her light blue eyes gave her
face an even more stern look as she kept her eyes fixed the screen. Her long black hair went past her shoulders, fading among the rest of her dark clothing. A large scar went across her lips, along with several others along her hands and arms. Miranda wasn't sure which were from before the war and which ones she got during the conflict. She remembered herself to ask her about them.

“But the blue side has warships, Fatima. The grey side does not”

The woman chuckled “That pretty much seals the deal then. Still, it's quite messy all over”

“Look at this”

Miranda leaned forward and tapped an area of the map, prompting the screen to zoom to a region of Earth “I've been following this front for a while. The Caucasus has been pretty active lately. First some separatists were sending lots of soldiers around, as if they were looking for something”

“That's where one of the pieces of the Citadel fell, yes ?” Fatima replied, her husky voice carrying through the room as she watched the holographic display of a dreadnought firing shells into several areas below it.

“Yes, but the Alliance is the one who's looking for the pieces of the Citadel, not the rebels. Not that they have done much with them anyway. But why where the rebels searching for, and in such large numbers ?” Miranda leaned back on her chair. Fatima softly placed her hand on top of hers “The Alliance launched a ground assault to drive them back, but an outbreak of every disease you can think of behind their lines forced them to stop, so now they're just blasting the rebels away from space”

“What about our people in the Alliance ?”

“They don't know more than we do. The Admirals tell everyone the same old propagandist bullshit about having to reclaim land and shit, and that's all anyone really cares about” Lawson let out an annoyed sigh “I hate being in the dark about this. It makes me feel so fucking useless”

“You were always smart, Miranda. You'll figure it out” Fatoma said as she leaned down and placed a soft kiss on the top of Miranda’s head “I’m going back to the infirmary”

“Has there been… Is Ori… “ Miranda asked in a hushed tone, as if she was afraid of the answer she might receive.

“She’s stable, but no changes. I'll let you know if something changes”

Fatima walked out into a dark hall beyond the room. Miranda looked beyond the monitor and into the sea of stars visible from the window.

Was the rest of the Galaxy that still had living beings in it burning in conflict just like Earth was ? Would there even be anything left to rebuild once the dust had settled ?

Miranda served herself a large glass of bourbon and downed it in a single swoop.

Such thoughts didn't bode well for her. But alcohol might help.

Shepard stared at the window, watching the cloudless sky from the medical bed where she laid.
Her eyes barely open, she didn't bother turning when she heard the door open, followed shortly after by footsteps that stopped at the foot of the bed.

“How are you feeling, Commander?” the familiar voice asked.

Katerina let out an annoyed sigh “I still feel, and I'm still breathing. I guess you could call this good. But I'd digress”

The man moved next to her and lifted her burnt arm. He looked closely at the number of unnatural designs and shapes that went through the entire limb and most of the left side of her body, giving the woman an unnerving look. The large bags under her eyes and the falling hair sent shivers down the man’s spine as Katerina looked directly into his eyes, the emerald green of her eyes feeling like it pierced him just through the gaze.

“Like what you see?” the woman smiled as she spoke in a deep voice.

The doctor softly placed the arm back in the bed before replying “Commander, we…”

“Stop calling me that, science boy. I haven't commanded anything in a very long time, not even myself”

“R-right. Com-... Shepard, despite our best efforts, we still haven't been able to identify the materials that now make up the left portion of your body. Given that memory analysis process is taking longer than expected, I was sent to see if you would voluntarily help us to ‘understand’ what…”

“Did you know I was cursed once?”

The man stopped talking as he listened to the woman's words “What?”

“Back in the days of the Wolfpack program. We had been sent to wipe out a tiny Batarian village on the Verge in retaliation for the attack on one of our colonies.

The soldiers move from house, building to building, room by room.

The deep dark night of the world of Tremula was lit by the fires that consumed the building and houses that had once made the colony.

The silence of the night is broken by the screams and the shots, the sound of flesh being torn. If there was a hell, it probably wasn't too different from this.

Alejandro chuckles and compliments Katerina as he watches her slice off another head and throw it into a large pile in the large square.

She winks at him as she cleans her blade on her armor and picks up her rifle, moving towards one of the houses that hadn't been touched by the fires of the soldiers.

As she kicks down the door, she turns on her flashlight and moves inside the small structure. She tosses the incendiary grenades in every room she passes, having learned that unless you were a Krogan, fire was the best tool to draw people out of hiding.

She enters the small room at the end of the hall.

She lifts her weapon, and the light of the flashlight shines the corner of the room.
Batarians.

A woman was pressed against the wall, shielding three sobbing children with her body.

The four eyes of the woman met Katerina’s, and Shepard felt the mixture of impotent rage, fear, pain and despair in her eyes. Feelings the Commander knew too well.

She aims her weapon directly at the woman, switching her Avenger rifle into automatic mode. Behind her, the sound of objects burning and the smell of smoke could be felt.

The children began to scream. The mother, without blinking, uttered a single phrase in a soft and calm tone in the Batarian common tongue that Shepard understood even without her translator.

“I hope that what you've done today haunts you forever, and may you never find peace in this life or the next. May your dreams torment you forever”

She presses the trigger.

“Ramos and the others had to drag me out. I froze looking at what I had done” Shepard said before turning to look at the window “I've never been too superstitious, but I think that woman got her wish that day”

An explosion sounded in the distance, making the whole room shake. The doctor hurriedly moved and looked outside.

“The Alliance ground armies may have stopped for now, but they still have a few ships left up there” Katerina smiled as another explosion rocked the area outside, followed by more in quick succession “First rule of Galactic warfare. If your enemy has the orbit, you better be ready to take your war underwater or underground, because the surface will be lost to you”

Shepard watched the streams of light coming down from the sky. The window shattered.

“HURRY! GET HER OUT OF HERE” the man shouted as he rushed out of the room.

Katerina began laughing loudly, clapping her hand against the bed as she saw several soldiers began to unplug the cables and releasing the safeties of the bed, and began to roll her out of the room.

Shepard looked at the crumbling building above her. She paused her laughter to let out a single phrase “And God shall smite the wicked and plunge them into the fiery pit”

A flash of light. And everything disappeared.

The soldiers walked among the smoking rubble on the hill, the breathing apparatus of their suits making robot like noises every time they exhaled. On the distance, they watched as the explosions from the dreadnought's shells shook the hills and the valleys in front of them, eradicating whatever life was left there. They turned and kept searching the ruins of the camp, the lights of their helmet’s flashlights casting eerie shadows over the pieces of vehicles and structures that surrounded them.

“I got her”
The soldier moved next to the other and saw as he pointed to a large amount of rubble directly in front of them.

“Clear it”

The soldier let out an annoyed growl “Why do I always have to be the one that clears shit up?”

“Because your aim is awful. And because I'm your fucking superior. Now dig and shut up”

Several minutes passed. The valleys in the distance had caught on fire from the bombing, and the growing flames gave the mountains and the night an infernal look.

“Hurry before that fire gets here”

“I got her. Give me a hand”

The soldiers moved a chunk of rubble and, beneath the ash and dust, they saw her. One of them immediately scanned her with his omnitool, the blue rays coming from the device moving up and down a couple of times before disappearing.

“She's alive”

“Of course she is. Pick her up and let's get out of here”

As the soldier threw the woman over his shoulder and began to walk away, he didn't notice the sharp piece of metal she held in her hands. Blood came out of her hand as she tightened her grip on the object.

Dozens of thoughts ran through her mind.

She could stab him in the back, then cut his friend in the throat when he came to check up on him. She could then grab their equipment and go… somewhere. Anywhere.

Her eyes saw the flames growing in the distance.

“Escape… for what? To keep fighting?”

Katerina thought as closed her eyes, letting the tears fall from them as she dropped the chunk of metal from her hands, watching it disappear in the distance as they moved away.

“No. I'm done fighting”

Liara sat on the bed of the medbay. The air of the room felt cold, lifeless.

She finished tying up the last zipper of her white suit as she threw a quick glance to the back of the empty room.

The 2 large beds were empty, the sheets perfectly folded, as if they hadn't been used in a long time.

There hadn't been a lot of serious injuries in those first few days after the crash.

"The infirmary is my second home, Li. I spend more time there than on my quarters" Shepard had told her once.
The Asari let out a deep breath as she shook her head, trying to drive away the thoughts from her mind. She looked at her face in a small mirror in Karin’s desk. The white lines that made the tattoos on her face had been interrupted in many places by the now healed scars; but there wasn’t much different in her.
The door of the room hissed open.
"Liara..."
Tali stood on the door, and she spoke in a warm, comfortable tone, trying to be as calming as possible “Remember when you said you wanted to walk around for a while? Well, I'm ready if you want to go now”

The Asari struggled a little to stand a she got off the bed before regaining her step.

“I'm ready. Let's go”

Liara and Tali paced around the empty cargo hold, listening to the humming noise of the ventilation systems in the background.
No one came down here much after they had left Earth.
There were no more shuttles to take care of inside, and with the losses of personal they had suffered after the crash, almost everyone remained in the crew deck and only came down to the engine rooms to do maintenance.

“How is your leg?”

“Better, thankfully. No complications after the surgery” Tali replied.

“And Garrus?”

“He's well too. He recovered faster than me. Benefits of having a strong immune system, I guess”

The 2 let out short laughs as they neared the end of the cargo bay.

“How are you doing, Liara?”

The Asari turned her head and looked at the Quarian, trying but failing to muster a smile. Tali felt her stomach sink as she saw the broken expression in Liara’s face.

“Tali, you know that” Liara answered as she traced the large bruised and marked area on the side of her head, from where her biotics had burned the flesh in her failed attempt to end her life “Otherwise, you wouldn't have to be accompanying me, to make sure I don't open a hatch and throw myself into space”

“Liara, that's not true. I…”

“But it's still nice to be out of the infirmary for a while. Thank you”

Silence fell between them as they watched the zone in front of them.
The floor and walls around the cargo door was still filled with small impact holes and burns. The ground was stained, dried up pools of oil and blood spread all around. Liara turned her head away, feeling the cold moving up her spine as memories began to flash through her head.

“Do you want to go? I'm sorry if…”

“No, Tali, don't worry” Liara let out a deep breath “I really appreciate you being here with me. It's nice to... to...”
Liara couldn't stop the tears that fell from her eyes. Tali wrapped her friend in a tight hug as she softly patted her back.

“I'm sorry. I shouldn't…”

“It's alright. I'm here for you. We all are”

“I'm tired, Tali… I am so… tired… of everything…:

The Quarian felt her stomach sink as she listened to the Asari’s words. She knew that many of the crew felt the same way, they just did a better job of hiding it.

Liara had worn a strong, stoic and cold facade in the years after she stepped into the SR1. But there were no longer reasons to pretend to be something you were not.

She remembered a phrase her father told her long ago.

“War shatters minds as well as bodies. That's why no one leaves a conflict in one piece. All who fight come out broken on the other side”

If that was true, Tali thought, then no one in the Galaxy survived the war against the Reapers unharmed.
Hi everyone, I'm back :) 

Sorry for the long break. Life got a little hectic for me. I moved to a new country and haven't had a lot of free time until now.

I hope updates come more regularly now. Hope you continue to enjoy the story.

“*Benezia must not survive*”

The words crossed Shepard's mind over and over as the Normandy surged through the Relay of the Horsehead Nebula, headed towards the frozen planet of Noveria.

“If she dies, Liara would take her place as head of the T’Soni house. I'm sure I don't need to explain you how beneficial for us it would be to have the head of an important Asari house be friendly to humanity. And more importantly, if she's as close to you…”

“I get it” Shepard replied, cutting the officer's speech cold. The woman unconsciously traced one of the many scars in her arm, her mind racing as she envisioned all the possible scenarios that could happen once they reached Noveria.

“This could be all we need, Shepard. Don’t go soft now. Just one last push. One last fight”

“I know”

The conversation replayed over and over in Shepard’s mind, taking apart every word as if wanting to find a hidden message in the words of the Alliance officer, some subtle hint that might mean something other than what she had heard.

But the voice in her head knew that wasn’t gonna happen.

“They don’t send you on missions to keep people alive, Shepard” the Commander said to herself as she let out a deep breath.

The hissing of the door opening made her turn around.

“Hello, Comman… Katerina. I hope I’m not interrupting anything”

Shepard smiled as she saw Liara standing in the doorway, doing her best to hide the feeling of her stomach sinking.

“Hi, Liara. No, not at all. I’m never too busy for you. Make yourself comfortable”

The Asari smiled as she walked inside, sitting in one of the chairs next to a small table inside the
quarters close to the Commander.

“Dr Chakwas gave some pills to relax, but they didn’t do much. I started to think, too much, I would say. I couldn’t sleep, and, well…” Liara looked at Shepard, with a half smile set on her lips. “Karin and Kaidan were asleep and I…”

I just didn't want to be alone”

Katerina stretched her hand and softly grabbed Liara’s, intertwining their fingers as she softly caressed the blue skin with her thumb.

“You sure you didn’t just want to see me ?” Shepard said with a smug grin.

“That was one of the things that crossed my mind, I’ll admit it” Liara replied.

“Are you scared ?” Shepard asked, immediately regretting the stupidity of her question. The prospect of violently losing one’s mother would frighten almost anyone. Not that you would understand that, of course.

“Scared, frustrated, angry, lost… I’m not sure what I’m feeling”

“That’s me everyday. Welcome to my life” Shepard joked.

Liara let out a half hearted laugh before lowering her sight towards the floor.

“Katerina ?”

“Yeah ?”

“What’s the plan going forward regarding my mother ?”

The Commander sighed as she leaned back into her chair.

“I mean, is there some sort of protocol for this sort of situation ? Has the Alliance or the Council given you some sort of orders regarding her apprehension ?” Liara paused for a moment before looking directly at Shepard “We are taking her alive, right ?” the Asari asked.

“Liara, we…”

“I- I understand that you obviously must ensure your team’s safety first and foremost, of course, and that my mother’s Alliance with a rogue Spectre who’s now one of the biggest threats to Galactic stability put her pretty high on the list of dangerous individuals…” the Asari said nervously, tumbling over her words as she rubbed the back of her neck “but I’m sure that the Council or even the governors back on Thessia would need her alive for questioning and for a trial, right ?”

Liara let out a deep breath as she buried her face in her hands.

“Please tell me I’m right”

Shepard stood and softly hugged Liara, who tightly grabbed her back as she pressed her face against her chest, trying to hide the tears that were flowing from her eyes. Katerina smoothly rubbed her back, trying to comfort her as much as she could.

“I promise you, Liara, that I’ll do everything within my power to ensure that your mother comes out of this unharmed”
Shepard felt the Asari tighten her embrace around her.

“Thank you, Shepard. That is all I can ask”

“Everything is going to be fine” the Commander said as she planted a soft kiss on top of Liara’s head.

She wasn’t sure if Liara had believed it. The Asari was smart enough to know she couldn’t ensure that with certainty, but when one is suffering one can blind oneself to many things, even the most obvious facts.

Shepard remembered how if this had been any other circumstance, she would have angrily scolded Liara. “Fucking civilians” had been her catchphrase during the years she spent in the Alliance when she had to deal with noncombatants. Scared, frightened people who didn’t do much other than cry, get in the way of soldiers and ask for hollow promises that everything would be fine.


And yet, here she was now, holding in her arms a person that was as non military as you could get, watching her pour her sorrows and concerns into her, and she felt… sadness.

Sadness at Liara for what she was going and would go through. And sadness at herself.

She felt the pain and anger and a whirlwind of feelings inside her as she wondered how her life had came to this.

The two of them remained in a silent embrace as time passed, both finding comfort and peace in each other, even if it lasted for a short while.

Maybe that was all they could ask.

Shepard felt as Liara’s breathing slowed down, her body relaxing as she fell asleep in Katerina’s arms.

The Commander closed her eyes and moved her head to the side to prevent her tears from falling on Liara.

“You would hate me If you knew what I’m going to do. You will hate me when you know”

“Please, I… I was just following orders”

Shepard chuckled as she listened to Captain Ventrali’s words as the rest of the squad neutralized the rest of the security crew.

“We all are, Captain” she replied as she pressed the trigger.

As she turned around, she noticed the quick glance Kaidan gave her. It lasted for a second, but she could see the disapproval in his eyes.

The last guards with Ventralis had surrendered. But Katerina knew that the less witness there were of what had happened on Peak 15, the better. Besides, they had fired first.

Kaidan. A good man. The kind of people the Alliance needed.
But there was still a long road ahead before humanity could reach even a slight parity with the other species. And soldiers like Shepard were the ones who would have to swim in blood to push her people forward.

“How far are the hot labs, Tali?” Shepard asked as she caught up with the rest of the crew.

The quarian displayed a map of the facility from her omnitool.

“We need to reach the next hallway and turn right. The first elevator will take us there.”

“It’s easy for you to read a map like this?” Shepard replied as she saw the multiple levels and areas being displayed from the map, each one identified with a more confusing code than the next.

“Please, Shepard. On the flotilla, there are ships that are 30 times the size of this facility. If you don’t know how to use the map, you’ll spend the whole day roaming through…”

Shepard eyes widened as she saw the tentacles coming from the elevator. She threw Tali backwards and took the acid blow that was meant for the Quarian as the tentacles took hold of her and dragged her down.

The acid from the Rachni’s spit made Shepard’s armor creak. She could feel the searing heat even under all the layers of shielding her helmet gave her. The creature’s tentacles and their pointed, solid cartilages slammed themselves against her body as the other appendages kept her up in the air.

The Commander could taste the iron like flavor of blood on her mouth. She wondered what had been ruptured inside her this time.

On the distance she could hear and see the fighting.

The constant clicking of Wrex’s shotgun seemed to go on forever as he put down wave after wave of the attacking Rachni, tearing the ones who clung all over him with his bare hands, the acid of the creature’s blood seemingly not affecting him at all. An eerie image that resembled the pictures of the war the 2 races had fought thousands of years.

The clanging noise of sniper and assault rifles and the curses and shouts that accompanied them meant that Garrus and Ash were also hip deep in the attacking creatures.

Tali shouted Keelah, followed shortly after by a series of shotgun discharges.

A tentacle slamming against her face brought Shepard back to reality. The creature tightened her grip on the woman as she spat another burst of acid against her. The Commander could now feel the heat of the acid growing in intensity as it consumed layer after layer of the broken armor.

She closed her eyes under her helmet as she felt her tears fall and mix with the blood on her face.

The swirling darkness washed over her, plunging the world in front of her into an abyss once again, the comforting peace of the shadows embracing her one more time.

It had been raining through most of the time they’d been on Syrap, that backwater shithole on the Verge where they had sent her and the rest of the recruits. They had spent months cursing the rain
and the cold, only to end up facing a flaming death.

“There are few ways that are worse to die than this” the voice said “Curious, isn’t it? How even
the animals from Earth all the way to the Outer Rim know to fear fire”

Shepard struggled against her restraints, her screams being silenced by the gag on her mouth. She
tried to break free, ignoring the pain coming from her swollen eye which dripped blood and from
the rest of her body as she watched in horror of the scene.

“Hey… Kat…” the man in front of her said, in the same calm manner that you would expect from a
couple of friends meeting on an afternoon for lunch “Don’t worry…”

A match was lit. Shepard felt her wrists getting bloodied as she desperately tried to break free, the
muffled screams and her tears of anger

“Everything’s gonna be alright”

The light and heat exploded in front of her.

Shepard

Shepard

KATERINA!

The Commander snapped her eyes open. The waves of biotic explosions rocked the laboratory. A
quick gaze let her look who was standing beside her.

Liara had her enveloped in a biotic bubble and dragged her backwards as she launched attack after
attack at the incoming Rachni.

Shepard smiled under her broken helmet. She wondered if it was due to the blood loss, a reaction to
the creature’s acid or the blows the creature had given her in the head, but she felt oddly relaxed.
Her eyes remained still on Liara, watching how the energy seemed to surge from her body with
every attack, bathing her and everything around her in an ethereal blue light. Her crystal blue eyes
had been swallowed by the same biotic mist that enveloped her body, and the anger with which she
threw pulse after pulse would have frightened even the most veteran soldier.

Few things were as terrifying during a battle than seeing what is essentially a person who could
deliver the same amount of damage as an artillery unit.

But Shepard just smiled.

She stretched her hand, now exposed as the pieces of armor fell from it, and softly touched the
Asari’s cheek.
A guardian angel.

“Move. NOW!” Wrex shouted as he held the door Tali had just hacked open.

Kaidan and Liara launched a final barrage of biotic attacks at the incoming Rachni before moving through the door, which slammed shut shortly after they passed.

“You look scary when you’re angry. Pretty hot, too” Shepard said as she looked at Liara

“Shepard, this isn’t the time” the Asari replied as she softly placed her on the ground and began to scan her with her omnitool “But thank you” Liara said with a smile.

“Shepard has the spirit of a Krogan!” Wrex said loudly as he sat on some knocked out crates. His wounds bled profusely, but Wrex, as usual, didn’t seem to mind “Only someone with the strength of a Krogan could survive a Rachni attack like that. And she’s a human! Not even Turian or Asari or…”

“Not sure about the surviving part, Wrex. Oh fuck, this is gonna hurt tomorrow” Katerina said as she tried to sit.

“Well, you were just telling Liara that she looked hot, so your mental integrity is assured” Ashley said as she let out a short laugh.

“Laugh it up, Lieutenant” Shepard said as she winked at Liara “Everyone ready to move out?”

Liara smiled. Shepard pretended she didn’t saw the concern hidden in her eyes.

“Have you faced an Asari commando unit before?” the Matriarch’s voice echoed throughout the room. The fact that Benezia was as tall as Wrex did little to help the team felt at ease.

“I have, as a matter of fact” Shepard replied in the strongest tone she could muster, doing her best to hide the fear inside her “Toughest fight of my life”

“The N7s are supposed to be humanity’s best. Let’s put it to the test” the Matriarch said as squads of Commando’s and Geth entered the room.

“Shit” was Wrex’s reaction to the scene.

“At least he said it and not me” Shepard thought.

Everything went to shit shortly after.

Shepard avoided the biotic blast from the commando as she caught her arm, twisting it with all her force until she heard the snapping sound. Asari were more flexible than humans, but they could break just as easily when enough force was applied.

The knife Shepard had did short work of the Commando’s throat before she was pushed over the railing by Kat.
Shepard dropped behind some crates and pulled out her sniper rifle.

The team was scattered. Wrex, Ashley and Tali were pinned in the left side of the room, handling the incoming Geth.

Kaidan, Liara and Garrus were on the upper floor, answering each biotic assault with one of their own.

Benezia remained in the hallway in front of her, besides the imprisoned Rachni queen.

Shepard aimed at her head, uttering a hushed “I’m sorry, Liara” before pulling the trigger.

The spark from the shot still hadn’t faded when the Matriarch slammed against Shepard, crossing the space between them in less than a second.

The Asari began to power up her biotics, the lightning swirling in her arm as she placed herself on top of the Commander. Shepard did a futile effort to resist, knowing full well that it wouldn’t be long before the Matriarch’s blow turned her head into jelly.

As the Asari lifted her arm, Shepard closed her eyes.

“Everyone knows how to fight till they find an Asari Matriarch” Katerina jokingly said to herself.

The blow fell.

It sounded like thunder had just landed next to her, debris and metal falling all over her face.

“I shouldn’t have heard that. Meaning I’m not dead yet”

The Commander opened her eyes and her ears ranged from the blow, which had torn open a hole twice the size of her head beside her. The Matriarch was a few meters away, holding her as if it had a mind of its own.

She was crying.

Katerina crawled towards her rifle and aimed it once again at the Matriarch. The Asari was holding her head, screaming as she writhed in pain. “I won’t do it” the Matriarch said over and over “I won’t do it”

Shepard put her finger to the trigger, and as soon as she tried to fire, Liara’s words on the Normandy crossed her mind.

As the rifle trembled on her hands, she heard Alejandro’s voice as if he were standing right beside her “Killing a mother in front of her daughter. It doesn’t get any easier no matter how many times you do it”

Tears were rolling down the Commander’s cheeks, tightening her grip on the rifle as she heard the man’s words, anger rising inside her.

“I’d say that your evil knows no limits, but who would I be fooling? This is what we were trained for. This is what they made us. The obedient automatons sent to fight… And you were always the best of us”

Shepard pressed the trigger. A biotic blast hit her a second later, a cracking sound filling the air as she landed. She hoped it was from the armor.
“Too easy. It was too easy” Shepard chuckled as she tried to get up, only to find herself in the air shortly after as the Matriarch grabbed her by the neck.

Benezia tightened her grip on Shepard’s throat as she began to push into the woman’s mind. Her eyes completely blackened by the meld, the Commander did a final effort to resist the intrusive prodding of the asari’s mind on her own, before a bolt of pain caused her to finally fall apart.

She felt as Benezia drifted through her mind like it was library, searching through her memories with ease. The raw strength coming from Benezia’s mind made any attempt to push her back futile.

A sudden torrent of visions of Rachnis, a relay and a location fell into Shepard’s mind.

“This is what Saren needs. Stop him. I don’t have much time left”

Before Shepard could reply, the Matriarch silenced her with her words as another patch of memories was traversed.

“You love her”

The Matriarch’s words echoed through Shepard’s minds as they both saw the images from the time they had spent together. The moments of peace, comfort and love found in each other.

“I do”

“You’ll have to look after her when I’m gone” Benezia replied “There’s such strength in Liara. She can carry herself, as she has done through most of her life, but she will need someone… we all do…”

Just then the Matriarch went into that dark, hidden recess in the Commander’s mind, the place she had managed to shut away from Liara, she felt the anger rising from within the Matriarch.

“You bastard”

Shepard felt the pain beginning to grow inside her, the electrical sensation coursing through her as her body began to tremble.

“I won’t let you do it. I won’t let you hurt her!” the Matriarch said as she tightened her grip on the woman’s throat.

“Do it then. Act like the mother you’re supposed to be” Shepard replied through the meld “Save your daughter… save her from me”

Katerina was no stranger to pain. In fact, she could even call it a close friend. But nothing prepared her from when blood began to pour out of her eyes, nose and mouth. Nothing could have readied her for when her spine felt like it was burning, her limbs trembling uncontrollably as the full force of the Matriarch’s mind assaulted Shepard. Gasping for air that wouldn’t come, praying that her heart or brain would explode soon so that it would all stop… relieved cause Liara will be safe, at last.

Her body still languished as she was dropped to the floor. She saw only glimpses of Benezia falling backwards, a smoking gun being dropped besides Shepard, Liara rushing to her mother, taking her
into her arms as she screamed out in anguish.

Katerina’s tears mixed with the pool of blood that was forming under her head.

She saw Benezia’s cold, dead eyes still staring directly at her, the fury and anger frozen on her face as she had died staring at the near dead woman in front of her.

Beneath the crushing pain flowing through her before she passed out, she remembered the shame she felt as her eyes met Benezia’s.

“Shame on me” Shepard whispered before she passed out “Should have been me”
Hey, everyone.
Sorry for the long time without updates. Was going through some stuff which left me little time to write but I'm back now.
Hope you enjoy :)

Nos Astra had been bustling with more activity than usual in the last couple of weeks. The capital of Illium was hosting one of the largest arms exposition events in the edges of Citadel space, and there was no shortage of clients willing to buy the latest toys for their own private armies and wars on both sides of the Galaxy.

The city benefitted as a whole from such events. Eternity, the bar near the main docks, had been filled with people day in and day out.

The buzzer of the bar rang again, another client asking for drinks.

"I'm coming, I'm coming" the Asari bartender said as she cursed under her breath.

A couple of Eclipse mercs sat near the bar. At least they were unarmed, the Asari said.

"What can I get you ?"

"A yusthia" the first said, the bartender quickly bringing forth a glowy pinkish bottle with her biotics as she poured into the cup.

"I know a few things you can get me" the youngest of the two said, winking at the Matriarch as she finished serving her friend.

Aethyta gave her a half smile "Is that so ? I think you might be aiming a little out of your league, kid"

The Commando leaned over the bar and grabbed the Matriarch by the neck of her dress, bringing their faces nearly on top of each other "Why don't we go somewhere so I can show you ?" The commando stuck out her tongue and gave a quick lick to Aethyta's lips, grinning as she did.

Before she could sit back down, the Matriarch pulled her back into a deep kiss, taking the breath away from the Mercenary as she watched her irises begin to darken.

"Wow"

"Wait for me outside in 2 hours, babe. If you're still up for it" Aethyta patted her on the head as she dropped her back into the chair before moving to other customers.

"Did you honestly ask to fuck the bartender, Rhia ? Right in front of me ?" The older merc asked with a disgusted expression on her face.

"I'm not sure i'll be doing the fucking. Just… wow" the asari replied, her wide eyed expression
making the Matriarch smile.

Aethytha's sight drifted throughout the room, from the news on the TV to the messages on her omnitool to the young Asari soundly asleep on her chest.

Cute thing, she thought. She wouldn't last long as a merc. Kids like her never did.

"How much has our society failed that its perfectly content with letting its future die in random mercenary wars or shanked by someone outside of a strip club all throughout the galaxy"

She remembered saying it once, one of the many heated discussions she used to have with…

"... about the apparent death of Benezia T'Soni..."

Aethyta swallowed hard, pressing the sleeping Asari tighter against her. She hadn't just heard that. Must be a side effect of the pills the merc gave her. They must be playing with her head. It couldn't be true…

"... had arrived on the human controlled world of Noveria, the full reason for her travel there is still unclear at this time..."

The Matriarch tightened her hands into fists as she felt her heart beating faster by the second, unconscious tendrils of biotics flashing from her body as she felt the water pooling in her eyes. She shut off the TV before launching the controller against the wall, making the Eclipse merc bolt up from the bed.

"What happened ?" She asked, looking confusedly at the Matriarch "You're crying. What …"

Aethyta placed her hand on her mouth, silencing her as she pushed her back into the bed and placed herself on top of her.

She felt her stomach sinking as her mind repeated the phrase over and over, trying to hide it by pressing herself against the merc moaning below her.

" Benezia's dead... Nezzie... My Nezzie... My love..."

She was no stranger to loss. But she felt a part of her dying that day. A part of herself she would never get back.

Zelinya and Tevos weren't sure how long they had been arguing in the room. The Councilor watched the faint smoke rising from her cup as the tea inside it remain untouched, while the other Matriarch looked towards one of the empty seats on the left side of the room. The seat that of the T'Soni house of Armali. A seat her sister would no longer use.

"We expected it could end like this" Tevos said, breaking the silence that flooded the room.

"I didn't. Benezia always had a plan. Always knew what to do, what to say" Zelinya replied "Did I tell you how our mother called her the smart one and I…"

"Yes, you told me"

"Right, right" the Matriarch replied, not taking her eyes of the chair.
"Shall I talk to the daughter? If you're not feeling up to it…"

"I'll talk to Liara. Just…" she scratched the scar on her cheek as she spoke. She hated Tevos's attempts at being compassionate, feigning understanding knowing full well she'd get her way in the end. The perfect Matriarch, as some would say "She'll need time. And we'll give it to her. And before you complain, my people are already in place, making sure the administrative functions of the house continue to operate normally"

"Order and balance must be maintained, Zelinya. Hate me for it, but keeping our people safe is my priority, and Armali is a big part of our people. I truly hope you and your niece can maintain that, but I fully expect you to be ready to assume charge when… if things go awry"

Zelinya closed her eyes and let out deep breaths, her fists tightening on the edge of the table.

She felt a soothing presence reach out to her mind as Tevos softly placed her hands on top of hers.

"I am sorry, Zelinya. Benezia was my friend and her loss hurts me greatly. But you lost your sister, and I can't even begin to imagine what you must be feeling"

Zelinya turned around and smiled at Tevos "That's right, you can't, Thea. Besides, you've never been big on sentimentality" Tapping on her omnitool, she confirmed her flight to the Citadel "Now, let's do what needs to be done"

Shepard slowly opened one eye, seeing the familiar white color of the hospital room greeting her again. Her sight was blurry, distorted, and her head felt… odd. Almost as if it was disconnected from the rest of her body.

The lack of sensation was what concerned her the most.

Slowly rolling her head to the side, she expected to see a familiar figure waiting beside the bed. Asleep, slumped over the chair, Liara had become the one good thing she could expect when she woke up from her constant hospital and medbay visits.

It wasn't right, she thought, making the person you care about become used to waiting to see if you'd be ok or not when you woke up, forcing them to wait patiently for her to return.

But what had ever been right in her life?

Except that this time, no one was waiting beside her. The chair was empty, and it looked like no one had been in it for a while. The room was eerily silent, and no one but herself laid in it.

The sinking feeling in her stomach quickly spread through her body.

She looked at the ceiling and let out a deep breath. They would be in here soon, she thought. Karin and a team of medical personnel asking a million questions, most of them about how it was possible that she had survived a mind meld attack from an Asari Matriarch, Anderson saying something about how I was tougher to kill than whatever metaphor he would thought up this time, and lastly Fatima with her judging gaze asking a couple of pointed questions before explaining how I had fucked up this and that.

There were going to be consequences for Benezia's death. And Liara was going to be in the eye of
that storm.
Because of her. Because Liara gunned down her mother to save her. She wasn't worth it.
She would never be worth it.
Before long, the door to the room opened and Fatima stepped in, her expression as cold as ever.
Walking next to Shepard, she sat on the empty chair and laid back, letting out a relaxed sigh before looking at the Commander.
"How's… Liara ?" were the first words to leave Shepard's lips.
"She's fine, all things considered. But she's gone"
Shepard's eyes widened "Did her people come for her ? Or did she leave on her own ?" Her head felt heavier with each word she said, not sure which of the two possibilities was worst.
"She's back on Thessia for her mother's funeral. We don't think she will return to the Citadel, or…"
"Or to me. Right" Katerina closed her eyes and let out a deep breath "So, I guess the mission's over"
"More or less. We hope that her experience with you and her crew will give us a friendly voice in Armali once she assumes control of her house. But otherwise, yeah. It's over"
"Over" Katya traced the scar on her nose "Good. That's… good"
Fatima gave a slight tap to her jacket "Off the record now, Shepard"
"Is something ever off the record with you ?"
"Not usually. Making an exception now"
Katerina didn't notice the tears until the cold air of the room brushed against her face, chilling the trail they left on her scarred cheeks.
"You fell for her"
"We've worked together almost a decade, Fatima, and as far as missions go, this is the one I've enjoyed the most. Let's just leave it at that"
"I understand. It's nice, isn't it ? Trying to be normal, seeing how the other half lives" Fatima smiled as she took a cigarette and lit it "But…"
"But that's not the life for people like you and me. Come on, Fatima. Save it for the recruits"
"I did told you to keep your feet on the ground"
Shepard chuckled "Sorry, boss. You see, that's the problem with these kind of jobs. You get close to people and…" Katerina felt a shiver move up her spine "they make you weak"
"What's weak to you, Kat ?"
The Commander looked directly at Fatima. She was surprised when she saw the usual cocky, self assured expression the woman had replaced with an understanding, almost sorrowful look. She
wondered how many times Fatima had been in her shoes. A lot, Shepard guessed.

"She made me feel like a person. Made me feel like my life was worth... something. And I was happy. Truly happy" Katerina felt her eyes stinging as she spoke "And I repaid her by making her kill her mom. And what we were planning for her... But just tell that I am emotionally stunted and got attached to an Asari who showed basic affection for me. It'll look prettier on the file"

Fatima stood up and looked at the window, brushing away the single tear that loomed in her eyes, the memories Shepard's words had brought forth swirling in her head "I saw how she looked at you. I wouldn't call it basic affection, precisely"

Katerina sobbed quietly "Can't have the people up top hearing their 'best girl' developed true emotions, can we ?"

"No, we can't" turning around, she moved next to Shepard's bed "You'll be on medical leave for a while. Doctor's orders. The Normandy will be working in conjunction with the Salarians to track Saren"

"I… Yeah, a break sounds nice. Kaidan's in charge ?"

Fatima nodded.

"We looked at what you said about him and agreed he was the best candidate. He was reluctant at first, but he gave way in the end"

"Kaidan will shine there. Time he got a real command"

Fatima placed her hand on Katerina's bandaged shoulder, the stoic look back on her face "For what it's worth, I'm sorry"

Shepard gave her a half smile "Got too close to the fire again. Bout time I got burned"

Fatima pretended she didn't see the hurt under Shepard's eyes as she walked through the door.

"If you ever want to talk…"

"I know. Hey, you ain't gonna ask me about surviving the Matriarch attacking me ?"

The woman smiled on the doorway "I'll leave that to Karin. Honestly, I won't be surprised if you're cast out from whatever afterlife you go to after you die and come back ready to serve"

The door closed.

Katerina scratched a patch of hurt skin above her nose, tears again dripping from her eyes.

"Is that what happened to you, Alejandro ? Got cast out from hell and came back to haunt my mind for the shit we did ? Is that what will happen to me ?"

Only the ventilation noise answered her words "What ? Did you leave with Liara ? Or are you waiting till I'm sleeping to come and fuck around ?"

She looked around the room, and still no one answered. Dropping her head into the pillow, she looked towards the empty chair next to the bed.

"It's fine. Everything's fine"
She drowned her screams and tears into the pillow before falling asleep.

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