Rest Now, My Warrior

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Rest Now, My Warrior

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Summary

The war is won. The heroine survived. But the scars have only just begun to heal.

(Destroy ending, Earthborn Shepard, Canon ending)
Chapter 1

Dying wasn’t supposed to hurt.

She considered herself an expert on the subject of dying. She already died once, then got brought back. She remembered the terror, the feeling of absolute helplessness and the panicked, half-formed thoughts that jumbled in her head as she fell away from the exploding Normandy. She also recalled the tightness in her lungs after her combat suit’s oxygen seals ruptured. She’d never forget the pressure behind her eyes as she descended into that ice planet’s atmosphere. She remembered every terrifying second before darkness consumed her for two years. None of it had hurt.

But she hurt now. Arms, legs, nose, chest, everything throbbed, tore and wrenched in agony. Nothing felt right. She couldn’t move. Her eyes couldn’t register any light. Were they stuck closed, or were they wide open but blind? She honestly could not tell. Nor could she find the strength to find out.

None of her limbs responded to her, either. She could tell the bones in one of her hands had been broken, but she wasn’t sure which. Her arms had been wrenched out of their sockets and hung limply beside her, twisted together into one mass of broken bone and flesh. She couldn’t muster the willpower to care about the state of her legs. She didn’t even want to breathe. But that didn’t stop her chest, full of shattered ribs, from doing it for her. God, it hurt to breathe. Air passing her ruined nose sent electric jolts through her face, into her broken teeth and down through her throat. The slightest gasp felt like hell boiled inside her lungs. Each puff of air burned and tore at her insides, no matter how shallow or deep she tried to make her ragged breathing.

For a brief moment, she felt a pang of sorrow. Not because she was dying alone in darkness, but because she never got the chance to hold her breath to get her way. Children in vids did it all the time in front of their parents and it always got them what they wanted or it made everyone laugh. She never knew her parents. She never got to see their horrified faces as she turned blue in a tantrum. It would have been so great. If she passed out, they would have taken care of her like all parents do. If she didn’t, they would have laughed together like a real family. She could imagine them laughing so hard tears fell from her parent’s eyes, maybe covering their mouths because she imagined her parents did that. It was her fantasy, after all.

Their faces… in tears. Her face turned blue. Blue face. Her blue face, covered in tears.

Who was that? As her mind drifted away from one fantasy, another took its place. A young woman with a blue face. How was that possible? People didn’t have blue skin. Well, not naturally anyway. No, that wasn’t right. Some people did have blue skin. And no hair, but these crests on their heads that swept back in the strangest, but most appealing way. If only she could put a name to this specific face.

Somewhere, deep down in her memory, she recalled seeing this face the last time she died. She remembered feeling something as well. What did she feel? Certainly not pain. No, that was her body letting her know she still wasn’t dead, unfortunately.

Dying wasn’t supposed to hurt.

No, she felt something else when she imagined this blue face. Something she couldn’t describe as her brain shut itself down. At least, not with coherent thoughts. Flashes of feelings joined the face, the last scraps of what she could remember before she died the last time. Warmth in her chest. Comfort in her arms. Laughter on her lips. …Love in her heart.
What a strange thing to remember when looking at a blue face. And yet, remember she did. It killed her inside, more than her shallow breathing did, to not have a name attached to the face or the overwhelming feeling of love she got from it. She really should have remembered the name before she remembered anything else. What good was it to know how she felt about a face when she didn’t know what she was looking at?

In a way, dying confused felt worse than dying in unbearable agony. At least the pain could explain itself. Nerves exposed or damaged. Her body shutting down in response to trauma. Natural biological processes meant to signal a problem, maybe encourage healing. Wow, why was she thinking about basic biology? The last time she had to do that was when she had to take some high school exams.

High school. Another thing she saw in vids but never got to live through. Sure, she got her education. In jail, after getting arrested for selling red sand to some guys on the street. She never touched the shit, she knew what her “uncles” in the Reds mixed into it so they could make it look like the bags were fuller. No, she shouldn’t be thinking about that. Biology. She was trying to remember why she thought about biology.

She had to dig a little, but she remembered the day she passed her biology exams with top marks. She jumped around in her cell for a few minutes before sitting down and watching the guard pass by. Why was she so happy? Oh yeah, because it finally made her eligible to enlist in the Alliance as soon as she turned 18. But why did that make her happy? Because she could leave her shitty life behind and see the stars and all the aliens that lived out there. Especially those blue women that everyone kept talking about. Blue women. Asari.

That was it! That blue face roared past her old memories and back into the forefront of her mind’s eye. Asari! That was the name! She felt love for Asari! If her charred lips were capable of moving, she would have smiled. Instead, she felt content at attaching a name to the face. One last victory as she died.

Dying. Yes, she should be dying any time now. Already, some of the unbearable pain in her limbs felt… less. Not healing, not even numb, just less.

The blue Asari face began to shimmer and drift away in her vision, the memories of love and contentment growing dimmer along with it. She recognized the familiar hand of oblivion as it overtook her mind. It didn’t make breathing any easier to endure. Nor did it stop her from feeling something warm and wet pooling under her back. Blood? What did she care if she was starting to lose blood? It would make her suffering end all the sooner. Encroaching nothingness snuffed out the blue face, just as it had done before. That was okay. This part of dying she knew well. She let the face and the memory drift away like she remembered doing before. She wouldn’t need them anymore. No one would come around to bring her back this time. No one knew where she was. She didn’t even know.

The firestorm in her lungs dulled to embers as she stopped breathing, and even that pain got swallowed by the darkness. She let it go. All of it. Every memory, every feeling, every sensation that still registered in her destroyed body. Like a whisper, she exhaled one last time, letting her life finally exit the ruined shell that used to be a human being.

She melted away. She didn’t know she could do that. She joined the pool of warmth under her back drop by drop. She wasn’t human, not anymore. She was gone. Oblivion had finally taken her pain away and let her rest.

...
Silence. All came to silence.

...

Nothingness.

...

Dead.

...

And yet, she wasn’t. Something lingered in the cavity that used to be her chest. Not pain, not the stabbing needles of ruined nerves, the cracking of burned flesh or even the scalding embers of destroyed lungs. Something different stirred there and it ached even more than her shattered remains.

No, not ached. It thrashed. It screamed. It fought oblivion with the force of a supernova.

Something accompanied the pain, a companion that tempered the ache, but did not dull it. It filled her empty mind with things she could no longer comprehend. Images. Smells. Sensations. Memories? Memories were for people. Living people. She had no need of those. All she needed was the rest she had been denied the last time. She needed emptiness. She craved the void, the darkness, the silence. She deserved to be nothing, to drift forever in dreamless sleep. Why wouldn’t the sensations stop?

Why did the ache in her chest want her to keep suffering? What had she done to deserve this unending torment? What was keeping her alive?

As if in answer, the pain in her chest exploded again, this time illuminating a memory so bright it threatened to burn death itself from her mind forever. The blue face. The Asari face. The one who made her remember love. Other fragments of memory joined the storm. She never got to make a blue face. She passed her exams. She could go into space and see those Asari one day. She got a ship. She met an Asari. She loved an Asari.

And the Asari loved her.

Liara.

Jane Shepard, hero of the citadel, commander of the Normandy, took in another breath as she felt her heart beat once more.
Liara T’soni had never slept well. Not even when alone on her many digs, surrounded by nothing but silent ruins and the stars. Oh, she’d had plenty of days where she slept long hours and woke up refreshed and ready, but they were rare exceptions. In her one hundred and nine years of life, there was always a new find to catalogue, a new paper to publish. And after that, there was data to sift through. Agents to contact. An entire war effort that hinged on her ability to sort through information older than recorded history itself.

And now that it was over?

Now she couldn’t sleep because she felt no reason to. Why run away into dreams when they’d ultimately fade and she’d have to face the unending nightmare of reality? Worlds still burned, people on countless worlds still suffered even without the Reapers around to menace them. The rebuilding effort would take years to truly get off the ground, decades to show any real improvement, and centuries before people began to forget what really happened in these terrible few months. None of that compared to the nightmare she lived at this very moment.

Alone in the quarters she had claimed as her own, the few agents who survived the war sent constant, desperate messages to her. They pleaded for the Shadow Broker to return to them, give them directions in a galaxy that had been fundamentally changed. They were lost without her guidance.

She didn’t stand up from her disheveled bed, nor look at the few screens that had remained on their wall mounts after Joker managed to crash the Normandy on this planet. Let them stay lost. Let them feel alone for a while.

Alone. That’s exactly how Liara felt. Just outside the bulkheads of her quarters-turned-office, her shipmates scurried around the ship, repairing the Normandy as best they could before Joker took them back to Earth. She didn’t know all the details of what had been damaged following the activation of the crucible. She didn’t particularly care to ask. None of them seemed to feel alone. They had their teams and their shipmates. She had no one. Not anymore.

Oh, a few matters still caught her attention, like how EDI stopped responding the instant the shockwave caught up with the ship. Liara knew next to nothing about fixing an artificial intelligence, so she felt no reason to walk into EDI’s core to learn what happened. All she could pick up from the sounds that echoed into her dark chambers were words like “burned out” and “dead”. Most of them shouted by Joker, and most of those preceded by the words “can’t be”. Could an AI actually be killed? Perhaps something in her extensive libraries of information could answer that question, but Liara didn’t get up to look.

Out of all the death the Reapers visited on the galaxy, only one lingered in her mind. Liara should have been upset with herself for allowing only one person’s death to overshadow the loss of trillions, but she didn’t care. Only one person in the entire galaxy mattered enough to warrant such devotion. Shepard. Just recalling her name made Liara’s eyes burn. She should have shed more tears as the grief once again welled up, but nothing fell anymore. Dehydration, most likely. She didn’t recall the last time she ate or drank anything.

All she did recall were those last moments on Earth. Running through a crater that had once been a city called London. Following Shepard toward the Reaper construction, listening to her radio crackle as people around her screamed and died. And then one of the human vehicles exploded and almost
landed on top of her. The impact sent Liara flying into the rough pavement. Shepard was there an instant later, ordering the Normandy to retrieve everyone while she completed the mission. Liara tried to refuse the order, to run alongside her love as the world ended around them, but neither she nor her crewmates let her go.

“No matter what happens,” She remembered the way Shepard’s voice broke as the words left her. Every syllable tore into her heart. “You mean everything to me, Liara. You always will.”

And then she died. Again. Leaving Liara alone. Again. It didn’t matter of Jane Shepard’s death signaled the end of the Reapers and the salvation of the galaxy. She left Liara behind in doing so.

The agents continued to call, their comms pestering her with incessant beeping. They didn’t appreciate being alone either.

Without thinking, as her eyes refused to let go of any more tears, Liara grabbed one of her pillows and threw it at the monitors on the wall. The impact broke one of the few remaining vid screens free from its holding, sending it into the pile of debris that already littered her floor.

“Do you wish to file another maintenance requisition, Doctor T’soni?” The perpetually cheerful voice of Glyph cut through the beeps. Liara didn’t answer, she just stared at the glowing drone as it hovered over the most recently broken thing in her room.

The incessant beeping did not stop. If anything, it got louder. Had the pillow somehow increased the volume of her notifications? No, that wasn’t possible. Liara coded the volume on all her equipment through her omni-tool, not a physical dial.

And yet, she swore the beeping grew louder.

No, not louder. Another notification had just joined the others. But this one sounded a little different from the constant noise from her equipment. A little more subdued. Less insistent that she respond immediately, like her agents begged her to do.

The oddity of the soothing beep finally coaxed Liara onto her feet. Still a little unsteady, as half her body now endured several massive, deep bruises from the vehicle that nearly killed her, but she managed to walk to her console in front of the ruined wall of vid screens. As expected, she had dozens of messages waiting to be read, notifications from all surviving agents and other bits of information that did not require a sound to notify her of their presence.

And yet the second sound persisted. If it wasn’t from an agent or contact, who could it be?

A new noise, a harsh metallic clank, joined the second beep.

The door! Goddess, how foolish Liara felt at that moment. Her door chime kept beeping, not her console. It went off so rarely she had forgotten what it sounded like. Nobody had ever entered without her permission and Shepard never needed to notify her for a visit.

Liara had to force a second wave of grief back down into her stomach before she limped to the door. The knocking grew more impatient as it waited for her to respond.

“Doctor?” A muffled voice, but with a familiar Turian tone, passed through the metal of the door. “Liara, are you okay?”

Without pause, Liara opened her door. The lights of the crew deck, dim as they were, blinded her for a moment. She hadn’t realized how much she preferred the darkness.
“Garrus” Liara managed to speak through dry lips as she blinked away the residual aches from the sudden light. “What can I do for you?”

“Actually, I was going to ask you the same question.” The Turian made a gesture Liara assumed meant he wished to be invited into her quarters. She stepped aside, a motion that aggravated her bruised ribs. “You haven’t come out of this dark little cave for days. We’re worried.”

Garrus took a few steps into the room, careful to avoid the broken glass and machinery on the deck, and turned to face her.

“And they sent you as ambassador?” She tried so hard to sound jovial, to make Garrus think all was well in her ruined little world. It must have failed, because even she could detect the venom that escaped with the words.

“I volunteered, actually. Tali wanted to be the sacrificial… what is that Earth animal? Sheep? But I convinced her that she should keep fixing our engines so they don’t fall apart when Joker lifts us off.”

“When will that be?” Part of Liara, somewhere deep down, cared to know what her friend’s plans were now that the war was over. She hoped her tone sounded less vicious.

“No more than a day or two. Just need to run a few more tests to make sure nothing explodes as it powers up.”

“Yes, that would be bad.”

“I agree.” Garrus’s mandibles flickered for a moment, something Liara recognized as a Turian smile. She did not return the expression. “On another bright note, you should be happy to know that Vega actually did his part in the repairs and got the galley working again. You probably heard him banging against the bulkhead once or twice. People in the next solar system probably heard him.”

“Can’t say I have.” If she did hear anything, she didn’t care to remember.

“Oh, well, you missed quite the show. But he got it done, like Jimmy Vega always does. Now we can eat our ration packs hot or cold. Speaking of which…”

Garrus reached into a pocket of his armor, which surprised Liara because she hadn’t realized his armor had pockets, and pulled out two Alliance military ration packs.

“Don’t worry, me and Tali made sure to separate the dextro rations as soon as we could. I grabbed these from the bigger pile. At least, I think I did.” Garrus held the packs up to his eye to make sure the rations had the proper label. Despite herself, Liara smiled at the gesture. It felt good to know he cared. “Yeah, these are good.”

“Thank you, Garrus.” Liara took the packages and set them down on top of her console. In an instant, it had gone from hub of the most critical information in the galaxy to a common table. She liked that.

“Oh, before I forget,” Garrus said as he took one step toward the door, “I was also sent in here to deliver a message. Doctor Chakwas wants you to go back to the medbay when you feel ready. She wants to make sure you’re healing well.”

“You can assure Doctor Chakwas that I am fine, Garrus.”

The Turian raised his hands in a defeated pose. A very human pose. “I’m sure you are, but these
orders come from a medical doctor. Not even you can ignore them, Liara. And I don’t want you to. So please, if anything, do it for me.”

Garrus stopped moving toward the door. Instead he faced Liara and put a hand on her shoulder.

“I know it hurts, Liara. You don’t have to tell me, I can see it in your eyes. But we’re all out there if you need anything. We miss her too.”

Liara wanted to tell him he had no idea how much it hurt, how she couldn’t expect anyone to feel the loss that seemed to physically pull her down like a great weight. Not even the day she left Thessia as it fell to the Reapers crushed her heart like this did.

But he did know. He watched his own world as it burned. He stood next to her in London as the Reapers systematically ruined their last fighting force. He had been the one to pull her back into the Normandy when Shepard ordered them to leave.

A phrase wormed its way into Liara’s mind. “There’s no Shepard without Vakarian.” The two of them had known each other a little longer than Liara. Their bond formed through battle and hardship, soldiers supporting each other through one impossible fight after another. Liara knew there was love between them. Not the same as she shared with the human, but love all the same.

If anyone knew how much it hurt, it was Garrus Vakarian.

“Okay.” Liara sighed as she looked up into Garrus’s scarred face. A reminder of one of those many impossible fights. “Okay.”

Liara took a step forward with Garrus, heading to the door, when she doubled over. Her right arm instinctively reached to hold a bruise that covered the left side of her abdomen. All that time spent sitting on her bed made her forget exactly how deep those injuries went.

“I may need some help getting to the medbay.”

“Don’t worry, I’m here.” Garrus, ever the Turian soldier and gentleman, reached behind Liara and supported her as she weakly left her ruined quarters for the first time in days.
“Liara.” Doctor Karin Chakwas turned to face the pair as Liara hobbled into the medbay. Unlike all other places inside the ship, the medbay remained well lit and impeccably tidy. No doubt the result of concerted efforts between Chakwas and however many crewmen could be spared to make sure their critical medical facilities remained functional.

“Doctor.” Liara nodded as Garrus led her to one of the medical tables. He kept his supportive grip as she leaned against it, in no mood or condition to hoist herself onto its surface. Behind her, Liara could feel the turian turn his head toward the human doctor.

“Thank you, Garrus.” Chakwas said as he slowly let go, letting Liara once again get used to the discomfort of her injuries. “Would you be so kind as to leave us for a moment?”

“Of course, doctor. Liara.” He nodded his head and walked out at a curt military pace. She didn’t see him head to his home on the ship: the forward weapons battery. He must have parked himself just outside the door, waiting in case she needed an escort back.

Chakwas held her omni-tool over Liara’s bruised side and took a few readings. She never looked up or even acknowledged her presence aside from the short greeting. A small wave of aggravation washed over Liara, flushing her cheeks a darker blue. Couldn’t the doctor have come to her quarters if she just wanted to wave the glowing computer in Liara’s face?

“Doctor, is this really necessary-“

Before she could finish her angered question, Karin dropped all pretense of professionalism and embraced Liara, making sure to place her arms away from Liara’s injuries. The sudden motion nearly caused her to fall onto the bed.

“I am so sorry, dear.” She whispered as she rubbed her hands on Liara’s back. The unexpected embrace shattered her sour mood, bringing back only the terrible weight and numbness that had been her companions since Earth. Liara’s arms instinctively returned the gesture, wrapping around the doctor’s back and holding tight.

Chakwas held her for longer than Liara though appropriate, but the contact was not unappreciated. Karin must have assumed Liara needed someone to share her emotions with, to be the “shoulder to cry on” to use the human phrase. She still had no tears left to cry.

After a moment longer, Liara pushed away with gentle pressure, letting Karin end the hug with the same care. Liara caught the long wet streaks that flowed down the doctor’s face before she wiped them away with her sleeve.

Chakwas took in a breath and finally looked Liara in the eye. “You’re on the road to recovery, Liara, but you show some dangerous signs I’m sure you are already aware of. I don’t need to bore you with the jargon.” She put on a faint smile as she walked to the medbay’s small clean sink. She returned with a tiny plastic cup full of water. Liara took it after a moment’s hesitation. A brief thought of succumbing to dehydration had crossed her mind once or twice, but she locked it away. She would not end her life like that.

The human doctor made sure to watch Liara as she sipped from the cup, obviously wise to people in similar mental states. “Good. I’ll have Garrus carry some water bottles to your quarters so you don’t have to aggravate your injuries while keeping hydrated.”
“Thank you, doctor.”

Karin nodded and took the cup back. She placed it down on the bed. “Liara, you know I’m here. All you need to do is buzz me on the intercom. I’d even come to you in person if you wish.”

Liara looked at the doctor for a moment. Of everyone left aboard, she knew Karin best. She recalled all the time she spent on the original Normandy, using a small corner of the medical storage area as a makeshift office as she helped the crew take Saren down. She spoke to Chakwas more than anyone else because of their proximity during the mission. Though most of their conversations had been academic or related to their goals, she still looked back on them fondly.

“If I need to, I will.”

“That’s all I ask.” Chakwas smiled and turned to her desk. Liara didn’t want to pry, but she still saw a few details on the doctor’s monitor. Health updates waiting to be sent back to Alliance command as soon as she could establish communications. A massive blank space sat next to Liara’s name.

“Is there… anything else?”

Chakwas turned away from her computer and smiled again. “No, that will be all. I just wanted to see how you’re progressing.” She paused. “But my offer is genuine and always open, Liara. As a medical professional and as your friend, I… hope you find time to talk to me.”

Liara nodded and took a few uneasy steps toward the door. Somehow, probably queued by Chakwas via omni-tool, Garrus appeared next to her and offered the same supportive arm.

But this time, he didn’t stand alone. Tali took a spot on Liara’s other side, though she thankfully did not try to hold her up or touch the massive bruises under her clothing. “Hey, Liara.”

“Hello, Tali.” Liara muttered as she began the painful walk back. Garrus led her through the broken galley a little slower than he did before. He knew her well enough to know she’d kick them both out as soon as she landed back on her own bed. This would be Tali’s best chance to speak with her.

“I don’t know… what to say. We all miss her.” Tali fumbled her fingers together as she tried to come up with the right words.

“I know.”

“I just wish I could say something to help you feel better. Shepard somehow always knew what to say.” Tali sniffled, a sound that echoed through her helmet.

“She did.” Liara turned and put her free hand on Tali’s shoulder.

“I think, right now, she’d try to tell us all to keep focused on repairs. She’d want us to get off this rock as quickly as possible so we can go home. But she’d say it better. Keelah, I am so bad at this.”

“You said it just fine, Tali.” Liara allowed herself to smile, a false one, but it seemed to reassure the Quarian. Liara put a small amount of weight on the hand she placed on Tali, to at least give the illusion she helped with this short escort.

Garrus opened Liara’s door. The constant beeping of her notifications began their assault once again. Had she not been held up by two friends, she would have smashed the console, the ration packs that sat atop it and especially the damned speaker that made the damned sound, with a biotic blast.

No, that wasn’t true. She just enjoyed the fantasy of violently destroying her life’s work now that she had no reason to keep working. Liara knew that she’d eventually answer. Soon, but not now.
all over the galaxy would fall apart as the recovery process began. She had to remain strong for them.

Like Tali said, Shepard wouldn’t fall apart like this. She’d find the exact right words to say to keep them on their feet as the days looked worse and worse. To the crew, she’d conjure a speech that would make them cheer for a moment, then get back to work with double the enthusiasm. To Liara, all she’d need to say were three words and she could find the strength to do anything.

She really could do anything. As long as those words rang in her head.

Garrus let Liara slip out of his grip but kept still as she walked over to her unmade bed. He cleared his throat as soon as she touched the yielding surface.

“Is there something else?” Liara asked as she began the arduous process of orienting herself back on the bed.

“Well, we were talking while Doctor Chakwas examined you.” Tali began.

Garrus finished her thought. “We think we should have some kind of… memorial before we leave. Something small, just for us. Before the galaxy turns everything we did into a media nightmare.”

“I think you should.” Like before, she hadn’t meant to spit the words out, but they left her lips with more venom than she desired.

“I meant,” he continued, “All of us.”

“I know what you meant, Garrus.”

“Liara, please.” Even through the obscuring glass of her face mask, Liara saw Tali’s pleading eyes.

“I will… consider it. I just need to think.”

“Of course.” Garrus nodded and put his hand on Tali’s arm. “We won’t keep you any longer.” Liara watched them leave and close the door behind them, once again shrouding her in darkness.

But not silence.

The beeping. The never-ending, maddening, horrific beeping.

Groaning with as much rage as pain from once again standing up, Liara took her time to reach the console. By her estimates, her agents had been waiting three standard days to hear from the Shadow Broker. It would have been a cause for disaster not too long ago, prompting galaxy-wide hysteria and perhaps the collapse of the galaxy’s entire economy if the Shadow Broker had gone missing for even a day. The Reapers left everything uncertain. She had the power, right now, to kill the Shadow Broker once and for all.

If she wanted to, she could walk away from secrets and return to her old life. Maybe even go back to digging. But digging for what? Survivors? Bodies? The galaxy wouldn’t let her pretend that nothing had changed. The Reapers would certainly have targeted major Prothean sites in their rampage, just to make sure the next cycle didn’t benefit from any more “gifts” from that long dead race.

Or perhaps, she could continue to fulfill a promise she made to her one and only bondmate not long ago. The Shadow Broker could continue to help the galaxy, not plunder its underbelly and profit from its lies. The old mission had been to stop the reapers. The new mission could be whatever she wished. If the Shadow Broker commanded that all agents immediately aid the rebuilding efforts, they would comply. Some might argue, but they’d eventually agree that an intact civilization is a
profitable one. You don’t make much money scavenging among the dead. She thought about her promise to her bondmate and those three words only Shepard could say.

Yes, right now, she could do it. The Shadow Broker would rebuild the entire galaxy from the bottom up. All she needed to do was open communication with all surviving agents. Liara took the ration packs off her console and set them down before looking back at the data she had ignored for three days.

Casualty lists. Endless casualty lists. She filed those away.

Communications from various military groups around the galaxy. Mostly shock, joy and surprise at watching the reapers fall and die. A few mentions of troop movement, but nothing that suggested a new war. Most likely soldiers coming to the aid of civilians. Some things in those messages might be useful, but not now.

Statements from surviving governments. Fewer than she’d hoped, but seeing even one official document caused a surge of hope to well up in her stomach. There was even a statement from the surviving Matriarchs of Thessia, encouraging people to stay brave and come together as a community while everyone put their lives back together. She put those official documents in their appropriate file.

More casualty lists, updates from agents, medical records from all known planets. Sur’kesh. Palaven. Thessia, of course. Even one from Rannoch. Liara paused as she looked at the list from Earth. She had avoided the casualty lists to avoid one name she knew would be there. If not now, one day, when the tallies had all been finalized.

But no.

It couldn’t be.

It had to be someone else. Someone who shared the same name. Billions of humans lived on Earth, it just had to be coincidence. She pried ever deeper into one specific file, skimming over it like an Asari possessed. The right name. The right Alliance serial number. A list of injuries noted from minor to severe. A hospital facility in London.

Injuries.

Not dead.

She was not dead. And being cared for in London.

Liara hadn’t realized her feet gave out until her bruised ribs reminded her of their tender condition. She didn’t remember falling to the deck in a heap of arms and legs, breath caught in her throat. Liara had never been one to faint, but there were always first times for everything.

She couldn’t get up, nor did she want to. Too much physical agony boiled on her left side to curl up with her knees under her chin like she wanted to. But even in this awkward, painful position, new tears fell from Liara T’soni’s eyes.
The memorial service had been brief, but necessary. The entire Normandy crew stood before the memorial wall, the plaque that contained the names of all those crewmates of this ship or the original that died to make today a reality.

Everyone shared their words and thoughts on their departed comrades and friends, save one. Some stories left them chuckling, others ended in tears. Kaidan had been the one to put Admiral Anderson’s name on the wall when all the words were finished. He lingered, hand on the simple name card they’d fabricated for this ceremony. Liara knew his grief had been for more than just the Admiral, his former captain. Kaidan had been responsible for many other things aside from his position on the Normandy and his recent appointment as a council Spectre. The fact that they knew nothing about Earth’s status weighed him down. He still had no idea the fates of his students, his old comrades or even his family.

After several moments of silence, Kaidan took in a deep breath and turned to Liara. The Asari held another hastily fabricated name plate, one that held the name of her beloved and their commander.

“Liara, do you wish to say something?” Kaidan’s calm voice almost broke as he looked at the object in her hand.

“I do.” Liara stepped forward as Kaidan took his place amongst his shipmates. He may have been commander of the vessel in the absence of Shepard, but he wouldn’t stand apart from the others. Not today.

Liara turned away from her friends and looked down at the plate. COMMANDER JANE SHEPARD shone brightly over the thin sheet of polished metal. With her head turned away, she allowed herself to smile. A genuine, knowing smile that lingered a bit too long. Even with her body swimming in pain killers to ensure she could remain standing for the entire ceremony, Liara T’soni had never felt so light on her feet.

“I will not be placing this on the memorial wall.” She said with confidence.

“What?” Kaidan’s shock overpowered his normally stoic demeanor.

Liara turned to see her shipmates’ faces. Their bleary eyes and dour expressions changed to confusion as they saw her grin.

“Liara, what have you heard?” Garrus fixed her with a steely glare.

“Commander Shepard is alive.” She managed to say before the entire crew deck erupted into shouts of joy. Even Joker, who looked just as miserable as she had been just hours before, managed to smile. The humans all shouted, cried, jumped and hugged each other as the news processed. Tali and Garrus joined in after a moment, letting the unbridled emotion overtake them. Even Javik, standing alone and apart from the group, nodded his approval.

Liara held onto the nameplate as the emotion of the room washed over her. So many days spent in miserable uncertainty fell apart after just four words. She allowed herself to laugh a little along with everyone else. Her time of unbridled joy would come later, when she had Shepard in her arms again.

Kaidan regained his composure first and extended a firm handshake to Liara. She returned the gesture as best she could while holding the plate. Somehow, it felt wrong to put it down.

“When did you hear?” His voice barely carried over the shouting and cheering.
“Not long before we gathered together. I just know she’s being cared for in London. An emergency Alliance hospital.” She hoped Kaidan managed to hear all that. She could never shout over the raucous noise of her shipmates, nor did she want to.

“That’s… that’s great. You have no idea how much I needed to hear that. It gives me hope that others…”

“I’m sure we’ll get more good news as soon as we return, Kaidan.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” Kaidan smiled again, but before he could do anything else, the large frame of James Vega burst between him and Liara.

“Woo! You sure know how to make an anuncio, Doc.” He laughed and grabbed Kaidan by the shoulder. Behind him, some members of the crew had settled down somewhat. A few passed out water and food in an impromptu toast to their commander’s health.

“It was my pleasure, James.” Liara said, overwhelmed by his sheer exuberance. Vega nearly reached out to grab her the way he held onto Kaidan, but restrained himself at the last moment.

“Sorry, Doc, old habits. Almost forgot about the injuries.”

“It’s quite all right.”

“Hey, as soon as you get better, though, I’m following through. You don’t get to drop that kind of bomb and expect to get away with it.”

Liara let out a chuckle. How she missed moments like this. “I think we can come to some kind of agreement.”

“Deal.” He laughed, shouted with joy once again, and then joined his shipmates in their informal celebrations.
Chapter 5

Where there had once been darkness, Shepard now could only see blinding light. Where there had been torment beyond endurance, she now felt at peace. Floating.

Had she actually died? She tried remembering, retracing her footsteps before oblivion. She remembered the pain in her limbs as she forced herself to keep moving. No one else could have finished the job. She remembered the rage and sorrow when talking to Anderson as he slipped away from her thanks to the Illusive Man. She also could also recall trying to crawl toward the console as Hackett’s desperate pleas crackled over her comm.

Then it got blurry. Or was it the light that struck and surrounded her making it blurry? Maybe her injuries had finally caught up with her and she was actually still passed out on the citadel, listening to Hackett and everyone else she knew and loved die because she failed to activate the crucible.

No, she had activated it. She remembered now. She met the intelligence, the voice of the Reapers. The catalyst. She tried to argue with it, to make it see reason and empathize with not only her personal suffering, but the suffering of uncountable trillions. Of course, a billion year old computer program couldn’t have been swayed with just a few words and drops of blood spilling out of her gut. So she did what any good soldier would have done.

The instant it told her that destroying part of the crucible's machinery would send a pulse that would destroy all reapers everywhere, she leapt. She channeled her anger, her fear and her pain into walking tall, into keeping her aim steady even as her body threatened to drag her back onto the cold floor. She recalled every shot she took, emptying her thermal clip into the crucible, she watched each bullet destroy something delicate but extremely powerful.

And that had been it. Something sparked and flashed, then she remembered nothing else.

No, that was a lie. She did remember something. She remembered saying goodbye.

Not out loud, certainly not to the ghostly image the catalyst had chosen to represent itself. She said goodbye to everyone she knew and loved. To those who had already died and those she prayed would live good long lives because of her choice. Most of all, she said goodbye to Liara. Shepard made sure her bondmate’s face remained in her mind’s eye as she took the final shots, not knowing if this would be her last living moment. She recalled every curve of her love’s smile. Her deep blue eyes. Her beautiful face full of the Asari version of freckles. She said goodbye to Liara with every heartbeat, every breath in her body.

And even though she knew Liara would never receive such a message, she prayed to any God or Goddess of any species, of any culture that may have been listening, to tell Liara how much Shepard would love and miss her.

Then it all went away. Was that when she died? She couldn’t recall anything more. Just some pain and then darkness. Perhaps for the best. Whatever happened in her mind as she slipped away probably hadn’t been pleasant.

Sounds began to echo through the light. Faint, distant sounds that she couldn’t make out. Voices, maybe? Weren’t there supposed to be chubby kids with wings dancing on fluffy clouds in the afterlife? Vids and greeting cards all said that’s what it would be like. Maybe she just needed to wait for them to manifest, to get over their shyness and come see her face to face. Then maybe their distant echoing voices wouldn’t be so incoherent.
Another noise joined the others. Much less pleasant. And louder. And familiar.

Any senior Alliance officer could recognize the sound of a standard UT-46 non-stealth shuttle as its engines powered down. They all had a familiar screech that grated on the ears no matter how far away they were. And cadets had to take them everywhere, to training bases in the solar system all the way to Arcturus station. All Alliance officers joked that they spent half their academy days learning, the other half inside the shuttles, trying to learn. But what the hell was a shuttle doing in the afterlife?

“Can you confirm…?” Another voice. Very close, almost as if it wanted to touch her.

“Suit’s emergency beacon… a miracle it survived…” These certainly didn’t sound like children. More like adults trying to talk while underwater. Distant, still hard to understand.

“…A miracle she survived.”

“Get her into a… emergency hospital… London… Top priority.”

London? Anxiety crawled through Shepard’s mind. No, don’t take her back to London. Anywhere but there. She wasn’t alive anyway, why take her back? If they were taking her back, that meant she wasn’t dead. If she hadn’t died, did they expect her to keep fighting? Were the Reapers still around? Where was Liara? She needed Liara more than ever. Terror clawed and scraped from the back of her mind into all conscious thought.

“Vitals… spiking.”

“Sedation!”

“But the… chance it could react… medigel keeping her intact… Overdose.”

“… Don’t care. Not losing…”

No, don’t take her back. She couldn’t fight anymore. She had done all she could. Liara! Please make them stop!

The light went away. The sounds followed. All Shepard could feel, other than anxiety and terror, was the momentary discomfort of a needle injected into her arm.
Chapter 6

The Normandy lifted into the air with grace and power. But even with such a masterful takeoff, the inside of the ship lurched and rattled like a water craft caught in a storm.

Liara had been waiting for Joker to finish his preparations for the last several hours, so she already had her hands in a vice grip around her console. She had also been given a large bottle of the same pain medication she used during the ceremony specifically for this rough takeoff. Half of the pills were now gone, swallowed so she could remain standing at her console as she rebuilt her network.

From what she had gathered from her agents and in a few conversations during the war, this new Normandy had never been designed to land on planetary surfaces. The fact that it survived its descent and now its ascent showed not only the skill of Cerberus engineering, but Jeff Moreau’s amazing piloting skills.

The ship quieted and stopped violently shuddering after it won its battle against the planet’s gravity. Liara went back to her own work, trying to not pay attention to the rapid change in the local sun’s position and orientation outside. Those details usually made her feel somewhat queasy. To keep distracted, she had several files open and flipped between each without thinking. One contained the most recent news from Earth, delivered to her from an agent buried somewhere in the Alliance’s military. She kept looking for familiar names or news about comrades they left behind on Earth before fleeing. The second file contained all the information the old Shadow Broker had on artificial intelligence. Some of the mathematics and theories in that file made her head hurt, but she continued to look through them. Perhaps she’d covertly send some of this to Alliance command when things settled down. An agent, or a skillfully worded message from the Shadow Broker ‘himself’, could convince the humans that rebuilding EDI would benefit their military and thus be top priority.

The final file, the one she paid most attention to, concerned medical reports from the Alliance’s emergency medical facilities in London. The information she needed to see came in only small amounts. Shepard was just one of many critically wounded soldiers recovered from the battle. Most hospital reports concerned large numbers of wounded, especially the aliens in their midst. Liara felt a glimmer of pride in the humans who seemed unwilling to give up on any patients, no matter their amino acid makeup or different internal anatomy. But still, she did not dwell on those hard working doctors. All she cared to see were status updates on Shepard’s condition.

Right after the memorial-turned-celebration, Liara had retired to her quarters, citing the fading effect of the painkillers. In truth, she felt fine, she just couldn’t stand to be away from this console anymore. Not when it had become her only link to Shepard in the entire galaxy.

The first real report had been full of doubt and worry. Shepard’s condition constantly fluctuated and the doctors had trouble keeping her stable with their limited resources. The list of Shepard’s injuries had been gruesome and painful to read, but Liara memorized every word. She grimaced and wiped her eyes as she imagined her bondmate enduring such unimaginable agony. But endure she did, and she survived. That’s what she had to keep reminding herself.

Other reports came at sporadic intervals, written by doctors half asleep and pushed to their limits by the sheer scale of injury and death both in the hospital at large and just on Shepard alone. Some injuries had been removed from the list one by one, taken care of by simple medi-gel and quick surgery. Others would take time and better facilities. But it seemed that Shepard would be stable as long as she remained well monitored.

Even with such hopeful news, however, Liara had trouble accepting a few notes in the Shepard file.
One constantly updated chart had a human word she had trouble translating. She had begun learning to read and speak English, Shepard’s native language, in her very limited free time since taking on the mantle of Shadow Broker. The language always sat heavy on her tongue, the alien sounds coming out awkwardly or not at all when she practiced. But such frivolous things had always taken a back seat to her duties, and as the war dragged on, all but forgotten.

Even with her console providing a translation of the hastily written doctor’s chart, she couldn’t make out the word. Her console, unfortunately, did not contain a human dictionary in its extensive collection of files for her to manually find the meaning. She should have known better. All those years spent looking through Prothean translations manually as she cataloged finds should have prepared her for this moment.

Doing her best to not worry herself over what could be a minor issue, Liara copied the words she couldn’t translate on her own onto a datapad and made her way out of her quarters. Around her, some of the lights in the galley dimmed for a moment as the Normandy’s powerful engines roared to full power. The thrum of energy seemed to invigorate Liara. She hadn’t realized how much she missed the constant rumble of engines and the reassuring purr of the Normandy’s massive drive core as it moved them through space.

Liara took a few steps more into the galley and peered into the medbay’s large windows. The lights shone bright and steady, as they always were, but Doctor Chakwas wasn’t. With no patients and a safe return to the familiar reaches of deep space, the doctor had fallen asleep at her desk. Liara wondered how much rest she had actually gotten during the war and these last few days. With her duties to the crew, it may have been less than Liara’s own pitiful schedule.

Other members of the Normandy crew had most likely also taken this time to catch up on rest long denied to them. Liara should have rested as well, but the nagging worry about the untranslatable word kept her moving. If the ship’s sole medical professional needed sleep, she would allow Karin all the time she needed. The doctor would probably jump back into the fray when they returned to Earth, spearheading multiple fronts in one hospital or another to heal as many people hurt by the war as possible.

Liara moved past the medbay and toward the front of the crew deck. For a time, she looked at the memorial. Anderson’s name stood proud in the center of the monument. She didn’t know the man as well as others on the ship, but she shared in their grief. And though she tried to not think about it, the image of her putting Shepard’s name on that wall came clear to her mind. No, that didn’t happen. It wouldn’t happen. She turned from the wall and activated the lift controls.

It only took a few seconds to ride up to the Normandy’s command deck. Like the crew deck below, the large room in front of her stood empty and silent. Liara stepped forward a few paces and placed her hand on the dark terminal that Shepard had used while commanding the ship. From this station, she had all but won the war for everyone. How many hours had she spent standing here, reading correspondence, making decisions and deciding the fates of entire worlds? And how many hours had Liara spent in her “dark little cave”, concentrating more on information, secrets and deals, than supporting her love as she took on the burdens of an entire galaxy?

Too many. The answer was too many. Even if their actions saved the galaxy, the guilt still weighed on her heart.

Liara pulled away from the terminal with some hesitation and made her way to the very front of the ship. She never spent much time up in the cockpit, always too busy with her own work to really explore or socialize. But still, she knew enough not to sit down in the empty chair next to Joker’s large pilot station. That seat would never truly belong to anyone again.
“Hey, Liara.” Joker sighed. He sat rigid in his own seat, arms folded at his sides as he watched the readings on his various displays. Every now and then, he’d reach out to adjust something, but he’d return to his sullen pose soon enough.

“Hello, Joker.”

The stars shimmered and blinked from outside the cockpit’s large viewports. For the first time in years, a well of anxiety did not bubble in her chest. The existential threat that had hung over each point of light for over a billion years had been defeated. Creation itself could shine all the brighter now that life no longer feared the harvest.

“Just come here to stare out the window?” Liara jumped. She must have lost track of time.

“I’m sorry. I was actually here to see if-“

“If I was okay? If I needed someone to talk to?” She recognized the pain in his voice. The same venom she had spat on Garrus came back to her.

Joker didn’t give her a chance to respond. “Like I’ve told literally everyone else on this ship, I’m fine. I don’t need to sit and sing kumbaya, I don’t need pills, I don’t need everyone patting me on the shoulder and telling me it’ll be okay. I guess they finally got you of all people to try and coax me out of my shell.”

“Jeff, I-“

“Liara, your lady love comes back from the dead as a hobby. Mine… mine was a machine. The sooner I realize that, the sooner I can move on.”

Liara said nothing, she lifted her datapad up and removed the words she couldn’t understand. Instead, she called up her second file, the one on AI research. She handed it to Joker, who took a few moments to notice it. He took it in unsteady hands.

“What’s this?”

“All the files my database has on artificial intelligence hardware and design. I’m going to forward it to Alliance command as soon as we establish regular communication. With luck, maybe we can-”

Joker sighed and handed the datapad back. He sat up from his chair just a bit, then reached out to his controls. One of the holographic screens shifted and grew a little larger. After a moment, an image of some dark-colored machinery came up. Under the still image, some of the same incomprehensible math that filled the AI files could be easily read.

“You see this bundle of wires and metal? That’s reaper tech. Something Cerberus pulled out of Sovereign’s giant corpse. It kinda made EDI who she was.” He pressed a few buttons and a second image replaced the first. The same bit of Reaper tech, but now burned and shattered.

“That’s what happened to it when the crucible’s shockwave hit us. It and a dozen more like it exploded at the same time inside her core. There’s nothing left in that room. Nothing. And don’t tell me a few nerds in suits will ignore a thousand years of anti-AI laws just to help me feel better.”

Joker angrily swiped the image away and took a deep breath. Liara could see him shiver, trying to hold back his emotions.

“Maybe we can’t bring her back, but maybe we could-“
“We could what?” Joker’s voice rose with surprising violence. He turned to Liara, his reddened eyes full of unfathomable pain. “We could make fake EDI VI clones that look like her, sound like her and parrot her old jokes over and over again? That’s not bringing her back, that’s just… pissing on her memory.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Liara took a step back. For a moment, she felt afraid that Joker might stand up and react violently out of grief. Even after all this time, she still didn’t fully understand humans and their reactions to strong emotions. She chose her words carefully. “I just thought, maybe… we could do something in her honor. If you show the galaxy what kind of sacrifices Artificial Intelligences made for us all, the galaxy could understand how foolish it is to fear and hate them. You could show everyone through your example how… alive they can be.”

Joker slumped back down. Still in pain, but no longer ready to hit anything.

“Maybe, I don’t know. I just know how to fly space ships and keep my extranet browser clean of viruses. I don’t know anything about actually understanding intelligent machines.”

“I think you know more than anyone else in the galaxy.”

He smirked through his tears. “Yeah, you keep on thinking that.” Shepard would do the same thing when she got upset. He wasn’t happy, just bitter.

“And I know very little about humans, even now. But that never stopped me from trying to reach out.”

Jeff remained silent for a long time. He just sat and stared at his screens. When he did manage to speak, his voice came out cracked and barely above a whisper. “What happened to reaching out after… when we lost her the first time? You disappeared on us when we could have helped.”

“That was…” Liara dredged through her memories. Of those horrible months after the destruction of the original Normandy. Her single-minded determination to get Shepard back and her desperate bargain with Cerberus to finish the job. All because she could not let go. “I was… lost. I remembered feeling just as you do now. I thought nothing could ever fix the emptiness Shepard left behind.”

Joker turned his head. “I guess you do understand. A little.”

“I know it’s not the same. No relationships are. But when I… we lost Shepard, I lost part of myself. I was no longer the same Asari you knew on the original Normandy. Just like you’re not the same man you were three years ago.”

“Yeah, not anymore.”

“But I know what that emptiness is like. And I know nothing can repair the damage.” Liara stared back out at the calm stars. She took in a deep breath, again thinking of memories she had tried to ignore since that fateful day she took over as Shadow Broker. “Can I confess something?”

“If you want to.” The words didn’t sound dismissive, just abrasive.

“When I first learned Shepard had truly been brought back, I told myself that everything would be fine. I told myself that I could go back to exactly who I was and I could rejoin her like nothing had changed at all. Then she walked into my office on Illium and…” She trailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

“You lied to yourself.”
“Yes. Even though she had returned to me exactly as I fantasized, I wasn’t the person she remembered anymore. It took us a long time to come to terms with that. I wasn’t sure if she’d even be interested in restarting our relationship because of it. I tried to push her away so many times.”

“Because it hurt so much.”

Joker sighed again. He reached up and rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. When he pulled his hand away, he took in a few deep breaths.

“Thanks for telling me that, Liara.” He said with an unusual gentleness.

“Of course, Jeff.” Her untranslated words completely forgotten, Liara turned to leave the cockpit. Joker needed time to himself.

“Liara?”

She turned back. “Yes?”

“Could you leave that information here? Or copy it to me or something?”

Liara looked down at her datapad for a moment and returned to Joker’s pilot console. She placed it in his hands.

“Thanks.”
Of all the things in the universe Shepard disliked, Batarians, Reapers, taxes, people who talked in the theaters, being drugged had to be near the top of the list. Drinking too much alcohol escaped such classification because it had always been her choice to do so. And it had been her own choices leading to the lovely consequences of vomit or terrible hangovers. Sometimes both.

But every time someone else came by with a substance intended to knock her out or induce some kind of high, the consequences had NEVER been good. There had been times in the Reds, not long before she got arrested, that people tried to force her to take Red Sand or other substances. She managed to refuse the sand, but sometimes couldn’t stop others from “sharing” their needles or blowing smoke in her face. Sometimes she woke up from those hazes in bad situations. Or in bad places next to bad people.

Later on, in the military, drugs always meant medical procedures. She had to endure unending amounts of pills and injections meant to strengthen her immune system, enhance her resistance to zero-g degradation and a thousand other things that made her into an Alliance marine. The doctors never once told her how sick she’d feel after each one, or how many hours she’d spend curled up in the fetal position, trying to not vomit all over her quarters. And then there were the enhancements they put in, small surgeries that required her to be put under for a couple hours as they added in their strength and bone enhancers. Again, nobody told her how much those would hurt or for how long they’d ache after.

But none of that topped what Cerberus did. Even now, she could remember waking up on that bed, confused and terrified after falling away from the exploding Normandy. Miranda had been there, trying to calm her down, but words weren’t enough. Not then. The Cerberus doctors had to pump so many things into her system that they risked killing her all over again just so she’d go back to sleep. Shepard tried to make a vow that that would be the last time she had to feel that kind of helplessness.

And yet, here she was. Back on Earth, away from the crucible, alone on a hospital bed with an old IV drip keeping drugs flowing into her body. She could not move her head or limbs, but couldn’t tell if the drugs kept her immobile or if she had been tied down. She probably tried to fight her way out of here in her long periods of unconsciousness. That would be her style.

Her eyes also couldn’t see much. She knew her bed was inside a room somewhere, and that the only light came from a large window, not an artificial source. The one wall and ceiling she could see had a sterile, white color, but she couldn’t make out any detail. Everything looked blurry to her, completely out of focus. Another side effect of the drugging, no doubt. Of all her senses, smell seemed to be the sharpest, though her nose stung a bit whenever she took in a breath. Unfortunately, all she could pick up were faint traces of antiseptic cleaners. Well, at least they place kept clean. Whoever they were.

Shepard tried to flex every muscle in her body, but to no avail. Nothing moved, not even the smallest twitch. Not even her eyes moved from side to side. They blinked on their own when they needed, but she could not command the same motion. A bit of frustration joined her growing fear. Too much of this reminded her of that first awakening on the Cerberus base. She still remembered getting a brief glimpse of her arm as she tried getting up. It had looked so frail, so sick. Miranda would tell her later, in a somber conversation, that she had just begun muscle stimulation to regrow them to acceptable levels. If Shepard had stayed awake, she wouldn’t have been able to walk more than a few steps.

Shepard tried to move again and again. It would be her only chance of getting out of here, should she
find herself back in Cerberus’s hands. Or worse. Even if her muscles had atrophied and she again looked like the sickly pale woman that had once been on Miranda’s operating table, she’d get out of here. She just needed to keep struggling. Keep fighting. It’s what she was best at.

“Oh, hello, Commander.” A pleasant voice came from nowhere. To Shepard, it sounded odd, like the voices before had been. Distant and hard to hear, like through water. “Looks like you’re up early.”

The source of the voice moved to the foot of her bed so he could stand in front of her. Through her blurred eyes, she could tell the person was human. And a man. She could see the clear outline of a white coat over dark clothes. Definitely a doctor. Civilian, maybe? She couldn’t see the details of the shirt he wore under the coat, but they didn’t match Alliance issue colors. Suspicion flared up, but she had no way of expressing it.

“I’m Doctor Nicolo, I guess I’m your attending physician.” He looked up from his datapad for a moment, “You’re showing remarkable recovery given your condition when you got here. For a monstrous terror group, Cerberus sure knew what they were doing.” The blurry doctor moved from the foot of the bed to her side. She tried following him with her eyes, but they still didn’t respond.

“You’re probably trying to move right now. I’d say I could see that look on your face, but you couldn’t make an expression if you tried. Sorry, that was a bad joke. Anyway, I’m just here to make sure you’re doing okay. Not much more we can do for you until some of the tissues heal a bit more.” He paused for a moment, probably writing something down on a datapad.

“Oh, but don’t worry. You’re doing great. With those implants of yours doing their jobs and you being, well… you, I don’t think anyone on this planet is getting better care.”

A thousand questions burned in Shepard’s mind. The fact she couldn’t voice even one made her rage. She struggled with every ounce of willpower to do SOMETHING. Blink! Cough! Wiggle your goddamn toes! Nothing.

As if on cue, however, the doctor, Nicolo, spoke again. “You probably have a bunch of questions you want to ask. And I know it’s probably eating you up that nobody’s here giving you the rundown of every single thing. That’s our fault. Not enough doctors and nurses, too many patients. I don’t think I’ve slept in three days. Thank the Maker for modern stims, that’s all I can say.”

He moved out of Shepard’s vision, but came back a moment later to fiddle with the IV. Try as she might, she couldn’t see all of his movements. Did he put more drugs into the drip? Did he increase the flow? What did he say about three days?

“Fortunately, by the order of every medical professional in this hospital, you’re going to get all the sleep you can handle. And more. I know, a tough marine like you probably hates all this, especially not being able to move. But you’ve still got some injuries that would only get worse if you could move around. Even a little wiggle might tear something right now. Some things just need time to heal and regrow without you throwing yourself around all the time. You’ve got a reputation.”

He stopped messing with the IV and went back to tying on his datapad. “I never joined the Alliance military, but I’ve had a lot of time to get to know soldiers like you. I worked at a hospital in Athens before the world ended, then spent some time with Anderson’s resistance as we globetrotted around, keeping away from the monsters. If it hadn’t been for those soldiers…” Shepard wasn’t sure if he trailed off or if he whispered the last bit and her fuzzy hearing didn’t pick it up.

“Anyway, when I got news that you had been found up there, I don’t think I ran faster in my life. I had to be there when your honor guard touched down.”
Up there? Honor guard? What happened?

“I clawed my way to the front of the crowd to make sure those military docs had taken care of you. I made sure I would be part of the team that put you back together. Again.” He stopped typing and talking for a moment. His blurry face changed a bit. Smiling?

“You have no idea what I’m talking about, of course. My apologies. Believe me, if I had the time, I’d grab a stool, sit right here, and tell you exactly what’s been going on out there, but I’m already behind schedule. We’ve got an entire wing full of Turians who can’t get enough water because our filtering system is a pile of rubble. As soon as I’m done here, I have to go talk to one of their ships in orbit and see if they have any to spare. That’ll be a fun conversation.” He looked back down and pressed down on his datapad with emphasis. Electronic signature.

“I’ll try to be here when you wake up again, but I might be passed out myself. Don’t worry, there’s an entire building of people out there dedicated to helping you. It’s the least we can do.”

Wait, wake up again? Doctor Nicolo moved away from the bed for a moment, then reappeared with something in his hand. No, please, not again!

“Rest easy, Commander. You have a lot of people to see when you’re well again.” He injected something into the IV.

A moment later, Shepard’s eyes closed on their own.
Nicolo woke her up with a gentle nudge on Shepard’s left shoulder. For a time, Shepard ignored the movement, trying to remain in the comfort of her dreamless sleep. Even in this groggy state, she remembered every moment of the hell it had been being awake and unable to move or feel anything about her body. The gentle nudge became a nagging shake.

Wait. She could feel him touching her shoulder.

It took longer than she wanted, but her eyes opened. Not of their own accord, but because she forced them to! And they didn’t close again! A few drops of moisture formed underneath them a moment later. Even this tiny victory had been enough to stir something resembling an emotion.

The light from the window bathed the room in a deep golden light. Sunrise or sunset? Either way, it made her tiny field of vision look lovely. She blinked a few times, trying to make the fuzzy wall and IV look clear, but they remained blurry and incoherent. She moved her eyes around after a few more blinks. With her vision still so poor, she couldn’t make anything out except the golden light from outside.

“Ah, I see motor control is returning.” His familiar voice still sounded muffled, but not as bad as it did before. “Very good. Those little implants are miracle workers. We really should keep you still for a few more weeks, but if you’re going to fight us like this, we may just have to give up on the inhibitors.”

Weeks? They wanted to keep her like this for weeks!?

Her eyes moved to look directly at the blurry doctor. She still couldn’t make out any details other than his white coat.

“Don’t look at me like that, Commander. This is for your own good. You do want to be able to walk again, don’t you?” He paused, aware that his tone had become a little too condescending. “Your spine has taken some rather heavy damage and we don’t want you moving it in the slightest until we know you’re recovered or we can get you to better facilities. We’re lucky the Alliance gave us power generators at all to make sure we could perform some of your more critical surgeries. I guess your name pulls some weight, huh?” His wide grin showed up even with her bad vision.

Her eyes flicked to the window, then back at the doctor. She prayed he got the message. How long was I out?

“How’s it going in there?” He moved to the foot of her bed and checked a chart she couldn’t see, then opened his omni-tool. The orange glow mixed with the light from the window, bathing them both in more gold rays. “Thirty eight hours and some change.” He ruffled the paper on the chart before setting it back down. “We’re so low on supplies we’ve had to resort to writing some of our paperwork on actual paper. Barbaric.”

The doctor moved back to the side of her bed and leaned forward. She could feel his hands moving up and down her right arm. Some places he manipulated caused a burst of agony that spread across her entire limb and up into her heart. Others she could feel nothing at all, as if that part of the limb had been rendered completely numb. Unfortunately, she could not wince or pull herself away from the torturous doctor as he probed her injured muscles. Her eyes, however, washed themselves with fresh tears as the pain wracked her right side and an involuntary groan echoed in her throat. Had she the ability to speak, that groan would have been a scream.
Shepard had endured a great deal of injuries and wounds in her career, but none of those compared to what the doctor did to her now. Every one of his light touches sent lances into her chest that she swore stopped her heart and destroyed the nerves in her upper body. She would have gladly endured walking into Harbinger’s beam one more time before she had to feel his hands on her arm again.

“I was afraid of this. Now that you’re lucid, I wanted to see if any of these spots on your arm caused pain or… not. I’ll have a nurse come in later and see what he can do to make you more comfortable.”

Wait, what? What’s going on?

“I don’t want to worry you, Commander. It may be nothing. It just seems like three of the implants on your right arm are damaged. One seems to be completely non-functional while the others may be short circuiting. The problem is that we don’t have the equipment here to really scan them and see what’s going on. You can thank the Reapers for destroying the only biomechanical analyzer in the eastern hemisphere. Along with all our major cities, of course.”

The obvious worry coated every word he said. “It could still be nothing, though. Those Cerberus people really did work a miracle when it came to bringing you back. Those little guys in your arm may reboot on their own and this whole thing will go away.”

What thing? Shepard cursed herself for not looking at the mountains of technical manuals and reports Miranda had written about the Lazarus project, the Cerberus effort to bring her back. Something in those two years’ worth of documentation probably held the exact answer Nicolo needed. She couldn’t remember if she saved any of them on the Normandy or if the Alliance had deleted them after she gave the ship to them before the war. All that time spent desperately hunting for the Catalyst, ending centuries-old problems and defeating the Reapers never left much time for digging through boring technical manuals.

It didn’t help that she had been rendered physically incapable of giving any information even if she knew it. She had to keep fighting.

Nicolo released her arm, but that did not end the agony. It lingered in her limb and upper body like a slow burn, but on the inside. She could not stop her eyes from squeezing shut on their own as she endured. When she managed to open them again, Shepard thought she caught the doctor putting on a smile, but the obviously fake smile doctors always used on patients to try to reassure them. Or it could have been the fact she still had no idea what his face looked like.

Her eyes turned away from him and back to the window. From her bed’s angle, Shepard could not see anything outside, just blurry patches of white against an amber sky. Probably for the best. If London still looked anything like it did when she arrived, she didn’t think she wanted to see it, even with damaged eyes. She could still imagine the broken streets, the skies that had turned an oppressive grey from all the smoke and dust of the Reaper’s slaughter and the look of total hopelessness in most people’s faces. No, she didn’t want to see that.

In fact, all she wanted to see was a certain blue face with a certain smile that always made her day better. With all these damn drugs swimming in her system, she had trouble imagining Liara’s face with clarity. It came to her just as blurry as the doctor who sat right next to her. She spared a glance in his direction to see him hunched over, probably writing something with an actual pen on actual paper.

Focus. She made herself focus. She brought Liara’s face to mind, the moment she remembered seeing just before she pulled the trigger for the last time. Liara looked up at her after she had snuck a kiss on the Shadow Broker’s cheek, completely breaking her concentration on some serious war-related manner. Instead of getting upset, Liara smiled at her for a moment, then returned the favor before going back to work. Shepard lived for those moments. The war had robbed both of them far
too much happiness.

Again, as if he could somehow read her mind, Doctor Nicolo stopped writing. “Oh, I forgot to tell you something. It’s hard for news to travel because of, y’know, the apocalypse, but I did hear from a friend of a friend that the Normandy is en route.”

Shepard’s eyes darted right back to her out-of-focus physician.

“I don’t want you to get overly excited, Commander. It was just a rumor overheard from a new patient then told and retold all over the building before I heard it. Keep your heart rate nice and steady for me. It’s hurt enough as it is.”

He had no idea how right that statement actually was.

“I promise, as soon as I hear anything concrete, you’ll be the first to know. Even if I have to wake you up from a medical coma, you will be informed. Do you understand?”

She blinked with as much power as she could manage. Being one of the only physical motions she could perform, she hoped he understood the message.

“Ah, the old ‘one blink for yes’, ‘two blinks for no’ gambit.” He chuckled. “Thank you for trying to help me out, Commander. I think I’ll trust you enough to lower the dosage of your muscle inhibitors some more. You’ll be able to speak and move a little, but I hope you trust me enough to not move your back.”

She blinked a few more times. Yes, fine. If she had to keep still to regain the ability to speak, she’d gladly bear that burden.

True to his word, the doctor stood up, went to the IV and fiddled with it again.

“You won’t regain control right away. You’ll probably need a good night’s rest before the heavier dose wears off. Oh, you’ll also need to sleep with some supervision. I trust you, but I don’t trust your unconscious body. Especially after what you’ve been through.”

Supervised? What, like someone staring at her all night like a creepy murderer in an old vid?

“I’ll make sure we send someone every couple hours overnight. Nothing invasive, they’ll just crack open the door and see how you are. I better write down this order exactly right, or every goddamn able-bodied person in the city will volunteer for this. Medical staff only.”

Shepard rolled her eyes. Great. Not just one creepy person watching her sleep, a bunch of creepy people.

“Now, I know I just made fun of your blinking skills, but if you could do it for real this time, I’d appreciate it. Are you in any pain?”

If she had been capable of sighing, she would have. Aside from the dull ache that still lingered on her right arm and in her chest thanks to him, she felt fine. Two blinks. No. He wrote down her response.

“Are you comfortable?”

The bed felt a bit lumpy, but other than that, yes. One blink.

“Do you require a nurse to help you… evacuate? Sorry, I usually ask these kinds of questions hundreds of times a day, but you’re Commander Shepard. It’s a little embarrassing.”
Even if she did need to go, she wouldn’t have told him now. Two blinks. Shepard felt glad that she hadn’t been conscious when she had to worry about such things. The idea of bed pans were… ew.

“Okay, let’s do one last test since you’re cooperating with me. I’m going to put my hand on your lower left leg. Tell me if you feel it.”

She watched Nicolo reach down and put his hand on her leg. She felt the pressure and heat from his palm, though not as intensely as she thought she would. One blink. Yes. She repeated the same thing for her right leg.

“Good, very good. Nerve damage is healing well. Even without a fully modern facility, we can still perform miracles. Well, medi-gel is the real miracle. We just know how to apply it.” He laughed at the terrible joke. If only he knew how many times she’d used the stuff in the field. “I’m going to move to your left arm now.”

Shepard suppressed a shiver that never came as Doctor Nicolo moved to her left arm. Expecting to feel the very same lances of agony race into her heart like his touch did to her right arm, she closed her eyes and held them shut.

Nothing. She clearly felt his fingertips move up and down her entire arm, but not a second of pain. One blink.

“Good, left arm is also showing great recovery. You’ll be shooting guns again before you know it.”

The same procedure happened again and again for every part of Shepard’s body. Head, neck, chest, stomach, feet, everything. Her nervous system seemed to be in good repair.

Except her right arm. He avoided that limb entirely. But then again, he had just recently told her all those things about the implants and why her arm hurt so much. Maybe he’d come back to it later. Still, it left a pit of worry in her gut.

The doctor went back to his writing for a long time. So long, in fact, that Shepard noticed the golden light from outside start to dim. Ah, evening. She’d never seen Earth at night with no electricity. Growing up in the city, she never got to see the stars at night. Just vids and recordings from other places. As the evening light faded, Shepard spared a moment to wonder if Liara had ever looked up at the stars as a young girl, wondering what she’d eventually find out there.

“Well, thanks for all the blinking. You’re probably exhausted after so much physical exertion.” She rolled her eyes again. “I’m going to administer a gentle sleep aid, just some over-the-counter stuff this time, nothing that’ll keep you out for almost two days. Don’t freak out if you wake up and see the door a little bit open, remember the deal we made about that spine of yours. By the time you wake up, we should be able to talk to each other.”

Shepard managed the faintest of smiles. The muscles in her mouth moved so little that she knew he couldn’t see it.
The flight away from Earth after the Crucible fired had been extraordinarily brief. Joker pushed the ship’s FTL engines to their absolute maximum trying to escape the shockwave from the blast, then pushed the ship even harder, sending them screaming through the void of space at unimaginable velocity. From what Liara had overheard, the engine room nearly fell apart from the strain. Only blind luck and the genius of Normandy’s whole engineering team kept the ship from exploding before it hit atmosphere.

The return trip had taken four days so far, with no end in sight. Engineer Adams and Tali made it abundantly clear that their FTL drive functioned at less than forty percent capacity and that the mechanisms held together with something called duct tape and “a lot of prayer”. That meant moving at far less than Normandy’s ideal speed. It meant more time away.

The medical reports on Shepard’s condition remained consistent over the course of the journey. The desperate, hastily written notes had given way to regular updates. Though Liara’s agent had trouble sending them to her, as the hospital had begun to rely on paper-based record keeping for the human patients. Their limited technological records and correspondence, by necessity, had been prioritized for the alien patients. The human doctors sent regular updates to the Turian, Asari, Salarian and Quarian ships still in orbit while the doctors of various species divided their time between the soldiers recovering on their ships and those on the surface. It had become a remarkably efficient system with such limited resources. But it made waiting for updates on Shepard all the more frustrating.

She didn’t know her agent’s exact methods of sneaking around the hospital’s staff, but every time Shepard’s chart changed, Liara got a quick omni-tool scan of the paper and her console provided a translation from English to Asari. The word she had trouble translating remained, but nothing about it had changed since it showed up. It must have been something minor or a language quirk of the specific doctor. Nothing else of note had changed over the course of the journey back. Reduced dosage of some medicine with a horribly complicated English name. Reduced swelling in the extremities. Good. Topical medi-gel treatments were still required and her vertebrae needed to be kept perfectly still, but she showed remarkable recovery. Liara reminded herself to breathe steadily as she read. All of these were very good things. Shepard would be back to normal before she knew it.

After reading the latest update for the seventh time, the now-familiar tone of her door chime beeped from her console.

“Come in.”

Garrus stepped into her still-messy quarters.

“Greetings, Garrus Vakarian.” Glyph said with his usual cheerful tone.

“How is she?” The Turian ignored the drone and looked right at Liara. He put his hands behind his back, trying to appear as professional as possible in the face of uncertain news. He, like most everyone on the ship, had gotten more and more anxious as they approached Earth. With their own communications systems still damaged, only Liara could inform them of critical news.

The only news any of them seemed to care about was the same news she had just read seven times in a row.

“I got the latest update just before you arrived. She’s responding well to her treatments. No word on when she may be fully recovered, but the physicians seem hopeful.”
“Any word on the conditions of that place? I can’t shake the feeling they’ve got her in some kind of bombed-out ruin full of dust and death.”

“My agent actually sent me an image from his omni-tool some time ago. Though, not of Shepard.”

“Odd, but not unexpected. They probably keep omni-tools heavily monitored around her in case someone tries to use one to scout the place. Or they just want to make sure no journalists disguise themselves as nurses trying to get the big story.”

Liara tapped a few buttons on her console and brought up the image. Several Asari and Salarians lay comfortably on makeshift beds and military cots in a large open room. A dozen or so lamps of various design provided illumination for the room while an air filter obviously cannibalized from a ship kept the air clear. The small portable generator giving those devices power sat tucked in a corner. It looked to be in good condition, given the state of the planet.

“Hopefully the Turian wing is just as well maintained. My people would find a way to be offended over such luxury in their medical facilities.” Garrus said with some of his usual dry humor.

“The humans have taken great care of the wounded from all species who joined in the attack. I’ve been amazed by their adaptability to all the various needs of the different species. Even the Krogan seem impressed. In their own way, of course.”

“That’s one way of putting it.” Liara dismissed the picture of the hospital and returned to looking at Shepard’s latest chart. Still nothing new, but it could be hours before anything changed.

Garrus’s familiar suspicion rose behind his voice. “Do you know which agent of yours is sending these updates? I know we can trust the Shadow Broker, but what about all her minions?”

“Garrus, I assure you that my agents would not harm Shepard in any way.” Some bile rose in Liara’s throat.

“You’ve probably thought of a hundred different ways to brutally maim and then kill anyone that tried, I’m sure. But I’m just asking. Now that the galaxy is so different, what if one agent already used to taking money and orders from a mysterious benefactor decided to double deal with another mysterious benefactor? Can anyone be trusted?”

“If I hadn’t trusted my agents during the war, we very well might have lost. None of them would ever turn against me like that.” She rose her tone a little, making her intention clear. She would not entertain this conversation for much longer.

Fortunately, he got the hint and moved closer to Liara and whispered as if they were being watched. “I know I probably sound crazy right now. I’m just more worried about Shepard than I usually am. We’ve made some enemies out there over the years. Some might come to settle old scores if they learn about her condition.”

Liara’s momentary anger dropped away. Garrus Vakarian wouldn’t be Garrus Vakarian if he didn’t worry about such things every waking moment. Such an attitude had probably kept him alive a lot longer than he would have otherwise.

“If that happens, you and I will be there to stop them, won’t we?”

“Or burn the rest of the galaxy down trying to find the one responsible.”
Liara nodded. “Of course.”

Garrus took a step back. “So any other news out there worth talking about?”

It took a bit of effort to file Shepard’s latest report, but Liara tucked it away. She pressed a few commands on her console to bring up the latest intel. Over the last few days, a few more agents had reported in. Barely a fraction of her old network survived, but it would be enough for now.

“Palaven command has already declared a state of mourning for all those who have fallen. If I’m not mistaken, that will last for a year.”

“Nice to know they’re concentrating on the important things. Not like rebuilding an entire civilization takes priority or anything.” He sighed after the comment. “Before you say anything, I know why they announced that. It’s for the people, to help them move forward so they can actually concentrate on the hard work ahead.”

“Nice to see you keeping perspective.” Liara smiled and went to another report. “The Salarians are happily reporting that several of their most important egg clutches remained completely untouched.”

“Good for them.” He didn’t sound condescending, but genuinely pleased. “I don’t really care to know much more about Salarian reproduction than I already do, but it’s good to know they’ll bounce back from this. Having your young exposed and vulnerable like that couldn’t have been easy to deal with.”

Garrus cleared his throat. “Anything else?”

Liara passed through a few reports. She intentionally scrolled past the ones from Thessia. She didn’t feel strong enough to look at them. She could easily read the reports of the staggering death and destruction the Reapers left on a thousand alien worlds, but not her own. Not yet. She would need help before she could look at those messages.

“Nothing that you haven’t already heard. The recovery process is just beginning, so most planets are still just trying to reestablish long range communication.”

Garrus nodded. But before he could say anything, Joker’s voice crackled over the ship’s intercom.

“Garrus, Liara? I think you should come look at this.”

The two of them shared a look and left her quarters.
“Goddess.” The familiar word escaped Liara’s mouth as she saw the Sol system’s mass relay. Or rather, what was left of it. The majority of the mechanism looked intact, but massive chunks of the relay floated around the structure. Exposed internal mechanisms stuck out from the broken machine, resembling a ribcage more than a mechanical device. It looked far more macabre than she thought a damaged relay would look.

And yet, even with that horrible image, a shred of hope clung to it. From this distance, the repair crews looked like nothing more than pinpricks of light against the relay’s massive bulk. But they were unmistakably there. A small fleet of human ships, plus one Asari cruiser, hovered around the repair site, no doubt funneling crew and materials to the relay.

Joker kept the Normandy at a safe distance, but still got them close enough to see the efforts. He also had the ship’s radio activated, filtering the chatter of hundreds of people into a barely coherent mess of different conversations.

“There’s a red light on the second intake valve over here.” One voice, an Asari, chattered.

“Ignore it for now. Focus on shoring up the struts. We need this thing rock solid before we install the new eezo core.” Human. Definitely human.

“Got it.”

Other chatter, other voices joined in, but Liara stopped paying attention. Instead she focused on the monumental effort the various races were putting into repairing the relay. The sheer amount of skill and resources astounded her, especially with so few resources left after the war. But these workers also showed a level of cooperation that would have been laughable less than a year before. Even though all Council races cooperated in one way or another before the war, it had always been for selfish reasons. Standing together just proved a better military or economic alternative to remaining isolated from the galactic community, not because each species had a vested interest in each other’s stability or happiness.

But now, people from several combined worlds worked together for one common goal: rebuilding the very essence of intergalactic travel and trade. None of them explicitly benefited over the others in this endeavor. They all benefitted equally. Perhaps this lesson, taught so painfully by the Reapers, would endure forever.

“Look at that.” Garrus muttered. A few other people began to file into the cockpit as Joker kept his leisurely pace around the relay. Tali, Specialist Traynor, a few crewmen she felt ashamed to still not know all stood and watched the construction.

“Can they really do that? Just rebuild a relay?” Traynor’s voice cracked a little as Joker pulled them in even closer. A hundred meters away from the damaged relay, they could all see the army of people standing on or near the machine, their repair tools gleaming against the dark metal. A few of them turned to see the Normandy fly past them.

The radio picked up again with renewed chatter.

“Is that…”

“You gotta be shitting me.”

“The Normandy’s back?”
“It looks so small.”

“We’re on a 15 kilometer-long piece of metal, jackass. Everything looks small.”

Some workers on the relay stopped what they were doing and turned toward the Normandy. They started waving, cheering and saluting, which looked a bit silly and stiff in their hardened space suits. Behind Liara, Traynor and a few others waved back.

“Oh, they wanna see us wave, huh?” Joker asked with a small amount of the old fire back in his voice. Even though Liara worried what stunt he might pull, she enjoyed hearing some of the old Joker again.

The relay dropped out of view a split second later, replaced again just as soon. The sight made her stomach flip, but she didn’t speak up. She had no idea what insane maneuvers Joker put their ship through, but it obviously entertained the repair crew.

“Look at that, graceful as ever.”

“Good to see Moreau hasn’t lost his touch.”

“Idiot could have crashed into something!”

“Get back to work! Some of us need to get back home before we starve to death!”

“Slave driver.”

“I heard that.”

Joker snorted. “Guess we overstayed our welcome.”

If any frustration had been bubbling inside Liara for delaying their trip even for a moment, it cooled as their pilot turned the ship away from the relay and set course back to Earth. The Sol system wasn’t any larger or smaller than most planetary systems, but it would still be a few hours before they reached the third planet.

“Remember the last time we came this way?” Garrus asked as a few people filed out of the cockpit and went back to their duties. “We had the galaxy’s entire combined might behind us, the Reapers in front of us and we all couldn’t think of anywhere else we’d rather be.”

He paused. “Right now, I think I feel the same way.”

“Me too.” Liara and everyone else replied.

Liara remembered all too well the last time the Normandy flew this way. Shepard had been almost where she now stood, giving orders to the fleet and making sure their grand, desperate plan succeeded. Where had she been? In her quarters, reviewing information, setting up lists of vital intelligence to hand to the soldiers on the ground, writing contingencies in case she didn’t survive their final battle on the surface. She had known Shepard would need her in the coming fight, so she had chosen to spend as much time at her console as possible, making sure the Shadow Broker’s operations would run as smooth as possible in her brief absence.

She should have been here instead.

No, she reminded herself. That work had been vital. It saved lives, it built the crucible. It won them the war. Her efforts had been no less important than Shepard’s, just less public. And had Shepard
ever once scolded her for staying reclusive and, in her words “creepy”? No, there had only been support. Not always acceptance, especially when Liara chose to stay awake for days at a time or when she concentrated on work during their brief times alone. Shepard never judged her like she judged herself.

None of that mattered now. Those terrible days stood behind them all, fading deeper into memory with each passing moment. The only thing that mattered was getting back to Earth.
Liara stopped listening to Joker as he listed off the planetary orbits they passed. She didn’t care to see the ruined hulks of destroyed ships and stations, nor the abandoned mining facilities in the system’s asteroid field. She spared a moment to glance at Mars as it sped by in the far distance, a faint red speck of light against the black of space. The distant planet sparked a few pleasant memories, like the discovery of the crucible and her reunion with Shepard after many long months apart, but even those times had been ruined by the war. By Cerberus. She shook her head and looked away from the spot of crimson.

The final part of the journey: boarding the shuttle, waiting for half the crew to pile in behind, entering Earth’s atmosphere, negotiating past the remains of Alliance security and landing in the ruins of London sped by like a blur. Liara kept her mind elsewhere, to pleasant memories as well as the most recent medical update from her agent. Shepard remained in the forefront of her thoughts until the moment the shuttle’s door opened.

Having only seen Earth’s surface during the worst part of the war, Liara expected to walk back into a hellish landscape full of choking dust, billowing smoke and oppressive clouds. Instead, the sun beat down on her skin with almost too much joy. Yes, she could see fires still raging in some parts of the destroyed city and heavy clouds still lingered in the distance, but here it seemed like the local star, Sol, sent them a clear patch of sky just for this moment.

A massive crowd of humans stood outside the shuttle, standing in mute awe as Liara and her shipmates left the cramped blue vehicle. The air held still as she looked over the faces of the humans. The faint smell of smoke still hung over everything, but the atmosphere did not feel as hopeless as it did during the war. By her novice guess, it would take a few years for the air to clear, aided by the few surviving atmosphere scrubbers. But even after a week, the city felt entirely different. The people looked much the same as their home felt. Gaunt and ragged, but hopeful. These people, like all others in the galaxy, had not given up. And thanks to Commander Shepard and those leaving their craft, their hope had been repaid.

Garrus and Tali took position on Liara’s sides as the human crowd slowly moved closer to them. A wave of apprehension washed over her. She didn’t think they would turn hostile, but she still did not know how aliens reacted to every situation. Her talk with Joker and his rapid mood swings reinforced that ignorance quite well.

And then, as if they shared the same mind, the massive gathering of humans erupted in applause loud enough to cause physical pain.

Some cheered, some wept. A few people had somehow found musical instruments and used the occasion to play a triumphant song, sparking a great deal of their fellows to sing human songs of celebration. The alien sounds did not go unappreciated, but the encroaching mass of humanity caused her biotics to unintentionally flare. Some had dirty faces, others clean. Some wore only rags while others wore crisp Alliance uniforms. Refugees, soldiers and humans of all kinds encroached on those who helped save the galaxy.

With her attention focused on the mob, she failed to notice one particular human shoving his way through the people.

“Normandy crew?” A human doctor managed to break through the last of the crowd and stepped in front of her, extending his hand to Liara in greeting. “Doctor David Nicolo. I’ve become Shepard’s physician since she was moved here.”
“Doctor.” She tried to reply cordially. Around her, people picked up on Nicolo saying “Normandy” and began to chant it over and over. A few others behind followed suit until the entire mob shouted the word. Pandemonium had started to become a riot.

“Sorry, as soon as people heard you’d be coming, we couldn’t stop them. We have heavy security inside, which is where I’ll be escorting you.” He retracted his handshake and started walking forward, forcing the crowd to part for Liara and her team.

“This response is overwhelming.” She managed to say over the roar.

“Defeating the Reapers was overwhelming. This is just gratitude.” David replied. Well, shouted.

“This really isn’t the right place for this!” Garrus screamed. “I thought the Alliance would have had something more formal planned!”

“They did!” David had to resort to screaming for his words to reach Garrus. “Nobody listened when they got the news your shuttle was landing!”

“This is insane!” The Turian, James and Javik tried to create a barrier between themselves and Liara, who held onto Doctor Chakwas to keep her from being swept away. But the human crowd seemed just as interested in thanking all of them without discrimination. Human hands grabbed, clawed and pinched everywhere, trying to capture some memory of this event.

David activated his omni-tool and pressed a few commands into it. A moment later, several armed Alliance soldiers emerged from the hospital and took up positions in the crowd that still blocked their path. They nudged, with gentle but deliberate force and clearly armed weapons, until they cleared a path for the Normandy team.

“This way, Doctor,” The human physician said, waving his arm forward.

The inside of the hospital looked much like her agent’s photo suggested. None of the lights, calming water features or other decorative displays functioned, but the building looked and smelled clean. The sound of several power generators overpowered their footfalls on the solid stone floor, but their noise felt like silence compared to the chaos outside. James took up the rear of their group along with the soldiers, using his large size to hold a few desperate people back. Javik stood beside him a moment later. The Prothean concentrated for a moment before conjuring a biotic shield in front of him, which began to shove people back form the door.

“You guys keep going, I’ll help make sure this calms down!”

“The humans seem to have forgotten their sense of order. We will remind them.”

The others still beside Liara, Doctor Chakwas Garrus, Tali, and Kaidan, continued to follow the human doctor, David, into the building. Deeper inside, some of the damage to its structure stood very apparent. Many windows had been destroyed by the Reapers and a few columns and walls looked ready to crumble. Temporary constructions of crudely welded metal and sheets of clear plastic covered and supported most of the damage. Nothing looked ready to collapse, but these temporary measures were just that: temporary. They needed to get Shepard out of here, especially if her recovery would take a significant amount of time.

After a few more moments of walking through the clean but damaged hospital, the sound of the crowds had finally dwindled to nothing. David turned to address the Normandy crew.

“We’re almost at Shepard’s room, but I’m afraid I must give some bad news.”
“What is it?” Chakwas spoke, taking the lead from the others. Liara’s heart had jumped into her throat, preventing her from speaking.

David sighed and pinched the top of his nose with his fingers. “We don’t have the equipment we need to ensure she has a full recovery. I tried for days to get the right scanners and surgery aids shipped here, but even invoking the name Commander Shepard can do little when we can barely hold off mass starvation, disease and exposure on a planetary scale. Everyone I talked to eventually gave a lengthy apology before telling me to stop calling.”

“What are you talking about?” Liara managed to squeak out.

“Commander Shepard was recovered from the Citadel just a few hours after the Crucible activated. Her armor’s emergency beacon activated on its own, which led recovery crews right to her. She had endured significant trauma to most of her body. Multiple broken bones, burns over sixty percent of her body, head trauma, punctured lung and smoke inhalation, you name it and she probably had it done to her. The physical injuries to her right arm seem to have been severe enough to damage three of the Cerberus implants they put into her. Without a real scanner, we had no idea what they did or how they had been damaged.”

“Keelah.” Tali whispered.

“Doctor, what’s going on? Just give us the run down.” Kaidan spoke with his usual gentle tone. Chakwas, for her part, remained stoic. After years of dealing with news like this, however she processed such things remained a mystery to Liara. For the Asari, it was all she could do to remain on her feet. Reading the reports of Shepard’s injuries had been awful enough, but hearing them spoken aloud made thinking about her bondmate’s agony infinitely worse.

“We waited several days, hoping the implants would either reactivate or stop damaging her nerves and muscles on their own. Neither of those happened. One had been rendered inert, but knocked out of position inside her wrist. It blocked blood flow to most of her right hand. The other two… as best as we can tell, short circuited. They had several days to send random and damaging electrical shocks into her muscles and nerves. Without real modern scanners, we had no idea they had begun to necrotize the flesh deep within her muscle tissue… until it was too late.” The human doctor lowered his eyes to the ground.

“Goddess.” Liara’s whisper barely caught form. The words she failed to translate. The ones she had tried to get Joker to reveal. Goddess, please don’t say those words! She pleaded. Don’t make this real!

“I did everything I could. But nine hours before you arrived, we had to amputate Commander Shepard’s right arm above the elbow.” David tried to look up, but couldn’t meet anyone’s gaze. “Please believe me, if we had even one more piece of working equipment, just one more analyzer, one more tool in this place, we wouldn’t have done it. Had the war spared this place even a shred of dignity, she would be walking out of this building with you right now. It was all we could do to keep her medi-gel treatments and pain medication on a regular schedule.”

Amputation. The one word she couldn’t read and now she remembered why. The Asari had used a similar medical practice long ago, in times almost forgotten. But even then, their biotics could make up for missing limbs. Her people’s long history of technological advance also meant they had developed advanced prosthetics while humans were still experimenting with bronze farming tools. The only word that could possibly translate between the human operation and Asari would be “replacement”. Her people had not cut off a limb without the express and immediate use of biotics and prosthetics for almost two thousand years. The idea of just cutting a limb off and leaving it bare felt perverse. It sickened her. No. It infuriated her.
Liara’s biotics flared up without a second thought. She didn’t grab any of the lamps, ruined furniture or anything of significant weight, but she still let the dark energy flow around her. The deep glow turned violet, causing Liara’s eyes to darken with raw power. Everyone recoiled around her. Nurses and other patients, innocently walking by, noticed her display and turned around. The few pieces of intact glass around them shuddered and rumbled with ominous force.

“You should have tried harder!” She shouted. “You have many ships in orbit! Every one of them would have torn their entire medbays from their decks and sent them to you if you asked!”

“I tried!” the doctor said, stepping backward in terror. “You have no idea how hard I begged and pleaded. I did everything I could! So many people are dead and dying!”

“Why didn’t you move her to one of the ships!?”

“Shepard’s spine is severely damaged!” He composed himself and stopped giving ground to the angry Asari. “Just getting her here caused more injury to her spinal column! I couldn’t recommend moving her until she showed significant healing or she’d never walk again! I tried to tell you, I waited as long as I possibly could before making this call!”

Liara’s biotic display did not lower in intensity until she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. She turned like a predator, ready to strike down anyone that dared stand between her and Shepard. Instead, she saw Chakwas’s kind face, uncharacteristically wet with a few shed tears.

“Liara, please. Calm down. She wouldn’t want this.”

For a moment, Liara did the exact opposite. Her heart raced too fast and her emotions boiled too hotly to let go of her power. Everyone in their group, Garrus and Tali and Kaidan, had fallen back, ready to dart into cover if she lost control.

Karin was right. Shepard would not want her to act like this. Her biotics would only hurt people right now, they would not help anyone. She reminded herself of Shepard’s three words, the ones that always gave her strength. Goddess, she needed to hear them again. It took several deep breaths and a few brief meditative thoughts before she could begin letting go. The dark energy receded a little more with each exhale, causing the glass to slowly stop vibrating and the building to return to its usual stillness. Liara closed her eyes for a time and let the calm overtake the storm.

“Thank you, my dear.”

David stepped forward, his attitude not calmed. He had the face of a man who did not take threats lightly. She would have to make up for this later. Perhaps she could arrange for another agent to deliver some of the equipment he had been missing. At least no one else would have to endure such an archaic and barbaric “treatment” again.

“I can’t take all of you in, there just isn’t room. You’ll have to decide which of you sees her today. We’ll discuss visiting hours later.”

“I believe only one of us needs to see her right now.” Chakwas again spoke for the group. Liara looked back to see her shipmates nod in agreement. “The rest of us can wait our turn.”

“Take me to her.” Liara said, trying not to shake with terror and remaining fury.

David scrutinized Liara for a moment, finally meeting her eyes with a deadly gaze of his own. He seemed to grasp the nature of Chakwas’s words, though he didn’t look like he approved. “Keep your biotics in check and I’ll give you five minutes. Deal?”
“Deal.”

The doctor turned around and beckoned Liara to follow. He moved through two large rooms full of humans lying in cots, up a flight of stairs and past a ruined office suite to a room with a heavy wooden door. She did not pay attention to any of it save to keep from tripping on exposed wires or cracks in the floor. She was so close now.

“This is Shepard’s.” He said solemnly, hand on the glowing lock mechanism. “She’s still under the effects of the anesthesia, so don’t be surprised if she doesn’t react like she normally would. I would also strongly suggest you remain calm in her presence, no matter what she says or how you feel. She doesn’t need undue strain.”

He looked at her again, still using that same dangerous expression. She recognized it in Chakwas sometimes, but not at this intensity. All doctors in the galaxy cared for their patients, but it seemed human doctors took their emotional attachments further than most.

And, of course, she had all but threatened to kill him just moments ago. He could have still been angry over that.

David sighed and pressed the door’s lock. The tiny computer authorized his entry a moment later and let the heavy wood swing open. Liara had seen such an elegant mix of old and new technologies all her life on Thessia. Her mother had insisted their estate use traditional doors in all the places she could manage to have them installed. It felt more real to her than automatic sensors and sliding panes of glass and metal. Liara smiled at the momentary nostalgia. It elevated her spirits just the slightest-

“Oh Goddess no!”

Liara’s world fell apart yet again the instant she saw Shepard.
The woman who lay upon the bed in the modest hospital room might have been Jane Shepard. Once.

Bandages covered most of the fair skin not covered by clean blankets and her meager hospital clothing. None of them showed any discoloration or signs of misuse, but even one such bandage on her bondmate’s body was almost too much to bear. To her disgust, Liara’s mind came up with an image from an old Earth vid she had seen when researching Shepard’s culture back on the original Normandy. The vid had told a story of corpses rising from their tombs to attack living people. She had laughed at some of the woefully inaccurate portrayals of a pre-industrial sapient civilization. But the fact her mind had compared Shepard’s current state to a living corpse caused her stomach to roil.

Her gaze moved to the top of Shepard’s head, which remained mostly free of the white cloth, but had also been shaved clean. A few red marks on her scalp showed where emergency surgery had taken place, but medi-gel sealed the tiny wounds. Liara had no idea how much she would miss the short red hair that reminded her of sunsets on Thessia until she saw it gone. There had been times when she’d run her fingers through the hair for what felt like hours at a time, enjoying the completely unfamiliar sensation. Shepard never complained about it, even when her fingers got caught in a knot, which she’d painfully rip out almost every time. Except for the knot removal, Shepard had encouraged that behavior. She said it relaxed her. Shepard even let Liara help groom the strands when they could spare the time. Washing and brushing made her hair look and feel entirely different.

And strangely, both her scientific curiosity and hunger to know this woman burned like a star when she was allowed to do such things. And now none of it remained, just bare skin.

Liara forced herself to look down, to see the heavily bandaged stump that used to be Shepard’s right arm. The arm that used to wield weapons across the galaxy like a goddess of war, ensuring that this time of peace would actually come. The arm that caught her when she fell out of that Prothean security bubble on Therum years ago. The arm that held onto her with insatiable need and strength when they kissed or in their brief times alone and away from the cares of the galaxy. Gone.

She had to remind herself that she would help fix this error. Even with the galaxy in its current state, if she just asked, aid from across the galaxy would pour into this hospital like a flood. They’d find a way to return Shepard to the way she used to be. Synthetic prosthetic, cloned limb tissue, actual limb donation, something. The Shadow Broker would make this right.

But the worst part, the injury that burned deepest into Liara’s soul, were Shepard’s eyes. Where they had once been vibrant emeralds, full of vigor and fire one moment, then ice and sorrow in another, now sat dull mossy orbs. The green in her irises had been clouded over, changing their shade to a color she could not describe. Green on top of white, yes. But lessened. Muted. Dull. Shepard’s eyes focused on nothing, showed no real emotion, no real compassion or love or even the rage Liara had fallen in love with. Like her hair and arm, it felt like nothing remained.

No, stay strong, she told herself. The physician told you that she is still under anesthetic. She will be okay. I just need to be here with her.

Liara almost collapsed as a familiar voice, barely a hoarse whisper, flitted from the bed. “Hey.”

Nothing else mattered in the entire galaxy. Liara rushed forward and put her hands on Shepard’s bed. Her one experience with fainting had been enough practice to keep herself upright this time, but the effort had been staggering. She placed one blue hand on the bandaged cheek of her bondmate, not caring to hold back any tears. Now that she stood right next to Shepard, she could see the unmistakable glow of the Cerberus machines that somehow kept her alive. Their lights poked
through the damaged skin, perhaps as an indication that they functioned normally. Not like the ones in her... no, don’t think about that.

“Hello.” Liara said after a few gasps for breath.

“Wow, did the doctor send you? You sound like an angel.” Shepard’s voice, broken and weak, still sounded exactly as she remembered. Liara could not stop herself from smiling. She remembered looking up the Earth concept of angels the last time Shepard called her that. Whatever vanity she had buried deep down enjoyed the comparison.

“I’m glad you think so.”

“Wow. You’re like... so blue. I didn’t think angels were blue. The vids always made them look boring. I wish I could see what you looked like. I bet you’re beautiful.”

Liara laughed. “You don’t need to keep complimenting me, Shepard. I’m right here. I’ll always be here.”

Shepard’s face twisted into a confused expression. From under the bandages, a few of her freckles peeked out. “I’m sorry, I can’t understand you. Can you understand me?” She said in a slow, exaggerated monotone.

Then her voice went back to normal. “Man, I bet she’s super hot. I hope she can’t hear all this or I’d blow my chances.”

The anesthetic. It had to be the medicine affecting her, making her speak without thinking. Liara knew enough of common medical practice to know most species reacted this way to heavy sedation. Shepard wasn’t quite awake or dreaming, but still lucid enough to communicate with the world. Just hearing her bondmate’s voice, addled as it was, would be enough for now. There would be plenty of time for more conversations later.

David moved to the bed and checked a chart. Though Liara could tell kept his eyes locked on her hands, ensuring she did not move or touch his patient in a way that would harm her.

“You don’t have to worry about any of that. You already have me.”

Shepard’s muddy eyes moved to the human. “Doc? Can you understand a word she says? I want to tell her how beautiful I think she is, but I don’t think she can hear me.” She pulled away from Liara’s hand just a little. Shepard seemed to want to whisper, but the words came out at full volume. “She’s way out of my league. Help me out here, man.”

He laughed. Liara didn’t quite find the humor, though the endless compliments still felt endearing. Something of the real Shepard survived in there.

“Her translator has been turned off, I didn’t realize it would be a problem. Sometimes you forget these things when you don’t go off planet.”

“It’s no problem.” Shepard and Liara said at the same time. The human on the bed seemed to giggle for a moment before composing herself.

Liara leaned closer to Shepard and looked directly at her love’s dulled eyes. A spark was there, just a hint of the fire that used to burn behind them. One day, it would ignite again. But for now, they just had this moment.

She took in a breath and remembered the three words Shepard would say to her. She pictured the
first time she heard them, not long after they finally and truly reunited in her cabin on the new Normandy. At the time, she tried to mimic the sounds, but Shepard had stopped her. She had promised to teach Liara to properly say them one day. The day when everything had been dealt with and they had nothing but time. Well the promise had been kept. Liara focused and remembered, then took in a deep breath.

“I… love… you.”

She forced the English words out as best she could, trying to sound as clear and soft as possible at the same time. She could feel the judgmental stares of the doctor standing so close, but she did not care. She silently prayed to the Goddess that Shepard understood and let a few new tears fall onto Shepard’s blankets. Her body moved on its own after that, planting a gentle but brief kiss on Shepard’s lips.

Shepard’s drug-slowed mind seemed to process the information like an overloaded computer. Her eyes moved back and forth, trying to comprehend and understand what had just been said and the meaning behind the kiss. For a moment, Liara thought she saw a glimpse of Shepard return to her. Their eyes met for a fleeting second, connecting together like they had done in their all-too-few times alone. A lifetime of understanding and love poured through that brief contact. For a moment, Shepard spoke to her alone through her eyes.

And then they turned away.

“Did you see that, doc? Holy shit.” She managed an exaggerated, comical wink. “But do me a favor. Don’t tell Liara.”
“What happened to her eyes?” Even though the sight of Shepard’s broken and mutilated body had shocked her down into her core, Liara could not let go of the memory of her bondmate’s aimless and cloudy eyes.

Night had fallen on the city of London and Liara sat outside Shepard’s room, flanked by Doctor Nicolo and Doctor Chakwas. The other Normandy crew stood further away, mindful of the space needed but also available should they be called. The air felt still, but restless. Like a summer night just before she got started on a new dig.

Liara had been escorted out after five exact minutes with Shepard, who said very little after their brief semi-incoherent conversation. Before they left, Nicolo had administered some more medicine, which put her into a merciful state of sleep. With Shepard’s eyes closed, Liara had an easier time seeing the woman she loved in that bed.

She pressed her back against a nearby wall as soon as she exited and let gravity drag her down. Her bruises, which had been half healed but mostly forgotten, reminded her of their presence as she covered her face with her palms. Nicolo had consulted with Chakwas for a long while, probably catching up on Shepard’s recent medical history. By the time evening fell, both approached her at the same time.

That was when she had sprung the question about Shepard’s eyes.

Chakwas cleared her throat. “It’s common for someone near a powerful explosion to experience damage to their eyes. It’s actually a bit of a miracle she hadn’t shown signs of eye or ear trauma before this, but we would have been able to clear it right up if we had been on the Normandy. There are treatments and surgery even in advanced cases, of course. But with Shepard so fragile right now, we can only wait and see when we can perform them.”

Nicolo continued. “We’re still trying to make a timeline for Shepard’s injuries based on what we know happened on the ground and in the Citadel. Most of her bruises, burns and superficial cuts came from… what did you call it?”

“Harbinger.” Liara said, her tone as flat as it could be. She again remembered every awful moment running through that crater, staring at both the gigantic Reaper and its larger, abominable construction. She remembered Shepard’s last words to her after Liara had nearly been crushed by that vehicle, words of love.

Did that addled woman asleep in the next room remember saying them anymore?

“Yes, Harbinger.” He contemplated for a moment before speaking again, “She also suffered several gunshot wounds, but we can’t tell exactly when they occurred. But we do know she activated the crucible. And something about that activation caused an explosion.”

“Yes, we saw that.” Chakwas said. “We saw it spread over the entire galaxy.”

“Not just that. When she got here, Shepard showed trauma from a more common type of blast. Shrapnel wounds like she endured only come from mundane objects, for lack of a better term, blowing up. We think a smaller explosion is what not only damaged her eyes, but threw her onto a hard surface and caused her head and spinal injuries. As well as dislocating her arms, shattering several bones, etcetera. The energy wave… thing, came later. Maybe because of whatever she
destroyed."

After hearing that list of injuries again, one thought and one thought alone raced through Liara’s mind. With everything Shepard suffered, with so much gone and never to return, with her mind possibly no longer what it used to be, was all this waiting and hoping she’d get strong enough for further surgery the right thing to do? Would Jane Shepard have accepted such a sad fate if she had the choice?

“Would it have been better if she died, doctor?”

The hallway remained silent for a time, save the hum of the generators.

Finally, Doctor Chakwas tsked her tongue and lowered herself to Liara’s eye level and took her hands in a surprisingly strong grip.

“Don’t you ever think that, Liara T’soni. Not again, do you hear me? Just because Commander Shepard endured some horrible injuries doesn’t mean she would be better off dead. The Reapers pushed us all to our limits and they demanded more of her than anyone else in the galaxy.”

Liara tried pulling her hands away, but Karin held them tighter, “And I believe, I truly believe, that the only thing that kept her in this world is you.”

She paused, holding back a flood but failing. “So don’t you dare ask that again. You don’t get to give up. Shepard never gave up, not once. Not when her entire crew said to not trust you. Not when the Council, the Alliance and even some of her friends turned their backs on her. And certainly not when the Reapers came to kill us all. Right now she needs you to be strong just like she remained strong for these last few months. She’ll need you more than ever if she hopes to come back all the way. Do you understand me, Liara?”

Liara T’soni, nearly double the age of this frail human woman, sat humbled. She felt like a child again, sitting on a mound of freshly dug soil as her mother scolded and lectured her. She had been foolish then and she had been foolish now. Her cheeks flushed dark purple in embarrassment.

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Act like it.” Chakwas did not back down. “Stand up and act like you understand. I’m not giving up. Your shipmates are not giving up. Nobody on this destroyed ball of mud and rubble will give up, either. We’re going to get through this just like we got through the war: together. And a healthy dose of faith in Commander Shepard.”

Karin raised her hand to wipe a tear away from Liara’s cheek after they both rose back to their feet. Her tone softened as she did. “Now, I know for a fact that Shepard has no next of kin or legal family to claim any visitation or legal rights. So with Doctor Nicolo’s permission, I’m signing all those over to you, Liara.”

The other human looked between Chakwas’s iron expression and Liara’s. “Y-yes. Of course. I’ll make sure word gets around. As long as her biotics are kept in line. I don’t need her picking up any patients or equipment we have in this place and shaking them around.”

“Fine.” Liara said, waving the concern away. Chakwas kept her supportive arm around Liara as she took in some more calming breaths.

“What about her arm? Tell me exactly what happened.” She kept her breathing steady, knowing this coming story would be difficult to hear. But she had to know the details. She just had to.
Nicolo answered. “After I determined that no aid would come from anywhere in the system, I waited two more days and resorted to prayer, hoping that Shepard’s implants would start working normally. Instead, they continued to malfunction. Shepard’s right hand would not have survived much longer with the one inert implant blocking blood flow. And the necrosis left in her other muscles would have spread infection to the rest of her body within days. Maybe hours, if we were unlucky.”

“Do you have any plans of correcting this?”

“To be honest, I’m just surprised she lived through the surgery. I mean, we performed it under lamps powered by a portable generator and used tools we could barely keep sterilized.” Liara’s glare deepened. “At this time, I just want to keep her here and observe. Such a large change in her already fragile body is bound to cause some complications. Perhaps when she is fully recovered, you and she can discuss other options.”

“I see.”

“I have to concur with Doctor Nicolo,” Chakwas said. “The situation here is dire, and the fact they spared so much time and effort for Shepard when so many others are in similar straits shows how important she is. I agree with his decision and assessment of the situation, given their lack of supplies. If you don’t trust his medical recommendations, trust mine.”

“Oh.” Liara managed.

“I’m sorry, my dear. I truly am sorry. They did their best to keep her alive. And like I said, it’s up to you now. You and her, together. They’ll keep her safe and free of sickness. But only you can help her heal. And to do that, you need to stay strong.”

“I have to be.”

“Yes, you really do. I’d imagine Shepard would be quite upset with you if you felt otherwise.”

“She’s going to be upset about a lot of things.”

Doctor Chakwas nodded solemnly. “That’s another reason you’re here. She needs to be kept as calm as possible for the next several weeks, or she could do irreparable damage to her body. The next time she awakens with full lucidity, you should be there.”

Liara returned the expression. “I intend to.”

“Liara?” Kaidan appeared, having moved away from the small gathering of Normandy crew across the hall. She got the impression he had been forced to walk over, his Spectre status making him the perfect agent/sacrifice to approach an emotionally unstable Asari. “How is she? I mean, how is she really?”

“I wish I knew, Kaidan.” Liara replied, though she did not look at her comrade. Her eyes had moved back to Shepard’s door.

“We’re all here for both of you, you know that.”

“Yes, thank you.” She nodded in thanks to Kaidan.

“If it helps, right now we’re all busy keeping everyone off your backs. I’ve been using Spectre authority to keep most people officially out. James, Javik and Garrus seem to enjoy the unofficial work.”
“I’m sure they do.” Liara paused, concerned. “How many people…?”

“Try to sneak in and see Commander Shepard for themselves? Not many. Especially when she’s guarded by those three downstairs. I’ve been keeping the brass at bay with promises of reports and future public speaking arrangements.”

“I imagine you’ll be quite busy soon. Thank you, Kaidan.”

“Oh, they’re not for me. They’re for her. I’ve got her booked for about a year solid.” Kaidan smiled. “Though I doubt anyone would raise a real stink if she didn’t show up to a few of them.”

Liara didn’t want to presume what Shepard would plan to do when all this sat behind them in memory. But still, she appreciated the good humor.

The night lingered on.
Chapter 14

The next time Jane Shepard opened her eyes, she could tell something had changed. Not drastically, and not in a Reaper-arrival way, but something felt amiss. A surge in her gut warned her to feel cautious and to stay alert. The same surge had kept her alive in hundreds of firefights, helped her see through lies and even steered her decisions more often than not. Escaping the Collector ship just after learning the entire thing had been a trap? Gut instinct had pointed her way out. Well, EDI helped, but it had mostly been her gut.

She almost sat up, but remembered her deal with Nicolo. Instead, she turned her head, just a small test of her diminishing muscle inhibitors. Her neck turned left and right a few inches, but like a slug. It took far too long to turn her head. If she had been in a real battle, she would have been dead five times over just from being unable to check her angles. At least some more of the ever-present pain had gone away. She no longer felt that terrible surge in her heart every time she concentrated on her…

On her…

… Well that certainly looked strange…

… Oh…

The next sound that emerged from Jane Shepard’s mouth wasn’t a scream, nor a moan of displeasure or even a drawn-out whine. A sound that came from the deepest, most animal part of her brain flew from her injured throat. A croaking roar that only comes when a mind is completely unable to express the levels of terror, rage, loss and grief it felt all at the exact same moment. Her heart rate jumped so fast the pain returned all on its own, forcing her hunch over as she half-screamed. Something started beeping as she began to sit up in a futile effort to calm the fire inside her chest. She barely heard it. Instead, Shepard’s dull eyes remained focused on the white blur that stuck out of her right side. She didn’t need to see it in detail to know what it was. And what it meant she no longer had.

This shouldn’t have happened. She should have been fine. She should have been able to clench her chest with her right hand. She should have been able to scratch an itch, wipe her eyes, maybe reach out and grab a cup of water… something.

But only the bandaged stump moved in response.

No. No. No. NO. NO. NO.

She made the noise again, but this time louder. She heard things calling from outside, but they only added to the cacophony in the room, they didn’t make it better. The beeping, probably a heart monitor, began making new noises. Erratic, whining, electric sounds now came instead of the increasing tempo of the beeps. It didn’t matter what they monitored, they just made noise. She couldn’t hear much of it anymore. Her ears still weren’t as clear as they used to be. All the sounds, even her own, swam around in her brain before they could be processed. Everything had an echo, even if she knew it didn’t.

Shepard no longer had the power to control her body. Fear had taken full control, fear and panic. Her heart pounded out of control and her tired lungs could only take in tiny, hyper-fast breaths. She knew exactly what this felt like.
The instant that thought hit her mind, Shepard’s door crashed open, and she saw something she never thought she’d ever see again.

A blurry Asari in white clothing ran to her bed almost as fast as a bullet. Some new noise joined with the rest, but she had no idea where it came from. Almost like a voice, but completely foreign.

Liara? No. It couldn’t be her. She had been drugged and messed with too long. This had to have been a hallucination as her terrified mind took over all rational thought and action. She continued to scream.

Her bondmate tried to hold Shepard down by her shoulders, in a desperate attempt to keep her still. But Jane did not care. All she saw was the stump and the place where her right arm should have been. Had it not been enough to keep her paralyzed, alone and scared on this bed for days? They had to start mutilating her body and making her hallucinate Liara pinning her down? Was this someone’s elaborate revenge plot? Was it just revenge over her growing resistance to the muscle inhibitors? But they had a deal!

She knew he lied to her!

She recognized Nicolo the instant his white lab coat entered the room. This time, she managed to take in a deep breath just so she could scream as loud as her damaged lungs allowed her to. She screamed out of unleashed rage, the rage she had carefully pent up over a lifetime of living on the streets, a career built on death and injury, and all the losses she had to endure thanks to the Reapers and Cerberus. She blamed him. She blamed this hallucination of Liara. She blamed everything that stood in front of her.

How dare this happen!

Her heart continued to rampage inside her chest. Jane no longer paid attention to how much it hurt or how little she could actually breathe. She thrashed and kicked and tried throwing her stump as if she still had a right hand to punch the blue woman that stood above her, keeping her confined to the bed with a surprisingly strong grip.

“Keep her steady!” Nicolo shouted. Jane saw only red as she looked his direction. Pure, undiluted, animalistic rage. Whatever sounds the heart monitor had made seemed to die as Jane tore her throat raw through screams. She ignored that minor pain. Nothing compared to what she felt now. Or what she didn’t feel.

Wait. She still had a left arm, didn’t she?

Jane swung with every ounce of strength in her body, connecting with Liara’s back and making a satisfying THUMP sound echo through her blue chest. So this Asari was real. She hit her bondmate again.

And again.

And again.

Why? Why did this happen?

She wished he could see Liara’s face. Just for a second. She should have apologized, even if the Asari was a hallucination, but she continued to lash out. The fear and rage had taken control now. Shepard had mentally turned away. She had already given up.

Jane looked up at her bondmate, trying to focus as her left arm hit not only her, but the bed, the
nearby wall, her own chest and leg, everything. She tried to swing at her damned IV, but it seemed to be just out of reach. She tried to use the tube still connected to her remaining arm to pull it closer, but nothing happened.

“Shepard, listen to me!” Nicolo had something in his hand. Another syringe. More drugs. She screamed again until she was sure she could feel blood fly past her lips. “You need to calm down! You need to breathe! You’re damaging your back!”

Liara said something, but Jane couldn’t hear it. Or maybe she didn’t want to hear it. With her eyes and ears in their state, she couldn’t be sure of anything. Except the rage. And the terror. And the loss.

“Do it!” Nicolo shouted, but he sounded like he had moved a hundred feet away.

The room began to spin. Probably because she couldn’t breathe right.

Her already unclear vision began to grow worse. Any detail she might have seen just became splashes of color against the white walls. She looked up at Liara again, but could only see a haze of blue.

And then… darkness.

But not.

Jane Shepard stood on her own two feet inside an endless expanse of stars. No, not in the stars, below them. She stood on something solid and black and reflective, which just made her feel like she floated in the void. She could feel gentle, warm water as it lapped at her bare feet, though she couldn’t see any in the twilight. None of this looked right, but it felt right. Silence and peace had replaced the noise. Only she stood here. Only she existed. This was her home among the stars.

Shepard knew she stood without clothes in this expanse, but that didn’t shock her. No judgment existed here. It also didn’t seem to register that she stood naked and WHOLE. She could see everything in perfect detail. Her hair fell in front of her eyes just like she liked it to. And, most importantly, her right arm connected where it should have. All the muscles, joints, skin and scars sat exactly where they belonged on her body. Not gone. Always a part of her. She raised the limb to eye level, studying it without reaction. She flexed her fingers and waved her hand. As it should have been.

The stars shone above. As they should. As they always will.

She took one step forward and let the water splash over her ankles. It felt good to be here. She belonged here. That thought above the others echoed in her mind. This place would always be hers. She was always welcome. She swung both of her arms around in the joy and freedom of this place. A place she wished she could stay in forever.

The meld. The bond. The place of intimacy only she and Liara could share together.

She often dreamed of this place during her time trying to defeat the Collectors. Liara had been so close, but she kept pushing away. Every time they talked on Illium, a stake drove through Shepard’s heart as her bondmate only spoke of revenge and death. And then she’d leave that planet and dream about their first night together. The dreams weren’t quite as necessary when Liara had finally joined her on the Normandy, but the war prevented them from joining almost as much as Liara’s old obsession had. Even then, when she found time to sleep next to her, Jane dreamed of this.

“Jane.” The gentle voice came from behind her. In front of her. All around.
In this world, translators weren’t required. They communicated in a deeper way here. One that didn’t require words and sounds. They understood each other perfectly when their minds became one.

“Liara?” She turned around again and again, trying to see the source of the voice. She saw nothing. Only she existed in this place.

“Jane, I’m here.” Liara’s voice echoed everywhere all at once.

“I can hear you, Liara. But I can’t see you.”

“You can’t give in to this, Jane. You need to fight the terror that’s taken hold of you. You’re making it impossible for the doctors to help.”

“Why?” Though the void around her remained serene, she could see and remember what she had just done. Or what she was still doing? The bond made such questions very confusing. Even though she felt her left arm hanging comfortably at her side in this world, in reality, she saw herself thrash and fight. She could feel the bruises already forming and the soreness in the muscles and joints and she flung her limb. In the bond, both sensations were just as real and just as equal.

Which is why seeing and feeling her right arm in here, but not reality, made it impossible to calm down.

“They did this to me.”

“To save your life. If they hadn’t, you would have died.”

“Again.”

“Jane Shepard, you cannot give up.” Liara’s voice boomed with conviction. Where had this sudden strength come from?

“Why not?” She watched what happened, or remembered what happened, in the hospital room. Her sole remaining arm flailed like a weapon, hitting anything and everything in its path. Herself, her bed, the wall.

She watched her arm hit Liara. But the Asari did not flinch or turn away.

She watched it happen over and over again.

“Oh no. Please don’t do that.”

Guilt joined the flood inside her mind and Shepard sunk to her knees. The water rippled around her, bathing her lower body in cleansing stillness. She watched her arm assault the only person in the galaxy who loved her. Her body betrayed everything. She didn’t deserve this peaceful place anymore.

Had she the will or ability, she would have ended the bond.

And maybe ended more than that.

“Shepard.” The echo stopped. Instead, Liara’s voice came from one point, one specific place behind her. Jane turned her head.

Liara stood next to her now. Just as naked as Jane, but that still didn’t bother her. Nor did it make her feel the things she normally did when they joined. Her body had other concerns at the moment. She didn’t think she’d ever feel that way again.
Besides, clothing didn’t matter here. Only the two of them did. Only their hearts and minds, maybe their souls, actually existed here. Liara still physically stood above her, holding her shoulders while Shepard’s body hit and screamed and panicked like an animal. But here, they were themselves. Two people of two different species, but bonded as one.

“Liara.” Jane said as her bondmate sat next to her under the stars. The shallow water sloshed and splashed around her.

“I’m here. Please, help me calm you down.”

“But, Liara. I’m…” She could not take her mind from the image of what her left arm did. What it was doing to her right now.

“That isn’t you. That is just fear.”

“But I…”

Liara smiled and looked directly into Jane’s eyes.

“You are forgiven, always and completely.” Her eyes, deep blue and so kind, always made Shepard feel unworthy. How could she forgive so easily?

“I forgive you because I love you.” Of course, she didn’t need to “speak” to communicate in here. Even though this wasn’t her real body, Shepard gathered the feelings of her guilt, shame and fear and held them in her chest. Sobs escaped her lips and tears fell from her face both in here and out there. No, she didn’t deserve this. Not after what she saw her arm doing. And yet, she felt Liara’s sincerity. Not a single thought of anger or hatred for Shepard came from Liara as she sat next to her in this expanse of darkness and stars. Just love. Just acceptance.

Real, honest forgiveness.

She deserved nothing but love.

It was time to let go of those feelings and go to sleep.

Shepard let the guilt free with a single teardrop that joined the water below them. The shame followed after a sob.

Liara wrapped her arms around Shepard and rested her head on Jane’s shoulder as she released her pain inside their bond.

“They took my arm away.”

“I know.”

“What am I going to do now?”

“We’ll think of something. We always do.” Liara turned and pressed her lips against Shepard’s forehead. “But for now you need to stop this. I’ll be here when you wake and we can talk. Really talk, like we never had time for.”

“Do you promise?” She spoke like a child, but in the bond, meaning meant more than words. She could not hide the fear that followed the thoughts, not from Liara. Shepard remained terrified she would wake up alone and helpless again.
“You’re never helpless. And you will never be alone again.” Liara said. And she meant it. With every fiber of her being.

Jane nodded and let some more unreal tears fall. She didn’t realize how much she needed this release.

In the real world, her body stopped moving.

Shepard fell asleep on her own, without drugs, and without terror clawing in her mind, for the first time in days.
Chapter 15

Liara awoke in a flimsy portable chair next to Shepard’s bed. Her bondmate remained asleep, thanks to their impromptu melding and a dose of heavy painkillers mixed with a sleep aid. Doctor Nicolo had accepted her suggestion to form the intimate connection without a second thought, probably too distracted by Shepard’s screaming, thrashing and the now-broken heart monitor to care what she actually suggested.

Doctor Chakwas had come in later during the night and offered Liara some more of those pills she had taken on the Normandy and to do a second check on Shepard’s condition. Their talk had been quiet and brief, lest they disturb her rest. Liara almost refused the pills, but decided to accept them. If only because refusing Karin’s medical aid after their last talk might have gotten her another lecture. And, as usual, Karin had been right. Several hours into the very dark night, the aches from Shepard’s… assault had come. No doubt she’d have some awful bruises for days after this. But she didn’t mind.

Liara remembered every second of their meld, as she did every time she and Shepard joined as one. She felt Shepard’s overwhelming fear and guilt. Her sorrow and vulnerability. Her rage and despair. Liara had taken them into herself to allow her love to experience true peace inside their shared vision. That mental anguish weighed more on her than any physical blows ever could. But she remained strong, she promised she would be. Liara wept in the real world as she finally communicated with Jane. The real Jane, not the drugged half-awake creature she had talked to earlier. Through their bond, she could tell Shepard had not left her. Jane Shepard remained in this ruined body, though her ability to remain in control of it had all but disappeared, surrendered to the negative and destructive emotions that had been building since long before the mutilation… surgery. She meant surgery.

That’s why Liara would be here, for as long as Shepard needed.

Liara guided Shepard into letting go of such horrible feelings. At least for now. The poisonous thoughts still lingered deep in her mind, hiding themselves behind calmer emotions and cold logic. Liara would help exorcise them in time.

Watching her bondmate find peace inside their shared minds had been a more joyful experience than even the very first time they merged as one. Their desperate, awkward, sometimes terrifying but ultimately rewarding experience in Shepard’s cabin on the first Normandy had remained her treasured memory for three years. That changed last night. She would never forget seeing her love, her real and treasured love, accept peace and forgiveness into her heart. That simple act of mental surrender to healing and forgiveness made her heart sing with more joy than any physical release ever would again.

It wasn’t a magical cure for all of Jane’s ills, but it had been a glorious start.

“YOU DID WHAT?!” A voice bellowed through the hospital, shaking the last bit of sleep from Liara’s mind. She recognized the voice just before the wooden door opened.

“Wait, you can’t come in-“A nurse followed Miranda Lawson as she barged into the room, though he hesitated at the threshold.

Liara had only met Miranda a handful of times, but she instantly recognized the engineered human. Her usually perfectly-groomed hair hung off her head as if it hadn’t been seriously touched in weeks and her previously form-fitting suit had been discarded in favor of more modest and easier to maintain set of Earth clothes. But Miranda stood out no matter how hard she tried to look plain.
Her feelings had always been confused about Miranda. On the one hand, she brought Shepard back. On the other, she had intended to use Shepard as nothing more than a weapon, a tool, to help stop the Collectors. And yet Shepard had seen something in her during that long campaign and that mission ended with them calling each other friends. She would defer to that judgment for now.

“Oh, Doctor T’soni.” Miss Lawson stuttered as she realized the room had more than one occupant. Liara stood, even though her back complained about every inch she rose.

“Miranda. I didn’t expect to see you.” Liara waved off the terrified nurse with a friendly but firm gesture. He thankfully left without protestation.

“Doctor Chakwas got a hold of me through her Alliance channels and I dropped everything to come here. She told me what this band of incompetents did to Shepard instead of trying to seek actual medical care. Well, not in those exact words, but I suspect she was trying to be nice.”

“Did Doctor Nicolo-“

“That country doctor buffoon? He tried to stop me. Then he tried to explain why he cut Shepard’s arm off. He’ll wake up in a few minutes. I didn’t hit him as hard as I wanted to.”

Liara didn’t hide a smile. “He seems well intentioned, for a buffoon.”

“Well, he should have called me. I could have prevented all of this.”

Liara didn’t know exactly what Miranda could have done with no resources and almost no electricity. But then, she had already performed a miracle with a patient in much worse circumstances.

“Short circuit, my ass.” Miranda said under her breath as she examined Shepard’s sleeping form. A protective flash of anger washed over Liara as she watched the other woman gently poke and prod at Shepard’s injuries. Miranda muttered to herself as she examined, though the Asari couldn’t make sense of what she said. The human spent a lot of time looking at the lights that glowed under Shepard’s cracked skin, checking for something Liara could not fathom. It took her several minutes to move her critical gaze to Shepard’s missing arm. She did not touch it or do anything but stare at the lump of flesh and bandages for a long time.

“Goddamn barbarians, the lot of them. They should have taken her right to a ship, not drop her through the atmosphere in a shitty old shuttle.”

“I believe I told Doctor Nicolo the same thing when I learned what they did.”

“Well of course you’d understand,” Miranda moved away from Shepard and the protective anger disappeared. “Sometimes military meat-heads just can’t conceive of simple solutions to things. It’s why I never really considered Shepard’s offer to join your band of galactic saviors during the war. She always thinks too big.”

“On top of some other issues.” Liara’s mind conjured all the files she had on Miranda. Behind the engineered genetics, a woman had fought against a controlling father, then a controlling company, to gain actual freedom. Thanks to Shepard, she had achieved that for both her and her equally engineered sister.

Miranda brought Shepard to life, Shepard gave Miranda a life worth living.

“Yes, well, I’m sure Shepard kept you well informed.” Miranda said with a half-smile.
“She might have. It helped her sleep during the war, knowing she did good things. She needed to be reminded now and then.”

“Yeah, she never resisted the urge to do the right thing, even if it was stupid.” Miranda looked to the window. They both looked to see Earth’s moon rising above the broken cityscape.

Liara cleared her throat, preferring to not dwell on Miranda’s past. “Is there anything you can do for her?”

“Not right now. I’ll need to see what I can scrounge and steal first. Maybe some people in the Alliance will listen to me instead of a groundside doctor who thinks it’s a good idea to remove a limb from the most famous person in the galaxy without consulting anyone.”

Liara unconsciously reached for the datapad she almost always carried. The one she specifically left behind on the Normandy to remain free of distractions when she reunited with Shepard. At the time, she hadn’t cared what her agents thought of her disappearing again. She would have just made up a story to placate them once things returned to normal. Besides, Glyph remained on the ship to make sure nothing in her now-tiny network completely fell apart in her absence.

But now, she had nothing to offer Miranda.

“Just… do what you can. Please.”

“I will, Liara. You can count on-“

“You, get out!” David Nicolo stood at Shepard’s door, a gout of blood pouring from his nose. He didn’t shout his command, but he gave it enough force to echo through the room.

Liara put her hand on Miranda’s shoulder to keep her calm. She definitely knew of Miranda’s powerful temper, and the fact she usually expressed it through biotics. “Doctor Nicolo, this has been a misunderstanding. This is Miranda Lawson. She-“

“I’m the one who put those implants in Shepard. And I’m the one you should have called as soon as she arrived here.”


“I could have saved her arm, you moron!”

Doctor Nicolo snorted a humorless laugh, spraying a little more blood down his upper lip. “You come in here, punch me in the nose and then expect to tell me you could have done my job? I already called security, so don’t think I’ll let you get away with this. Not when Shepard’s life could still be in danger.”

Liara took a step back from Miranda. She trusted the other woman to not hurt Shepard, but she didn’t trust her to not cause further harm to Nicolo.

“Her life is in danger because of your incompetence!”

“My incompetence? The only incompetence I saw was in three broken machines that shouldn’t have been put into a living patient in the first place. How could you possibly think that was a good idea?”

“I don’t need to explain myself because you clearly have no idea how to practice modern medicine. I’m surprised you haven’t resorted to bloodletting yet.”
“Don’t you dare…”

The two of them stepped forward, their verbal argument clearly about to become physical. And just a few feet away from Shepard.

“Enough!” Liara pushed her voice with the same quiet command Nicolo had used. “I’m stopping this. Now.”

She turned to the woman standing next to her and spoke like she remembered her mother doing. Diplomatic, but assuredly in charge. It had helped her a great deal when commanding her agents. “Miranda, go with the soldiers and find Doctor Chakwas. She’ll explain everything to them and find a place for you to rest. We all appreciate you coming here to help.”

She met Nicolo’s accusing gaze. “You will let Miranda go, under the guard of those men outside.”

“Doctor T’soni-“ He tried to plead. Liara interrupted him.

“She was right about one thing. You should have called her first.”

Nicolo shook his head in indignation as Miranda walked out of the room. The sounds of her and the soldier’s footsteps echoed through the hall.

“I don’t even know who she is.”

“She’s the one who brought Shepard back to life.”
“I’m thirsty.”

Shepard’s weak complaint escaped Liara’s notice. She stood at the window of the hospital room, looking out at the ruined city. People, humans mostly, milled everywhere. Most of them worked inside destroyed buildings, clearing rubble or tearing down unstable structures. Portable mass effect field generators had been placed everywhere, keeping fragile buildings stable or aiding workers in moving the biggest chunks of debris from one place to another. A few other humans cooked food in open-air kitchens, serving huge lines of workers and refugees alike.

She hadn’t sampled much variety in human food, or any food really, preferring to stick with simple meals or rations she could eat quickly before returning to work. Even back on the original Normandy, when she had all the time in the world compared to her recent duties, she kept her preferences… boring. Maybe she could go down there and pick up a surprise for Shepard when she woke-

“I said I’m thirsty.”

“Oh, Jane. You’re up.”

Shepard’s voice sounded worse thanks to her panicked screaming fit. The doctors could do nothing for that damage except wait for it to heal on its own. Until then, Shepard would have to make do with an even more cracked and hoarse speaking voice than usual.

“Liara.” Jane’s eyes followed her, but they did not focus. “You’re still here.” Liara made sure Shepard’s translator had been reactivated while she slept. Though in the hours spent watching her unconscious love, she had also convinced Kaidan to find an Asari-English translation booklet. Several of the soldiers in other parts of the hospital had them, just for circumstances like these. She had already practiced a few new phrases just in case the machine needed to be deactivated again.

“As I said I would be. I won’t leave this room until you do.” She picked up the small cup of water that sat near the room’s clean sink and placed it near Shepard’s mouth. She didn’t want her bondmate to strain her back by reaching out with her left arm. Shepard sheepishly drank, obviously not used to being waited on in such a way. When she finished, Liara returned the cup to its place on the sink.

“I’ll understand if you need to leave every once in a while to, uh, what was the word Doc Nicolo used? Evacuate? In fact, I think I insist.”

Liara smiled. “Don’t worry about me. All you need to do is concentrate on getting better.”

“Too bad, T’soni. If I recall, you agreed to this relationship as much as I did. That means I get to worry about you.”

Her heart broke as she saw Shepard try to reach out with her right arm like she had done countless times before. Instead, Liara reached for Shepard and placed her hand on her love’s cheek. She could feel Shepard shake just a little under her palm. Chakwas’s words came back to her mind. Shepard always tried to be strong. She was trying to stay in control for Liara.

“It will be all right. I’m here.” She let go after just a moment, letting Shepard relax back into her doctor-mandated position on the bed.

“How do you feel?”
Shepard threw her head back. “Do you really need to ask that question?”

“I think I do. I can’t help you if I don’t know how you feel.”

Shepard’s eyes darted back and forth. Liara tried to remember them as they were, not as they looked now. It made things easier for her. “How do you think I feel, Liara?”

“I honestly do not know. I’ve never been in a situation like this.”

Shepard looked at her again, though it seemed her damaged eyes only saw past her. Liara moved her chair as close to the bed as possible and leaned close. She hoped Shepard could see her from this distance.

Shepard reached with her left hand to touch the top of Liara’s head, caressing the crest that ran across her scalp. Liara didn’t care if this motion somehow messed with the doctor’s strict orders to keep Shepard’s back perfectly still. It soothed her just as much as she used to be able to soothe Shepard.

“I can’t see. I can barely hear. It hurts to do anything. And oh yeah… they cut off my fucking right arm. That’s how I…” Liara watched as the frustration visibly affect Shepard. She said nothing as her bondmate gathered her thoughts.

“I don’t know how I feel, Liara. I don’t know if I can put anything into words. Not yet. Not without going back to yesterday.” Liara looked at Shepard to see her sincere and pained expression. From the meld, she knew her mind would be in a constant storm of pain of many different kinds for a long time to come. And she didn’t expect Shepard to be able to express everything right away. She suspected nobody of any species, had they been in Shepard’s position, could express anything so early in their recovery.

“Whenever you’re ready, I’ll be here.” Liara smiled. Shepard did the same as she kept her hand on the crest.

They remained that way in silence for a blissful eternity before Shepard coughed and cleared her throat. “Liara?”

“Yes?”

“About yesterday.”

Liara moved closer, trying to rest her head next to Shepard’s. She wished this conversation wouldn’t happen, but she wouldn’t stop Shepard from trying to come to terms with her attack.

“Don’t think about that. I told you, that was fear. Not you.”

“I know you forgave me. I still don’t know how you could. But it’s just…” Shepard took her hand away from Liara’s head and held it stiffly against her side. “Every time I look at you, I see it happening again and again. I tell myself to stop, but I can’t.”

Liara moved up a little more until she took up a sizeable part of the bed. Naturally, she contorted herself to avoid touching Shepard’s right side. Jane shuffled herself a few inches over, allowing Liara to share the space with her. She took Shepard’s bandaged head in her hands. To her great surprise, she could feel the prickly growth of new hair on the top of Jane’s scalp.

“Jane Shepard, listen to me.” She channeled Karin Chakwas as best she could. “We’ve endured things in this galaxy a thousand times worse than your body reacting out of panic. We endured them together and we beat them. Didn’t we?”
Tears pooled under Shepard’s muddy eyes as Liara continued her impromptu Shepard-style speech. “We beat Sovereign together. You were with me when we rescued Feron and defeated the Shadow Broker. We were together in London before this. Do you remember?”

“Yes.”

“Then why would I possibly be angry at you for releasing all the fears and sorrows you’ve been holding inside? I’ve seen you holding that pain from the moment we met all the way through the war, and I have always been ready to help you whenever you needed.”

“But I… I HIT you.” Shepard could no longer hold her gaze on Liara. She kept her eyes down on her rigid left arm.

“And I believe the human phrase is ‘I’ve had worse’. That wasn’t you, Jane. I’ll say it as many times as necessary until you understand.”

Shepard looked back at her. “But it was, Liara. You don’t understand, I wanted to do it. I knew it was you holding me down but I convinced myself… I told myself horrible things. I wanted to hurt you. God, I wanted to hurt everyone so much.”

Shepard all but collapsed into a new set of sobs. Liara kept still, just holding Jane as she shook and breathed.

“I think you’re forgetting something, Shepard.”

“What?”

Liara finished her journey up the bed, taking up a position just like she would have done at night in their cabin. She moved her hands from Shepard’s head and placed one on her rapidly-beating heart.

“I know you. And I know you. The real you. The one in here. The one who meets me when we become one person.”

Shepard turned her head, unable to speak.

“The real Jane Shepard is here.” She put a little more pressure on Shepard’s chest. “Not in your head. The Shepard that knows how to shoot and fight is up there. That is just part of you. Your head holds the training, memories, and facts that help the real you survive. They work together, but they are not the same.”

“You sound like Thane.” Shepard whispered.

“Well, maybe the Drell were right all along about the body and the spirit.” Liara took her hand away from Shepard’s heart and reached for her left hand. Jane held it closed in a tight fist. Instead of fighting her, Liara just put her open palm near her clenched fingers. “I mean to say, I know the difference between the two Shepards. The real you is the woman I love. The real you merely wears her battle experience like your body wears armor. The real you is sweet, caring and kind. She’s the kind of woman who apologizes for an involuntary act because she can’t bear to hurt anyone else. The real Jane Shepard is in a great deal of pain right now. Which is why, even if you can’t forgive yourself, I will always forgive you.”

Liara ended her speech with a hesitant kiss on Shepard’s lips. For a time, her lover remained completely still, her lips pursed and tight. Anxiety crawled up Liara’s spine. Had she made a mistake?
Fortunately, Jane returned the affection after only a few seconds. Liara kept it simple, too afraid to move Shepard’s neck to really show how much she loved her in this moment. But even with such reduced mobility, she poured her passion into the embrace.

Finally, when she felt the need to take a breath, she pulled back.

“I hope that helps you feel better.”

Shepard’s left hand opened, allowing Liara to slide her fingers between the human’s.

“Maybe a little.” Shepard managed a weak smile. Pain lingered on her face, but at least she had lessened the sting.

Liara looked in her bondmate’s eyes for a long time, looking past the physical damage and the deeper hurt. She saw Shepard in there, she had no doubt about it. The fire burned behind the eyes, but weak, like a candle in a gentle breeze, easily snuffed. The real struggle, to get Jane herself to see it again, had just begun.

She slowly uncurled her fingers so she could stand up and let Shepard relax over the whole bed again. She refilled the water cup and handed it to her. Shepard took it in her left hand without a word and finished its contents.

Shepard’s mind needed to be occupied with other things, lest she lose herself to despair again. Liara mentally kicked herself for not studying more human culture and practices, especially for those who happened to be in Shepard’s situation. She hated walking into the unknown like this, but she also could not bear to see Shepard in so much pain. Maybe she could find one of the Normandy crew to bring something to read or even a vid player. Cortez would have been all too happy to make quick “supply runs” between the hospital and the ship if it would help the Commander. She made a mental note to begin setting something up. But for now, only she could keep Shepard’s mind on better things.

“Miranda arrived here last night.” Liara said, trying to sound as casual as possible.

“Miranda? How’d she get here? Better yet, why?”

“Doctor Chakwas managed to contact her. She knew there would be no one more qualified or dedicated to helping you recover. You should have seen the show she managed to put on by just walking into the building.”

Shepard sighed. She kept her gaze conspicuously away from her right side. “How can she possibly help? If I recall last time, she had billions of credits and an entire space station at her disposal.”

“Well, she already punched your doctor’s nose. There was quite a lot of blood.” Liara hoped that would make her smile.

It did. Shepard’s dull eyes lit up for a moment. “Really?”

“The instant she heard what he did. She said it knocked him out for a few minutes.”

“Good. That’s good.”

Liara smiled again. Even now, after everything that happened, she could pretend this moment was everything they both wanted. Just the two of them together. With nothing to do but talk and enjoy each other’s company. They had no time limit, no countdowns to the next battle, not even her duties as Shadow Broker to pull them apart.
Chapter 17

Just as Laira felt that nothing in the world could ruin the moment she now shared with Shepard, the entire hospital began to rumble and shake. The floor itself gave way every few seconds, making everything, including Shepard’s bed, jump with every thudding shudder. The glass in the window also vibrated and flexed, making strange sounds as it struggled to keep whole against the forces throwing the entire building into chaos.

Shepard tried to instinctively sit up and prepare for the worst. Fortunately, Liara noticed it in time and held her back.

“What’s going on?” Shepard asked as dust began to fall from the fragile ceiling.

Liara’s eyes darted to the window. A ship flying overhead? No, the skies held nothing but clouds and smoke. A firefight? No, she couldn’t hear the familiar cracks of gunfire or the familiar energetic sounds of biotics. Perhaps a utility line below the building had been damaged, or worse.

“I’ll go check.”

Shepard’s left hand reached up and grabbed Liara’s arm before she moved away from the bed.

“Be careful.”

“I will.”

Liara squeezed her bondmate’s hand before letting go. She mentally prepared her biotics as the shaking grew in intensity, ready for anything.

She touched the door’s lock and let it swing open just as the quaking stopped.

“Liara, there you are!” Urdnot Wrex, in his full half-ton of glory, stood in the hall, facing down an Alliance soldier who literally quaked in his boots. “Tell this little pyjak he can stand down and take a break. The Krogan are here to provide actual security for this dump.”

“Wrex.” Liara smiled as she walked a little further into the hallway, making sure to keep the door wide open so Shepard could hear everything. Behind the Krogan leader, six other giant warriors stood in formation, guns at the ready.

The human guard remained standing directly in front of Wrex, though his body language easily betrayed his terror.

“They could at least recognize the authority of a foreign dignitary or something,” Wrex complained. “I’ve gotten nothing but hassle since I walked through the door.”

Liara walked over to the terrified Alliance soldier and put her hand on his shoulder. He calmed, but he did not move.

“I take it Kaidan let you in?” She asked.

“Oh course he did. I’m one of the few ‘official’ people allowed access to the building thanks to his fancy Spectre connections. Besides, it’s not like any of these tired little humans could stop me if I really wanted in.” Wrex grinned a toothy grin down at the soldier.

“Don’t doubt that. But all these soldiers?” She gestured at Wrex’s retinue.
“One part gift, another part ol’ Wrex finding a loophole in the system. Bakara and a few of the other clan leaders didn’t want me walking around without an escort, especially on a planet that had a small Reaper infestation. Fortunately, these idiots follow any order I give, so I’m ordering them to guard Shepard.”

“And then you’re free to wander about unsupervised.”

Wrex laughed. “You’ve always been the brains of the group. Glad you’re here to keep everything in line.”

“I try.” Liara turned to face the Alliance guard. “You can stand down. He has official authorization to be here and he has my permission.” She glanced at Wrex then back to him. “It really is in your best interest to be somewhere else.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The soldier nodded and walked away, his pace slowly increasing until he turned a corner and entered a dead run.

“You enjoy doing that.” Wrex laughed.

“There is a certain appeal to ordering people around, yes.”

He laughed again.

“Wrex.” Jane’s weak, hoarse voice echoed past the door.

“Shepard!” Wrex shouted as he bounded into the room. Liara remained close, but at a far enough distance to not be hit by his armor or his strong limbs. Fortunately, the well trained Krogan guards did not follow.

Liara entered the room to see the Krogan leader standing over the bed and smiling down at his former commander, savior of his people, unofficial Urdnot battlemaster, and dear friend.

“You look like shit, Shepard.”

“You’re one to talk.” Jane smiled and raised her left hand to point at Wrex’s scarred face. “At least I kept myself pretty.”

“Pretty boring, if you ask me. But then, most humans are. Frail skin can’t hold a scar like natural heavy armor can.”

“Frail skin feels better when you’re not fighting.”

“Can’t argue with that one, I suppose. Still boring, though.”

“What are you doing here, Wrex? I thought you’d have stolen a ship and be back on Tuchanka by now. Maybe siring yet another generation.” Shepard asked as she lowered her arm.

“Damn traffic’s all messed up since you went and saved the galaxy, so I’ve been stuck here helping your people clean up the place. But if anyone knows what it’s like to live on a pile of broken buildings and dust, it’s my people. We’ll help yours learn to thrive. Hell, I may send some warriors to every planet out there and make sure everyone learns good old fashioned Krogan survival techniques until they get their beds all made up again. Ugh, I hate thinking about politics.”

“Where’s Grunt?” Shepard asked, obviously a bit disappointed at his absence.

“I lost track of the whelp a few hours after he decided he could demolish buildings faster than the
machines your people are using to clean things up. You know how boys are when they see the opportunity to smash entire buildings with their fists and heads.”

“You know, even with our vast cultural differences, I know exactly what you’re talking about. Anyway, why are you here in this place? You just coming to make your favorite Commander feel better?”

Wrex feigned offense. “Just because I’m getting older doesn’t mean you get to make fun of my eccentricities, Shepard. Don’t humans have some kind of law about respecting their elders?”

“No when they’re being asses about it.”

Wrex turned to Liara. “Yeah, you’d know about your elders and their asses, wouldn’t you?” She couldn’t help but sink her face into her palm.

“No comment.” Shepard replied with a wink.

Wrex grunted and tried to look wistfully out the window. Krogan did not do wistful expressions very well.

“It’s damn good to see you up and about, Shepard.”

“Wrex, I haven’t left this bed in days.”

“But you will. And before you know it, you’ll be making things explode and signing your name with blood all over again. You have a reputation to uphold.”

“Yeah well maybe that reputation is gonna change.” Shapard’s light mood disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

Wrex looked away from the window.

“I may be a doddering old fool these days, but that doesn’t sound like the Shepard I know. The Commander Shepard I followed into battle wouldn’t let a few minor injuries keep her from standing back up and-“

“Minor injuries?” Shepard moved her right side to better show off her missing limb. “That’s what you call this?”

“I call it a damn fine reminder of what kind of person you are. A krogan can go his entire life wishing he got a scar like that and wind up dying of old age whole and healthy. It’s just another way to prove you’re the best battlemaster clan Urdnot has ever welcomed into its ranks. Besides me, of course.”

“I’d rather not prove anything to anyone. I’ve done enough, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, maybe defeating a billion-year-old menace single handed probably means you don’t have to keep throwing your weight around to make people respect you.”

“Single handed? That supposed to make me feel better?” Shepard did the angry, bitter smirk Liara hated to see. She moved to the foot of Shepard’s bed and put her hands on Jane’s legs.

“What? I thought it was clever.” Wrex said, keeping his good humor up. “Let the old man make his jokes. It’s all he can do to keep sane in the presence of a legend.”

“Fine, Wrex, you get a pass. Just this once and only because of our history. But you came
dangerously close to making me show off that big bad reputation again.”

The Krogan leader laughed a boisterous, charming bellow. Loud enough to shake the window yet again. “You sure know how to throw your quad around. Always trying to make me feel inferior.”

“Can’t have you challenging my authority, can I?”

Wrex nodded and turned away from Shepard. “Well, I think I should get back to teaching humans how to survive without their luxury food, fancy skycars and soft beds. Or whatever you used to have on this planet.”

“It wasn’t all paradise, Wrex. We had some bad spots, too.” Shepard turned her gaze to the window. She never spoke about her childhood much, but Liara knew she grew up in a bad part of the planet, though she wasn’t sure which. The Alliance had helped her rise above such things after many years of struggle.

“Yeah, yeah. You’re tough, as you keep reminding me.” He waved his hand, trying to emulate the common human farewell motion.

“Shepard.”

“Wrex.” She replied.

His thudding footsteps again made the room shake, but neither of them paid any mind to it this time.

“It was nice to see him again.” Liara said as she went to the door to close it. True to Wrex’s word, the Krogan bodyguards remained in the hall, standing at strategic positions with their weapons ready. She had no idea how they’d find places to sleep or food to eat, but Krogan were resourceful.

“Gonna be hell convincing the doctors to let them stay.” Shepard said after Liara returned to the bed.

“I don’t think it will matter what the hospital staff wants. Wrex’s orders seemed very clear.”

“What do you think he’ll do now that he doesn’t have a group of Krogan always staring at his back?”

Liara turned to the window before she answered. True enough, Urdnot Wrex, in his distinctive red armor, trod into the ruined street and walked up to one of the open-air kitchens, shoving past the lines of humans waiting their turn. A few people tried to show their displeasure, but he ignored them. The people serving the food handed him a gigantic handful of their wares a moment later. Smart of them.

“What all men do when given a taste of freedom. Eat until they can’t move and enjoy themselves until they can't stay awake.”
Chapter 18

“That’s it. Remember to breathe, Shepard. You’re doing fine.” Miranda tried to use calming, soothing tones, but nothing she said would have made a difference.

Shepard struggled to sit upright in her bed, covered in sweat and visibly trembling from the effort. Miranda stood at her side, a gentle but firm hand on the Commander’s back. Liara held onto Shepard’s extended left hand, trying to comfort her as best she could. The remainder of Shepard’s right limb swung back and forth as her strong muscles tensed and wrrenched in the monumental effort to keep herself from falling back. Liara tried to shut out the sounds of Shepard’s agonized groans as she struggled to follow Miranda’s directive.

Another day had passed since Wrex’s visit and Doctor Chakwas managed to clear most of the remaining bad blood between Miranda and Doctor Nicolo, though the Greek doctor had been less than pleased to take a back seat to a woman who clearly did not practice normal medicine. Fortunately, aside from the initial punch on her arrival, it had been a bloodless coup.

Miranda moved her hand gently over Shepard’s back, applying pressure to different areas with her palm. Some places she touched caused renewed cries from her taxed patient, others caused her to tremble and shake even more.

“Almost done, I promise.” To Liara’s relief, Miranda stopped her agonizing touching and activated her omni-tool. She held the glowing device a few centimeters away from Shepard’s back, swinging it slowly up and down her spine.

“I’ve done a million situps before. Why does this hurt so much?” Shepard managed to ask between gasps.

“You’ve still got a lot of muscle and lung damage. Your implants are doing what they can, but they can’t do your body’s job for you. Keep sitting up, just a few more seconds.”

Beads of sweat fell down Shepard’s bald had, pooling on her hospital gown. Miranda’s omni-tool pinged soft sounds and a holographic screen showed a readout of some kind as she continued to scan.

“I think, right now, I would have preferred you just cut my brain out and put it in a mech body or something back on Lazarus station.”

“That was one option.”

“Really?”

“No.” Miranda stopped scanning and took a step away from the bed. “Okay, you can lie back now.”

Shepard exhaled and slowly returned her head to the pillow. The silence that followed Shepard’s cries of discomfort sounded like paradise to Liara.

Miranda spent a few minutes looking over the information on her holographic display before deactivating the omni-tool.

“It’s just as I figured. Nicolo might have meant well, but he would have probably kept you in that bed for months for no reason.”
“What do you mean?” Liara asked, as her bondmate gasped and struggled to find a comfortable position.

“Obviously fingertips and an omni-tool app don’t do the same job as a good scanner, but I’ve got two years of experience looking at very detailed readouts of Shepard’s anatomy. I can tell when her spine is in good or bad shape…” She paused and looked at her omni-tool for a few more seconds. “Your backbone is in very good shape given your circumstances, Commander.”

“But everything Nicolo said,” Liara began, “About her injuries being severe…”

“Oh, they were.” Miranda said with a smirk. “But he had no idea what kind of person he was dealing with. And I don’t mean Shepard. No offense.”

“None taken. I think.” She managed to whisper.

“The only thing that would have prevented Shepard from walking would have been a complete separation of nerves. Instead, Shepard’s spine only shows signs of impact trauma. Still bad, but manageable thanks to my improvements. Actually, it’s not that different from, well, you both know.”

“Yes.” Liara said quietly.

“I’ll confirm these scans with Doctor Chakwas and the buffoon,” Miranda said, not losing that grin, “But I think we can start getting you on your feet in two weeks, Shepard. Though, knowing you, it’ll be half that time. Your medi-gel treatments are almost done so all we need to do is wait for the rest of your insides to catch up with the outside.”

“Does that mean I can get some of these damn things off? They’re really itchy.” Shepard gestured to the bandages that still covered her body.

Liara had let the nurses take care of the medi-gel and re-bandaging of Shepard’s skin. Not only was she unsure of how to handle the delicate procedures, she still couldn’t bear to see such injuries on her bondmate. Though the nurses did make an effort to tell her how much better Shepard looked after every session. Jane remained silent about the whole thing, probably because of her stubborn human pride balking about needing such care.

“Actually, we can take care of one of those right now. Hold still.” Miranda hovered over Shepard for a moment, unraveling some of the fresh layers of cloth. “There.”

She stepped away, allowing Liara to see Shepard’s uncovered face and head for the first time in days.

The woman who looked up at her was unmistakably Jane Shepard. Yes, without hair, with clouded unfocused eyes, and her Cerberus implants still visible, but Jane Shepard all the same. Her dark freckles seemed to shine against pale skin, as if grateful for being freed from their long cover.

“How does that feel, Shepard?” Miranda asked as she neatly folded the bandages she removed.

“Like I can breathe again.” Shepard took in a slow breath as she raised her left hand to her face. She traced over some of the marks that revealed the implants below, but said nothing more.

“Those will close in time, just like they did before. I’m surprised the idiots here didn’t smother your face in medi-gel trying to close those scars.”

“Trust me, I’ve been drowning in it ever since I got here. They tried.”
Miranda grimaced and muttered “Morons”. She gently pushed past Liara and grabbed the paper chart ever-present at the foot of Shepard’s bed. With a few short, stabbing motions of the attached pen, she updated some of the information. “There, we’ll have no more of that.”

“Thanks, Miranda.”

“It was my pleasure, Shepard. Did you have any questions about anything? Otherwise, I should get back to scavenging what these apes have tossed around to see if I can get some decent equipment running.”

“Just one.” Shepard said, still gasping. “Why did you make me sit up? Couldn’t I have just turned over?”

“Maybe I’m just a horrible person that likes seeing galactic heroes in terrible pain. Ever think of that?”

“All the time.”

Miranda laughed. “Actually, I needed to see your muscles in action so I could see what’s going on under that freckled skin of yours. I got a little paranoid about all the fumbling Nicolo did before I got here.”

“He fumble anything important?”

“Not in your back. Like I said, it’s good to be cautious about injuries to the spine, but he wanted to take it too far. As he probably does with all those unfortunate enough to be his patients.”

“And limbs.”

Miranda and Liara remained silent, not sure how to respond.

“Yes, well.” Miranda broke the discomfort. “I’ll leave you two for now. You know how to get ahold of me.”

“I’ll let you know when I need another round of torture, Miranda.”

As soon as she left the room, Liara turned to her bondmate.

“That was a little mean, don’t you think?”

“What, the torture comment? She’s heard worse.”

“I just hope you’re not upset at her.” Liara returned to her familiar flimsy chair next to the bed. Shepard tried to focus on her as best she could. “If it helps, we could invite someone else up to talk. To help keep your mind off your back.”

“Who did you have in mind? Maybe me and Garrus can swap scar stories now. Or Tali can talk about all the ways she can pull a Geth’s arm off and stick it into my nervous system. Better yet, let’s have James tell me all the ways he can beat me in a fight now.” The anger and frustration rose in her voice like it did before, but Jane quickly caught it and stopped talking.

“It was just a suggestion, Shepard.”

Shepard covered her face with her hand. “I know, Liara. I’m just in a lot of pain right now, not thinking straight. You still have those pills Chakwas gave you?”
“Yes, but I’m not sure if I should give them to you. I don’t know enough about medicine to know if they’d adversely affect you.”

Shepard smirked, though not in the bad way. “Did I ever tell you how much I love it when you use big words?”

“Adversely is not a big word.”

“It is to me.”

“Well then, I know just what we can do to pass the time.” Liara stood up and retrieved her Asari-English translation book.

“What’s that?”

“Something I picked up while you were asleep.”
Chapter 19

Shepard groaned as she awoke in the same bed, looking at the same blurry walls, window and IV she had seen for over a week. Breathing hurt significantly less than it had her first day here, but she still felt every puff of air as it slid down her throat and expanded her lungs. It didn’t burn, but she still didn’t enjoy the sensation. She did, however, enjoy the feeling of having her face freed of the bandages that had been stuck there for no reason.

As always, she tried to reach up with her right hand to wipe the sleep from her eyes, but nothing happened. And as always, she threw her head back into the pillow, sighed, and raised her left to do the same thing. Her fingers remained on her face after she cleared her eyes, tracing the scars left behind by the implants. She had gotten used to this behavior when fighting the Collectors, but thought she had gotten over it as the scars healed. Running her fingertips around the jagged lines on her cheeks felt both comforting and revolting. It reminded her of a lot of bad memories.

“Oh, good afternoon, Commander.” Doctor Chakwas’s voice came from somewhere Shepard couldn’t see until she strained her neck to look past her feet. Karin sat on Liara’s chair in a far corner of the room, hidden in shadows that only looked like grey blurs to Shepard’s eyes.

“Doctor Chakwas? Where’s Liara?” A small amount of anxiety came through her words, but she hoped Chakwas didn’t catch it.

Who am I kidding? Of course she did.

“I convinced her to leave this room for a while, to go catch up with your shipmates and maybe get some sleep in an actual bed instead of this uncomfortable old thing.” Karin wobbled the chair she sat on. “I’ve been keeping watch ever since she agreed to my orders.”

“I’m guessing it wasn’t easy to convince her.”

“The verbal battle will go down in history, I’m sure. But she knows better than to argue with me for too long. I always win.”

Shepard couldn’t help but smile. “Could you teach me how to win arguments with her? I think that might come in handy.”

“Alas, such a skill cannot be taught, Commander. It requires a certain personality and a gentleness of spirit.”

“Hey, I can be plenty gentle.”

Chakwas laughed and stood up. Shepard saw her carrying the blurry outline of the paper chart that everyone else could read but her. “In many ways, yes, you can. But I’ve yet to see you resort to such depths of gentility. The day you discover proper social grace and good manners is the day I can teach you. Not a moment before.”

“Yeah, well, so much for that.” Jane slunk back in mock defeat.

“Don’t worry, Shepard. All you’ll ever need to do for the rest of your days is remind people how you saved all life in the galaxy. Nobody can ever argue against that. Not for anything.”

“Liara could. She always finds a way to talk me out of things.”
Chakwas placed the chart back on the foot of Shepard’s bed. “That’s because she’s much better at arguing than you are. Don’t give me that look, we both know it’s true. Even when she was that bright-eyed young woman hitching a ride with us back on the original Normandy, she could get her way with everyone. Everyone but me, of course.”

Shepard smiled and sat up just a little bit, just enough to see Karin pacing in the dark corner of the room. It hurt, but she could handle it. “Wait, what did she try to get out of you back then?”

“Oh, that crafty little Asari tried everything she could to get information on you, Commander. She tried convincing me to release your official medical records to her so she could, oh, how did she put it? Ah yes…”

Karin changed her pose to greatly resemble Liara’s old, tentative and endearing posture. When she spoke, her voice carried the tones of a passable impression, though laced with Chakwas’s accent. “I wish to know more about the Commander’s physical health to better study the effects of the Prothean beacon. I know they are classified by the Alliance, but I’d hoped you could create a copy for my eyes only.”

Chakwas cleared her throat and went back to normal. “Thankfully I saw right through her flimsy deception and told her she’d have to find other ways to ogle you in private.”

“Ogle me? You really said that?”

“Of course, Commander. I could tell from the moment she opened her mouth what she really wanted that file for. And it certainly was not to compare your old vitals to the records we had of your encounter with the beacon.”

“Wow. She never told me any of this.”

“I don’t think she would. A proper Matriarch’s daughter would never stoop so low as to look at medical records to fulfill her fantasies. The scandal!”

Despite the ever-presence of frustration, rage, sorrow and guilt in Shepard’s gut, a laugh escaped her lungs. It hurt, like everything else in her goddamn life did, but it also felt good.

“Oh, I am so using this against her.”

Chakwas moved closer to the bed, laughing along with her. Shepard could see her friend and Doctor in a bit more detail. She looked haggard and maybe a little bit thinner since the last time they spoke.

“You doing okay, doctor?”

“Oh, the usual. The Normandy crew is helping out all over London right now, and I’m doing my part here. Most of the soldiers stuck here are fine, just in need of a long rest and medi-gel to heal their physical wounds. The Turians remain frustrating, since we have so little for them. But not one of them has succumbed to injury, dehydration or starvation under our watch. I think the Hierarchy will give this entire hospital’s staff a medal when things return to normal.”

Shepard turned her body to take a more relaxed pose. She almost fell onto her face when she realized she didn’t have a right hand to steady her position. The anger returned, causing her to shake for a moment. The same rage that drove her during the... attack almost took control, but she hammered it back. She closed her eyes and took in a long and steady series of breaths. She imagined the anger leaving with each exhale. Stay strong.

“Are you all right, commander?”
Shepard took in a final breath and stilled her trembling muscles. She had to add this to the list of things she disliked. Random violent mood swings were for Krogan, not her.

Right?

“I’m fine. How’s Kaidan?”

“I haven’t seen much of the Major since we all arrived here. I suspect he’s somewhere with Admiral Hackett, coordinating with the military and keeping the rest of the Alliance off your back.”

“Garrus?”

“He’s been spending his time with the Turians still on the planet. Those not in need of immediate care have a camp set up outside of the ruins of the city so Turian ships can more easily land nearby and drop off supplies. He’s been invaluable in keeping them all, including the patients here, alive.”

“Good for him. What about Tali, James and everyone else?”

“I think Tali is in orbit with the surviving Quarian ships, helping them make repairs. Mister Vega is still downstairs. If I recall, he guarded you before the war. He seems to have gone back to that job alongside his new Krogan buddies. Admiral Hackett made it an official order for him to stay here and keep things running smooth for now.”

Chakwas stopped talking and handed Shepard her cup full of water. Shepard mentally forced herself to reach out with her left hand.

“I’m afraid I have no idea where Javik went off to. He said something about primitives and caves before walking into the ruins alone. I suspect he’ll be fine.”

“What about Joker and EDI?” Shepard handed the cup back, but Chakwas dropped it.

“Oh dear, has no one told you?”

Shepard tried to look down on the floor, where her only source of water now sat. Anxiety welled up yet again. “No, I’ve been a little cut off from the world. What’s going on?”

Chakwas took a long time to respond. A little too long.

“The crucible. When it activated, it didn’t just kill the reapers. It disrupted every system on the Normandy and caused us to crash land. Fortunately, Jeff kept us alive through that ordeal. Most of us.”

White hot rage boiled inside. The Catalyst had told her, in plain but cold terms, what her choice would do to synthetics across the galaxy. She hadn’t believed him…it. She thought it had been yet another lie in the Reaper’s billion years of deceit and terror. At the time, she never even considered the other options laid before her like some kind of sick game show. Another thing she assumed had been another form of Reaper cruelty. The last three years of her entire life had been dedicated to killing the Reapers, not controlling them or teaching them how to love…or whatever that “new paradigm” was supposed to be.

Should she have chosen differently? Would she have survived following through with the Catalyst’s other awful options? Did it matter?

To save her own life, she had killed EDI. And the Geth.
An entire species and a brand new life form that existed only to help, care for and love her crew, exterminated.

Because she made the choice to kill them.

Jane closed her eyes and let a painful deep breath fill her lungs. Her left hand went back to her face. No amount of breathing calmed her this time. She tried tracing the scars, but pulled her hand away. She felt disgusting. She deserved to be so loathsome.

Stay in control. Stay strong.

Panic did not flood her mind, but everything else did.

“Commander? Are you all right?”

“Get out.” Jane whispered.

Chakwas moved closer to Shepard’s bed and tried to place her hand on her shoulder. “Shepard, listen—“

“GET OUT!” She yelled. She yelled it as loud as she could, right into her friend’s face. She didn’t care how much it hurt. She deserved to feel that agony in her chest for what she did. "GET OUT! GET OUT!"

Chakwas stood still for a moment. Probably collecting her thoughts for a patented Karin speech. But instead, she just sighed and turned toward the door.

“I’m going to send for a specialist, Shepard. Someone you can talk to that’s not me or Liara. We’ll speak again.”

She left the room, leaving alone Shepard to shake and tremble, unable to lash out at anyone or anything around her.
Liara knew this would not be easy. She knew Shepard fought against the poison in her mind every waking hour, but she could also see her defenses growing weaker day by day. And when Doctor Chakwas had told Liara of Jane’s actions during their last talk, she agreed without hesitation to Karin’s order. Neither of them waited or cared if Nicolo or Miranda had anything to say about it. They might have repaired her body, but they could not save Shepard from herself.

Though she never vocalized it, a part of Liara felt as if she had failed Jane by letting this new doctor into her room. Shouldn’t she have been enough to help heal her love’s mind? Wasn’t a rousing speech, a declaration of eternal love and maybe a quick meld from a loving Asari enough to fix all these problems? It seemed to work in all the vids.

No, of course not.

No species was immune to the harsh reality of such situations, and all of them had developed ways to care for those who suffered. Liara had to remind herself to treat this like any other medical concern for Shepard. All these dark thoughts weren’t her, they were just echoes and shadow, manifestations of the scars the Reapers left on Jane’s mind.

If Liara hadn’t found the Reapers abhorrent before, she hated them even more now. How many others besides Jane would need lifelong care because of the mental scars they left behind? How many uncounted trillions needed the same all through galactic history?

This new Doctor would help, Doctor Chakwas had personally vouched for him. He’d find a way to bring Jane back from the edge and Liara would pull her back the rest of the way. It was the only possible solution to this.

Four paces away from the door. Four paces back. The Krogan guards didn’t move their heads to watch, but she knew they kept their eyes on her. They guarded her just as much as they guarded Shepard. To do anything else would likely incur the wrath of not only their clan leader, but their human battlemaster. A fate none of them wished to experience. However, as the seconds dragged on in their endless march, she wished they did more than just act like furniture. She needed some kind of distraction!

A husk, crawling out of the ground, intent on murdering everyone in the hospital, would have been perfect.

During the war, she’d visualize such attacks on a daily basis, even when locked in her quarters, commanding agents and operatives. Shepard often needed her expertise or biotics in the field, so she needed to keep her abilities honed. Sometimes, Shepard would catch Liara mock-aiming her gun at various objects in her quarters, “shooting” at the “reapers” while pretending to practice her combat skills. Her reactions to said discoveries had always put a smile on both of their faces, so she made sure to “practice” more often than she should have.

“How is she?” Doctor Nicolo appeared behind Liara as if by magic, almost causing her to jump into the few remaining ceiling tiles.

He blushed as she turned around. “Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s quite all right.” Liara said as she tried to regain her dignity. “My mind was… elsewhere.”

“I imagine. It can’t be easy standing out here with all that’s going on.” Nicolo adjusted his jacket.
“It isn’t. But I know she needs this. Even though I wish she didn’t.” Her words came out flat, toneless.

“Sometimes matters such as this can affect loved ones just as much as the victims. All you can do is keep supporting them.”

“Yes. You were present when Doctor Chakwas gave me a similar speech, you don’t need to re-tread on that territory, Doctor.” Liara turned an eye to him.

“All right, point taken.” David Nicolo grinned. “How about I escort you out of here for a little while? I’ve heard one of the food trucks is serving excellent re-heated emergency rations.”

Liara’s gaze turned back to the door. “How long will they be in there?”

“As long as it takes. And besides, you should take care of your own needs while we help with this. When was the last time you actually left this building?”

Liara hadn’t so much as seen the front door since she walked in and reunited with Shepard. “A while.”

“Come on.” Nicolo said, extending his elbow for her to hold on to. “Let’s take a walk. And we can pretend that the food they’re serving out there isn’t the exact same as we’re eating in here.”

“Why would we do that?”

“Remind me to tell you all the human stereotypes about hospital food while we walk.” Nicolo said with a grin.

***

The world outside the hospital felt busier than it looked from Shepard’s window. Seeing the crowds living, working, and surviving on the ruined streets of London reminded her of the Citadel in a way. True, there were no garish advertisements, fleets of skycars overhead or news reports blaring at high volume, but the city still felt alive. These people had survived the greatest disaster in history and they knew it. And the humans celebrated this new chance at life by, well, living. The sun shone overhead, the sky remained mostly free of smoke and things seemed hopeful. If the buildings hadn’t all been shattered ruins and the corpses of several dead reapers in the distance hadn’t overshadowed them all, Liara would have assumed this was normal for Earth.

Sometimes, when looking at those gigantic mechanical corpses or into broken alleyways, Liara’s muscles would tense, still expecting a Reaper ambush or other horrible “surprise” from the war. Nicolo had to repeatedly assure her that no such threats remained. Shepard’s actions had destroyed everything, not just the huge capital ships or their “small” destroyer cousins. All synthetics, from the massive brutes to the husks, even the “helpful” Geth that nobody had really ever trusted, had been destroyed.

Liara did think it strange that she saw none of the Geth fleet that followed the galaxy’s armada to Earth, but had assumed they left on their own following the battle, not needing food or water on their long return trip to Rannoch. Perhaps only those Geth Shepard called “heretics” had been killed by the crucible. She’d confirm this when she returned to her console on the Normandy.
Though she tried to not think about it, seeing the ruins all around her made Liara imagine her home. The last time she saw Thessia, the Reapers had just arrived in force and started slaughtering Asari en masse. She remembered keeping her radio open to all Asari frequencies, listening to them get snuffed out one by one until the entire planet went silent. The only thing that kept her even remotely sane that day had been Shepard, saying just the right things to get her back on her feet and working to preserve her entire race from the menace of the Reapers.

Why didn’t she have that skill? Tali had said it best just before they left that unknown world: Shepard always knew exactly what to say. Even when things looked hopeless or her bondmated Asari stood on the verge of completely breaking down, she knew the exact words to fix it all.

There were no words for Shepard. None that Liara could think of, anyway.

Nicolo escorted her through the human crowds until they found one of the lines waiting for food. Several children milled about, laughing and playing in the rubble as if they had done so all their lives. She noticed most of them had toy weapons in various states of disrepair, acting out the battles she had experienced first-hand not very long ago.

“How is your back doing?” Nicolo asked, again shaking Liara from her reverie.

“It’s fine, Doctor. Just a little sore, but nothing I can’t manage on my own.”

“Are you sure you don’t need any more pain medication? I saw what she did to you during… well, when she woke up.”

“I said I am fine, Doctor. Thank you for your concern, but I’ve managed worse injuries on my own.”

Nicolo shuffled forward with the line. “Yeah, I’ve been reading about some of your exploits on what databases I can get my hands on. You never know how much you miss the extranet until it gets cut off. I remember reading something about you being an archaeologist?”

Liara shrugged. She knew most every database in the galaxy would be lacking in detail about her, just her school records and list of published journals. It all seemed so petty now, an entirely different life. “That’s correct.”

“Must have been exciting to be able to go to different planets and dig for things. All the really exciting Earth archaeology’s been dug up already. Well, the stuff I used to be interested in, anyway. But to go to an entire new planet all on your own and just… dig.” Nicolo had a spark in his eye not unlike a child explaining their dreams to an adult. Had this doctor at one time wanted to follow her old career path?

“Archaeology is much more than just finding a place to dig and moving soil. And I was very rarely alone on an entire planet. I spent most of my time on already settled worlds just going over things other archaeologists had worked on for centuries, trying to find microscopic clues in the middle of sites the size of cities.”

A few of the children playing war ran between Nicolo and Liara, disrupting the line only for a moment.

“I remember reading something about you not being very popular among your people for some reason. Did you have any strange theories or anything? I’m just asking because I used to watch vids with my brother all the time and he’d watch this one about an archaeologist who had crazy theories about one of our ancient cultures, but he was right all along and helped save everyone from ancient aliens.”
His enthusiasm for the subject almost looked endearing to Liara. If she hadn’t lived these past few years and instead remained the sheltered young scholar of her youth, she would have engaged this conversation for hours. Instead, she had other concerns on her mind. She condensed her thoughts into a few sentences.

“My unpopularity was due to my youth, not wild theories about ancient cultures. And I’ve seen a few of those vids with Shep. Your culture has an absurdly large amount of stories concerning other species coming to kill you.”

“I actually took a class about that while attending university,” Nicolo smiled as he shuffled forward again. “I remember one discussion talking about aliens representing our fear of the unknown, or paranoia of not being masters of our own domain. Or something like that. It’s been a few years and one too many wars to remember it all.”

The line shuffled forward again. This time, the smell of cooking wafted over a gentle breeze. Liara had no idea exactly what sizzled on the kitchen’s large heating elements, but it did not smell unpleasant or completely alien to her. She recognized the aroma of a few Earth spices and flavorings from her time on the Normandy, though she did not know their names.

Nicolo kept silent as they approached the person handing out the meals. A young woman still in her teenage years handed people small trays of warm food with a smile and a wave. Behind her, a large and unusually hairy man stood over the huge cooking surfaces, singing songs in heavily accented English that Liara’s translator had trouble making sense of.

To her relief, Nicolo took the lead as their turn came up. He flashed his hospital badge to her, hanging under one of his pockets. “I’ll need one extra, a little something special for one of my patients.”

Unfortunately, the girl looked at him confused. “Sorry, mister, but only one per person. That’s the rule.”

“But I’m a doctor, you see. I’d really like to bring one back to the hospital.”

“You and about a thousand other people are doctors today. Yesterday, everyone claimed to be an Alliance officer to try and get more.”

“Hold on, we can work this out.” Nicolo stepped forward and put his hands on the table full of trays.

“This man bothering you, love?” The hairy cook had moved away from the stoves and towered over the crowd. His glare, pointed at Nicolo, rivaled Shep’s in ferocity. “We’ve had four people today try to steal more than their share. I should let you know that I defended my daughter here from the Reapers while the Alliance did nothing but run around the planet scared. So if you think you can force her to—”

“Gentlemen.” Liara said, once again bringing her calm but commanding presence forward. “If I may, the Doctor here is telling the truth. The extra meal is for Commander Shep, who is recovering in that hospital over there.” She pointed to the building. To Liara’s relief, both father and daughter followed her pointing with reverence and awe.

“THE Shep?” The girl asked, her face suddenly lit up. “You know her?”

“Well, yes. I do. We both do.” Liara said, trying not to blush at the sudden hero worship.

“Dad, we HAVE to give something to Commander Shep!”
The father looked a little less impressed, but also less angry. “Well I guess I can’t argue with Shepard. Even if she’s just another one of those Alliance types.”

“Don’t mind my dad, he’s just jealous Shepard saved the galaxy and not him.” The daughter said to her.

Liara expected another outburst or another swing toward the rage the father had shown Nicolo. Instead, he started laughing. A loud, booming guffaw that almost shook the ground as much as Wrex’s footsteps. She would never truly understand humans.

“Only because I had to save you, girl. Only because of you.”

Nicolo laughed politely and took three of the cooked meals and handed two to Liara.
Chapter 21

Doctor Nicolo had left Liara alone after they returned to the building, citing his desire to see if the hospital database had any of the vids he mentioned on file. While she had enjoyed their brief talk of such things, she preferred the solitary walk back to Shepard’s room. The Krogan guards remained perfectly still as she passed, but she knew they followed the trays in her hands with hungry eyes.

Another human doctor exited Shepard’s room only a few seconds after she arrived with the tray. He walked out looking tired and disheveled, like most of the medical staff, though he carried himself with an air of pride. He stood a little shorter than Liara and had a head covered in short gray hair, but otherwise no other outstanding features. Unlike Nicolo’s ever-present white coat, this new doctor just wore casual Earth clothing. The badge on his shirt and paper chart in his hand were the only indicators of his status as a medical professional.

“Liara T’soni?” He said, extending his free hand out in greeting. Fortunately, he saw her food trays at the last moment and pulled back. “Doctor Eriks. I’ve been told you’re her partner?”

“Yes.” She replied.

“Good, I was hoping to catch you.” He paused and looked down at his handwritten notes, “I can tell you that our talk went well, but we’ll definitely need further appointments. She says she wants to work out a schedule with you before getting back to me.”

“I see.” A sliver of suspicion slid by her words. Her eyes darted to the chart in his hands. Had she been on the Normandy, she would have immediately ordered the agent in this building to get her a copy of those notes.

“Well, unless you have any questions, I should get to my other patients.” Eriks said after a brief silence.

“No, no questions. Thank you for seeing her, Doctor.”

“No problem at all, Miss T’soni. It’s not every day you get to talk to a legend.” He said with a perfect mix of humor and politeness.

“Doctor T’soni.” She corrected, though with the same mix.

“Forgive me, Doctor. I had no idea.” He smiled and walked away. Again, a small bit of suspicion hung over her. What else had Shepard failed to mention?

“What you got there?” Shepard asked as Liara entered the room. She could tell her bondmate tried to focus on the trays, but any details eluded her. Her face showed no signs of any significant emotional change, but then Jane Shepard usually remained stoic in the face of strange people and food.

“I visited a local kitchen while you talked. I figured you would like to eat something other than Alliance emergency rations.”

Shepard took in a long breath with her nose. “Smells like rations to me.”

“The important thing is that they are not cold for once. Well… they’re slightly above room temperature.” She looked around the room for a place to set the trays down, but nothing flat stood close enough to the bed.
“Here, put them here.” Shepard groaned as she slid a little bit away from Liara, creating some room on the bed. The Asari obliged, though she hated to see Shepard in a slightly uncomfortable position.

“So all I can see is a brown mess on top of a white square. What did you get for us?”

“I believe the cook mixed several different things together to make something resembling an Earth meal. My translator didn’t quite pick up his words.”

“What did it sound like?”

“I believe the closest translation would be ‘Shut up and eat it’. Does that sound familiar?”

Shepard laughed before a small fit of coughs interrupted her. “You happen to bring any forks?”

“I, um. No.” Liara felt her cheeks light up with embarrassment over the question. How could she forget utensils? “Let me go out and see if I can find some.”

“Don’t take too long. I could pass out from starvation at any moment.” Shepard teased.

The instant Liara opened the door she saw the face of Doctor Nicolo. “You forgot these.” He said with a smile and two disposable forks in hand.

“Thank you.” Liara said, trying to close the door at the same time she took the utensils. “We’d like to enjoy our meal in peace, Doctor.”

Nicolo nodded his head. “Of course, but if I could get just a few seconds with Shepard before you eat, please?”

Liara eyed him, but did not stand in his way. “Just be quick.”

“Doc.” Shepard said as he walked in.

Nicolo walked straight to Shepard’s chart before speaking to her. “Are you in any pain, Commander? I understand that Miranda woman has you straining your back before it’s fully healed and other such nonsense.”

“Nothing I can’t handle.” She replied with confidence.

“Good. I’d still like to slightly increase the dosage of your painkiller, though. Just in case she wants to repeat her little exam, you know?”

Shepard’s face contorted as she pondered, but she eventually muttered. “Agreed.”

“Excellent.” Nicolo moved to the IV and fiddled with it for a few seconds. “Let me know if she comes back and you feel any discomfort, Commander. I mean it. I may not be your primary physician, but I’d still like to think I have a hand in getting you back to one hundred percent.”

“Will do.” Shepard waved him off.

Just as quickly as he appeared, Nicolo left, leaving Liara and Shepard alone. But now with utensils.

“I was only half joking, Liara. I’m starving.” Shepard said as soon as the door closed. Liara grinned as she handed Shepard the fork, which she took in her left hand without a moment’s hesitation.

To her surprise, Shepard repositioned herself yet again, pulling her body into a slightly more upright position with only a few audible hints as to the discomfort.
“Are you sure that’s wise?”

“Hey, Doc just dosed me with more drugs, might as well take advantage of it.”

“If you say so.” Liara placed one of the trays on Shepard’s legs and watched as she awkwardly balanced it while at the same time stabbing with her left hand.

“This reminds me of some of our times back on the first Normandy.” Shepard said after a particularly large mouthful. “Especially those nights you’d sneak out of medbay and I’d leave my quarters unlocked.”

Liara couldn’t help but grin and blush. Not only because of the pleasant memories she recalled, but just hearing Shepard say such things after her ordeal raised her hopes.

“Yes, we’d stumble into the galley between shift changes, grab anything we could take without anyone noticing and rush back to your bed.”

Shepard laughed again. “Remember when I grabbed some of Kaidan’s energy bars because it was literally the only container not locked? Those tasted god awful.”

“He swore he’d kill whoever stole those.”

They both smiled and returned to their food for a moment. Then Shepard cleared her throat.

“So, after you became Shadow Broker, did you ever get your hands on my private Alliance medical records?”

Liara nearly choked on her mouthful of food. A new wave of embarrassment, humor and shame spiraled in her head, causing her cheeks to flush darker than they ever had before.

Shepard’s grin widened. “Your silence tells me that answer is ‘yes’.”

It took far too long for Liara to regain the ability to speak. “That was- I was- You… I needed to see… Doctor Chakwas told you, didn’t she?”

“She even did an impression of you. It wasn’t bad, though she could work on the accent a bit more.”

“Oh Goddess, I am never going to hear the end of this.” She said with mock resignation.

Indeed, Shepard did not let up. “So, was I right? You got the files?”

No point in lying about it, especially if Chakwas had breached her trust in such a terrifying way. “Yes, if you must know.”

“All those scans and charts of me. All those… pictures… of me.”

Her food forgotten, Liara turned to face her bondmate, whose lopsided grin looked exactly like she remembered and loved.

“It was purely for research. I wanted to corroborate files and confirm some suspicions.”

“You’re a terrible liar, T’soni.”

“Some might disagree with that.” She slid closer to Shepard. Perhaps if she truly felt better, she could defuse this situation another way...
“Uh-uh, you’re not getting off the hook that easy.” Jane paused. “So how many times?”

“How many times what?”

“Did you… you know…”

Liara stood at full height and put her hand on her forehead. “I cannot believe we’re having this conversation while eating.”

“Hey, you’re the one who wanted to look at pictures of me before we’d even committed to anything. I remained respectful the entire time.”

Liara fired back. “So all those extranet searches you did with the prefix ‘Asari’ were purely academic?”

“How did you…” Shepard groaned. “Shadow Broker.”

“Almost three hundred different searches in the span of six weeks in the year 2183, all with at least one visit to extranet sites known to verify age and sometimes bank information before accessing.”

“Well, not ALL of them were porn. And wait… you counted every single one?” Shepard’s grin had rapidly deflated. Liara’s grew. Finding those two year old searches had taken quite a bit of digging after she took over as Shadow Broker, but it had been a worth it just for this reaction.

“I wouldn’t be a good information broker if I let small details like that slide.”

“So. I guess we both have dirt on each other.”

“I guess we do.” Liara slunk back to her tray. The two of them finished their meal in happy silence before Liara spoke again. “So how did it go?”

“How did what go?” Shepard pushed the tray off her legs and settled back down.

“You know what I mean.”

Any mirth or joy that had built up over the last several minutes evaporated in the span of a single heartbeat.

“You know, I’d rather not talk about it.”

“I thought if you just—“

“Liara, you really should stop. I don’t want to talk about it.”

Liara pulled back. She knew she had made a mistake the instant the words left her throat. She should have chosen her words more carefully, or waited for Shepard to bring it up first, not force the issue. Goddess, sometimes she was just as naïve as she had been three years ago.

“I understand.” She said. She placed a comforting hand on Shepard’s shoulder. She could feel her bondmate’s toned muscle tense under the contact, but it relaxed a moment later. “I won’t pry if you don’t want me to.”

“I really don’t.” Shepard turned her head away.
A week of drudgery came and went. Meetings and appointments with Miranda, Nicolo and Eriks blended together into a colorless swirl for Shepard. One minute, she talked at great length about how she felt about things, then another she’d be sitting upright and trying not to scream her guts out as the wrenching agony in her back got worse. Then, of course, she’d fall back into a blissful cloud of numbness as painkillers and medi-gel worked their magic. Her long talks with Liara well into the night had also become part of the haze, even if she enjoyed them. She couldn't tell if the numbing drugs or her mind had begun to turn life into this unpleasant pattern, but she also didn't really care to find out.

The only thing that snapped her out of the endless cycle of blurry faces, pain and tedium had been the day she got most of the bandages removed. The nurses that came in to do the procedure had been kind and professional, chatting to each other and her like she was a normal human being, not an invalid patient or lump of flesh to analyze. There had been an unexpected amount of pain when they uncovered her chest. Shepard didn’t know if her ribs were still broken or if they just remained tender after medi-gel treatments, but as the nurses’ hands worked around her torso, she had to fight to stay calm and in control. But, in the end, the feeling of freedom from the itchy cloth had been well worth the torment.

They ignored the bandages that encased lump of skin and bone that used to be her right arm, citing Doctor Nicolo’s orders to keep it clean and sealed. He still seemed worried about any residual damage from the malfunctioning implants. And much to Shepard’s disappointment, Miranda agreed. That part of her body remained in a constant state of itchy discomfort.

Liara entered the room a heartbeat after the nurses left, brightening the place even as the sky outside grew a little darker. She then spent several long seconds looking over Shepard’s bare limbs, and even though she couldn’t see her bondmate in detail, Shepard could guess the expression Liara had on her blue face. A small blush colored her freckled cheeks.

“You’ve never looked better.”

“I didn’t know you were so vain, Liara.”

“Of course I am. The Shadow Broker only accepts the best.” She teased back.

A little thought squirmed past Shepard’s defenses as she processed the compliment: *Liara only likes the Prothean data in your head, nothing more. There’s no way she looks at you that way. She’s just trying to make you feel better.*

Naturally, her answer to such a little annoyance had been just remembering all the times Liara had physically proven such thoughts wrong. It shut the voice up. For now.

“You sure you don’t miss the hair?” Shepard ran her palm over her scalp. Her hair never grew very fast, but she could tell it had begun an earnest resurgence. Finding out she had been shaved to facilitate emergency brain surgery hadn’t been nearly as bad as her… other major discovery. In fact,
she had already awoken bald once before. A prank taken a little too far during basic ended up with several female recruits walking tall, proud and bald for several weeks, Shepard being the leader of said group.

She had come to appreciate the lack of hair back then, just as she did now. It felt like heaven not needing to spend all that time washing and brushing it. And not having to deal with Liara pulling it out every time her fingers got caught in a tangle. Still, she planned on letting it grow back to the way it used to be. If, for any other reason, to keep comparisons to Jack at a minimum.

“I have learned very recently that human hair grows back, Shepard. I only need to wait for yours to regrow and I’ll have the full package again.”

“Wait, how recently?”

Liara hesitated. “A few days ago.”

Shepard smiled again. “I keep forgetting the Shadow Broker, badass holder of all the galaxy’s secrets, is still just a sheltered young Asari.” She pushed herself up to a sitting position. The effort hurt, but she needed the extra reach to be able to put a hand on Liara’s cheek.

“Well, if you could keep that a secret, I would appreciate it.” Liara returned the gesture.

But before they could say anything more, someone knocked on the door.

“Commander, are you decent? It’s Kaidan.”

Shepard and Liara separated before they both turned to the door. “Come in, Kaidan.”

Shepard watched the blurry form of Kaidan Alenko walk into the room. She couldn’t register any details, but she could tell, just from knowing him, that he kept his uniform well maintained even in the post-apocalyptic conditions they lived in. She also guessed his expression looked as it always did: calm and stoic.

He stopped a few feet from the bed and formally saluted her, a motion she had been rather unprepared for. “Good afternoon, Ma’am.” He said.

“Kaidan, you really don’t have to do that.” Shepard said, trying to wave him down with her remaining hand.

It took an eternity for Kaidan to lower his salute. “Sorry, but I do. You’ll just have to get used to it.”

She watched Kaidan’s blurry form close the distance to the bed. Liara moved out of the way, temporarily melding the blue blob of her face with the blue mass of his uniform.

“I, uh, heard you had the bandages removed.”

“Yes. Got tired of playing mummy. the Krogan outside get too scared.” During the war, Shepard managed to lock any dark thoughts away when she talked to her crew. It had become second nature to bring this side of herself out, just so they didn’t see how much of a toll the constant fighting and death had taken on her. Eriks said she should stop doing that, but old habits...

If Kaidan smiled, she couldn’t see it. “I imagine so. Anyway, I was wondering if you felt like getting out of here for a while.”

“Why?”
“Well, we’ve done a lot of cleaning up around London Headquarters. There’s not much left, but a lot of the rubble has been dealt with. A lot of people in the Alliance want to use this opportunity to hold a memorial for those we lost. Especially Admiral Anderson.” His voice broke a little bit. “The things people who were stuck here during the war say about him… You wouldn’t believe some of the stuff he did to keep them motivated. And I figured, as some of the few remaining people who served with him, well, you’d want to attend. It's going to start in a few hours, so there's time to get ready.”

A thousand different emotions and memories hit Shepard all at once. In that moment, she no longer sat in a hospital bed with no hair, blurry eyes and just one arm. Instead, she saw herself standing on the CIC of the original Normandy, listening to Anderson as he listed off all the new and impressive things the ship could do. He had been so vibrant then, unaware of the years he’d spend standing in front of the council, then kicked into the dust by the Reapers and then killed by her own gun. She pulled the trigger that ended his life. Even if the Illusive Man had taken control of her muscles thanks to all that Reaper tech infesting his body.

“Shepard? Commander?” Kaidan snapped her back to reality with a friendly wave of his hand. Shepard blinked the memory away as hard as she could.

“Yes, Kaidan. He does deserve to be remembered. He deserves much more than that.”

She retreated back to memory, to her last waking moments on the Citadel. She remembered every agonizing moment as she sat next to Anderson, the breathtaking vista of Earth unfolding below them. She remembered the searing agony of the bullets still in her body, the blood pooling around her stomach and the crushing realization that neither of them would leave the station alive. She forced herself to relive those last few moments with him, watching him struggle to take in one last, pained breath before he slipped away forever. Her fault.

“Agreed.” Kaidan said, again shaking her back into the real world. “I don’t think your doctors would have a problem with us wheeling you out for a few minutes.”

“Wheeling her out where?” Miranda strode in, though Shepard could not see her behind Kaidan and Liara.

“Oh, Miranda.” Alenko turned, “The Alliance is going to hold a memorial for Admiral Anderson-“

“And you wanted her to attend.” Lawson didn’t sound angry or upset as she interrupted, just very matter-of-fact.

“A lot of people expect it.”

Miranda stood still, obviously deep in thought. “If Shepard wishes to go, and she thinks she can handle remaining upright in a wheelchair, I don’t see why she can’t make a brief appearance. But not for the entire ceremony, and certainly not in front of the press or whoever else would want to keep her for hours.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking.” Kaidan muttered. “She’d be in the middle of a media circus the instant a camera spots her.”

"I expect the Alliance would descend like a pack of dogs if they caught her outside this building as well. You’d do well to just let her view from a distance, pay her respects in her own way, then bring her back here.” Miranda pushed past Liara and confronted Kaidan.

"It's not really your decision to make."

“You know, I’m right here. You can actually talk to me about this.” Shepard waved her hand to
remind everyone of her presence.

“Of course, Commander.” Miranda said, a tone of embarrassed defeat coming with her words. “I’m just making sure the Major knows exactly what I expect from everyone if you decide you wish to do this.”

“Why wouldn’t I go?”

“Shepard, are you sure?” Liara had taken a place beside Miranda and Kaidan. “You shouldn’t exert yourself.”

“It doesn’t matter. I need to be there.”

Kaidan shuffled a few inches away from Miranda and turned toward the bed. "Well then, we should look for a way to get you out of this and into a chair."

"Can't I just walk?" Shepard kicked her legs. Truth be told, spending every waking hour in a lying or sitting position had not only turned her days into mush, it had begun to make her legs ache. A lifetime of constant moving, fighting and training had made this sudden shift to nothing almost painful in its own right.

"Not yet, Commander," Miranda butted in. "I don't want any stress on your backbone or muscles just yet. There's still too much tearing and too much risk of everything falling apart. You'll walk, but when you're ready."

"What if I say I'm ready now?"

"I'll say you're lying and then I'll remind you I know what I'm talking about." "You win this round, Lawson." Shepard narrowed her eyes. She hoped she looked in the right direction.

"I always do. Now, if Major Alenko will go find a suitable means of transporting you, Liara and I can discuss how to get you into it." Miranda nodded to Kaidan, who mumbled something in agreement and left the room.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the clunky writing in this one. Unlike my real projects, I'm doing this freeform with no solid plan or outline. (I also get to apologize for bad writing here instead of trying to pass it off to the reader as some kind of master plan!) I hadn't really considered adding a Wrex cameo until I figured "why not". Wrex is great, it would be criminal to not include him. Of course, said cameo then screwed everything up and I feel the last few chapters have lost focus upon another read-through.

Anyway, next chapter will return things to their Shepard-tormenting form.
“I managed to find one.” Kaidan called from outside the door. A moment later, he pushed in a wheelchair that resembled a collection of dents and rust more than it did a medical aid. One of its wheels squeaked a little with every rotation and the whole thing rattled as it moved, but it would serve their purpose.

“A soldier on the ground floor found it in the rubble nearby. When he heard it was for you, he said to take it for as long as you need.” He moved it close to the bed so Shepard could reach out and feel it. Solid and light, even with the damage it sustained. And the back cushion still felt warm from the person who had just occupied it.

“Let’s just make sure we get it back to him.” Shepard gritted her teeth as she pulled herself to the edge of the bed. As she moved herself with her left hand, her back exploded into a level of wrenching, tearing agony as she slid away from the pillow. It felt as if a husk had latched onto her, but instead of clawing and tearing at her face and shoulder, its metallic fingers dug into every single one of her back muscles and pulled them out one by one.

She did her best not to scream, but it became more and more difficult as the seconds ticked by without support from a cushion or even a friendly hand. Her fingertips dug into the thin cloth of her hospital gown, cutting into her left leg and drawing blood. Breathing became more difficult as the invisible husk starting tearing into her taxed lungs.

“Are you sure about this?” Liara asked for the sixth time since Kaidan left to find the damn chair.

“Just do it, Liara.” Shepard took in a deep breath and held it as her bondmate moved behind the wheelchair and summoned a biotic field. She felt the energy wrap around her like a warm embrace, finding places to hold and support her body without hurting her. It tingled and it hurt just a little bit, like touching a metal orb charged with static electricity, but all over her body. Had this been any other circumstance, she would have called the feeling pleasant.

Until she felt herself lifted a mere inch off the bed. Shepard’s sudden agonized scream caused Kaidan to recoil and the Krogan outside to jump and ready their weapons. Liara nearly dropped the field, but managed to hold it and Shepard in place.

The pain in her back had exploded into a firestorm, causing her already blurred vision to go dark and her left arm to seize into an ugly, clawed position. She could feel her right limb convulsing, almost tearing itself out of its socket as it too tried to react. Her toes curled and uncurled as electric torrents of anguish arced over her body. She swore she felt one of her little toes crack under her muscle’s involuntary and over-charged spasms, but that pain barely registered against all others.

“I need to put you down!” Liara shouted.

“NO! KEEP GOING!” Shepard didn’t mean to shout, but she had no other way of communicating as her entire world became a dark abyss of broken nerves, shredded muscles and a heart beating out of control. She would endure this because she had to. She owed this to Anderson. She needed this.

You should have died and he should have lived. He’s the real hero. He kept those people on Earth alive while you ran away. You don’t just need this, you DESERVE this. You need to feel every moment of this a thousand times more. You killed him.

You killed him!
“Jane!” Liara broke through the darkness, her blue hands warm and sweet against Jane’s clammy skin.

The world returned to Shepard’s blurred eyes. Kaidan and Liara hovered around her, kneeling to meet her eye level. While Liara held her cheeks, Kaidan had a supportive hand on her left shoulder, keeping her up as her body threatened to slump forward. Her mouth hung open just a little, though she didn’t think she had suffered the indignity of drooling over herself in the moment of blackout.

It took a few seconds for Shepard to realize she now sat in the chair, her back supported by the soft cushion behind her. Kaidan had his other hand on the IV stand, keeping it close to the chair so the constant drip of Nicolo’s drugs did their work. Her entire body curled as if lit aflame, consumed by the agony that throbbed and oozed from her back.

“This was a mistake.” Liara said, standing up, “I’m going to put her back.”

“No.” Shepard managed to growl. Huge drops of sweat shook off her forehead as she fought against the tide of nausea that always followed such powerful and painful convulsing. “I’m going.”

“Shepard, I shouldn’t have asked this of you.” Kaidan turned around, about to return the IV stand to the bedside. Shepard lashed out and grabbed a handful of his uniform jacket.

“No. I’m going.” She growled again, this time with a ferocity she didn’t know she had. The pain had already begun to subside, though not nearly as much as she wished. For the first time in weeks, she wished Nicolo would appear from thin air and mess with the IV again. Shepard inhaled and sat up straight, letting a groan escape her lips as she felt the weight of her upper body push down. The chair did much to alleviate the discomfort, but not everything.

Kaidan paced in front of her now-worse eyesight.

“Kaidan, we’re going. Find me a set of dress blues. Liara will take me to HQ.”

She could see Liara and Kaidan exchange looks, but neither of them said anything to deny her. She knew they could. All Liara had to do was invoke her worries and privileges. Kaidan would just need to call Miranda or Nicolo and this entire exercise in torture would have been for nothing. Kaidan paced for a second longer before saluting and exiting the room.

Liara bent down again, this time putting her hand on Shepard’s forehead. “You feel ice cold, Shepard. I think you’re about to faint.”

“I think I already fainted.” Shepard slurred through each excruciating heartbeat. “I’ll be fine, Liara. I have you with me.” She reached out and put her hand on Liara’s crest. Even in a world full of grey monotony, she loved when her bondmate let her do so. In this one particular case, the fact she couldn’t see Liara’s head very well let her concentrate on the feeling of Liara’s skin. Not human, but subtle and sublime in its difference. Liara had almost invisible bumps and grooves on her crest that were unique to her, like a fingerprint. Shepard vowed to learn them by heart.

But not today.

“I’ll always be with you.” Shepard could tell Liara smiled as she gently took Jane’s hand from her crest and placed it on the IV stand for her to hold onto as they moved. “Let’s get moving.”

The hallway outside the room looked exactly like Shepard imagined it would. Hospital-white with just a hint of ruin and decay splashed on. Wrex’s Krogan stood where they always did, silent and
immobile as statues. One of the wheelchair’s wheels emitted a tiny squeak every time it finished a rotation, adding the only sound to the echoing hall. She liked to imagine the sound would be painful to sensitive Krogan ears. Not out of malice or hatred of the guards, but just because she thought it would be funny if such a small sound bugged them. The momentary distraction helped keep her mind away from her back.

“Don’t worry, boys. I’ll be under full Alliance guard the whole time. Why don’t you get some rest?”

They didn’t respond. But as Liara pushed the chair further down the hall, Shepard could hear them turning all at once like giant machines. Their heavy footsteps shook the floor as they took two marching paces forward. Liara stopped the chair and they stopped. Unfortunately, the sudden deceleration made it impossible to ignore a new flare of torment in her backbone.

“No seriously, guys. This is an Alliance thing. I know you’re under orders from your clan leader, but let your battlemaster have this. I owe it to someone to see this through.” It felt awkward to talk over her shoulder, but she didn’t dare turn her neck.

The Krogan did not flinch.

“Fine. Stand down and wait for my return. That’s an order. Got it?” Adding the familiar fire to her voice hurt her throat and caused her to cough, but she prayed the Krogan got the message. To her relief, the sounds of heavy footfalls did not follow them as Liara resumed her trek through the hospital.

They journeyed through rooms Shepard guessed used to be wards or recovery rooms, though her bad vision left much to the imagination. They could have been office blocks or even storage for all she knew.

“How many floors up are we? I heard Kaidan said he found this chair downstairs.”

“Just the second. The bottom floor sustained the least damage, so most of the patients are there in big rooms. You’re lucky enough to be the only patient in the entire city to have a room all to herself.” Liara spoke with a casual tone, even as they passed empty room after empty room. It got creepier the further they went. Fewer and fewer lamps and emergency lights kept these dark recesses lit, giving everything deep dark shadows.

“They sure know how to make a girl feel special. But shouldn’t we be heading for some stairs or something?”

“After your reaction to me lifting you a few inches, we’re not taking any chances, Shepard. I’ve got the full layout of this place memorized and there is a ramp between floors just ahead.”

Shepard let a momentary smirk cross her lips. “Have you really been so bored you committed a hospital floor plan to memory?”

“It could be information that saves our lives. What if the building collapses or someone comes to attack? I know several ways out.” Liara paused. “But yes, I also got very bored.”

Shepard shifted a little in the seat. It hurt enough to make her grab her knee until the pain and nausea subsided. “Sorry if I get boring from time to time.”

The familiar electric tingle of a biotic field arced against Shepard’s arm, but it did not wrap around her body. Instead, she saw the blue glow of Liara’s biotics encase the wheelchair itself. “You are never boring, Shepard. Your sleeping habits, on the other hand…” Liara pushed the chair and IV stand with her mind as she walked to Shepard’s left side and took her hand.
They continued down the ever darker second floor until they reached the ramp. Shepard could only see shadows pierced by a few tiny lights, likely set up by someone just for this journey. Kaidan, probably.

“So, a dark creepy wheelchair ramp between floors. This is different.”

“Not just wheelchairs. After a species discovers practical uses for mass effect fields, they tend to lift most heavy machinery and bulky items with them and send them up ramps designed to make floor transitions easy but not power consuming. Much faster than waiting for elevators all the time.”

“And I thought memorizing a floor plan was boring. Any other facts about this ramp I should know about?”

“I could push you down and you’d reach a very unsafe speed before hitting the wall.”

Shepard grinned. “You wouldn’t.”

The biotic field surrounding the chair faltered for a second. “I might.”

“As soon as my back is fixed, we’re doing this.” Shepard said as she felt the biotic field grow in strength and gently push her down the ramp.

At the bottom, the huge windows of the bottom floor showed an impressive panorama of the city outside. Shepard felt glad she couldn’t see the grey and black blurs with clarity. She pretended the city remained whole and vibrant, just a little darker than it should have been. She told herself there were no holes in the ground, no Reaper corpses in the distance, nothing terrible.

She also pretended the thick clouds that had already begun to pour a light drizzle of rain on the streets was nothing more than a pleasant summer shower, not the residual effect of all the smoke and dust thrown into the air by the Reapers and the war.

Just London, Anderson’s birthplace, sat in front of her.

_You killed him!_
Chapter 24

Grey. Colorless. Flat and dull.

Shepard’s world, both inside her head and all around her, had become grey, colorless, flat and dull. Buildings in various state of ruin all looked the same to her blurred gaze, blending together into dark expanses that shared no difference from the grey sky, the grey ground or the grey rain that fell on it all.

It started the instant they left the hospital, as if it had been waiting just for her to exit the building. The city had been bone dry as she met Kaidan, James, Traynor and Doctor Chakwas at the door, all of them in their full dress blues. Kaidan, in an unusually contrite tone, apologized for being unable to find a spare uniform for her in time. But knowing how much it hurt for her to adjust in the seat, to say nothing of the contortions she’d need to get dressed, Shepard forgave him and called it a blessing.

Still, as the heavy drops began to pelt the small group as they headed for the Headquarters ruin, Vega had removed his own huge jacket and placed it over Shepard’s shoulders. To her surprise, she detected no funky odors or signs of damage she expected from the enthusiastic soldier. He kept his assigned uniform in excellent shape, even during and after a war.

“If they reprimand me for aiding the woman who saved us all, so be it.” Was all he said on the subject.

Liara continued to push the chair as they proceeded through the miserable grey conditions. The dark color of her shipmate’s uniforms barely contrasted with the world around Shepard, though she still felt comforted by their presence. The few civilians they passed provided brief respites of color against the eternally monochrome world, but as the downpour increased, they all but abandoned the open air and thus her field of vision. A twinge of disappointment struck her as she failed to notice a single bird, dog, cat or even a rat as they journeyed through the ruins. She knew she might not have been able to see them, but there should have been some sign of life beyond the sapient refugees in the city. The fact there were none made the city feel even deader than it already was.

After a few long minutes of marching, Traynor spoke up over the growing sound of the water hitting the ruined buildings around them: “You know, I’ve been reading a lot of weather reports over the last few days.”

“Weather reports?” Vega asked, probably desperate to make any other sound than the sloshing of his boots against ruined pavement. “Nothing else to read until they fix the extranet?”

“The weather is basically all the official channels are talking about. Aside from body counts and relief efforts, of course…” She trailed off for a moment before picking back up. “Anyway, it seems like it’s raining all over the world right now. Dust and smoke in the air is attracting water vapor, making clouds, which keep growing until they burst. It’s probably the same in all the garden worlds right now.”

Kaidan joined the conversation next. “You know, I’ve heard about that. After volcanoes or asteroid impacts, weather can get screwy for a while. It’s like the planet is healing itself, getting rid of all the shit kicked into the air.”

“London got lucky. The rain here is late and a lot weaker than other cities. They’re saying that beam that connects to the Citadel probably does something to keep a lot of particles out of the air. It might
“Yeah, we can stop talking about that.” Shepard spoke up as she forced her mind to think of anything other than what Traynor had just brought up. Her mind echoed with the memories of Hammer’s desperate final push. The sounds of soldiers around her screaming as they died. The acrid smell of burning armor, charred metal and flesh that made her nose hurt and breathing difficult as she ran. And finally, the blinding flash as Harbinger’s beam contacted…

“Sorry, Commander.” Traynor apologized.

Shepard shuffled under Vega’s impossibly large uniform jacket, trying to comfortably rest it on her right shoulder. The motion hurt, but she did her best to ignore it. Her left arm snaked into the left sleeve well enough, though her hand didn’t quite come out the other side. Her bandaged right stump could not move far enough to even begin contacting the right sleeve. In the end, she had to reach around her torso, bunch the jacket at the chest, and shove her residual limb through the huge sleeve. That, too, had been awkward and painful. Fortunately, Liara had not lost control of the IV stand during Shepard’s awkward motions.

She felt like a child wearing an adult’s clothes. Humiliated and completely out of her depth, buried in the huge amount of cloth. But at least it kept the rain off her hospital clothes. The rest of the jacket did an admirable job shielding her legs from the damp conditions, as well as hiding the injuries she had inflicted on herself trying to move past the pain of getting into the chair.

“Should be almost there.” Vega said. Shepard craned her neck to see her crew around her. They had formed something of an escort formation around the chair, with Kaidan and Vega up front, Traynor and Chakwas on her sides. Liara stood behind the chair, pushing with her hands instead of her biotics. James’ torso had been soaked completely, almost turning his black and grey undershirt the same color as the buildings around him. If Shepard unfocused her eyes just enough, she could imagine his entire middle section had gone invisible, leaving a floating head, two arms and unsupported trousers marching alongside his crewmates. Had the situation been any different, she might have laughed.

It had been a very long time since water hit her scalp directly, not since that prank so many years ago. The rain that hit her head felt heavy and cold, almost enough to painfully knock her neck around. The drops felt different from the rain she had experienced growing up. London didn’t sit much further north or south than the city she grew up in, but this rain still felt colder. Meaner. Maybe the difference between European rain and North American truly could be felt and measured. Or maybe she should stop fantasizing and realize this rain had nothing to do with geography and everything to do with the Reapers.

The group stopped on their heels, ending Shepard’s momentary diversion.

“We’re here.” Kaidan said as he stepped aside, allowing Shepard to see a vast expanse of flat blue and black against larger swathes of grey. Dozens, maybe hundreds, of Alliance officers had gathered in the clearing in front of London HQ, standing in perfect formation in the semi-circular area. A collection of multicolored displays stood at the end of the clearing away from the approaching Normandy group. Shepard could not make out exactly what the colors were, but they flickered just enough for her to make a guess.

“Someone must have rigged up a holo-projector.” Traynor confirmed her suspicion. “Looks like a lot of people uploaded photos of those they’ve lost.”

“This display has been active for some time.” A familiar accented voice broke through the silence of the moment. “I see far too many able-bodied humans in this area. They should be focusing their
efforts on rebuilding, not staring at the dead.”

“Javik!” Shepard exclaimed a little louder than she intended.

“Commander.” The Prothean nodded his large head in her direction. His distinctive armor made him easily stand out against the drab darkness of everything around her. Even his four eyes and unique skin provided a splash of color she didn’t know how much she needed to see.

“What are you doing here? I thought you were off doing… stuff.”

“By ‘stuff’, you mean pulling survivors from rubble and educating others on how to survive with limited resources. As well as fighting off animals that try to prey on those who cannot defend themselves.”

Shepard blinked in surprise. “Please don’t tell me you’ve been killing all the cats and dogs.”

“No, I killed only those who are capable of using weapons against their own kind. Those are the animals I speak of.”

“I see.” Shepard should have told him off like she used to, or maybe get to the bottom of his definitions and find out if he really had murdered desperate people or not. But she didn’t. Not enough energy, maybe.

“Do not worry, Commander. I only kill those unwilling to listen to reason.”

“I thought you’d be on board for the strong killing the weak.” Kaidan said, his arms crossed across his chest in his usual ‘slightly annoyed’ pose.

Javik regarded the Major for a long time. “Everyone on this planet is a survivor and a refugee. None here are stronger than any other. Those that now use terror and weapons to prey on those without are no better than Reapers. They must be killed if they do not listen.”

“Harsh, but if it’s life or death…” Vega said.

“Brutal.” Chakwas said, shaking her head. “But until we can establish proper law enforcement, we might see worse in days to come.”

“You will.” Javik said to her.

A hush fell over the crowd and Shepard’s gathered team as the holo-projection changed. The multiple smaller pictures coalesced into a single, much larger image. Shepard didn’t need perfect vision to recognize the face that now hovered in the air above the Alliance crowd.

Even if her eyes saw the projection as a blurry collection of browns over a while background, her mind filled in the details. She recognized Anderson’s every feature, every wrinkle and frown line, every pockmark and scar from a lifetime of service and sacrifice. She could even tell, from the color of the hair atop his unclear head, that the picture had been taken not long before he transferred to the Normandy. Her mind’s eye created the perfect image of David Anderson.

And in her head, he did not look at the camera with pride, nor did he look slightly away to create the image of a portrait. In her head, he stared straight at her.

“Move me closer, Liara.” Shepard ordered. They had stopped a few yards away from the assembly, so Liara pushed the chair until they had almost joined the formation. Almost everyone had their backs turned to her, which she didn’t mind. Miranda and Kaidan’s words about a media circus
descending on her had not gone unheeded. She’d try to remain invisible as long as she could.

Someone near the projector had taken up a microphone and began to speak of Anderson. Someone from the Earth resistance. Shepard couldn’t make out all the words, but she could understand the gist.

“Admiral Anderson became something more during the occupation. He went beyond a soldier and a leader. He had become another symbol for humanity before the end. When we felt like falling, he pulled us back up. When we wanted to lay down and give up, he gave us a reason to stay on our feet. We survived every single day because he just somehow knew where to go and what to do when we got spotted. Some might say he had some kind of divine protection, others might call it decades of experience. Either way, he saved us again and again.

“We’d live for the days we could find a working generator and connect that damn QEC to the Normandy. He’d talk with Shepard for however long he could, then deliver any news in person, and then expect us to do the same to others until the word had spread across the planet. When Shepard won a victory for us, it became a shot in the arm. When she lost, we all felt it.

“The Admiral used Shepard as an example of someone who never gave up, even when things got darker and darker. But even when he told us stories of her, we were still looking at him. And while we owe her a debt that can never be repaid, we also owe one to him. Without him, the war would have been just as lost. Without him, we would have had no hope.”

Shepard hadn’t realized tears fell down her face as the speech ended, thanks to the powerful rain still assaulting her head. She didn’t sob or lose control, she just let the hot tears pool on Vega’s jacket, joining the cold water that had already soaked it through.

The rain fell down ever harder as the first speaker stepped away, almost drowning out the voice of an Alliance officer not connected to the microphone. Again, she couldn’t hear the words, but her years of experience told her exactly what was about to happen.

Shepard reached behind her and tugged on her bondmate’s arm. “Liara, I need to stand up.”

“What? No, Shepard. You shouldn’t.”

“Liara, please. I have to do this.”

The officer said one last command and then not even the heavy rainfall could drown out the sharp impact of hundreds of soldiers saluting at once. Even Shepard’s crew had joined with perfect precision. A wave of shame washed over Jane as she looked back up at the Anderson projection. His eyes, or rather, where she knew his eyes to be, bored into her skin. Accusing her. Judging her. Stand.

“Liara!”

“We’re both going to regret this.” The Asari said as she pulled the chair back just a little.

Without waiting for biotics or even a hand to hold her steady, Shepard slid her feet off the chair and let them touch the muddy ground. An electric chill went up her body as her bare soles touched solid ground for the first time in months. Maybe years. She honestly couldn’t remember the last time she had simply been outside without her boots or combat armor. The water and mud felt like heaven against her toes and for just a moment, she almost forgot why she had done this at all.

But the moment passed as soon as it came and Shepard began to use her left hand to push herself out of her chair. The wrenching agony of all her back muscles screaming at once returned, but she clenched her teeth. The burning in her spine flared with every breath, but she ignored it. She had to do this, even for a moment. She owed it to the man she killed.
Liara’s hand touched her tormented back a heartbeat later, adding just enough support for Shepard to make the final part of her journey. New tears streamed from her face as she controlled her breathing and her screaming. The pain had almost reached the same level as when Liara had put her into the chair, but she didn’t care.

Jane Shepard stood up, trembling in a coat far too large, covering a thin medical gown, head shaved, broken eyes and with only one arm, but she stood up. Like she always did. Like she was meant to.

Anderson stared at her from across the clearing, accusing her. Blaming her. Why didn’t she have her arm up like everyone else? Why did she keep disrespecting him?

Without thinking, Shepard raised her right shoulder like she had done uncountable times since she turned eighteen. A precision borne only from drills done day and night for many years kept the muscle memory alive, even if no other flesh remained to continue the gesture.

The strain of the sudden movement caught the rest of her body off guard. She had barely kept control of her inflamed muscles as they succumbed to their injured torment. Now she had none. Every nerve in her right side flared with unexplainable agony as she held the limb up, sending their needles directly into her heart.

She felt Anderson’s eyes follow her as she began to sink into the mud, no longer capable of standing up. Did he find this acceptable? Had she suffered enough?

She managed to move her eyes before she blacked out, meeting the projection’s one last time.

No. Not nearly enough.

But she had tried.
Chapter 25

Shepard awoke in darkness, but not oblivion. As her mind coalesced, she could feel the scratchy thinness of the same hospital clothes around her body and the lumps of the familiar bed beneath her legs. The stench of cleaning fluid assaulted her nose as she took in a deep breath. The large window outside popped and crackled with the sound of rain slamming against it. The clouds outside stopped any moonlight from illuminating anything in her limited field of vision, preventing her from making any detail of the space at all. But she knew where she had been returned to. The same hospital room. Her prison since she ended the war.

How could she have been so stupid? She should have listened to reason, listened to the agony that still thundered in her ruined back, listened to Liara’s pained warnings. She should have listened to anything but her stubborn pride.

It had been a strange experience to watch herself faint without feeling it, as if the sudden influx of sensation in her heart had disconnected her brain from her body. The pain had lasted only a moment before that, too, faded from her perception. She took it as a kind of mercy. Maybe from her body trying to spare her such pain again, maybe from a distant deity she didn’t know or believe in offering a blessing, it didn’t matter. She felt the needles stabbing her chest, then nothing. She watched the world fall away, then nothing. She had been a soldier again for just a moment, then nothing.

The image of Anderson looking down at her had not left her memory. That look of judgment she had entirely conjured in her mind still haunted her, as if he continued to judge her from beyond. And he had every right to, after all. She didn’t need a distant, incoherent image of him to know that.

“Liara?” she called out to the void. Her lips cracked and burned as she spoke, forcing her to momentarily retreat them into an equally dry mouth. She must have dehydrated herself on top of aggravating a broken back. Wonderful. “Liara, could you get my cup?”

Shepard craned her neck just enough to look past her feet to see if she could spot any detail in the darkened room. Nothing moved or responded, but she couldn’t be sure of anything in the near total blackness. No lightning accompanied the rain, no matter how powerful the storm became. She had never prayed for lightning before, but she did now. Anything to provide even a second of illumination to her hospital-cell.

“You asleep over there?” She said a little louder. Still no response. “You must be. Probably exhausted yourself dragging my stupid ass all the way back here.” She momentarily lost herself imagining Liara sitting in her chair at the foot of the bed, hunched over and fast asleep. Liara never slept well, so picturing her completely knocked out in blissful slumber almost made Shepard smile. If only her lips weren’t so painfully dry.

She took in a sharp breath and turned to her right, toward the area she knew the cup to generally inhabit. Even in midday light, she could only make out hazy tones and shapes from the sink, shelves and other items on the wall next to her. The pale cup often blended into the wall’s sterile white shade, thanks to her damaged eyes, but she could guess where it had last been placed. But now in total darkness, she might as well have kept her eyes closed.

Turning even a little caused her back to complain with a series of sharp, powerful muscle spasms, forcing Shepard to hold still and focus on breathing until they passed. Lying down again had dulled the pain to something she could manage, but it was anything but pleasant. Getting caught unawares by a Vorcha flamethrower had been a nice stroll on a hot day compared to what her spine and back muscles did to her just now. But then, she had no one to blame but herself in that case. She could
blame the Vorcha all she pleased, since he didn’t live long enough to even notice he had caught her armor on fire. Stupid mercs. Stupid pride.

Once her back settled back into a palatable rhythm of throbbing in time with each heartbeat, she moved a little closer to the bed’s edge, trying to see if she could find the damn cup. Even the tiniest sliver of moonlight would have been met with endless praise from her at this moment, but only the rain and the black of night responded. Shepard grunted as she pulled herself a little further, finding a place to balance herself without falling over. As she again had to stop and breathe, she imagined what it would feel like to fall off. She had more or less fainted from being gently lifted by Liara’s biotics. Impacting the floor would likely kill her.

Would that be so bad?

Anderson’s image came to mind again as she rested, breathed and concentrated on her screeching spine. She didn’t want to die, not really. She had fought so hard for so long just so she could actually enjoy not being dead. But then, so many others had to pay for this moment. So many killed by her hand. Not just Anderson and EDI, but the genocide of the Geth. An entire species wiped out because of her decision. Wouldn’t Liara be disgusted if she saw how much blood covered Shepard? Would she leave if she ever found out?

Mordin had died because she couldn’t figure out a better solution in time.

Thane fell victim to an assassin’s sword because she wasn’t fast enough to stop him.

All her fault.

Someone had to pay for those crimes. No amount of excuses or arguing could dissuade her. She deserved to feel this agony, to suffer for the rest of her life. That she did not argue. But suicide? Shouldn’t a court decide that punishment? Once she got better, she should turn herself in to the Council, or whatever group called itself the Council these days, and let them sit in judgment. They alone had the power to decide the fates of entire species, not her. And they alone would be able to judge her actions and render a suitable punishment. If they felt the need to execute her, she would not argue.

But first, she needed some damn water.

Her back refused to calm down while half of it hung precariously close to open air, forcing Shepard to remain still for several minutes longer than she liked. She refused to surrender to helplessness, however. It had been a special kind of humiliation to wake up unable to move and be completely incapable of taking care of herself in any capacity. She had vowed to never again feel that way and she meant it. She’d be damned before she couldn’t keep herself hydrated.

She stretched her left hand as far as it would go into inky nothingness, this time letting the agony in her back to fuel her determination. She did not shake and tremble, she held herself calm as sweat formed on her skin from this simple act. She had no idea if her fingers were anywhere near a cup, but she still tried. She would fight and keep herself alive until her time of judgment came.

“You do realize you could have called for assistance at any time, right? You’ve got an entire hospital staff out there ready to do anything you need.”

The voice that echoed in the darkness was certainly not Liara. A moment later, a bright white coat broke through the black room as if illuminated from within.

“Doctor Nicolo. I didn’t hear you come in.”
“I doubt you would have with all that grunting and groaning you were doing. What were you trying to do? Not stand up again, I hope.”

“Just trying to get some water.” Shepard returned to her place in the bed’s center. She could feel a well-worn groove waiting for her, sending a blush of anger and shame to her cheeks. So much time rotting here.

“Oh, well, that’s not a problem at all.” Nicolo moved through the darkness like it was daylight, his white coat showed no sign of hesitant steps or swerving around obstacles none could see. In a few moments, he held the cup to her hand.

As Shepard reached up, her eyes went back to the spot at the foot of the bed. “Liara must be really tired to sleep through all this.”

“She’s not here, Commander.” Nicolo said as he watched her drink. “After your little show of… well, let’s call it what it was: stupidity, your shipmates convinced her to let you rest while they returned to the Normandy. She said something about planning to do so for quite a while.”

“You can call it whatever you want, Doc.” Shepard said as she shoved the empty cup into Nicolo’s hands. Her mind went elsewhere, trying to imagine Liara walking with her shipmates to a shuttle, then going through her quarters and maybe even Shepard’s, for spare clothes and things to keep them entertained while she healed. Liara had told her what condition the ship had been in following the Crucible, but she felt confident most of their creature comforts survived. Plus, it felt good to know Liara would spend at least a little bit of time relaxing as she bossed around the galaxy’s dark underbelly again. If she really was on the Normandy, Liara was safe and happy. Shepard could relax.

“I heard about what happened.” Nicolo spoke again as he maneuvered around the room to grab the flimsy chair. “Going out in the rain, standing up even when several people who know much better than you said not to. Then passing out for several hours when you put immense strain on your nervous system. You’ve more than likely permanently damaged your ability to walk for the rest of your life. I usually don’t say it, but, Commander, I told you so.”

“Technically Miranda told me so. And you wouldn’t understand why I did it.”

Nicolo sat down a little too close to the bed for Shepard’s comfort. She also noticed the fact he did nothing to the chart or the IV, though she hoped he had just walked in to keep her company until Liara returned. “Actually, I bet I do. I told you I spent a lot of time with Anderson during the occupation, patching up the soldiers who kept us alive and relying on his leadership day in and day out. I saw the way they looked up at him, like he was some kind of super hero from the old vids. He inspired them to be better, sometimes through telling stories about you and your adventures, but mostly just from being himself in the face of the apocalypse. He led us from bunker to bunker, he kept us alive through grit and willpower alone sometimes.” Nicolo paused.

“Hell, I’m starting to sound like I look up to him as well. Don’t I, Commander? Maybe I did. Maybe, in my own non-military way, I did.”

The image of Anderson looking down on her came back as he spoke, forcing Shepard to choke back a flood of emotions she didn’t wish to express in front of the doctor. “He did a lot of good for a lot of people. He kept you alive in the worst possible conditions. There’s no shame in feeling grateful to him.”

Nicolo put his hands on the bed. Shepard could tell, even in such low light, that he had his head bowed down. His breathing became a little more intense, almost matching her pained gasping.
“Now I get to tell you that YOU don’t understand, Shepard. You don’t understand at all.”

He stood up and kicked the chair away. Shepard heard the frail metal struts snap apart as it impacted the wall. Her heart began to twitch a little faster in her chest, though she kept her exterior calm. Too many past battles and years of experience replaced the doubt and depression that had previously filled her mind. Something had changed for the worse.

“You soldiers,” Nicolo sneered as he reached into one of his glaringly bright coat’s pockets, “Are always so focused on your objective that you lose sight of everything else. I never told you that my family was also part of Anderson’s little resistance, did I?”

“No, you didn’t.” Shepard’s voice came out calm and controlled, just like it used to be. Her soldier voice. “Tell me about them.”

Nicolo’s hand came out of his pocket. Against the coat, she could see the dark outline of a very large hypodermic needle. “I very much intend to.”

“What’s that for?” She needed to keep him talking. Keep him distracted while she worked out tactical options. The Krogan outside would come barging in if she started yelling for them. She just had to make it an order. But would they be fast enough to stop him before he plunged that needle into her?

“This?” Nicolo tapped the syringe. A few drops of cold liquid fell onto her hospital clothes as he did so. “Just a new dose of muscle inhibitors. Nothing lethal, I assure you. Unlike some people in this building, I like to stick to the oaths I swore.”

“You just going to paralyze me and talk about your family?” Make light of his ideas and check if you’re misunderstanding the situation. He could be tired, or delirious. If anything, keep him off guard until your moment comes.

“No, no.” Nicolo’s voice returned to its normal calm and soothing tone. “Well, yes, actually. I’m going to tell you everything you need to know about my family and how you killed them, Shepard.”
Chapter 26

Shepard let out a derisive laugh. “How I killed them?” Her mind flashed with images of Anderson and all the friends and innocents that weighed on her conscience. What more could he throw onto that crushing pile?

“Not directly, of course.” Nicolo hovered over her, syringe in his right hand, “Not with any of the guns or bombs you took into this city. They were already dead before you arrived.”

“Then why the hell are you blaming me?”

Doctor Nicolo’s face moved mere inches away from hers. The faint stench of alcohol followed his breathing, but not enough to judge how drunk he might have been. “Because you… you’re poison, Shepard. I watched Anderson’s face light up like a puppy every time a soldier said they had a secure connection to you. I watched grown men and women turn into children listening to a storybook every time he relayed one of your reports. You and your crew weren’t people, you had become legends and fables. They lost sight of the real threats just outside the bunker every time Anderson talked about you. They got careless.”

He stood up again and looked at the rain-soaked window. The smell did not follow him, preferring to linger at her nose. “Then you told him you were coming back, and our little resistance army all came to this hellhole to wait for you. You should have seen us. A convoy of trucks and guns a mile long, moving in the dark. Reapers in the distance screamed at all hours, preventing anyone from sleeping. We could see the floodlights above the extermination camps from miles away, keeping their prisoners in line. Have you ever seen a river full of bodies in the middle of the night? I have. They looked like branches and sticks being carried off by a flood, not people. Sorry, I’m trailing off again.” Nicolo cleared his throat. “We had to use the old underground tunnels to cross from France to England, of course. Boats or planes would have been spotted as soon as we set off. Can you guess what we saw in those tunnels?”

“Husks.” Shepard remembered every single time she had to fight those abominations. From her terrifying first encounter on Eden Prime all the way to her final moments on Earth before the Reaper beam took her away. They always seemed to pop up everywhere, especially in dark, tight spaces where their clawed hands and teeth could do the most damage.

“Thousands of them, probably waiting for people stupid enough to hide in the tunnels. The soldiers all kept pushing forward, mowing them down as best they could. They were supposed to closely escort us non-combatants: doctors, engineers and the like. People too valuable to lose. They didn’t pay as much attention to those who couldn’t pull their own weight, so to speak.”

“Why would your family go with you?” Keep him focused on his family, keep him emotional and rambling. He won’t concentrate on his plan if he’s stuck in thoughts and memories.

“Where else would they have gone?” He echoed her derisive laugh back at her, "None of the resistance stayed behind, not one. And I wasn’t the only one with family. We probably had three civilians for every soldier by the end, but everyone contributed in their own way. We were all equal in Anderson’s eyes. Until he talked about you. Until he started using you as an example to his soldiers. And in those tunnels while we made our way to London… only you mattered to them.”

Nicolo took in a deep, shuddering breath. He put his left hand, the one not holding the syringe, on her right shoulder. Shepard wished more than anything that she could see his face so she knew where to aim.
Her left hand balled into a fist.

“They stopped paying attention to the back of the column just before we reached the surface. Too many battle cries of Shepard on their lips and thoughts of measuring up to your glory stained their minds to even notice, I think.”

“Were you up there with them? Do you know exactly what they ran into on the surface? Maybe they had to redeploy to hold off a bigger threat.”

Nicolo’s hand on her shoulder began to squeeze. It didn’t hurt, but it felt more dangerous than the needle he still held. “No, you don’t get to speak for them. I saw it all happen. I watched them march outside and move away from my family, chanting and praising your name like some kind of god damned saint. My wife and daughters screamed when the husks broke through the rear defense. I’ll never forget that sound.”

The squeezing increased in pressure, pinching sensitive nerves and causing Shepard to wince. “I was strapped down in a chair in the back of a tank, unable to move as I watched my son, my youngest, try to defend his mother and sisters with a scrap of metal. He did not cry your name as he died. He cried for me to help him.”

Nicolo’s gasping, shuddering breathing collapsed into a moment of sobs. Shepard felt a few hot, heavy tears fall onto her stomach.

“When the husks… finished with my family, they turned to the tank I sat in. But only then did Anderson’s toy soldiers actually start fighting back. There were three other doctors in that vehicle, you see. We were valuable. The woman and children who just died in front of them were not.”

“David,” Yes, use his first name, connect with him on a personal level. Maybe he’ll see reason if you break through the emotions and alcohol. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“How could you, Shepard? You were up there, in space, leading the glorious charge to free us all from the monsters. You’re a soldier, eyes focused on the goal, never the people.”

“You’re wrong, David. I’ve lost to the Reapers too. I’ve watched people I cared about die just like you did. Good people. Their deaths haunt me every single day.”

Nicolo sighed and looked back out the window. His hand on her shoulder did not move away. Instead, it crept lower, down to the tape holding the bandages in place. Her heartbeat began to increase as she felt his fingertips descend. She couldn’t see his other hand anymore, but could feel the hospital gown bunching around her right leg. A momentary sensation of cold metal against her upper thigh told her enough.

She began to raise her fist.

“It doesn’t justify what you’ve done. And now you’re going to pay for it.”

The needle scraped against her leg, lost in the dark as much as he was.

She had no more time.

Shepard sucked in a deep breath and sat up. Her entire world became a spinning, agonizing torrent of raw nerves and nausea as the pain overwhelmed her, but she had no other option. Her left hand moved like a whip, grabbing Nicolo’s syringe hand in a vice-like hold. She paid no attention to the fact that such a sudden and violent motion ripped the IV line from the back of her hand, nor did she hear the horrible sound the stand made as it hit the floor. She held onto Nicolo’s right hand with
every fiber of her being. Instinctively, she tried to raise her own right hand to start subduing him with an expertly aimed punch, but nothing happened except more pain and nausea. Her face, contorted into an expression of fury she had never known before, hovered over his.

“Impossible.” The Doctor whispered as he pitifully tried to pull his hand free. “I replaced your anesthetics with saline days ago. You shouldn’t be able to move.”

Long past the ability or inclination to talk, Shepard shoved Nicolo’s right hand away and pulled her fist back. This time, she struck him in the face. Not a perfect hit, but she no longer had her primary hand. She did it again a half second later. She felt his flesh and bone impact her fist every time. She concentrated on that dull, satisfying pain instead of the world-shattering agony in her spine. She hit him a third time.

_You son of a bitch!_ Echoed in her mind, however. Every event in the past day made sudden, horrible sense. Her fury rose some more, dulling the complaints her body sent to her brain. Survival had overtaken reason.

Nicolo reared back, caught off balance by the assault. She could tell he would fall back at any moment. Unfortunately, in her haze of rage and torment, she had forgotten his left hand rested on her bandaged right stump.

As he staggered back, his fingers dug into the cloth and tape, instinctively trying to hold onto something.

He ripped the bandages off as he fell.

Shepard screamed as she felt herself being pulled forward with him.

The fall only lasted a second, but it felt like an eternity to Shepard. Her head would not stop spinning, and the sudden feeling of air and fingertips against her bare right limb sent more needles into her heart. On top of all this, her back had already cut off her desire to breathe, so every last scrap of air she had left escaped with the agonized yell.

She landed on top of Nicolo’s stomach, overwhelmed by the spinning and the hurting to move or even notice her change in surroundings. Her right knee smashed against the hard floor a millisecond after her body hit his, further adding to her fragile body’s torment.

For a moment, they sat there in the stillness, the only sound coming from the rain outside.

She had to do something. She had no idea if he still held the syringe, or if he had worse things in his white coat, waiting to be used. She couldn’t take the chance in hoping he had hit his head on the floor and lie there knocked out or dead. She never got that lucky. Now or never. He would kill her if she didn’t stop him NOW.

Her back refused to let her breathe, but she did it anyway. She had to keep focus on different sources of pain, different nerves, to distract herself and let her lungs function.

“Help!” She called to the Krogan outside. “I need help!”

They did not respond.

"HELP!"

Nicolo’s stomach convulsed with soft laughter. Of course he hadn’t been hurt in the fall.
“You think I’d walk in here in the middle of the night ready to watch you die without taking care of your bodyguards first? I laced their last meals with enough sedatives to knock out a hundred Krogan. They won’t be getting up for a while.”

Just like she had done, Nicolo sat up with a violent thrust and plunged the syringe into Shepard’s lower back. Into one of the many muscles that made her entire existence a nearly unbearable hell. A new agony, a kind of liquid fire, began to spread from the injection site. Anxiety began to replace the rage in her heart and stomach. She screamed again.

“You were supposed to have died days ago, Shepard. Without those painkillers, your nerves were supposed to overload and you were supposed to go into shock. I can’t ignore my oaths, but I don’t have to stop your own body from killing itself.”

Shepard had no idea how long it would take for the muscle inhibitor drugs to take hold, but she couldn’t let that stop her. She raised her left hand to find Nicolo’s throat.

“I died already. I got better.” Her fingers smashed into his cheek, the soft, sensitive part of his face she had repeatedly punched. He hissed as she touched it. The fire in her back joined the symphony of other wrenching, tearing muscles and nerves as it spread. She didn’t care. Her fingertips curled into claws as she raked them against the doctor’s weakened face. She could feel warm blood pooling around her hand as she clawed and scraped, but couldn’t tell if it was his or from her own hand, which still gushed from the IV wound. They had both become locked in a desperate, horrible dance. One of them would not leave this room alive.

Nicolo roared and shoved his shoe into her chest, kicking her away. She could feel his skin scraping under her fingernails as her body slid back. A minor victory. She tried to steady herself, but only managed to not land on her throbbing right side. She collapsed onto the cold floor as he stood up.

“This was supposed to be easy. I told the Shadow Broker you’d be dead by now.”

The muscle inhibitors worked their way through Shepard’s back, shutting down her control of the muscles. The pain, however, did not lessen. She didn’t know how long she had, but she knew it wouldn’t be enough. She had to think of something.

Wait, what did he say?

“Shadow Broker?”

Nicolo stood up and walked to the sink, navigating toward it even in the darkness. She could see his white coat swaying. Unsteady. Good.

“I may not go offworld, but even I know about the Shadow Broker. One of the soldiers with Anderson at the beginning of the occupation used to work for him… it. She sustained horrible injuries after an ambush, and I was the one who sat next to her as she succumbed to them. We didn’t have enough supplies to let her pass away peacefully at the time. She kept talking about how proud she was that she kept her double life hidden from Anderson. She thought she was doing her family a favor by making so much money selling our people’s secrets to that alien. She had a special omni-tool, you see.”

Nicolo stepped away from the sink and activated the omni-tool. The orange light beamed like the sun to Shepard’s eyes, covering them both in amber light. Of course, she couldn’t have seen Nicolo’s features with her damaged eyes, but she could clearly make out the dark spots and black lines on his face. Bruises and blood. She smiled up at him as the inhibitors began to freeze her shoulders.
“I’ve been sending him reports on your condition since you arrived here. I’ve also been looking at the databases the soldier had on file before she died. There’s a lot of information here about you, especially a deal the Broker made years ago for your corpse. It seems your Liara stopped that deal somehow.”

“So?” She forced her lungs to keep taking in air on her own terms. It would be suicide to pass out now. Nicolo still swayed on his feet. As soon as he deactivated the omni-tool, she’d kick his legs and hopefully watch him fall over and hit his head.

“Nothing here says he’s ever backed off that deal. If he gets your body, He’ll pay me a great deal of money. Probably enough to rebuild this hospital. Maybe even the whole city.”

“That won’t bring your family back.” She spat at him. She stared at the omni-tool and its damned orange light. Her head yelled for him to turn it off.

“No. And killing you will only make you a martyr for the rest of the galaxy. But you and I will know what kind of monster you were. And your death will help rebuild a lot of lives. You should be honored, Commander. Aren’t spectres like you supposed to make these tough decisions like this?”

He wasn’t going to deactivate it, not when it gave him the light he needed to watch her sprawled on the floor. He looked down on her like a customer at a zoo. She could imagine the smug, condescending expression he had on his face behind the blood.

She imagined that expression on his leg and kicked.

Nicolo saw it coming and tried to jump out of the way, but he didn’t move quite fast enough. Her foot caught his shin and sent him tumbling forward. He caught the wall with his left, omni-tool, hand and Shepard heard a satisfying snap as his entire weight pushed against the unfortunate bone. He cried out a sharp, pitiful whine as the device shut down.

He crumpled to the floor, but not onto his head. His left arm curled around his stomach as the pain overwhelmed him for a moment.

“It doesn’t matter.” Nicolo said after catching his breath. He began scooting toward her, pulling his body forward with his legs and right hand. “The inhibitors are doing their job. I just need to induce the shock. I'm not killing you. You're killing yourself.”

His right, undamaged, hand reached out to her stump. Shepard tried to scoot back, but her back pressed against the bed. His face loomed over hers, morphed into the same expression she had before. Rage, pure and raw, consumed him.

“You have no idea what kind of hell I’ve had to endure, going through the motions to save your life. But if anyone caught me doing less than my best, they would have kicked me out. The day I cut your arm off was the happiest day of my life since I watched my family die. Just a little bit of revenge to soothe my soul. And now I’m here to finish the job.”

“You talk too much.” Shepard said as she reared her head back and slammed her forehead into his nose.

The Doctor roared an inhuman sound as he reared back again, but recovered faster than Shepard anticipated. His right hand grabbed her flailing, aching, burning right limb and started to squeeze.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Bumped up the rating because of the last chapter and this one, just in case.

Not enough. Shepard didn’t hit him hard enough. She doubted she had even caused a nosebleed thanks to the inhibitors rushing through her body.

Nicolo’s mere touch on her right limb caused the entire world to shatter into broken glass, each shard digging into and shredding her already taxed nerves. The fact he squeezed the sensitive remainder of her right arm just turned everything into an unbearable storm of white hot agony. Even with the darkness of the night surrounding them both, she could feel herself blacking out. She’d gotten very used to that sensation lately thanks to him.

She could no longer control her lungs. Breathing came in tiny, pitiful gasps as her body succumbed to the overstimulation. Dizziness gave way to nausea, which gave way to her empty stomach trying to release itself over Nicolo. But like most functions in her body, nothing worked quite right anymore. Bile rose in her throat instead and sat heavy on her tongue as she lost more and more control of herself.

Her left arm still worked, but she could only flail it in weak, plodding motions. Every remaining scrap of willpower in her body focused on her left hand, still oozing blood from the IV wound. She couldn’t tell if she had trouble closing her fist because of the hole in her skin or the drugs that burned in every muscle. It didn’t matter. She had to push him away.

Shepard threw everything she had into one desperate, final shove against Nicolo’s body. She reminded herself that was Commander Jane Shepard, dammit! Her bare hands had thrown countless Reaper abominations to the ground during the war. She punched reporters, mercenaries and alien creatures alike until they surrendered or stopped moving. She once shoved a mercenary through a window and didn’t think twice about it. She could push this doctor away for a few moments and catch her breath.

Her hand hit him with little more force than a limp slap, like trying to fight in a dream. It bounced off his chest as if she had not touched him at all.

Not enough.

She had nothing left.

Shepard couldn’t even shut her eyes to try and forget Nicolo’s snarling face as the inevitable heart attack swept her away. She would have endured, given or done whatever the universe demanded of her to be given the simple kindness of closed eyes.

It hurt so much. He might as well have had his hand on her heart and crushed it. She could feel no difference anymore. The needles had given way to a sledgehammer, pounding on the strained muscle over and over again.

His grip shifted. She could feel his fingernails digging into her still-healing flesh. More fuel for the pyre he inflicted on her.
She couldn’t even let out one last scream.

Helpless.

Dying.

...

And then the world turned blue.

Nicolo’s hand flew away from her almost as fast as a bullet. The rest of his body followed suit as if thrown like a rag doll, slamming against the far wall of the room with a satisfying thud. He cried out in surprise as his own brain processed the sudden change.

“The Shadow Broker received your reports, Doctor.” Liara’s voice cut through the quiet like an angelic choir. Even the sound of rain outside lessened in her presence.

“And she is very upset.”

Shepard couldn’t move her eyes, but she could see Liara’s gleaming white boots enter the room, covered in the blue fire of her powerful biotic abilities. It didn’t take much to imagine her entire bondmate’s body radiating power like only an Asari could.

Liara’s feet didn’t move, but Nicolo did. Shepard watched the biotics flare again, sending him flying out of her field of vision. She heard him impact the large glass window a half second later. It wobbled and cracked under the pressure, but did not break.

“You…” Nicolo managed to whisper.

Shepard’s entire career had been one of violence, of inflicting terror on others or inspiring hope in those too afraid or unable to defend themselves. Plenty of people had been afraid in her presence. Sometimes as her victim, sometimes as the victims of others. She had never heard a voice as frightened as David Nicolo’s.

“Yes.” she replied. It was all she needed to say. Another flash of blue and David’s body crumpled in front of Shepard, still covered in the radiating inferno of dark energy. He trembled and sobbed as he surrendered to her control.

Liara’s feet moved to either side of Nicolo’s body, pinning him physically as well as biotically. Shepard watched her bondmate crouch down without a word or sound, then put her blue forehead next to the Doctor’s bleeding and terrified face.

With the light from the biotics glowing almost like a cerulean star in the room, Shepard could see Liara’s wide eyes as she regarded the other human, head slightly cocked in a predatory gaze. They were supposed to be gentle spheres of blue on white, conveying her great patience, intelligence, strength and sometimes her vulnerability. They had been one of the first things Jane noticed about her when they first met on Therum, so wide and full of fear. They were often the last things she imagined before she drifted off to sleep.

Not anymore.

Liara’s gorgeous, expressive and compassionate eyes had gone cold and black.

Shepard remembered when she saw Aria T’loak do the same thing after retaking her station from Cerberus. General Petrovsky had been her victim, just like Liara hovered over Nicolo. Jane never
asked the ancient Asari what she had done at the time, a little too afraid to know the answer and a little too eager to get back to the war. She assumed a few things about that killer meld, but never spoke them out loud. Mostly about it being a mix of sex and violence that only Aria could conjure up.

She assumed very wrong.

Liara’s hands weren’t resting on Nicolo’s throat, so he did not suffer in choked silence. Instead, his throat gurgled and retched sounds that would have made Shepard cover her ears had she the ability to move. As the glow of the biotics increased, she could see new dark streaks flowing down Nicolo’s face. More blood, streaming from his eyes and ears.

Aria T’loak had a dark side she kept hidden like a whispered secret. People across the galaxy knew what she was capable of and how far she’d go to accomplish her goals. It kept a lot of her underlings in line to know exactly what would happen if they crossed her, especially if they did it on Omega. In contrast, Liara tried to hide any such darkness away from everyone. She had other priorities, and no desire to strike fear into the hearts of others. Even after two years of living alone in some of the galaxy’s most dangerous places and then taking the mantle of Shadow Broker, most of her more sinister actions had been mere bluffs and lies. Most of them.

Shepard was infinitely more terrified of Liara’s dark side.

Nicolo gasped and sputtered for a few more seconds, held down by biotic powers and the shaking muscles of an enraged Asari maiden. Finally, just when Shepard thought she couldn’t watch any more, he went silent and the biotic lights went out. The room plunged back into darkness.

“Liara, stop!” Kaidan’s voice echoed from outside the room.

Liara stood as the human Spectre pushed through the door. Blinding white light followed him in, the familiar intensity of a flashlight attached to an Alliance rifle. He had rushed in gun ready.

“Ay dios mio.” Vega said a moment later. His heavy footfalls stopped just a heartbeat after Kaidan’s. As their gun lights moved over every inch of the room, Shepard could see what her fight had done to it. Blood pooled on the floor in front of her, as well as a few spots on the wall where Liara had thrown Nicolo. The remains of the chair and the IV stand had been strewn everywhere, and though she couldn’t see it, she imagined the window had been cracked and nearly broken, further adding to the chaos of the place.

“What did you do?” Kaidan’s gentle voice seemed to break as his light pointed down to Nicolo. To Shepard’s great surprise, the heavy shadows from Kaidan’s light made it possible to see his chest moving up and down. Still alive. Though she imagined he wished he wasn’t.

“I was not gentle.” Liara said with a voice that almost didn’t sound capable of inflicting the horrors she had just unleashed.

“Do I wanna know what you did to him?” James asked, just as shocked as Kaidan.

“You do not.”

“We were supposed to arrest him, Liara.” Kaidan stepped forward, iron returning to his voice. His light conspicuously left Nicolo, unable to look at what had been done to him anymore. “How can we be sure he’ll be able to stand trial?”

Liara’s white boots moved away from him and closer to Shepard. “He sent his entire confession to my terminal, if you remember, bit by bit. He assumed the Shadow Broker would appreciate his
thoroughness. I did. The Alliance will get a copy of the reports when we return to the Normandy.”

“With some things edited out, I’m sure.” Like the fact that she had been the recipient of the messages in the first place.

“Of course.”

Kaidan almost said something more, but yet another voice interrupted the trio that now stood in the room.

“Get out of the way, now!” Doctor Chakwas burst in, followed by a pair of legs Shepard recognized as one of the hospital’s nurses. The second person held a large white rectangle Shepard had trouble identifying until they placed it down. A stretcher. “Vega, Alenko, out! I’ll call you if I need you. Liara, you can stay but keep out of my way.”

The soldiers turned to leave, taking their bright gun-lights with them.

“Wait, one of you keep the light on Shepard.”

Neither one argued, but Shepard couldn’t tell which one of the boys stayed behind and raised his weapon like a spotlight. Chakwas leaned down to her eye level, her warm face a very nice thing to see after what she had just endured. If she could have smiled, she would have.

“Good lord, she still has that thing in her back! Shepard, I’m sorry for this.” Chakwas leaned over her and reached for her back. The syringe! She felt the needle exiting her skin a moment later. It might have caused her distress in any other situation, but with her nerves on the verge of killing her at any moment, the discomfort passed as if it hadn’t been there at all.

“She’s hyperventilating, we need to get her out of here immediately.” Shepard rarely heard Karin speaking with such an authoritative tone, but it reassured her to hear it. The doctor leaned forward again and did a close examination. Her fingertips pressing against Jane’s skin did not send the same waves of revulsion Nicolo’s had in the past. The trust and understanding between them felt like a cool, refreshing breeze to Shepard’s frayed nerves. It calmed her more than Karin would ever know.

As if on cue from thinking about the other Doctor, Chakwas turned to look over her shoulder at him. “One of you get him out of this room.”

Heavy footsteps moved to comply with her order, probably Vega’s. Shepard watched Nicolo slide away and out of her vision. She hoped she never saw him again.

“Commander, I need you to hold on. We’re taking you back to the Normandy.” Chakwas turned to the Nurse. “Get the anesthetics from my bag outside. Now.”

The nurse ran to comply as fast as possible.

The Normandy? Were they really taking her away? Were they freeing her from this cell?

Chakwas moved her hand over Shepard’s right limb, inspecting the damage. The touch did not feel comforting or caring. It brought everything back. Her eyes welled up and then flooded with tears, causing them to fall over her paralyzed face.

“Damn that bastard.” She whispered at a volume only Jane could hear. “God damn him.” Whatever she did almost brought everything back, but Karin had the good sense to stop at the perfect time.

The nurse returned after one last agonizing moment, prompting Chakwas to turn toward him with an
impressive display of speed and agility. She took the bag and set it down in front of Shepard, then threw it open with minimal care. It didn’t take her long to find a syringe of her own, but this one looked much smaller and didn’t scare the life out of her. Chakwas injected the needle with the skill and grace borne only from decades of practice, so fast and professional that Shepard couldn’t even see or feel it happen.

She did, however, feel the first twinges of relief as it spread through her body. Like a winter wind, the new drugs passed over her rampaging nerves and calmed them to a dull stillness. For the first time in far too long, the pain started to ebb away. She still couldn’t move, but she no longer felt trapped. She normally didn’t shed tears of joy, she had just never been the kind of person to do so. But just now, she let them fall. It felt nice to feel the new ones leaving her body.

Shepard’s left hand convulsed, and not on its own. Somehow, by some miracle, the inhibitors had not denied her control of her fingers. Not enough to wave or curl into a fist, just enough to wiggle and spasm. No one in the room seemed to notice. She wished they would. She prayed someone would. She needed to communicate, to connect with someone. To thank them.

And then she felt Liara’s hand reaching down, her warm digits intertwining her own. It didn’t matter if her bondmate had come too close to Chakwas or if such a thing would interrupt her ministrations. Her hand tightened around the soft blue skin and squeezed. Liara responded in kind. Three times.

Three times for three words.
So I completely rewrote this because I hated the original interlude. For anyone who read the original, or are curious about it, nothing major changed. The format and overall message is the same, just different characters and a less confusing time frame.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Logging in…

- 

User Identity Confirmed…

- 

Welcome to the Citadel Extranet Archives…

- 

Please wait as your search VI integrates with our server…

- 

Search VI program integrated…

- 

Loading sequence: Jane Shepard and Liara T’soni.

- 

Continuity error caused by unexpected dark energy spike. Correcting for error. Resetting…

- 

Do you wish to continue?

- 

Reloading sequence: Jane Shepard and Liara T’soni.

- 

Search VI program integrated…
Please select specific time period or select [Autoplay] for chronological display of records…

- 

Loading all records for period covering one year through two thousand years from event known as “The Reaper War”…

- 

Prepare to receive…

- 

Accessing records from initial scanning date… Stand by…

File found. Accessing.

**Date of Record: 18 November 3186**

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*Archive Note: The following is a transcript of a news segment from the popular stellarcast “Illuminating Illium”. In it, representatives of several species discuss the state of the galaxy on the 1000th anniversary of the Reaper War. Citadel historians urge users to take note of the languages used between the various speakers. It would be several generations before Galactic Standard became the required language for all Council species. A translator program has been added to this file for your convenience.*

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**Host AI:**

[Static]… With another in our series of educational stellarcasts on the 1000th anniversary of the Reaper War. Taking part in this discussion from Earth is Professor James Tallis from the University of York. From Thessia, we are joined by Political scientist Doctor Vallisia Irevos, University of Armali. And from Palaven, renowned psychologist Quentis Extius, retired from NYU.

We have just under two billion viewers for this cast, which is more than expected. Apologies if your connection experiences significant lag times.

Our first question comes from Palaven: What role do you believe Shepard played in the war, not just the Reaper’s defeat?

**Tallis:**

Well, the woman herself? Almost none at all. She was an Alliance figurehead elevated to fame because she fit the standard bill of a fit and healthy human. She looked good on advertisements, so she became the face of military recruitment at a time when humans needed soldiers the most. We have documented evidence she disappeared for two years following Sovereign’s attack, only to reappear on the galaxy stage during the war itself. It’s obvious she slipped in and out of the limelight only when the Alliance needed her. The fact everyone says she somehow destroyed the Reapers by herself is preposterous.
Vallisia:
I agree. We have to remember to separate the legends from known facts. It’s true a lot of records of the time were lost due to the extreme damage the Reapers inflicted on galactic infrastructure. But almost three zettabytes of extranet information still survived from that 2186 alone. Almost none of it explicitly showed Shepard involved in combat or doing anything but giving speeches and wandering around locations like the Citadel, where many people could see her.

Quentis:
You both are being just a little unfair, aren’t you? She was a soldier. She fought with her comrades just like any other soldier. Just because she didn’t appear on vids every waking hour doesn’t mean she didn’t contribute.

Tallis:
Of course she contributed. Everyone did their part during the war. But the publicity machine would have you believe the entire war hinged on her efforts alone. If anything, Shepard’s fame allowed her to work as a fulcrum for other people to rise up and do the actual “dirty work”, as it were. I quote: “The individual at the center gives permission for others to act, can inspire others. But the individual really cannot effect change as an act of will. She did not do. She allowed others to do.”

Quentis:
Point conceded. We all have a profound psychological need to believe in heroes. Even my own people praise others, often undue, if they perform acts above their stations. We want to believe in heroes riding in their invincible space ships, smiting enemies. But they don’t exist. We create them.

Vallisia:
If you look at the social dynamic around Shepard, you’ll see she really couldn’t have done anything. She had an entire crew at her disposal. What responsible ship captain would risk their own life, time and again, to go down on a mission where bullets are flying? People elevated to command military vessels are far too valuable to do anything but make major decisions that affect the lives of those under their command. There’s no such thing as a chain of command if the commander herself acts like a common soldier.

Host AI:
A follow-up question: Do you think the record of Shepard’s accomplishments are overrated?
Vallisia:

Absolutely. To use a human phrase: “She screwed up.”

Tallis:

Only the force of history saved the situation from collapsing of its own weight after so many people died in the opening weeks of the war. The Prothean archives already had the data on the Crucible. And many of the resources and builders were already in place across the galaxy to build it. Admiral Hackett rarely gets any credit for his work during the war, but without his organization, the weapon would not have been built.

Host AI:

We should not get off track and speak of associated biographies, so let’s go to the next question.

This comes from Earth: Where do you think Shepard “screwed up”?

Tallis:

Where do we begin? Let’s not forget she lied to the Geth to make them to join the war effort, and then killed their entire species.

Vallisia:

And her failure to defend Thessia.

Quentis:

Wait, wasn’t she on Thessia for a classified mission? Something about a final piece of information about the Crucible?

Vallisia:

That’s what the propaganda wants us to believe. I was raised on stories of how the Legendary Shepard set foot on my home world to defend us all from the Reapers. But when we needed her most, she vanished.

Host AI:

We may be getting off track again. Personal anecdotes are not valid historical discussion.
Quentis:

You can’t blame her for that. What would one human do against two-kilometer long machines?

Vallisia:

Whatever she did to kill Sovereign. Or the reapers on Tuchanka and Rannoch. She could have done something, but the records show that she evacuated before lifting a finger to help my people. She would go on record saying she regretted that day more than any other, but I don’t see it that way. She just said that to avoid public backlash from the surviving Asari.

Host AI:

Please, we must change this course of discussion. Allow me to play this vid file for you. I would like your comments when it is finished.

(Archive Note: Video file has been lost. An audio transcript remains, and has been placed her for your convenience.)

Shepard:

This is Commander Shepard speaking. We have our orders: Find Saren before he finds the Conduit. I won’t lie to you… this mission will not be easy. We all know what happened on Eden Prime. We saw the destruction. We saw the bodies. We saw what Saren did. And I plan to make him pay! Time to show them what humans are made of! Wherever Saren goes, we’ll follow. Wherever he searches for the Conduit, we’ll be there. We will hunt him to the very ends of the galaxy and bring him down! Humanity needs to do this. Not just for our own sake, but for the sake of every other species in Citadel space. Saren must be stopped. And I promise you all… we will stop him!

(Archive Note: Video file ends here.)

Host AI:

Let us begin with Professor Tallis. Your comments, please.

Tallis:

Shepard was clearly pathological. You can see the coldness in her personality, the way she focused on Saren and revenge. That was not a woman you wanted on the front lines. Her only real saving grace was her looks and propaganda potential. She never let anything get in her way. Humanity was just lucky the Alliance reigned her in.
Host AI:
Doctor Irevos?

Vallisia:
A truly pathological individual could never have constructed a mythos around herself the way Shepard did. It's a very sophisticated PR campaign that’s kept her so famous for the last thousand years. Brilliantly done. And there's that bit about the way her death was handled.

Quentis:
Yes, the myths of how she went off alone in her ship one night and disappeared forever among the stars.

Vallisia:
Everyone knows Shepard died in bed, on Earth. The cover story they put out was clearly designed to perpetuate the myth of her character. And I guess it worked, because a lot of people still believe it, 900 years later.

Host AI:
Let us begin another question. This one from Rannoch: If you are skeptical about the legends of Shepard, do you believe the stories about Liara T'soni?

Vallisia:
All matriarchs eventually get legends told about their own lives not long before they die. It’s almost Asari tradition to overstate their life’s work to make them seem more important than they really were. It elevates them in a way, so they are remembered long after they die. No one really believes she held that much political power. But like Quentis said, we like to create heroes. And an Asari Matriarch with power beyond a single city-state is an Asari a lot of maidens would look up to.

Tallis:
Even people on Earth know of her influence. It’s said she personally funded the rebuilding and operation of several human orphanages on the North American continent alone. There’s some recorded misunderstandings between her and humans who felt upset that she took more care of Earth’s underprivileged than actual humans, but those are obviously overstated. More myths about one of Shepard’s comrades to make them seem bigger than life.
Quentis:

The idea that Liara T’soni is still around after this long and living in seclusion is very convenient. The Citadel Council is obviously continuing the illusion that Liara is alive for their own purposes. Apparently they feel they have to maintain this fiction to keep their people in line. If the Council fleet is as strong as they say, they don't need this security blanket of lies and myth.

Host AI:

We’re almost out of time for this segment. I would like some final thoughts from you all. Once again, staring with Professor Tallis.

Tallis:

I would like to use another quote, if I may: “The force of history is what moves us forward, our common shared destiny. The individual does not move society forward. To give them undue credit is immodest and impertinent. Shepard was a megalomaniac. And to allow history to feed that megalomania, even posthumously, simply compounds the error.”

Host AI:

Excuse me, but we seem to have an interruption in the studio. Wait- [sounds of muffled fighting]

(Archive Note: Liara T’soni famously replaced the Host Ai for several seconds during this segment, gaining a great deal of media attention for the interruption. She and her bodyguards would eventually be tried for trespassing and assault, but were released the next day. Take note of Liara’s advanced age, as signified by the markings on her face and the clothing of a matriarch.)

Liara T’soni:

Jane Shepard was a good, kind and honest woman.

Tallis:

Wait, you did all that, came so far, just to say THAT?

Liara T’soni:

You have come just as far to say less.
Vallisia:

But this is extraordinary. You were there during the war! There’s so much we want to know! So much we want to ask!

Liara T’soni:

You do not wish to know anything. You only wish to speak.

That which you know, you ignore because it is inconvenient. That which you do not know, you invent. But none of that matters. Except that she was a good woman. A kind woman, who cared about the galaxy even when the galaxy cared nothing for her.

Quentis:

Well, of course you’d say such things. You were her bondmate...

- 

Record ends.

Auto play feature engaged...

Loading next sequence...

Stand by...

Chapter End Notes

We all know that one day, we'll all be stories in the end, our words and actions archived in one digital format or another long after our individual lives are dust. Jane Shepard will live on, thousands of years after the war, as information. The organics have myths and legends, the synthetics have databases.

But she will not be forgotten.
Shepard didn’t remember falling asleep, or if another round of drugs had forced sleep upon her. She also didn’t want to remember. At long last, Nicolo had finished what the Reapers started. She had no fight left. No passion, no fire. No more reason to care. No thoughts remained in her head but those of guilt, shame and self-hate. More and more, she fantasized about all the battles and fights she had engaged in, but instead of walking away, she imagined if just one bullet had managed to pierce her heart. Or her head. The image of Anderson, the one she mentally constructed during the memorial, still burned in her mind’s eye. It approved of the fantasies. It stood for all her enemies as it accused her. It reminded her of how much she had failed.

Not strong enough. Not fast enough. Not good enough. So many people died because of her. Not just her own friends and comrades. But entire families. Entire species. Nobody walked away from the war unscathed. And it was all her fault for not being… enough.

Bright lights woke her up, but Jane kept her eyes shut, letting the insides of her eyelids glow dark red. She didn’t care anymore. She didn’t even want to test and see if the inhibitors had worn off. Being trapped in her own body had been a special kind of hell that threatened to snap her final vestiges of sanity and control. In the past, when she encountered horrible and dangerous things, she would vow to fight harder, move faster or just mentally set it aside. Before the war, she had no time to dwell and brood over things she couldn’t control. But then Nicolo had come around and pumped her full of chemicals that physically made it impossible to do anything but sit, think and dwell on things. The inhibitors combined with enduring the unfiltered and terrible agony of her ruined body crushed her spirit more than anyone would ever know.

Her back and right arm, no, her stump, still ached. Not like before, not by a long shot, but they hurt nonetheless. Every time her weak heart beat in her chest, a throb and a surge of heat spread down her back muscles, up her right side, then returned to the source. The pain itself did not bother her, she made herself feel worse when she used to exercise in the morning. But the fact it existed at all weighed her down. It meant she couldn’t ignore what had happened. It made her suffering real and impossible to shut away. It made her very aware of the fact she could no longer do a simple thing like curl her right hand into a fist, or shield her eyes with her right forearm. Even without inhibitor drugs, her body had become a cage that would forever be lesser. Not enough. Never good enough.

She had fallen into the pit, finally dragged down by the Reapers, Cerberus, the Collectors, Nicolo and her own self-doubt. More than ever, she wished she had died when the Crucible fired, or that she had never been brought back at all.

And then a warm hand touched her left cheek. A gentle, soft contact that distracted her from the metaphorical darkness, if only for a moment. Shepard had to fight a burst of self-conscious anxiety, since she knew this hand had come into contact with the deep scars that signified the presence of her implants.

“Good morning.” Liara’s words wafted into Jane’s ear, carried on her breath as a quiet whisper. The darkness and doubt began to drift away, carried off by those two words.

Shepard opened her eyes with careful, deliberate slowness. Even her bad vision still could be sensitive to strong artificial light. It seemed like her ears awoke with her as well, as she became painfully aware of the constant hum of a shipboard ventilation system and the constant, gentle rumble.
of powerful engines. The kind of rumble only possible from one very special ship. Chakwas had been telling the truth after all, they were back on the Normandy. Shepard didn’t realize how much she would miss such background noise after the complete stillness of London.

Her time on the ship had already given Shepard a crystal clear mental image of the medbay and all the medical clutter it contained. She began to map it all out in her head as her eyes adjusted to the terribly bright artificial illumination. She needed to start preparing to compensate for her blurry, damaged vision if she were to avoid running into anything in the future.

Except… when her eyes adjusted, she did not see a blur of different colors. She saw the light above her and the fine details in the ceiling tiles all around it. One had a large scratch on its surface, probably from a piece of debris thrown around during one of the ship’s desperate battles.

Then Shepard looked down to notice the stitches sewn into the blanket that covered her chest. She sat and stared, suddenly fascinated by the tiny, intricate patterns in the cloth. Not wanting to squander the moment, she turned her head to look at the green contact panel on the medbay’s large door. Not only could she make out the subtle gradients of the paint, but she could identify the large seams between each door section.

“Welcome back.” Liara, sitting just to her left, leaned forward and put her lips on Jane’s forehead. She saw it coming and leaned into it. The subtle, scale-like patterns in Liara’s skin became irresistibly apparent as her body moved so close. Even the tiny spots and faint wrinkles on her face stood in perfect clarity to Shepard’s gaze. She took it all in like dehydrated soil, unblinking and unmoving, but very, very focused.

The instant Liara retracted even a little bit, Shepard’s left hand rose up and rested on top of her crest. Her fingers touched each ridge and bump with slow, deliberate and gentle strokes. Not only could she feel the tiny changes in the skin, but she could now follow them with her eyes. Her fingertips ran through the crest like she would have stroked human hair, gentle sloping motions that caused Liara to smile. She found herself unable to speak, but words weren’t necessary. Not in this moment.

The world began to blur again, but this time, Shepard knew exactly why.

Sniffling like a child, Jane moved her hand away from Liara and wiped the tears of joy that had begun to run down her cheeks. Her breathing became ragged as she fought to hold off the sobs that forced their way past her lips. She never really broke down and wept like this, never let her positive emotions overwhelm her entire state of being. In her childhood and in the military, it would have been seen as weak and shameful, no matter how many times vids, books, psychs and doctors said it was okay to let your emotions out. But right here, right now, she let herself sob and sputter with unending, primal, wonderful elation.

Her bondmate wasted no time in seeing Jane’s predicament and leaned forward again, this time wrapping her in a strong, all-encompassing embrace. Shepard could feel Liara’s own shuddering breaths as she reacted to the emotions. She nuzzled her face against Liara’s neck, allowing the blue skin and white clothes to become her entire existence. She breathed deeply when the sobs allowed, replacing the foul memories of the hospital’s astringent cleaning fluid with the Asari’s clean and familiar scent.

“I can see.” The words came without thought or effort, not even fully under her control. “Liara, I can see you.” Shepard’s tears fell hot and heavy into Liara’s shoulder.

“You’re back. You’re home.”

Shepard held onto Liara for as long as she could, letting relief and comfort fill the void that had
consumed her for so long. She blinked again and again, both to clear her eyes and confirm she hadn’t begun to hallucinate.

“I really am, right? I’m not just going crazy?”

Liara pulled back from the embrace just enough to look deep into Jane’s eyes. They were so big and drenched with their own tears, but still full of the compassion and love she remembered. Twin sapphires in the middle of an ocean. She did not answer back, instead, she pushed forward again, this time to touch her lips to Shepard’s. She kept her tentative distance for a time, silently asking for consent to take the kiss further. After the last few days, she could understand the hesitation, but she did not need it. Shepard threw herself into the kiss, locking her lips with the Asari’s until it almost hurt. She pulled her hand down to the back of Liara’s neck and gently pulled her further in as she opened her mouth just enough to deepen the embrace. Nothing else mattered but this to her. Every sorrow and shame melted away as Liara enthusiastically reciprocated everything Jane did. Low, guttural sounds escaped both of their chests as they continued. Liara’s hands moved up to hold both of Jane’s cheeks-

“Glad to see you’re awake, Commander.” A familiar accented voice rang through the medbay, causing a spike of embarrassment to flush through Shepard’s face, turning her deep red.

“Miranda. I didn’t expect you to be here.” Liara pulled back, her own face a dark violet, to resume sitting at Shepard’s bedside.

“Where else would I be while you needed to be rebuilt? Besides, I’d like to think I still have something of a welcome here.”

“You do, Miranda.” Shepard smiled. She looked near the door to see the other woman approaching. For the first time, she missed seeing the skin tight Cerberus outfit, but only because she wanted to check if her newly clear vision could still see the hexagonal pattern in the material it was made from. If anyone caught her staring, neither she or Liara mentioned it.

Miranda did not approach the bed, but instead walked to the main desk, the place Doctor Chakwas usually sat when she wasn’t tending to patients. She typed a few commands and then turned away.

A small click and faint buzzing of machinery came from below Shepard, making her jump. And then the bed jumped with her, slowly rising until it moved her into an upright sitting position. She winced as it moved, expecting her back to send her into another surge of agony. But nothing happened, just the constant, ignorable throb. She let her lips form a half smile at the comfortable change.

“Isn’t that better, Shepard?”

Shepard turned to look at Liara, who now sat at eye level, not hovering above. Her hand had not left her neck, and she stroked it slowly, feeling the inhuman, but not unappealing, ridges and bumps on the back of her head. For her part, Liara spent a moment wiping the latest batch of tears from both of their eyes, returning them to a somewhat respectable appearance.

“Much.”

Miranda’s footsteps echoed on the medbay’s hard floor with heavy clicks as she finally moved to stand at the foot of the bed. She had a hard time making eye contact. “Shepard I… apologize for not seeing what Nicolo had done to you. I should have known what he was doing the instant I saw him.”

“You punched him in the face when you met him. That’s good enough for me.”

“Yes, well, I should have done it harder. And with biotics.”
“It’s okay, Miranda. Really. Nobody could have known.” Shepard removed her hand from Liara and put it down on her leg. She looked at it intently to see a very faint scar from where the IV had been torn out. Just a tiny line of white remained to signify the source of so much of her suffering. She prayed it would not last, she wanted to forget every horrifying second she spent in that hospital.

“Well, I hope your newly repaired vision helps solidify this terrible apology.”

Try as she might to hide more tears, Jane could not stop them as she turned to face Liara, then back to Miranda. “You have no idea what you’ve done for me.” She took in a very unflattering sniffle.

“I have some idea, based on what I caught you two doing as I walked in.” Miranda smirked. How odd that Shepard enjoyed just watching someone smirk. “A simple enough operation, given the equipment in this medbay. Just needed to repair the damage to your optic nerves and clear the lenses. I recall doing something very similar.”

“Yes, thank you.” Liara interrupted, obviously unwilling to bring up certain painful memories.

“Anyway,” Miranda said with no small amount of indignation, “Doctor Chakwas will be back soon, she just needed to get some sleep. Oh, speak of the devil.”

The medbay doors slid open, allowing Karin Chakwas to enter, a large cup of coffee in hand. The aroma hit Shepard’s nostrils like a mortar shell. She missed that smell so much. “The devil, am I? What would that make you, Miss Lawson? Beelzebub? Mephistopheles?”

“I’ll leave that to the biblical scholars, I think.” Lawson said as she nodded to Chakwas.

“I’m sure it’ll be a debate that will never find an answer.” Karin said as she took a sip. “Commander, it’s nice to see you’ve rejoined us. I trust you’ve been enjoying some of the work Miranda has done while you were out?”

“Trust me, Doctor,” Lawson said before either Shepard or Liara could respond, “I can tell you with confidence that she is. And she is very grateful.”

Chakwas clicked her tongue as she set the coffee down on her desk. “Please don’t defile the sanctity of this place, Commander. The war has prevented me from having that particular privilege first.”

“Well, thank you for making me very uncomfortable this morning, doctor.” Shepard said as more red returned to her cheeks.

Karin laughed as she approached the bed. She had to push Liara out of the way just a little to reach Shepard, much to the Asari’s chagrin. “Excuse me, dear. Doctor coming through.”

Chakwas held her hand over Shepard’s heart for a few long seconds, measuring its strength and pattern, before pulling it away. She then held up one finger a few centimeters away from Jane’s eyes. “You know what to do, just follow where I go. I want to make sure everything healed properly.”

Shepard rolled her eyes but complied with the test. The finger darted up and down, side to side, but never too fast to follow, nor did it become blurry or cause a headache.

“Good,” Chakwas said as she retracted her hand, “Very good. I’d consider the first stage of your recovery a smashing success.”

“Great. So what’s next?”

Both Karin and Miranda turned toward each other, uncomfortable expressions flashing between
“Well, Commander, that’s up to you. Though I think you should consult with-“ Shepard could hear the hesitation in Karin’s voice.

“What’s wrong?” Jane’s heart beat a little faster in her chest. “It’s something to do with my arm, isn’t it?”

“Shepard,” Miranda began with more than enough hesitation, “We wanted to break it to you gently.”

“Just tell me. I’ve been fucked with enough, don’t you think?”

Chakwas took in a deep breath as Miranda took a step away from the bed. “We did a full neurological scan of your system the instant you were brought aboard. David Nicolo might have become a madman by the end, but he was still a brilliant surgeon. He-“ She trailed off.

“Doctor, you need to tell her.” Liara said, once again grabbing Jane’s hand.

“Well, the truth is, Shepard, that when Alliance soldiers are injured just like you have, they get a biomechanical prosthetic. Metal bones and electric motors instead of joints and ligaments, but covered in a synthetic skin that becomes indistinguishable from the natural limb. And a direct neural connection that gives perfectly normal responses. Several of the Normandy crew past and present have needed them, but you could never tell. That was the point. Both for the patient and the people around them. They’re supposed to be seamless replacements.”

“And…”

Miranda stepped forward again. “We can’t tell if Nicolo told the truth about your implants malfunctioning or if he just wanted to hurt you so badly that he fabricated the story. But either way, the nerves in your residual limb are… God I didn’t think this would be so hard to say.”

“You cannot get a prosthetic, Shepard. At least, not of the same kind we’ve been using for decades. There are still options, but…”

“I’m stuck like this.” She raised her right limb as far as it would go. Only then could she see the long, jagged scar that ran along the end of the nub and ended just below her armpit. It looked awful, a horrible collection of mangled skin and flesh. It started to hurt again.

Memories of her reaction when she first noticed it missing flooded back to her mind. Her despair and panic. Her very real need to hurt someone, and Liara had been her victim. Nicolo’s manic, rage-filled face joined the dance in her mind.

The memories mixed with the sight just before her eyes and she felt sick.
Chapter 30

Liara did not think she could feel more hate for David Nicolo until she saw Jane lift her right limb and just… stare at it. She saw her bondmate’s remaining hand curl into a fist and watched her chest rise and fall with greater and greater speed the longer she held the position. She hadn’t been in the London hospital room when Shepard’s last panic attack began, but she imagined it started much like this. Doctor Chakwas and Miranda hovered over the bed, silent, but ready to spring into action should they be needed.

“Shepherd, look at me!” Chakwas took control of the situation like the professional she was. “Shepard!”
Jane’s eyes snapped away from her arm and to the doctor. Liara continued to hold her bondmate’s hand down, but could feel it beginning to slip from her grasp.

“Commander, you can get through this. You need to remain strong and in control. Do you understand me?”

If Shepard tried to speak, all that came out were huffs of air.

“She’s locking her jaw. Liara, you may need to move away.”

“No, I can’t.” She nodded her head down, where she struggled to keep Shepard’s fist still. Still, she would not be able to hold it forever.

“Commander, I don’t want to sedate you again, but I will if I must. You have to fight this!”

Miranda moved to the opposite side of the bed from Liara. “Shepard, we’ve been in this situation before, do you remember? On Lazarus Station, before you were ready. You woke up too early and we had to put you back to sleep.”

The Shepard that turned to face Miranda was not the same commander that she had worked with to fight the Collectors. Jane’s eyes were wild, manic. Her breaths came hot and strong through her nose, like a wild animal.

“Listen to Doctor Chakwas,” Miranda said, putting a gentle hand on Shepard’s right shoulder. Liara noticed how she intentionally blocked some of the scar from view. “Don’t succumb to this. You did once before and it almost killed you. We’ve all worked too hard to see you die here.”

Liara leaned in close to Jane’s ear and loosened her grip on the left fist, but only a little. “Please, don’t lose yourself. We’ll get through this together, like we always do. Concentrate on me. Turn back to me.”

Shepard’s head whipped back to her, fast enough to hear some of the bones in her neck pop and crackle. Liara had to close her eyes for a second to hide a grimace at how much that must have hurt. Jane’s jaw creaked and a vein in her turned neck began to pulse with a wild rhythm. Those wild eyes, open too wide and consumed with everything that wasn’t Jane Shepard, once again cut into Liara like daggers.

“That’s right.” She forced herself to don a reassuring smile. Surrounded by people who knew medicine, or at least Shepard’s physical body, better than she ever would, Liara felt completely out of her depth trying to calm this storm. But she had to try. She kept her face and breathing calm even though she wanted to do anything but. “Look at me. Don’t look at anything else, don’t think about anything else. Look at me, Jane. Nothing else exists but me. Shut it all out. Can you do that for me?”

Shepard’s wild stare did not falter or break, but the vein in her neck began to pulse a little slower.

“I’m here for you. I’ll always be here. You don’t have to be afraid or feel alone anymore. You can rest now.” Liara removed one of her hands from Jane’s fist and put it on top of her head, replicating the way Shepard’s hand had stroked her crest just a few minutes earlier. The spiky barbs of new hair growth tickled her palm, but she managed to keep her face calm. She even managed to smile. “This is just a temporary thing. We’ll get past this. You’ll get past this. And I will be here every time you need me.”

The labored breathing slowed down, so did the wild heartbeat. Shepard’s jaw also relaxed, not enough to open, but the horrible grinding sound ceased. To her left, Liara saw Chakwas disappear from view. She feared the doctor meant to sedate Shepard no matter what happened here.
“Just keep holding on, Jane. You’re home now. You’re far away from the war, from that place, from everything. It’s just us, and it will be that way forever. Just hold on.”

“What am I holding on to?” Shepard’s voice sounded so weak, so full of suffering that Liara could not stop tears from falling down her cheeks. Miranda turned away, though she kept her supportive hand on the scars. How could this warrior, this slayer of Reapers, monsters and villains alike sound so broken? All cultures had stories of heroes who did impossible things then walked away like they had done nothing at all. They were invincible and mighty, characters who could not be harmed because people needed to believe in heroes like that.

In reality, heroes got hurt. And they suffered. What real heroes needed were people like Chakwas, Miranda, and Liara. People who helped them heal and people who loved them.

“Me, Jane. You’re holding on to me.” Like she did before, Liara slid her fingers into Shepard’s fist, slowly opening it and entwining their hands together.

Shepard finally closed her eyes, which had begun to redden and take on a disturbing hue. She uncoiled her muscles as she took in deliberate, controlled breaths. No other sounds in the medbay reached Liara other than Jane’s deep, calming breathing. She thanked the Goddess in the silence, grateful that she could once again reach Shepard before she fell to something horrible inside her mind.

After a long moment of quiet, Jane opened her eyes again. “I think I can do that.” She whispered. “I love you.”

Liara’s cheeks blushed violet, hearing the words through her translator, but knowing the sounds Jane actually made. She leaned forward so she could whisper in return and not hear any comments from the other women in the room. “I love you.” Liara said in English before planting a tiny, loving kiss on Shepard’s ear.

Before she could sit up again, Doctor Chakwas’s hand touched Liara’s shoulder.

“Thank you, Liara. I don’t think anyone else could have done what you just did for her. I also don’t think Shepard’s system could have handled any more sedatives for a good long while. Am I correct?”

Shepard nodded her agreement.

“Still, I’d like you to take this, Commander. It’s not a sedative, anesthetic or anything that will make you drowsy.” She held up a small white pill and cup of water. Liara had to reluctantly untangle her hand with Shepard’s so she could reach up and take the items.

“What is it?” Liara asked as she took the cup of water, while Shepard’s fingers wrapped around the pill.

“Something she should have been prescribed weeks ago.” Her voice became very serious. “Shepard, I am going to make myself very clear: You’re not well. Obviously your body is still injured, but the damage to your mind is going to get worse if you don’t treat it. I’ve been a military doctor for a very long time and I know exactly what you’re going through. You must take these pills and you WILL continue your appointments with Doctor Eriks as soon as we set up a video communication system with him. Do you understand me?”

Shepard cowed under Karin’s overbearing presence like a scolded child. She nodded again and took the pill and then a sip of water without fuss. A grin spread on Miranda’s face as she turned back to
face the Commander.

Chakwas was not finished. “You’re going to take these pills as directed on the bottle without deviation, do you understand? If I have to, I’ll put Liara in charge of them. I somehow doubt you’d enjoy that.” She nodded at Liara. Not a casual gesture, but a very serious confirmation. “When you run out, come see me and you will be given more. I will not have you lie about taking them, nor will I tolerate you deciding one day that you know best and want to stop. Do you understand me?”

Shepard nodded again. Her pale, freckled cheeks lost some more of their color under the withering speech.

“Good.” Karin returned to her normal self. “I just hope you really do understand, Shepard. It pains me to know you didn’t escape the war unscathed. We have ways to help you get back to your old self, but they only work if you are willing to keep up with it.”

“I am.” Shepard replied with a hoarse but determined voice.

Doctor Chakwas smiled and patted Shepard’s leg, which still remained covered by the soft blankets. “Well then, now that we’ve finished this nasty business, I think we can finally give you some good news.”

Liara’s head perked up as Karin turned to Miranda. “Miss Lawson, I believe this is your show. I’ll be here if you need me.”

Chakwas returned to her coffee while Miranda went back to the foot of the bed.

“Shepard, I need to know, right now, without a single shred of lying, how your back feels.”

Liara looked at her bondmate with pleading eyes. She wanted to know as well.

“It aches.” Came the weak answer.

“That’s to be expected, given what you went through. Does it feel any worse than before?”

“No. Feels better.”

Miranda grinned. “Good, then we did our jobs. You still have some residual nerve damage we’d rather your body healed on its own. Your spine is in okay shape, but you really shouldn’t put any real stress on it for the time being. Other than that…” A glint crossed the woman’s eye. Something akin to an excited, but nervous look. “If you feel ready, we can get you back on your feet. You can start walking again.”

“What?”

Liara’s hands went back down to Jane’s arm, caressing the muscles for a half second before squeezing them out of excitement.

“Not very far at first. And not without something to help support your weight. But your legs were not significantly damaged, and even the idiots in London managed to not screw up their healing. But we can start your physical therapy any time you like.”

Shepard’s face almost returned to something resembling its normal countenance. Liara expressed joy enough for both of them.
Chapter 31

Upon reaching N7, Shepard, along with all the others who completed the program with her, had been given unique jackets by their superiors as a gift. A small token of appreciation for enduring, surviving and achieving what so few Alliance marines could ever hope to accomplish. A hectic military lifestyle (and the fact she wore it at literally every opportunity) degraded the original hoodie until it barely resembled the garment she had been given. Black had become dark grey, holes appeared in the armpits, along the waistband, and on the front. And somewhere along the line, the N in the N7 logo had worn away to nothingness. But she still had it with her on the original Normandy and often wore it along with an old pair of sweatpants to do her endless amounts of paperwork for both her Alliance superiors and her new Council overseers as she hunted Saren. In the month after Sovereign’s destruction, before the Collector attack, Liara had begun to wear it. And she often wore it over nothing but bare skin when they spent time in Shepard’s quarters.

The original jacket, the original pair of sweatpants, as well as every material thing she owned, were lost with the ship. And yet, at the start of the Reaper war, when Shepard had been semi-forced to retake command of the second Normandy, she found a brand new N7 hoodie waiting in her cabin with no explanation of how it got there. She never had the time to ask anyone about it, so she never found out the identity of her mysterious benefactor. The new jacket had been a great source of comfort in those horrible wartime months, reminding her of better days every time she felt the familiar cloth shield her from the cold of the ship’s ventilation system.

After brutal negotiations with Doctor Chakwas to allow her to wear SOMETHING other than a flimsy hospital gown, Shepard once again donned the comfortable combination of hoodie and sweatpants. The cloth hadn’t become as worn and comfortable as the original jacket yet, but it still did wonders for her mood to feel it wrapped around her. The cool shipboard air no longer bit into her skin, both on her arms and torso, but most importantly on the top of her head. Having the hood up provided a comforting illusion that she still had a full head of hair, and thus she felt a little more like herself.

However, the right sleeve of the jacket, the one that proudly displayed the white and red stripes she earned through immense hardship, sat deflated and empty against her torso. She tried to stick the end of the sleeve into the front pocket of the jacket, but it kept falling out every time she adjusted her position in the reclined bed. Chakwas tried to suggest rolling or tying it up to keep it from becoming a hindrance or distraction, but Shepard vetoed it. She could pretend she still had two arms as long as the sleeve remained whole and loose, no matter how many times it bunched, tugged or pulled as it caught on something. The illusion provided more comfort than the dark thoughts she sometimes succumbed to, so she preferred it stay for as long as possible.

Still, the more she moved, the more the sleeve began to tangle under her backside, which made her wiggle in a very undignified manner to dislodge it. She would have asked Liara for help, but she insisted the Asari not confine herself to a single room anymore. Liara had things to do, a network of spies and bad people to manage, and friends to connect with out there. Shepard could handle some isolation.

Maybe she was starting to prefer it.

Still, it had been Liara who delivered the clothes from Shepard’s cabin. And she always found ways to spend time in the medbay. Like when she’d transfer her console’s readouts to a datapad and then lie down in the medical bed next to her. Or the way she always brought in food for herself, Jane and Doctor Chakwas. Liara had also become a capable nurse, handling the things Shepard needed done
for hygiene and grooming reasons. It still felt humiliating and degrading every time, but it hurt her pride a little less when Liara helped.

But that would end soon. Miranda had begun to make good on her promise to get Jane walking again. The worst damage her feet and legs sustained from the Crucible had been minor fractures and burns, something medi-gel handled with ease. Had that been the extent of it all, she would have walked out of medbay days ago.

Unfortunately, the shadow of David Nicolo still hung over Jane Shepard. When they fought in that dark room, he pulled her to the hard floor, and her right knee impacted before the rest of her body, shattering the kneecap. She recalled the fall with great clarity, but not the damage it caused. The only pain she remembered from that night, which promised to haunt her for the rest of her life, came from her back and right limb.

Still, that meant she required more procedures from Chakwas and Miranda. Most of the repair work had been done immediately after they returned to the ship, but the two had become wary of taxing Shepard’s system further. Part of the deal that allowed her to wear sweatpants included she allow her own body finish healing the damage to her knee instead of submitting to more surgeries, medi-gel and anesthetics. That meant pain. A lot of it.

Not comparable in the least to what she had already been through, but why did it have to be her right knee?

It had to have been a cosmic joke. A horrific attempt to make Shepard’s entire right side a useless lump of flesh while the left side of her body remained whole. It wasn’t fair. And it made her more upset than she thought possible over simple joint pain.

Flexing her right leg made her concentrate on her right side. Which made her concentrate on her missing right arm. Which forced her to realize just how much she lost to the war. It made her realize how useless she would forever be as a soldier. Without a perfect biosynthetic replacement, she would never be able to shoot again. She could never pass physicals, never wear armor, and never pilot an Alliance vehicle again. What good could she possibly serve now? Her entire reason for living had been stripped away.

A mental image struck, a vision of one of her battles going wrong, ending with a bullet in her head. It provided that strange comfort again to think about her life ending as it should have: in battle.

No. Stop that. Stop thinking like that. Concentrate on something else.

The service had long ago taken second priority to Shepard. The Alliance and the Council gave up on her after the Collectors destroyed the Normandy. Liara had not. Liara brought her back. Yes, Cerberus did the actual medical stuff she’d rather not think about, but they would have never been able to do it without Liara’s intervention.

She had other reasons to live. The service pulled her out of her first life, back on Earth among the trash of civilization. Liara pulled her away from the Alliance military. She gave Jane the chance to start a third life, one free of fighting, guns, armor and warships. She just needed to hold on a little longer, to let the galaxy rebuild itself like her body healed. And while it did, she could remain here, with the people that mattered. With the one person that mattered.

Yeah, she could do that. She had a plan. She could endure. She could rebuild her life into something worth living as long as Liara stood by her.

Right?
Would she be there?

“Good afternoon, Shepard.” Miranda strode into the medbay. “You ready to stand up?”

“So soon?” Jane asked as she unconsciously flexed both her knees, bringing them up to her chest and back down flat. She grimaced as she felt bone scrape against bone on her right.

“No time like the present. Besides, I’m sure you’re just as excited to get out of that bed as I am to get off this ship.”

“You’re leaving?” Shepard asked as she shuffled forward with her left arm. She had to stop multiple times to tug the right sleeve of the N7 hoodie out from under her.

“Don’t need me around to rebuild you if there’s nothing to rebuild. Besides, I got used to having my own living space when I was XO. It doesn’t feel right knowing I can’t go into my own office.”

“Yeah, Liara’s kinda claimed that room.” Shepard scratched the back of her neck, which almost slid the hood off of her cold head.

“So I noticed.” Miranda smirked and moved to Jane’s side as she dangled her legs over the side of the bed. “Have you been doing your exercises like I instructed you? I’m no physical therapist, but I figured what I told you couldn’t hurt.”

“There’s a difference between ‘couldn’t hurt’ and ‘didn’t hurt.’” She swung her left leg out then placed it back. She did the same for the right, but slower. Again, she felt the pain that Shepard imagined would feel the same if someone smashed a hammer directly onto her kneecap.

“I can see there’s some discomfort.”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

“Do you think you need more time? We should probably get Chakwas in here.”

“No.” Shepard interrupted as fast as she could. God, she was sick of lying in bed. “No, I can take it.”

“If you say so. We’re just going to take a few steps for now, get your legs used to your weight again. You’re going to need to stay honest with me, Shepard. If you try to act tough about this pain and don’t tell me if something goes wrong or suddenly starts to hurt, you may lose your ability to walk permanently.”

“I understand.” Shepard breathed and flexed her knees again. She mentally pushed the discomfort aside. She had been taught to do that a long time ago. When her muscles and joints hurt too much to keep going, she put that pain in another part of her mind and concentrated on moving forward. The discomfort in her knee did not feel a thing like her nerve-damaged back. That agony seared like fire, impossible to ignore. But this petty little knee ache? She could mentally wad that up and throw it away.

“This would be so much easier if we had access to a tissue synthesizer worth a damn. And a billion credits to pay for it.” Miranda mused as she moved to Shepard’s left and put a hand on her back.

“You know, getting off that table when you woke me up on Lazarus Station wasn’t exactly pleasant, tissue synthesizer or not.”

“And then you shot your way through a dozen security mechs and managed to hold a gun to my face not twenty minutes later.”
“Yeah, well, I had priorities.” Fear, mostly, she reminded herself. Terror at waking up in an unfamiliar place, surrounded by unfamiliar people and hostile mechs. And yet, one of the very first things she blurted to Jacob had to ask about the location of her crew. She wanted more than anything to get back to them.

“Did those priorities involve a certain blue body?” Miranda’s salacious words had been the perfect distraction for Shepard’s mind as she pushed the Commander off the bed and forced her feet to contact the floor. Of course, the one person she truly wanted to reunite with had been her primary motivator to keep fighting in those early days with Cerberus.

Like when she tried to stand up in London, the cold of the medbay floor against the soles of her feet sent electric tingles up through Shepard’s body. She had almost forgotten what it felt like to feel anything other than cloth and cushion beneath her. It surprised her how much her feet ached as her body adjusted. But the ache didn’t bother her. It felt good. It made her smile. It reminded her of how it felt to be a person.

Shepard mentally pictured herself, Miranda at her side, standing tall and proud. Her left arm and right sleeve dangled where they should, giving her the mental illusion of two strong limbs. And with the hood still up, she didn’t have to think about her bald head. She imagined herself as a whole being again: the Commander Shepard that had saved the galaxy multiple times and always came back for more. The soldier and the Spectre in one deadly package. The black-armored heroine who saved a demure archaeologist from ancient traps and still had time to destroy a legion of Geth before a volcano destroyed them all. The woman who-

Jane held in a scream as her right knee reminded her of everything she could no longer be. The joint began to fold and collapse from under her as the mental pain-blocks eroded away. Shredding torture reached a new crescendo as her knee bent and the bones wrenched.

“Shepard!” Miranda’s perfect reflexes sprung into action as she leapt forward and supported Jane’s left side, holding the Commander’s weight as if it were nothing.

Shepard instinctively put all her weight on her left leg, letting Miranda hold her upright. Her right knee complained and creaked, but it did not threaten further danger. “Shepard, are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” Jane said through gritted teeth. A few beads of sweat glistened on her brow as she regained control. “Just wasn’t expecting it to give out like that.”

“Are you in pain?”

“No more than usual.” In the face of her sore feet and ravaged knee, the throbbing in her back sat far away in her mind. Still there, but not relevant.

Miranda pushed Shepard up so she could find her balance again. “Think you could take a step?”

“Only one way to find out.”

With a supportive pair on hands on her left side, Shepard lifted her right foot and pushed it forward. She didn’t mean to, but the feeling of the deck under her feet, her weight back on her legs, and her head looking at the world from her normal height instead of from a bed overwhelmed her. Maybe she still had a few too many emotions left boiling from when she realized she could see Liara, but tears welled in her eyes as she took a literal step toward becoming a human being again.

“Good, very good. Let’s do another.”

Shepard sucked in a deep breath and put her weight on her right knee. Agony rose, but she forced it
away for long enough for her left foot to catch up.

“All right. Take a moment to rest before we turn around.”

“Turn around? I’ve taken two steps.”

“On a knee that’s still healing from major surgery. I won’t have all my work go to waste because of your stupid pride. We’ll pick this back up after you’ve had a moment to rest.”

Shepard shook her head as she felt Miranda begin to put gentle pressure on her side, urging her to turn around. She complied, but with zero enthusiasm.

“Couldn’t have gone for one more?”

“No.”

The instant Shepard turned back to the bed that had become her new home as of late, a massive crash echoed from the medbay door. Had she the capacity, Jane would have jumped into the air as she reacted to the startling noise.

“Oh goddess.” Liara’s breathy voice followed the sound, which prompted Shepard to continue her pivot. She forced Miranda to follow along until she once again faced the door. The Asari crouched at the open threshold, hovering above two metal trays that had once been full of food. Real food, cooked on a real stove, not heated emergency rations. But Liara’s focus was not on the messy floor. Instead, her wide gaze stared at Shepard back on her feet.

“Hi, Liara.” Shepard managed to say as a goofy grin wormed its way across her face. She loved the sight of the powerful Shadow Broker fretting over a ruined meal.

“Shepard.” Liara managed to squeak out as she stood back up, the spilled food a distant memory to her. She approached slowly, a bit too slow for Jane’s tastes. Had her left arm not been wrapped around Miranda’s shoulder for support, she would have reached out for her bondmate.

Fortunately, the former Cerberus employee took the hint and shifted her position. “Liara, if you don’t mind taking over, I’ll… get someone else to clear that mess.”

“Y-yes. Of course.” Liara and Miranda shifted positions in less than a heartbeat’s time. The other woman disappeared from the medbay, intent on doing anything but cleaning up the deck plates. Shepard felt a brief spike of pity for whoever Lawson forced to do that job. But it passed as soon as her arm settled around her Asari.

“Hey you.” Shepard said as her grin widened.

“Hello yourself.” Liara replied before turning her head back to the bed. “So what were you doing before I arrived and made a fool of myself?”

“Walking back to the bed. Because I’m apparently a baby who can’t walk yet.”

“You seem to be doing just fine.”

“I thought so too.” Shepard took one small step forward with Liara to prove her words. It felt good to defy Miranda, even if the rebellion proved nothing.

She looked into her bondmate’s eyes as they both stood in the center of the medbay. A few more tears managed to escape as they looked at each other the way they were supposed to. Not from a bed
looking up, but as equals. Two people.

She didn't need to pretend as long as she stood right there. In Liara’s eyes, Shepard was still the same woman, whole and healthy, she had always been. No amount of scars, hair or limbs mattered to her. And in those eyes, they didn’t matter to Shepard.
Chapter 32

Miranda disappeared for several days, leaving the physical therapy in Doctor Chakwas’s capable hands. As a military doctor, she understood Shepard’s need to do more than simple exercises and pacing back and forth for what felt like hours, so the good doctor had Jane help with small things around the medbay. Simple tasks like organizing supplies on easy-to-reach shelves, filling out boring paperwork while standing over Karin’s desk, and cleaning the dust off of some of the equipment. She remained under strict orders to not strain her knee, and to rest far more often than she felt necessary, but Shepard complied as long as she got the opportunity to actually do something.

With only one hand, and the one she didn’t consider her dominant one, many of those simple tasks became very complicated. She could not hold down any of the equipment and clean it at the same time, for example. Some of the bigger things were bolted down, of course, but smaller tools and individual items like handheld scanners became objects of frustration. Typing on Chakwas’s personal terminal also became an exercise in tedious, slow, boring hell. Everyone, even homeless gang members like her, learned how to type at a very young age. She became very proficient at it over the years, otherwise she would have never had time to do anything else but paperwork. But now, Shepard felt like she had to punch each key with just one finger, and then go back and fix the dozens of mistakes she made trying to get all the formatting correct.

She did not go near the AI core, or its locked door. Nobody went in there. Jane tried to think of it as a regular wall, not the entrance to the home of someone she killed. Sometimes the lie worked, but not always.

Liara tried to help, and Shepard appreciated the times she came to the medbay with food or to help take care of things she didn’t like to think about. But she also felt the overwhelming need to convince the Shadow Broker to stay in her quarters and attend to her duties. Likewise, Jane also felt better in the long periods of time when Karin needed to leave for various reasons.

Chakwas had been gone for over a day so far, attending an emergency briefing somewhere on Earth. The empty medbay had become her own slice of isolated heaven.

Solitude had been a very rare thing in Shepard’s life, and now she couldn’t get enough of it. It helped her think, and not in the bad way when the muscle inhibitors forced it upon her.

At least, she didn’t think it was bad.

Would it be so terrible to tell everyone she sought internal peace by thinking about how close she came to dying? Or fantasizing about the thousands of ways her life could have ended over the years? Or reminiscing about the time it actually happened? Chakwas would obviously answer such a statement with another lecture and redoubling her efforts to set up a vid-comm with the London hospital. But what would Liara think? Would she be happy to know Shepard found some way of finding internal happiness, or would she be horrified at what it required? Probably the latter.

If she ever reestablished contact with Doctor Eriks, she would be obligated to tell him, of course. But what could he do about it? Prescribe more pills? Give her a Chakwas-style talking-to? Not much a man on the surface could do to a woman in high orbit.

Did any of this matter? It’s not like they needed to know, right?

She’d keep this to herself for now. It made her smile to think about dying, and smiling had become all too rare these days. All she needed to do was close her eyes and imagine one of the hundreds of
batteries she encountered over the years…

She began to drift away to a memory of one of her many battlefields: An uncharted planet somewhere in the Traverse, full of Saren’s Geth and nothing else. They had her, Ashley and Wrex pinned down in a crater with dozens of weapons firing from all angles. The Mako’s shields withstood most of it, but they couldn’t last forever. In reality, Williams had shown amazing precision shooting with the vehicle’s main cannon while Shepard and Wrex cut a hole through the Geth’s ambush with their own withering hail of gunfire. The battle had been short, but exhilarating. At least for Wrex.

But what if something went different? What if Shepard left cover at the perfect moment, and instead of a Geth projectile flying overhead, it impacted her chest? She wouldn’t feel it breach her shields, but she would feel the searing heat as it burned her armor away. Then it would impact her skin, cooking and burning it until it passed through and shattered her ribcage. The bullet and bone fragments would wreak havoc on her internal organs. Death would have been instant but extremely painful-

“Good to see you’ve made progress, Commander.” Miranda opened the medbay doors with a hiss louder than Jane expected. It yanked her out of the memory-turned-fantasy.

“Where’d you go?” Shepard slurred the words out as she banished the pleasantly dark thoughts. *Just as I got to the good part, too.*

“Needed to spend some time in places other than this ship and London. Not all of our cities are charcoal and dust, you know. A lot of the smaller towns on most of the continents were relatively untouched. There’s a lot of surviving infrastructure out there, and a lot of hope.”

“So it’s not all as bad as London?” Of all the lessons Shepard had been taught in her career, it was that hope tended to be infectious. Even with her mind in such a bad place, that little bit of news brightened her day.

“Not at all.” Miranda smiled as she walked to the bed that had become Shepard’s home. “Fortunately, when people evacuate an area, they tend to loot the jewelry stores and electronics shops. Not many are smart enough to pick through clinics and hospitals. Which is why I found these.”

She placed the objects on the bed. A set of modern crutches, with a polished metal surface but otherwise plain and unassuming.

“I appreciate the thought, but I can’t exactly use the whole set.” Shepard raised her right limb, still covered in the N7 jacket. Much to her dismay, Chakwas put her foot down about the sleeve. It had been rolled up and tied so it no longer caught on anything while she helped out around the medbay. Still, in this one instance, it helped her make her point.

“You obviously don’t need both, Shepard,” Miranda replied in her usual ‘you’re an idiot’ tone, “But it’s always good to have a spare. You never know when it comes to you and your lifestyle.”

“What lifestyle?” Shepard snapped back.

Miranda seemed to ignore the comment. Instead, she lifted one of the crutches and held it out for Shepard to take. “I’m sure you can figure out how to use it.”

Shepard huffed and took the single crutch with her one hand. She leaned it against the bed and limped closer to it, doing her best to not knock it over as she slipped her left arm into the open cuff.
She wrapped her fingers around the handgrip and put a small amount of her weight into it. A moment later, she shifted her body away from the bed, testing her balance.

“How does it feel, Shepard?”

“A little high, maybe?” She didn’t know how to describe it. It felt a little uncomfortable on her arm, making it hard to put enough weight on the crutch to help her right knee. “I don’t know, I’ve never used one of these before.”

“I can adjust that.” Lawson said as she approached the stick of metal attached to Shepard. She fiddled with something for a second before the entire thing slid down half a centimeter. “Any better?”

“A lot, actually.” Indeed, the tiny adjustment made all the difference for her. Shepard put more weight on the device, which seemed to make her scraping knee pain all but disappear. Or at least become infinitely more manageable.

“Good, then I need you to do something.”

“What?”

A glint of something mischievous glinted in Miranda’s eye.

“I need you to leave the medbay and don’t come back. Unless you absolutely have to, of course.”

Shepard turned to look Miranda. She couldn’t believe the gall of this woman. Well, actually she could. “Shouldn’t Doctor Chakwas make that kind of order?”

“She’s not here, is she?” Miranda paused, an unusually concerned expression crossed her face. “You’re driving yourself crazy, Shepard. Anyone who looks at you can see it. How many more times can you dust that scanner over there before you start removing the paint?”

“Well… I… How did you know that?” Shepard’s eyes narrowed.

“Chakwas has been sending me messages about your recovery. I may not have her bedside manner, but I still care about what happens to you. Your recovery has been unusually fast, mostly thanks to my efforts. But that means you also need to move forward faster than protocol might dictate. That includes getting out of here.”

*Why do you care?* Jane thought. *There aren’t any more Reapers. Your investment has done its job. No need to fret over it any longer.* But she did not say it out loud. “Where would I go?” is what actually came out.

“How should I know? It’s your ship. I’m sure you’ve got access to every room, nook and cranny on this vessel. Get out of this room and don’t come back unless you absolutely must. Doctor’s orders.”

“What if I need to stay here?” Something tugged in her guts. Anxiety? Fear of leaving the hospital space she had become all too familiar with? Maybe she needed to be in here because it made the dark fantasies palatable. If she imagined death every day, she could remind herself her real body sat in a place of healing. Maybe she really did need to stay-

Miranda snorted a laugh. “Seriously? You’re going to pull that? Get moving before I pick you up with my biotics. And I will not be as gentle as your Asari.”

Shepard huffed and slammed the crutch down, but she did not argue. Instead, she took a tentative
Then she hesitated in front of the entrance. The anxiety came back, squeezing around her heart. *No, too soon. Need to stay here. You can’t go back to the world yet. They might need you to fight again. And what kind of pathetic fight could you put up?*

“Keep moving, soldier.” Miranda said in her most condescending tone. A flash of anger burned the anxiety away as she heard the words. For a moment, she contemplated turning around and smacking Miranda with the crutch, but decided against it. Her knee would hurt too much if she wanted to do a proper strike.

The medbay doors opened on their own, sending a wave of slightly warmer air washing over Shepard. She forgot Chakwas kept her space a little cooler than the rest of the ship. Still, she felt no need to lower the hood of her jacket. The Normandy wasn’t that warm.

As the new air rushed by, the distinct aroma of the ship’s nearby galley followed. James must have cooked something several hours ago, if the distinctive spices that lingered in her nose were correct. As a chef, his food usually came out edible, though Shepard sometimes missed Gardner’s unique recipes and the way he made the crew deck smell when he had all the proper ingredients at his disposal. Not all of those smells had been pleasant, but she still missed them. She hoped he hadn’t become one of Cerberus’s victims during the war. He followed her when she broke ties with the organization and took the ship, but then disappeared when she spent those long months in Alliance custody.

Shepard limped forward some more, getting used to using the crutch on her arm for support. Her right knee still ached and scraped, but she shoved the discomfort away. She could feel Miranda’s gaze on her back, willing her away from the medbay like a solar wind. Just as she considered the crutch-slap, Shepard thought about faking a catastrophic fall, one that would not only send Miranda into a fit, but summon several people to her side so they could carry her back to her bed. But only for a moment. She didn’t need people taking time away from their schedules to aid her. Besides, if she faked a fall, she could get really hurt, or worse, embarrassed. And then people would need to spend more time doting on her. Too much hassle for a lame excuse.

The medbay doors closed after Shepard reached the table in the middle of the crew deck. A few dents and scratches covered its surface. Some she remembered, put there by stressed crewmembers slamming utensils down, one even came from the Collectors during their brief takeover of the ship. But many more looked very new.

Even now, all these weeks later, nobody took the time to tell her what happened to the Normandy when Shepard activated the crucible. Liara’s story had been vague, since she mostly talked about her bruises, spending some time in medbay, then even more time in her quarters before the ship returned home. What horrible fate did she bring down on her crew to cause all these scuffs and cracks on a table meant for meals? Her mind flashed with horrible images of panics, damage and suffering. People fighting for food as they limped home, or pieces of the ship falling onto the table as it nearly shook itself apart trying to escape whatever energy the crucible released on the galaxy. Either way: her fault.

She should have celebrated her new freedom by heading straight to Liara’s quarters. For once, an actual pleasant memory reared in her head, of sneaking up on the Shadow Broker as she lost herself in her work, then wrapping her arms around the Asari and making her yelp with surprise.

Shepard couldn’t do that anymore. Not with one arm.

*Then why should she go there?*
Obviously, the Shadow Broker would be too busy repairing the galaxy to pay attention to Jane’s pitiful needs. Entire populations could depend on agents doing what needed to be done. A lot of lives could be saved or lost on Liara’s word alone. What could one injured soldier compare to that much responsibility?

But Liara always said Shepard came first.

Well, she lied. If Liara wanted to see Shepard, she would already be out here, talking to her. The fact she remained locked in her quarters explained everything. The Shadow Broker came first, Liara T’soni came second. Shepard a distant and minor priority. Not just Liara, but everyone around Jane had better things to do than waste time with her. Even Miranda had just kicked her out.

Shepard growled and turned away from the closed door. In her jacket pocket, the almost full bottle of pills Chakwas lectured her about rattled. Forgotten and unused without someone around to remind her of their presence.

She took a few steps forward, not really knowing where to go. Maybe she could see what state her cabin had been left in. Not many people had access to the room, and she doubted anyone had taken the time to clean and organize it after the ship crashed. What kind of horrible mess awaited her up there?

Only one way to find out.

Her crutch sounded entirely too loud as it made intolerable THUNK noises against the deck plates. That’s when she saw it.

As Shepard rounded the corner toward the elevator, the memorial wall filled her vision. She lost count of the hours she spent staring at it during the war, memorizing each name and its position on the display. Then spending more time memorizing each time a new one had been added. Just like during the war, she arrived to see more names placed with the other honored dead.

EDI.

And Admiral David Anderson.

His name had been put onto a plate much bigger than the others, and placed in the center of the display. A second mount hovered over his, ready for another large name.

She felt drawn to it.

Shepard limped forward and raised her hand to the spot where another name plate should have been attached. The crutch fell from her arm and hit the deck with a loud crash.

She could only think of one name that would have warranted a position above Anderson’s. A name that should have been there in the first place.

Even her own crew wished she had died with the Reapers.
Chapter 33

When Liara first saw Jane back on her feet, taking those tentative steps with Miranda, the flood of emotions that hit the Shadow Broker had been nothing short of overwhelming. Every scrap of progress Shepard made toward recovery had been a source of untold joy for Liara, but walking again trumped them all. The first night after that monumental event, she sat over Jane’s bed like she had done so many times before, fighting against tears and uncontrolled laughter at the same time. She spent those hours imagining how their life would turn out together now that they were both free of Reapers and debilitating injury.

And then Shepard asked to be left alone.

Then she asked again. And again. Every day, she pushed Liara out of the medbay so she could work in peace. The only times they spent together had become stiff and formal, especially when Liara had to take care of Shepard’s hygienic needs. No matter how many times she said she didn’t mind aiding her bondmate in such a way, Shepard treated each visit like a burden that grew heavier with each passing day. She understood Jane’s aversion to feeling so helpless about such matters, it would have eaten away at her as well if the positions were reversed. But did she have to be so… mean about it?

Fortunately, Liara T’soni held no concept of true privacy when it came to Shepard. She had long ago connected her equipment to the Normandy’s security systems and set up a video feed from the medbay to one of the surviving video terminals on her wall. She spent more time watching the feed than she read her reports or digested information about the galaxy. Glyph could still handle most of it, and he managed to get her attention when something truly important came her way.

Miranda’s unexpected arrival broke Shepard’s well-established daily routine, which also broke Liara’s. The Shadow Broker stared with rapt attention as Lawson helped Shepard adjust to a single crutch that helped her move faster than she had earlier. The security feed did not include audio, but the tone of the conversation in medbay could be easily deduced. Miranda kicked Jane out.

Without sparing a second thought, Liara closed the medbay feed and opened a security camera in the crew deck, so she could continue to watch Jane as she moved about. Her first destination had been the table right in front of her. That meant her body faced the direction of Liara’s door! That could mean Shepard intended to come right over!

She unconsciously smoothed some wrinkles out of her white coat as she watched Shepard look down at the table, then sent a quick request to the Goddess that Jane get bored of looking at it and start moving toward her quarters. The Asari’s mind went wild with thoughts about how they could spent their first moments in private together. Nothing too strenuous or physically demanding, unless Jane felt up for it. Most likely a lot of time on her small bed just enjoying time together. Time they earned after so many years of hardship and suffering.

But then Jane turned around. The expression on her human face had been hard to read on the small monitor. Anger? Sadness? Disgust? Why would she feel that way?

As Shepard began to limp away from the door, a chime squeaked out of her omni-tool. Odd, very few people sent her messages directly to the device, especially when they stood just a few meters away on the same deck.

*Concerned about Shepard’s behaviour. Estimated, by listening to the bottle rattling in her pocket, that she has not been taking her medication. You need to confront her before something happens.* – Lawson
Miranda?

Why would Shepard refuse to listen to Doctor Chakwas? That medicine was essential for her to get better. It would be like refusing antibiotics for a bacterial infection. It did not make sense.

As the questions swarmed in her mind, another sound startled her. Not from her omni-tool or her console, but outside. A loud THUMP.

Then another.

She looked up to her video feed. Shepard stood a few centimeters from the memorial wall, staring at the blank spot that almost held her own name.

“Oh, Goddess.”

Liara watched as Shepard slammed her hand into the empty space. A half second later, the thump echoed through her almost silent quarters.

"Oh no.”

The secrets of an entire galaxy mattered absolutely nothing to Liara T’soni as she ran from her dark space and into the crew deck. She didn’t even check to see if her door closed and locked behind her as she dashed forward, too concerned with Shepard to deal with such a mundane matter.

She reached Jane in a matter of seconds, but it felt like an eternity. Her bondmate continued to pound her fist into the memorial as hard as she could, replicating her behavior in London when she first realized what Nicolo had done to her. The bruises on Liara’s back were no longer a concern, but she still remembered the powerful assault with grim detail. This time, she worried about the bruises Shepard would inflict upon herself if she continued to hit a solid bulkhead.

“Jane!” She shouted over the noise of fist against metal. “Jane!”

Shepard did not stop, but she turned her head.

“Shepard stop this!”

As if to spite her, Shepard smashed the memorial one more time before lowering her hand. She wobbled on unsteady feet as she locked her bright emerald eyes on Liara’s. A petulant, barren expression followed them. It reminded her of much younger Asari at the human equivalent of adolescence, the face of someone physically listening but mentally far away.

“You wanted me here.” Shepard said with a dangerous, low voice. Her arm raised again, but not to strike, just to point at the place her nameplate would have gone.

“What? No.”

“You were ready for me to die.”

“Why would you say that? How can you possibly think that?”

Shepard heaved forward on her injured knee, almost falling into Liara’s arms. “It’s the truth, isn’t it?” She took in a single, sharp breath through her nose. “Please tell me it’s the truth.”

“We… didn’t know what happened to you. We waited for days to hear anything, but we were cut off from normal communications. Kaidan wanted us to organize a memorial after we finished the repairs to the Normandy, so we could return to Earth ready to face the challenges ahead.”
“Why am I not up there?” Jane reached out as her knee began to give way. Laira caught her and held her against her shoulders. She knew the question had been about more than just a name on the wall. Even after all their moments together where it seemed everything would be all right, the thoughts that poisoned her mind had not been excised. She would never stop thinking this way if she continued to refuse help.

Laira reached out and pulled Shepard to her, holding her up and at the same time holding her close. “Because I couldn’t do it.”

“Why?” Jane slowly wrapped her one arm against Liara and buried her face in her white coat. The word came slow and muffled, as if she could not comprehend the answer.

“You survived and I knew it. It would not have been right to put you on a memorial for the honored dead if you weren’t among them.”

“But I should be.”

Liara wanted to shove Jane back and tell her an emphatic “NO”, but she did not. Instead, she continued to hold Shepard to her, running her hand along her left arm.

“You made a promise to me, and I to you. You returned to me, just like you said you would. And I said I would be here for you, no matter what happened. You mean everything to me, Jane Shepard. And you always will. The only place you belong is right here.”

If Shepard wanted to say something more, possibly more words of self-hatred, Liara did not let her say them. Instead, she looked up to the elevator and directed Jane’s gaze toward it.

“Let’s go somewhere else, somewhere better than an empty corridor.”

Shepard did not refuse or comply, she just let Liara mutely guide them forward. Shepard’s steps felt heavy and plodding, the walk of someone completely uninterested in moving forward.

They entered the lift and Liara pressed the top button without thinking, just relying on muscle memory to take them up to Shepard’s cabin. The ride was brief, but uncomfortable. As Jane’s knee got worse, she put more of her weight on Liara. Shepard didn’t weigh enough to cause concern for her own stability, but it did make moving a lot slower and awkward.

It took her a moment to realize this would be the first time they both occupied this room since the night before they assaulted the base that Cerberus used as their headquarters. She had been here in brief stints after that, to gather the clothes Jane wore, or to make sure Traynor kept the hamster fed and hydrated. But she always entered alone.

They worked hard to keep the damned rodent alive. The fishtank that took up most of the cabin’s left wall shattered when the Normandy crashed, spilling every drop of water and all of the fish into the room. None of the aquatic animals survived the crash, and had to be disposed of along with the glass and torrent of water that flooded the cabin. Fortunately, the repair crew managed to clean everything before mold and rot overtook the room, and worse, began to spread through the rest of the ship. But that left the hamster as Shepard’s sole pet.

Fortunately, the glass that held Shepard’s model ship collection survived the crash, with only a few small cracks near the edges to show anything happened to them at all. The displays had a special layer of different materials injected into them, both to support the weight of the models and to allow the panes to double as large vid screens. That bit of ingenious construction kept the ships in their place. Mostly. A few had been knocked loose and sat in haphazard ways, but none had fallen down.
“Come on, Jane.” Liara encouraged her limping love into the cabin. She looked around for a place to set her down before settling on the large bed. Hopefully, Shepard would not mind going from one bed to another. At least this one would be more comfortable than a medical table.

The short set of stairs caused Shepard to groan in agony as they descended, but they made it down together.

“Lie down.”

Jane still didn’t argue or fight, she just followed directions, settling down on the bed and extending her legs so her knee no longer pained her. Liara remained on her feet, looking down. Miranda’s message still bothered her. If Shepard hadn’t taken any of her medication, it would explain her behavior. But that didn’t explain why she made the decision to ignore direct orders. A soldier like her would never ignore orders from a superior or a physician.

The Shadow Broker couldn’t rely on agents and contacts to get this information. She stepped close to Shepard’s side and knelt, meeting her face to face.

“Why haven’t you been taking your pills?”

“How did you know that?”

Liara smiled, “You should know by now that you can’t hide anything from me.”

Shepard sighed and turned away, curling into a fetal position on her left side. She pulled her hood further over her head, trying to hide her face. The motion slid her right sleeve, still tied into a knot to avoid dangling haphazardly, further up until it stuck out like a macabre black, white and red flag.

“I don’t deserve them.” Jane said after a long pause.

“And why don’t you deserve them?”

“Please leave, Liara.”

“No.” Liara stood up just enough to slide next to Shepard on the bed, wrapping herself around the human, even though her backside hovered dangerously close to falling off. She hoped the warmth from her stomach soothed Jane’s back.

Shepard did not turn around, but she did uncover her face. “You have better things to do than be here.”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

They remained silent for several long minutes, just breathing and staring at nothing. Jane barely moved, though sometimes she had to adjust for her knee or her arm growing uncomfortable.

“Jane? Please answer me. Why don’t you deserve your medication?” Liara prompted.

Instead of speaking, Shepard suddenly flipped over, not paying a moment’s heed to the fact she now rested on her bad knee and limb. Her eyes still held the vacant expression from the wall.

“All those people on that memorial. I killed them, Liara. I killed them all.”

“You didn’t kill any of them. The only fault lies with the Reapers. How does that make it okay to ignore what Doctor Chakwas wants for you?”
“You don’t understand. I don’t think you can ever understand.”

“Then help me. Tell me what I need to know.”

Shepard tried to push away, but could not escape the embrace of an Asari.

“If you tell me, Jane… I’ll leave.”

More silence, with only the sound of the ship between them.

“There was…” Jane began slowly, her voice barely above a whisper. “The crucible. And the catalyst. We hunted for it for so long…”

“I remember. The Citadel was the catalyst. It’s why we went back to Earth, because the Reapers moved it there.”

Shepard’s distant, adolescent look melted away, replaced by an empty stare that Liara had only seen in picture form. The look of someone who had stared into an abyss and never turned away. “No. It wasn’t. Not really. The catalyst was part of the Citadel. Some kind of… intelligence. It told me things. It told me how I could save everyone, if I chose... It wanted me to choose… it wanted…”

Large, hot tears began to flow down Jane’s cheeks. She began to slam her head against the pillow. Liara tried to reach out to stop her, but she pulled away.

“It wanted me to choose how I died, Liara!” Her head stopped moving. "Each choice would end the war… the harvest, but I had to die to make it happen!”

“Goddess.” What else could Liara say to that? She would not dare ask what awful choices the Reapers put in front of her. She never would find out. “But you didn’t.” She whispered a moment later.

“I think I should have.” Came the response, also a hoarse, broken whisper. “I killed everyone on that wall. I killed the Geth. I killed the Reapers. All of them my choices. And I wasn't good enough to save any of them. How can you possibly think I deserve to live after all that?”

This time, Liara spent time thinking of a reply. Shepard stared back at her, not weeping, not showing anything but that blank expression.

“Because I can’t live if you aren’t here with me. If you hadn’t returned to us after the war, Jane, I don’t know what I would have done. In the lifetime of an Asari, our time together would be less than a fleeting moment. But I don’t think I could ever move on. Not if I knew you had been taken away like that.”

“You don’t mean that.” A sneer crossed Shepard’s face.

And then Liara knew.

She just knew.

That she no longer talked to Jane Shepard, but the thing, the disease, in her mind. Put there by the Reapers and their allies, injected just like a foul drug, but through suffering instead of a syringe.

Doctor Chakwas made it clear that Liara might need to be put in charge of Shepard’s medication. And she would never forget the lecture Karin gave her in London.

She would not give up on her bondmate.
“I do mean it. And I will prove it to you.”

Without thinking of the consequences, Liara let her biotics loose and held Shepard down with gentle pressure all over her body.

“You will not succumb to this. I’ve let it go on long enough.”

With one hand controlling the biotic stasis, Liara reached into Shepard’s jacket pocket to fish out the bottle of medicine Chakwas had given her. Miranda’s estimates were correct, it had barely been touched.

“Doctor Chakwas assured you that you would not enjoy it if I had to be in charge of this.” She contorted her expression into something between her genuine worry and hard determination. She needed to do this, but she didn’t want to make it seem like she was just hurting Shepard out of spite. “I don’t want to do this more than once, Shepard. I hope you understand, however, that I will if I must. I won’t have the demons in your head take you away from me, not after all we’ve been through.”

Shepard did not reply because she could not. Liara could not guess much it hurt her, to again be unable to move her own muscles, but neither of them had a choice. It was either this, or watch everything fall apart. She asked the goddess and Shepard for forgiveness before opening the bottle.

“Wait, please.” The instant she let her biotics free Shepard’s jaw, just so she could force it open and drop the pill, Jane spoke. The voice sounded much the same as the awful, sick Shepard she had just been talking to, but had an undeniable spark of something else. Sheer terror, or the memories of what she had gone through, broke through the wall of nothingness and despair that consumed her. “I’ll take it. I’ll take the pill. Just please stop.”

Liara did not let go of the biotics, but did let her body’s own glow cease, as a show she would be willing to acquiesce. “Do I have your word? Will you make another promise to me that you will fight this? Just like you promised me you would come back?”

“Yes.”
Chapter 34

Jane did not fight when Liara let go of the biotics, nor did she run or argue. But she did uncontrollably shiver when Liara handed her some water to go with the medication. They both knew this would be the beginning of a colossal battle, a struggle between the depression and the person. But Shepard had help, and would never fight it alone. She just had to accept that she could no longer be alone when it came time to swallow a little pill. Not out of anger or sense of punishment, but because the enemy she fought would do its best to sabotage her at every turn.

Several hours passed before either of them spoke again. They remained on the bed the entire time, though somewhere along the line, Shepard sat up and wrapped a blanket around herself, then removed the N7 jacket. Liara did not ask to join her under it, suspecting Jane remained uncomfortable with what remained of her right arm. She had just traded one method of hiding for another. Hopefully, when the current mental battle reached a sense of stability, they could conquer that one next.

“I feel like someone is going to open that door any second and tell me that the war isn’t over.” Shepard startled Liara, who nearly dozed off surrounded by the stillness and comfort of a room she knew very well. “I’m terrified they’ll force me to fight. Even when I’m like... this.”

“You don’t have to fight ever again, my love.” Liara adjusted her position to sit behind Shepard, so she could hold her bondmate without choosing a preferred side. “You have earned the right to say no.”

“Except to you.”

“Except to me.” Liara smiled as she rested her head on Jane’s left shoulder. The human’s slowly growing hair tickled the right side of her crest, and her ear pressed against the place Liara would have had one if she weren’t Asari. Human ears fascinated her, since almost no other council races had external auditory organs. Maybe, when the galaxy returned to normal, she could spend time studying the strange appendage in detail.

“Liara, I-” Shepard turned to face Liara, who greeted her with a quick kiss on the lips, but she pulled away from it. “Sorry, I just don’t feel like…”

Anxiety and sorrow threatened to pull Liara's stomach up her throat, but she swallowed it back down. Why did Shepard not want a kiss? Did she truly make a mistake in trying to force the medication? Had she pushed the last button that ended Jane's connection to her? Or maybe she just overreacted. Shepard's thoughts still needed time to heal. Perhaps this was just another one of her many symptoms.

“You don’t need to apologize for anything. In fact, I should be the one apologizing for what I did.” She wrapped her arms around Shepard all the tighter. To her great relief, Jane did not shrug her off.

“No, you were right, Liara. As usual.” She bumped her shoulder a little for emphasis. “I just… I can’t keep living like this. One day I’m with you and I know I get through anything, the next I want nothing more than to be alone and think about all the ways I should have died. It’s tearing me up inside. I know we should be celebrating right now, just you and me. Doing everything we promised we would do as soon as the war ended...

"But at the same time I can’t stand to be in my own skin anymore.” A single tear fell down Shepard’s cheek. “I think I’m about to fall apart.”
I already told you I won’t let that happen.”

“You might not have a choice.”

Liara managed to clasp her hands around Shepard’s chest. “We always have choices. And I right now, I choose to never let you go. If it takes us sitting here, just like this, forever, I’ll make that sacrifice.”

What Shepard truly needed would be help from the right human doctors, a lot of time and even more patience. But in this exact moment, Liara sensed that Jane just needed to keep her thoughts distracted, to make her think about anything other than the horrible things she had been forcing upon herself for days, possibly weeks. Perhaps she could keep Shepard distracted long enough for her to fall asleep on her own, in peace. Sleeping always seemed to calm her mood, even if just a little bit.

A few possibilities crossed Liara’s mind as to what she could do. Some topics of discussion she could bring up would definitely put them both to sleep, but she didn’t want to bore Jane. Neither did she want to worry her with some of the information the Shadow Broker’s agents sent to her. No, she could think of only one real solution. One option that made her cheeks blush, but only because she hadn’t studied it enough.

“Do you remember that Asari-English book I had back in London?”

“What about it?” Shepard kept her head turned, but not all the way. Liara unclasped her hands to wipe the tears that fell from her bondmate’s eyes. “I think we looked up a couple of phrases one afternoon, but didn’t keep up with it.”

“What if I told you I didn’t stop studying?”

“Really?”

Liara deactivated her translator with a wave of her omni-tool. But instead of speaking, she just sat and listened to Jane breathe. The device didn’t filter out all the natural sounds made by other species, but it did find ways to make them palatable to other races. Unprocessed Turian vocal harmonics could cause discomfort to more sensitive species, like Salarians, for example.

She’d done this before, at night, when she couldn’t sleep. Shepard’s breathing always sounded very Asari to her. Calm, confident, powerful. Even now, after her body had gone through so much, suffered injuries that would have destroyed anyone else, her lungs sounded very much the same. The only difference she could detect was a slight wheeze when Jane inhaled. She doubted Shepard could hear or feel it. No matter. It just added to the symphony of her beauty.

“Hello… Jane.” Liara said in the alien language.

The thrill of greeting her bondmate in her own language sent a chill down Liara’s spine. She hoped Shepard felt the same.

The speed at which Jane turned her head seemed to confirm Liara’s hope. She replied with a short sentence that sounded like a mash of different exclamations, something that probably wouldn’t have made sense in English, let alone to a translator.

Rather than try to figure it out, she continued with the phrases she had practiced. “I… am… Asari. You… are… human.” She used her finger to point each of them out as she said the correct words. Then she felt her cheeks darken into deep violet as she finished. She hoped her accent didn’t make this all an exercise in futility.
“I will… learn more… for you. Soon.”

Jane said something in response that came out very fast and somewhat recognizable, but she said it too fast for Liara to process.

But then she then paused, closed her eyes, and said:

"Nu'zen fel'ani in-a lis'e medran."

Had they not been sitting together in the bed, Laira would have fallen backward. Shepard not only replied in Liara’s native Asari, but a full phrase with only a hint of accent, not the mangled grammar she managed to call English. Just hearing Jane’s voice, her real voice without a machine in the way, had been enough, even if she couldn’t understand the words. But to have her say that entire phrase back to her…

“You… speak… Asari?” She managed to build the English sentence even though her mind raced and her heart fluttered too hard in her chest. Shepard had no idea what effect it had on her. Liara only wished her gift of words did the same.

“One sentence.” Shepard said in English, but she also said it slow enough for Liara to comprehend, and also held up one finger on her left hand to help clarify.

“You… know the… meaning?”

Shepard shook her head negatively, which made Liara instinctively raise her hand to activate her omni-tool. She could barely contain her giddiness over how she could explain all the intricate meanings of the phrase.

But just before the orange glow enveloped her arm, Shepard raised her own and stopped Liara.

She did not need to vocalize what she wanted to happen. Shepard didn’t want the machine to translate for her, she wanted to hear it from Liara herself. And, after she thought about it, she wanted to do the same for Jane.

Some of the words had no absolute translations to English, at least in the limited vocabulary she managed to memorize. Her brain practically buzzed as she struggled to piece together something coherent. If she had her book, or could activate her omni-tool, she could have worked out something much better, more nuanced and more detailed. But she wouldn’t back down from a challenge.

Liara looked into Shepard’s green eyes when she finished contemplating.

“You are… the most beautiful… I have ever… seen.”

Shepard turned her head to the size, puzzled. “Really?”

“Yes.” She paused. “Did you… tell the… truth?” Part of her worried Shepard found the phrase at random, or that her hurting mind no longer let her see Liara in such a way. She honestly wanted to know if Jane meant what she said.

“Yes, I did.” Finally, Shepard smiled. “Nu'zen fel'ani in-a lis'e medran.” She said it again with more energy.

“And you… are beautiful… to me.”

Jane began to shake her head negative, something Liara expected to happen. But she reached up and
put a calming hand on Shepard’s scarred cheek. New tears rolled down the human’s cheeks and onto her fingers as Jane’s tormented mind tried to refuse the truth right in front of her.

“I… love… you, Jane Shepard.”

“I love you, Liara T’soni.” Shepard raised her hand to cover Liara’s and closed her eyes.

“Will you… teach me… more English?” She hoped Jane would accept the invitation. They needed anything but more silence, anything but time to sit and think horrible things.

“Teach me more Asari.” Shepard challenged, which caused the Shadow Broker to smile wider than she intended. She wanted to keep calm and gentle in front of her bondmate, but could not contain her excitement over the prospect of teaching something to Shepard. She already knew the perfect place to start.

“I say: ‘Hello, Jane.’” She said, moving her palm to her chest. “You say: ‘Na’chea Vi Liara’.” She moved her palm to Jane’s chest. A simple greeting, but said between two people very close to one another. It’s what she said every time she greeted Jane in private.

“Na’chea Vi Liara.” Shepard parroted, then pondered for a moment. “Did I say it right?”

“Yes.” Liara confirmed with great enthusiasm. “You always learn… fast.”

“Good teacher.” Jane said.

***

They talked without a translator between them for several hours, teaching each other different words and phrases they had grown up with, but the machines had trouble picking up. The most fun came from teaching each other the various words considered foul in each language. Liara couldn’t quite grasp the exact meaning of some of them, but she guessed most of the English phrases had to deal with bodily functions and sex in various ways. She found the subjects humans considered taboo to be strange, given her own upbringing. But then, Shepard probably felt the same about her.

Shepard already knew the term “pureblood”, which, given the right context, could be one of the worst insults you could say to an Asari. When she taught Jane the actual un-translated word, she also asked it not be repeated back to her. Even spoken in ignorance or scientific curiosity, if it came from Shepard, it would have hurt.

Other than that, Liara taught Jane some of the phrases Commandos and other Asari fighters used, since she had devoted so much of her life to being a soldier. Though she made sure to not mention Asari dancers, specifically ones in clubs and brothels, also said the same things. Jobs that had a sense of danger and drama shared the same lingo among her people. Shepard latched onto the untranslated “azure”, which she first learned on Illium. Also the word “Le’weth”, a crude way to refer to the more sensitive areas of an Asari’s crest. Not exactly sexual, but more descriptive of how they reacted to gentle contact.

For her part, Liara enjoyed saying the words “Motherfucker” And “Asshole”, which seemed to mean the same thing if used in the right context. Also, the two words alone made up half of Jack’s vocabulary, which amused her almost as much as the strange mouth movements she needed to make to pronounce them correctly. It made Shepard laugh every time Liara said the words, no matter how
many times she did. It apparently had something to do with her accent. Shepard said it made Liara “even more adorable”, which required a bit more back and forth before she caught Jane’s meaning.

She found Shepard’s laughter adorable, so she continued their descent into bad language until they both felt too exhausted to continue. And though she didn’t like to admit it, translating a new alien language always gave her a headache, no matter how special it was.

She activated her translator without fear of Jane stopping her.

“That was great.” Shepard said as soon as the machine restarted.

“I’m glad you had fun. I was hoping to expand my vocabulary of English, and there’s no better way to learn a language than immersing yourself in it with a native speaker.”

“I still wish I could have taught you better things than swears. I’m just a dumb grunt, so I never got to learn anything good.”

Liara cupped Shepard’s chin. “I learned exactly what I wanted to learn.”

“I’m not sure you were particularly interested in learning how to insult people in English.”

“No, I learned about you.”

“Well,” Shepard pulled away again, but not very far. Liara hoped she just found the position uncomfortable. “I hope the lesson was worth it.”

“More than worth it.”

Shepard managed to lie down after that, though she kept her entire right side covered with a second blanket. Liara settled in next to her, reminiscing about times past and thinking of the future. Above her, the stars glowed as they had done since the beginning of time, always so peaceful.

She didn’t realize her hand moved to the top of Jane’s scalp until some of the hairs prodded her palm. Shepard still let out an appreciative sound when she felt the soft strokes, which made Liara continue despite the odd feeling. Her head felt softer than the last time she touched it, back in London. Liara hoped that, soon, she could see the natural dark red return instead of the brown the short strands seemed to be at the moment. She missed that color.

As the night wore on and sleep began to overtake the Shadow Broker, she could not help but feel a small sense of dread. Though she had won this battle against the darkness inside Shepard, the war was far from over.
MAJOR WARNING:

This chapter deals heavily with the issues of self harm and suicide. If you have a hard
time reading about such things, I ask you to skip this.
This chapter is almost quadruple the length of all the others because it's the entire
sequence of events from beginning to end. So for those who do not wish to read such
content, you don't have to skip multiple times. And for those who want to brave these
waters with me, well, there's a lot of waters. (I'm keeping this awful metaphor, don't
judge me.)

It had become too hard to lie.

To Chakwas, to Miranda, to Liara and to herself.

Shepard waited until she knew Liara fell asleep, trying to take comfort in the small things like the
warm hand running through her sparse hair and the constant fantasies of death her brain conjured for
her. Staying still on the bed had been a torture in itself, struggling to remain peaceful on the outside
even though her heart and mind screamed at her to stand up and do what needed to be done.

Liara had put on such a nice performance, hadn’t she? Trying to convince Shepard she was still
loved and accepted, even though all the evidence said the exact opposite. Pinning her down with
biotics, using a hold she only used on people she intended to hurt, had been the final nail in the
coffin. Jane had to lie, to accept the single pill, or Liara might have killed her right there. She just
knew it. Liara T'soni had a very dark streak in her, hidden behind her intelligence and gentility. But
Shepard saw it first hand with David Nicolo. The same fate, or worse, might await Jane someday if
she displeased the Shadow Broker enough.

Still, darkness aside, the lessons on naughty Asari words had been fun. And listening to Laira
mangle English cussing made her laugh harder than she had in months. But funny words did not
change her mind. She needed to do something, and she needed to do it tonight before she lost the
nerve.

Shepard began to sit up as quiet as she could, doing what she could to keep balance with just one
arm. She put one foot on the cold deck, then another, and started to slide her weight off in such a
way she prayed Liara wouldn’t notice.

“Huh? Jane…?”

Crap.

“I just… need to use the head. It’s been too long since I did it alone. You go back to sleep.” She tried
to make her voice sound like a pleasant whisper. It really had been too long since she had any
privacy in that regard. A good excuse. A good lie. Like so many others.

“Ok.” The simple, breathy answer joined with a snore as Liara instantly returned to sleep. She never
slept much, so Shepard felt a small spark of happiness to know the Shadow Broker would get a little rest. She would need all the sleep she could get as she rebuilt the galaxy.

Jane sighed as she stretched to her full height, though mostly because her knee chose that exact moment to start aching. After all those hours in the comfortable bed, she had almost been able to forget about her newest source of agony and discomfort. But the universe just never gave her a break.

Without the aquarium and its soft blue illumination, her cabin remained uncomfortably dark during the ship’s night cycle. The low light gave her a perfect excuse to not look at her own body as she searched for her N7 jacket, which seemed to have disappeared on the deck. She used her feet to search for the familiar cloth, since bending down would have been too noisy and painful.

A memory struck like lightning.

Seventeen years ago. Stuck in a dark room in a condemned apartment building, trying to run away from the Reds when they realized what a teenage redhead could do for them. She didn’t want to bend down and look for her stuff. Any noise could have woken someone up and alerted them to her plans.

She used her feet to probe for a used pair of shoes. She hated going outside barefoot. The garbage trucks stopped coming to this part of the city, so people got in the habit of throwing everything on the ground. Old glass bottles were the worst. They always broke in the perfect way to slice the feet of anyone who didn’t wear their shoes.

No, put that memory away.

“Aha!” she whispered as her toes made contact with something soft and cool. Had she been a normal human being, Shepard would have leaned down, grabbed the jacket and slid it over her arms in a matter of seconds. Instead, she put all her weight on her left foot, raised her right just a little, and wrapped her toes around the garment. She waved her arm back and forth to keep balance as she raised the jacket onto the bed. To her great relief, her right knee did not complain or scrape as it moved.

With the N7 hoodie back on the bed, Shepard reached down and slid it over her right shoulder. She then locked her head and eyes forward, not focusing on anything, even though she stared right at her model ship collection. She raised her right limb and slid it into the sleeve, then held it tight against herself as she slid her left arm into the other. Her head only moved again when she pulled the hood up over her cold scalp.

She had no way to zip it closed.

The small stairs made her knee finally creak as she walked on them, but she didn’t notice the pain.

Then she left the cabin and entered the elevator. Jane’s mind knew exactly where to go and what to do. She thought about it more than enough as she waited for Liara to drift off. All she had to do was press a button and she’d be off.

Her broken body took over for her burdened mind. It would handle everything, she knew it would. She relied on muscle memory alone to touch the console at the back of the lift. The door slid closed and Shepard closed her eyes.
Not much longer now.

But the ride ended all too soon.

Her eyes opened to reveal the Normandy’s CIC, not her destination. The room had been cast in darkness just like her cabin, though the galaxy map provided a muted sort of illumination. The holographic representation of the Milky Way spun in place like it always did, like she watched it spin for countless hours as she worked herself to death, literally, trying to save it.

Shepard’s hand reached out for the terminal she spent most of those countless hours standing behind, now dark and unpowered. She viewed it with cold detachment, not sure how she felt when she looked down at the screen. How many casualty lists and horrible pieces of news did she read each day? How many reports of lost battles, orphaned children and burning worlds?

But then, how many bits of good news came to this terminal? How many personalized messages came from friends and members of her crew, celebrating their victories and wishing to share them with her? How many victory announcements, heartfelt messages of thanks and tales of joy came to this very place? Even people she thought long gone, or abandoned to her past, found ways to contact her here, keeping her connected to the real world when she thought she might float away.

She drifted back through her memories as she took in the stillness.

Walking down Tenth Street in the middle of the night. Lights flickered all around her as Skycars screamed overhead while smoke-belching oldcars ran through roads full of holes and cracks. It rained a few days before, so moisture and puddles filled everything, making her shoes, already filthy and falling apart, even worse. She would have given anything for a little money to buy something better. Shoe stores had the worst security, but even shit security systems got better every year, especially in this city. She preferred buying her own stuff. It made it feel more real. More hers.

How long would it be before someone back in that apartment realized she left? Maybe she could make it across town before sunrise and never see them again. She never really went beyond the Red’s territory these days. Too many cops and bad people out there. They’d take her back to the foster system or worse. But she had to take a chance if she wanted to change things.

Stop that. She didn’t need to swim through those ashes. That life had been left behind and forgotten.

She needed to leave the CIC. Her destination rested deeper in the ship.

This time, Jane did not rely on muscle memory to push the button for her. She knew she would have ended in the crew deck as her body tried to reenact the rounds she used to take every day. Those were the times she talked to her crew, reassured them when they felt weak, shared in their happiness when they felt strong, or just provided an ear when they needed someone to listen. They all did the same for her, in their own way. The Normandy crew had become her new family, one she could never abandon.

And yet, where were they all now? Gone. Almost everyone stayed somewhere in London now, with only a skeleton crew manning the ship. Tali and Garrus were with their people. Javik probably had a pile of criminal skulls by now. The crew, the people she called family, had their own concerns to attend as they rebuilt their lives. They didn’t need Commander Shepard barging into their personal spaces anymore. Everyone would move on in time, that’s what people did.
They should have put her on that memorial wall. They wanted to put her there. She defied them. She lied to them by coming back. She had to make it right somehow.

Shepard stepped into the elevator and made sure she pressed the lowest button, then double checked to make sure her destination truly was correct.

As she felt the lift take her down, she closed her eyes.

_Fifteen years old and living on the streets again. One day after her dramatic escape from the apartment. She didn’t know which part of the giant city she wandered into. It looked better than Tenth Street, but not much. The aroma of home cooked food drew her down one alley after another, promising sweet temptation the closer she got._

_A small restaurant. Full of people eating lunch. Her stomach growled and roiled as she remembered she hadn’t eaten in days. How much harm would it cause if she walked in, ordered something and left before paying? “Dine and Dash” is what Finch called it. They did it all the time before. And yet, she couldn’t bring herself to walk through the door. Maybe because she felt self-conscious about her ratty clothes. Or maybe she never felt that euphoric rush everyone else did when they stole something._

She moved past that. No need to think about the days when she starved and begged.

The door opened to the wide expanse of the Normandy’s shuttle bay. Unlike the rest of the ship, this place remained bright and ready for duty at all hours. Too much regular shuttle traffic and heavy equipment stored nearby made low-light conditions potentially fatal. At this moment, however, the light just served to irritate Shepard’s eyes and make her squint as she walked past the maintenance areas and main weapons locker.

Her destination lay a few meters away from the elevator. Even all these weeks after the war’s end, Vega hadn’t cleared out the space he claimed as his own among ammunition and spare thermal clip cases. He seemed to enjoy living near potentially explosive munitions, and space had been extremely limited as the ship raced across the galaxy in their hunt for the Catalyst, so Shepard allowed it. Plus, he had been the only one with sense enough to bring some weights and other exercise equipment on board before the Reapers came to destroy everything. So his personal space became the Normandy’s official gym after a time.

She needed exercise. Real exercise, not some low-impact drudgery that Miranda and Chakwas tried to push on her. She could feel her body wasting away the longer she went without the feel of her armor and arsenal weighing her down, the excitement of running into a drop zone, or the terror of bullets flying toward her. She smiled at the thought of the right bullet hitting her in just the right way as her armor sizzled and her shields collapsed.

Exercise cleared a person’s head. She knew that. She had been taught that as a very young girl, long before she became a marine. Perhaps if she spent a good hour or two making her muscles sore, she could go back to her cabin and get some actual rest. She could also use this time to think, to really think, about her plans now that she no longer felt confined to a hospital bed.

Shepard ignored the growing pressure in her right knee as she approached Vega’s punching bag, suspended off a haphazardly constructed frame of metal and screws. She didn’t remember when he brought it aboard, but she did recall that he got upset when he couldn’t hit it hard enough for his
liking. His strong punches sent the bag flying and warped the frame, no matter where he hit it or how.

Commander Shepard surpassed Vega’s ferocity in every fight, and definitely moved faster than he could dream, but Jane had to painfully admit that she could never hit as hard as James and his overabundance of muscles. But that meant she didn’t have to worry about throwing the bag around as she took shots at it. Especially when she could only work with a fraction of the muscles she used to have.

Her fantasies of real cardio, blood pumping and the delicious feeling of sore satisfaction came to an abrupt end when Shepard’s knee buckled and forced her to stop limping. She hunched over, and reached across her body to put her hot left palm on the aching joint. Sweat began to bead on her forehead as she tried to soothe it. The agony took too long to pass, and she wished more than anything that she had picked up her crutch from the crew deck on her way here.

She walked back to Tenth Street in the pouring rain, barefoot and bleeding. Her shoes had finally rotted off, left behind miles ago under a crumbling bridge. She cut the heel of her left foot pretty bad as she tried to cut across an empty lot, most likely on a broken glass bottle. She didn’t stop to look.

The rain got bad enough to turn midday into a grey, miserable mess. She barely saw any color in the city around her, all of it seemed to wash away in the torrent.

She tried to wash the Reds off of her, to forget about them and start over somewhere else. Just one week later and she learned her lesson. No home, no food and no help ever came her way and it never would. She spent her nights wet and cold, too afraid to talk to anyone and too proud to dig into a dumpster to feed her roaring stomach. No one ever took pity on the skinny teenager obviously homeless and out of school.

Her fifteen years of experience did not prepare her for the real world. She only had one family left. Did it matter what price they would ask for her loyalty if it got her a roof and something to eat? They’d make sure she got healthy and happy before… anything happened. Right?

She couldn’t do this forever.

Shepard stood up and went into a stance she had done a million times before. Knees loose, hips low and relaxed, arms… well, arm, up and ready to spring. The remains of her right limb mimicked what the left did, but she couldn’t see or feel it under the N7 jacket.

She let a few test punches loose with her left arm. Quick jabs with no power, just to see how her knee would react. To her relief, the relaxed position, with her weight held on her left side, left it in a state of only mild throbbing. She could do this after all. Maybe even work up a real sweat and grow some muscle back over time.

Shepard lashed out with a little more power and felt the satisfying feeling of release, both inside and outside, into the bag.

She punched the first guy who suggested it. Hard, right in the face. Knocked some teeth out, too. They shouldn’t have taught her how to fight if they didn’t want it used against them. Just as she thought, some of them waited for her to get better before they suggested the things Jane could do for
A boost of confidence surged through Shepard as she increased the speed and ferocity of her attacks. No wild swings or fancy acrobatics, just lightning fast attacks with her left arm then resuming the ready position. She had trouble keeping balance with just one limb, but she compensated with her legs and core muscles.

“Listen, I know you need new shoes. It’s gotta be hell walking around in men’s boots all the time. It’s your decision, I won’t force it. But the offer’s there if you want it. You’re growing up, you gotta learn that you don’t get anything free in this world.”

She couldn’t believe that shoes, fucking shoes, were the things that began to sway her mind. Walking around in heavy boots far too large for her feet hurt a lot, and made it impossible to be quiet when she wanted to sneak around or act casual in the streets. She spent more time on her ass than she did anything else. It made her vulnerable. It made her weak.

Ferocity turned to anger. Anger at the Reapers. At Cerberus. At the mercs, Geth, terrorists, traitors and incompetent fools that refused to listen to her. Anger at her past. Anger at her present. Anger at Liara for holding her down with biotics. Anger at herself for being too weak to fight anymore. Anger that she had not died when she should have. Her name should have been on that memorial from the beginning.

Her one-handed punches began to sway the bag.

The bedroom stank of mold and neglect, the bed even worse. Thank god for the needle they shared before getting down to business. At least when he got high, he couldn’t count for shit. She would have enough money to get the shoes she had been pining after for months AND buy something to eat on the way back.

The pain between her legs haunted her for days, but the shoes she got for the sacrifice lasted until she left Earth for the first time to start basic training.

Why did she have to start remembering that NOW? She left that behind so many years ago.

Punch! Let it swing back.

Weak. Not good enough to get your own money. You had to start whoring yourself.

Punch! Swing back.

You could have applied yourself more during training. Maybe get a better assignment than Akuze. But you didn’t. You watched your team die and didn’t do a damn thing about it.

Punch! Swing back.

You let Ashley die. You could have been fast enough to save her AND Kaidan, but you weren’t.
Punch! Swing back.

*You could have found another way to save Mordin and the Krogan together. But you’re not smart enough.*

Punch! Swing back.

*You could have saved Thane if you were fast enough.*

Punch harder! She didn't wait for it to come back.

*You lied to the Geth about giving them a chance at true freedom.*

Hit it again!

*You should have stayed dead.*

HIT IT AGAIN! Her knuckles began to ache, just like her knee, but she ignored it. Hit!

*Anderson died ashamed of what you failed to accomplish. Even if he never said so.*

She felt the skin on her knuckles break as she hit the bag with everything she had.

*The Catalyst told you to die. You didn’t. You killed billions of Geth. You killed EDI. You doomed the entire galaxy to years of painful reconstruction. And for what?*

Shepard didn’t hear the metal buckling.

*You should be a corpse, not walking around on a ship full of people who want to see you dead. Your name should have been put on that memorial.*

She didn’t realize she began to scream as she lost track of her speed and stance and just began to smash the bag. She also didn’t notice the jacket sliding off her right shoulder.

*Liara hates you now. She showed you just how much she hates you.*

One last shove with a left arm that suddenly felt very sore and taxed. Bloody handprints covered the entire punching bag.

It fell apart with an ear-shattering SMASH.

She fell apart with a pitiful wail.

Shepard wanted to melt into the deck and disappear forever. She wanted this to end. She needed it to end. She had to make it end.

But how?
Shepard let her body auto-pilot her way back to her cabin, only realizing she walked to the right of the elevator door after a few moments of slow limping. Must have been her bad knee.

Young Jane spent many afternoons crying in a filthy bathroom. She never forgot that first night, nor did she forget every time after. No matter how many times she shot up or had some kind of drug put into her body before the deed happened, she remembered it all and she felt nothing but shame and regret. She never had much control of her life, but now she could feel it slipping even farther away. She saw no escape. Except one.

The ride felt like an eternity. Or an instant. She stopped paying attention. Her body handled the waiting and the standing. It also handled the walking as she returned to the dark cabin. She didn’t even pull the jacket back over her right shoulder. Her body didn’t care, only her mind hated what it saw.

The door opened and she stared at the large room. She could see Liara, still fast asleep on the bed. Other than that, it looked exactly like it did during the war. Oh, except for the huge gaping hole where the fish tank used to be. Another thing taken away from her as a “reward” for saving the galaxy. Not that she ever felt particular pride for the decoration before, but it had been filled with living things. Fish and aquatic creatures that depended on her for their very survival. They died along with everyone else. Her fault.

A voice, a very small voice, buried deep in the back of her mind, begged Shepard to go back to bed. To curl up in Liara’s arms and fall asleep. She would feel better in the morning and she could forget this night ever happened. All Shepard needed to do was trust her bondmate, to accept that she needed help and that all she needed to do was ask. The exercise plan had been good, but she could not do this alone.

No. She didn’t deserve any help. It didn’t come before, it won’t come now.

Jane turned right and limped toward her hamster’s glass cage, but she couldn’t see him in the dark. Someone said he remained fat and happy as ever, even after the ship crashed. She wished she could see it, but she didn’t want to disturb him at this hour.

She limped forward two more steps until she entered her “executive lavatory” and then closed the sliding door behind her. The lights flickered on automatically.

Shepard took control of her body again just so she could slide the N7 jacket off and place it on the sink in front of her. Then she pulled her shirt over her head and threw it on the floor. And finally, she stepped out of the sweatpants that weren’t as comfortable as her old pair, until she wore nothing but her standard issued undergarments. She needed to see everything, to finally get a good, long look at what the galaxy had done to her.

Jane Shepard stared into the mirror. A one-armed monster stared back.

The butcher of entire species, friends, comrades and innocents had a thin, but not emaciated, body. She didn’t find much time to eat during the war, then all those days and weeks spent between unconsciousness, surgery and emergency rations in London had done the rest to reduce her muscle and fat to a profile she didn’t recognize.

The monster’s body was also covered in scars. Some of them she recognized, some she didn’t. The
Cerberus implants that sat just under her skin were everywhere, peeking up through their obscene dark cracks with their orange glow. She could see them on her hips, her chest, her legs and arm. Even one jagged line on her right shoulder glowed Cerberus colors.

The biggest scar on her body did not glow, but she recognized where it came from immediately. On her lower left abdomen, just above her waist, a huge white mark stuck out from the rest of her skin. She remembered feeling the blood oozing out of that wound as she wandered through the Citadel, confronted the Illusive Man for the last time, and then passed out before meeting the Catalyst. Bullet hole, most likely. But a nasty one. One that should have killed her.

She had other bullet holes, cuts and bumps from a lifetime, a second lifetime, of putting her life in danger. They all crisscrossed her skin in a strange pattern, somewhat resembling tattoos, but paid for with blood instead of money and ink.

Shepard’s own green eyes looked back at her from the mirror, but they seemed to sink into her skull, not show the pride she had cultivated in herself over the course of seventeen years. The monster had no pride left to express. It had nothing behind those eyes, just an empty stare, the look of someone lost in the abyss.

Of course, her hair remained short and prickly. She could see the faint lines where doctors had worked on her brain and then closed the wound with medi-gel. It would be months before those marks disappeared under her dark red locks.

Wait, did she think she had months left? No, she had a matter of seconds.

Trembling, Jane reached into the N7 jacket and pulled out the gun she stashed into the pocket.

A small sidearm, one that she normally didn’t take on missions because they barely pierced shields and competent body armor. But thin flesh and some bone? It could destroy them easy. That’s why her body turned right before leaving the shuttle bay. Not because of her bad knee, but because her real destination had been the weapons locker all along. Too bad nobody took the time to change the lock codes, or her entire plan would have ended right there.

Her bloody left hand raised the firearm up so she could see it in detail. Even now, with so little time left, she did a check of the weapon. She clicked its safety on and off with a satisfying flick of her thumb. Without two hands, she had to bump the thermal clip with her collar bone to make sure it had been seated properly. The gun whirred and beeped to acknowledge its readiness to fire.

She did not raise it yet. Instead, her eyes lingered on her bare right limb. The remains of her right arm stuck out as if trying to get her attention. She stopped it from moving and raised it as high as it would go, just so she could get a good look at it. It hurt to do so, more than she realized it would.

The long white scar that ran from the tip of the limb, through the muscle and into the armpit sat over mangled muscle and wrinkled skin. It looked like an abomination, a thing out of a horror movie, not a real person’s arm. Not her arm. A limb that could never get a prosthetic even if she wanted one, because her “surgeon” managed to fuck up the nerves to the point that they could no longer do anything but ache, let alone connect to a machine. Shepard could feel her jaw clench and her breathing grow ragged the longer she stared. Yes, the familiar panic she felt every time she concentrated on it came back. She embraced it this time. It would give her strength.

Shepard once read an extranet article about phantom limbs, the things amputees felt after their surgeries. Some felt like they hadn’t lost anything at all. Most reported that it hurt. Even with a life devoted to violence and killing, she never imagined she’d feel those exact things the article described.
Every single day, she felt Nicolo’s hands grabbing the edge of the limb, squeezing with all his might.

She definitely hurt.

Just thinking about this in detail made her heart increase its tempo and force in her chest. The needles and agony returned. The panic settled in.

Her back burned.

Her knee ached and scraped bone against bone.

She needed to feel all the pain in the galaxy.

It would make things right.

As she scraped a dull razor blade against her leg, not deep enough to cause any real damage, a huge vidscreen billboard came to life outside the tiny dust-covered window she sat below. It played a brand new recruitment ad for the Systems Alliance Navy, showing proud and strong soldiers doing their part to keep Earth safe. She saw something in that advertisement, something that spoke to her and her alone.

It gave her hope. Hope that she could get away from this life and do something better.

It took a month of planning, but she managed to sneak out and spend the night in front of the closest recruiting station. She learned all she needed to know about how to enlist and what exams she needed to take and pass to be considered. All she needed was a little bit of cash for some study aids. She heard one of the guys wanted to push some Red Sand that afternoon. They wouldn’t possibly deny her a cut of the profit if she agreed to be the seller.

Where was that hope now? It all abandoned her as soon as she did her job and blew up the Reapers. Even the people she had started to call family left her behind, never to come to her aid again. She had nothing. She was nothing. Always had been. She needed to make peace with that.

Shepard flared her nostrils, took in one last, giant breath and shoved the gun barrel against her temple until it hurt.

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Liara T’soni never slept well. Not on digs, not in school, certainly not when an entire war effort hinged on her ability to decipher and collate information. But now, as she fought against the darkness inside Jane, she couldn’t sleep at all.

She slipped in and out of consciousness when she felt assured that Shepard fell asleep beside her, doing her best to enjoy their first real night together, considering the circumstances. But the feeling of a sudden pressure change in the bed brought her back to wakefulness in an instant. She listened to Jane make her excuse of needing to use the bathroom, which she understood, and tried to fall back asleep. But the sense of dread that clawed in her abdomen did not leave her.
If only she hadn’t been so exhausted, she would have seen Jane leave the cabin entirely, not walk into the lavatory.

She woke up again when the light from the small room flashed over the entire cabin, just for a second, before the door slid closed behind Shepard. Liara sat up, all the sleep in her mind melting away as her heart began to beat faster in her chest.

“Shepard?” she called into the darkness, but got no reply.

The knotted, gnarled feeling in her stomach got worse as she heard Jane fumble around behind the closed door. Liara knew that, without her right arm, Shepard would need to adapt and find new ways to navigate and utilize her surroundings, but the sounds coming from the stall did not ring true to Liara. Perhaps she had become overly paranoid, or maybe she needed to stay vigilant in this crucial night, no matter how Shepard reacted.

If anyone knew the value of being too involved in other people’s business, it would be the Shadow Broker. Even if the sounds were just Shepard getting herself caught in an embarrassing situation, Liara felt the need to help take care of it.

She stood up in the darkness and felt it perfectly natural to let her biotics add a blue glow to the room. It allowed her to sidestep the blanket Shepard threw on the deck as well as navigate the steps into the other section of the cabin. Her bioluminescence relaxed Liara as she took the final steps forward. It almost matched the glow from the fish tank before its destruction. She mused that maybe Shepard would enjoy the sight when she saw it.

“Jane?” she tapped the lavatory door with a fingertip. “I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

No reply.

She counted down from ten seconds. Maybe Shepard got stuck in the middle of something. Or perhaps she fell asleep in there. She couldn’t have spent more than an hour lying still on the bed before getting up. And though Liara tried to suppress them, a few dark images crossed her mind as she imagined why Jane did not respond. What if she fell and hit her head? What if her heart gave out without warning? What if…

She could not wait. Liara guessed the door would be locked from the inside, so she opened the security panel just below the hamster cage and released the lock. She doubted she was supposed to know about that particular safety feature, put in just for the dark emergencies that flooded her mind. But secrets were her trade, and she knew more about this ship than anyone aboard with the exception of the silent woman in the room in front of her.

The door slid open and bright light flooded the cabin, blinding Liara for a moment and forcing her to take a step back.

“Liara, I swear to god if you raise your hand one more inch or I see the tiniest amount of biotics, I will pull this trigger.”

The Shadow Broker blinked her pained vision back to normal as she listened to Jane hiss her warning.

“Goddess.”

Shepard stood in her undergarments, frail and shaking, holding a gun in her bloody and swelling left hand. The barrel pressed against her forehead hard enough to leave a large red mark and Liara feared she saw blood beginning to pool under the wound. Her right limb remained oddly stiff as Jane
trembled in front of the mirror. To really see it, naked and away from bandages, jackets and blankets, brought fresh tears to her eyes. No wonder Shepard kept it hidden.

“You weren’t supposed to see this.” Shepard said with her cold, emotionless voice that sounded more like a cornered animal than a fragile human being.

Liara didn’t speak, instead she tried to take a step forward, trying to think of her options. The parts of Shepard’s knuckles that weren’t covered in blood looked as white as bone instead of their normal light skin color. Her grip on the weapon’s handle would probably be too much for her biotics to pull it away with just one attempt. And if Jane saw her body flare for even a second, the soldier’s reflexes would work much faster than Liara’s.

“Get away from me!” Jane shouted as she watched Liara approach from the mirror. “Don’t touch me. Don’t come near me.”

She complied, pursing her lips together and lowering her hands. She also let her biotics cool down, so the glow around her body ceased as well. The Shadow Broker stepped backward until her legs bumped into Shepard’s desk.

“Jane Shepard…” she tried to sound calm even if she felt anything but. She wished Doctor Chakwas was aboard. Or anyone else aside from the skeleton maintenance crew. Garrus could have done something reckless but heroic to end this situation. Tali might have found a way to hack the gun to make sure it didn’t fire. Javik, Vega and Kaidan might have been fast enough to stop her before she fired. If Joker had been his old self, he might have been the perfect person to talk her out of it. What could Liara do?

“THAT’S NOT MY NAME!” Shepard shouted with unexpected power and rage. She breathed through her mouth for a moment after that, trying to slow her quaking muscles, but failing. “Jane Shepard” she spat the name out like an insult, ”was the name the government put on my birth certificate. I don’t know what my real mother named me before she died in the hospital. Oh, I bet the Shadow Broker didn’t know that, did she?”

“No. I know your past causes you pain, so I never looked into it.”

“Why not? You pry into everything else. Did you just want to ignore what kind of person your girlfriend used to be?”

“Whatever you may have done before, that’s not who you are now.”

Shepard’s hand joined the rest of her body in its wanton trembling. Liara looked over the scars, both Cerberus and otherwise that crisscrossed her love’s pale skin. So much suffering etched into that freckled canvas. How much more had been burned into her mind over a lifetime? Was the confident, strong soldier she fell in love with just the mask all along? Or was this suicidal and frail being, stomped into near nothingness by fate and tragedy the real Jane Shepard all along?

“Then what am I? You’ve been in my head enough times. TELL ME!”

Liara flinched as Shepard screamed again and pushed herself further into the desk, pinching the skin on her legs.

“You’ve messed with my brain over and over, you should know the answer.” She paused and pulled the gun away from her head a half centimeter, then tapped it back against the painful looking welt a few times, as if in deep thought. “Is that why I fell in love with you? Before we met, I never really thought I’d actually end up with anyone, especially an Asari. I put everything I had into my career. I
was the best because I made myself the best. I never looked back, never got distracted and I never once thought about fraternization, human or alien. I wanted to be good enough to do anything. And I thought for damn sure I’d die proud, old and alone.

“And then you came along. The young archaeologist who had a fetish for Protheans and apparently me. Every time we learned something new about that damn beacon, you made us join minds. Again and again. Did you… do something to me? Did you plant some kind of Asari suggestion in my head so I’d return the feelings you developed for me? Did you just need to see what it would feel like to be with a human before you moved on with your life?”

“No, of course not.” To know that Shepard held these suspicions in her head, even if they came recently, made Liara feel ill. “How could you think such things?”

“How could I not?” That awful, humorless laugh returned, ”I’ve been fucked with by so many people, why do you think you’re the exception?” The gun wavered again, and she saw Jane’s right knee try to bend, but then lock back. “What did you do to me?”

“I did nothing to you.”

A moment of silence passed between them.

Shepard sighed. “I’m getting too tired of lies, Liara. I’ve been lying since before I can remember. I lied to cops and innocent people on the street. I lied when I said I wanted things done to me for money. I lied when I told myself I could handle anything the military could throw at me. I lied every time I tried to keep my crew motivated. I lied when I… when…”

“Did you lie every time you said you loved me?”

Shepard stared at the mirror, past the mirror, to look at Liara. Her green eyes looked puffy and full of tears that refused to fall. “I don’t know.” She whispered. “I honestly don’t know.”

“I don’t believe you.” Liara said. She moved away from the desk, pushing herself up just enough to stop hurting her legs. Hopefully not far enough for Jane to notice.

No help would come for them, her and Shepard, she knew that. But she could also not sit and wait for something to happen, she had to make it happen. She feared this confrontation would happen someday, in the long war to come between darkness and light. She just didn’t expect it to happen so soon. But Liara T’soni did not come into this battle unprepared.

If anyone knew anything about preparing for any possible circumstance, it was the Shadow Broker. A Shadow Broker madly in love and would stop at nothing to save Jane Shepard.

“You don’t need to believe me,” Jane rambled.

“Then what do I need to do?”

The gun moved away again, but only from Shepard’s temple. It still rested against her head as she lowered her eyes and hit her head against the mirror. Her right arm raised, as if she tried to wipe her eyes with a right hand that no longer existed. “I don’t know.”

Liara took the opportunity of Shepard’s momentary distraction to move forward just a little more. A few centimeters away from the desk now. Still too far away to physically touch Jane, but every nanometer helped.

“Can I tell you what I know?” She asked as she watched Shepard’s right knee flex back and forth.
“Why should I care?” She stood back up, put the gun back onto the red and oozing welt.

“I know that I fell for you almost immediately after you saved me on Therum. Asari don’t believe in such rapid infatuations, but that’s exactly what happened to me. I know that I learned how to fight because it gave us a chance to be together. I know that I used those skills to fight for you after you died on the first Normandy, doing everything in my power to keep you away from those who wanted to exploit you. I know that waiting for two years killed me every day, even after I mourned and tried to move on. I know that I tried to push you away when you came back, because I was too afraid of what you’d think of me and how much I changed. I know you never gave up, never once, before the war and during. Even when you felt like you could not go forward, you still put one foot in front of the other until you fulfilled your promise. And do you know what else?”

Shepard turned her head, though she still kept the firearm pointed at herself. “What?”

“I know that I learned from your example. Both when we opposed Saren and then the Reapers themselves. I’ve not given up on you yet, Jane Shepard, and I won’t give up now.”

“Why? Why can’t you understand? I deserve this. I’ve always deserved it.”

A small shuffle forward. “Because you don’t deserve a bullet, or the smallest amount of pain. You deserve to be celebrated, loved and admired for the rest of your life and beyond.”

“You do that for heroes, not monsters.”

“You’re not a monster.”

“YES I AM!” The roar almost pushed Liara back to the desk, terrified that Shepard would pull the trigger, but she didn’t.

“No. There is only one monster in this room, and it is not you.”

Jane’s body began to violently shudder. Her fingers curled deeper around the gun.

“Don’t give me any more of that ‘this isn’t the real you’ bullshit. I know how I feel and I know what I need to do, since nobody else is willing to. It’s what I’ve always done, isn’t it? Fix everyone else’s problems? Well, I’m about to do it one last time. You won’t have to worry about dealing with me anymore. Goodbye, Liara.”

Liara watched helplessly as Jane closed her eyes. She reached her arms out as Jane took in a long, deep breath. Tears blurred her vision as Jane’s body went rigid and calm.

And then Jane Shepard’s body collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut.

“Goddess NO!”

The weapon, still cold and unused, fell from Shepard’s hand as she passed out from the agony in her knee and right arm.

Liara jumped forward and threw the gun across the room with her biotics. At the same time, she caught Jane, unconscious but very alive, in her arms and let the ship’s gravity drag them to the deck.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Through the use of biotics and adrenaline, Liara managed to stand up, grab Shepard’s unconscious body, and march out of the cabin. Her vision swam and blurred as she tried to walk forward. Shock made the world seem unreal while tears of both unfathomable relief and despair filled her eyes. She could barely comprehend what just happened, and she did not want to. Maybe, one day when enough time had passed and the wounds were allowed to close, she would look back on this night and recount her mistakes and her triumphs in returning Jane to her. But not right now.

With both of her arms occupied with holding her bondmate, Liara used a small biotic smash on the lift controls, uncaring if she damaged them or if she even hit the right destination. She would have torn holes in every deck plate and bulkhead in her way if it got Jane to the medbay faster.

To her great relief, the elevator stopped on the crew deck. But to her horror, it meant it also stopped in front of the memorial. Faint handprints covered the spot where Shepard hit it, small markings that the maintenance crew would likely clean by morning, but signified a suffering they could never understand. The crutch Shepard used for all of two minutes was nowhere to be seen, though Liara paid little heed to that. She had much larger concerns than the location of one medical device.

She turned left and walked to the medbay as fast as she could. To her annoyance, the indicator on the large door glowed red, probably Miranda’s method of keeping Shepard from turning around and negating her efforts to get the Commander out of the large room. Liara hoped the color was just for show, otherwise she would have to make good on her internal promise to tear the ship apart to get Jane the care she needed.

Fortunately, as she approached, the medbay door opened with a hiss and allowed her in. Thank the goddess for false indicators. The bright lights stung almost as much as the lavatory’s in Shepard’s cabin, but she didn’t pay attention to the annoying sting. She just ran forward, placed Jane on the nearest bed and let her biotics power down with a deep sigh and roll of her shoulders.

She did not wait to catch her breath or wipe her eyes. As soon as she made sure Jane would not fall off the medical table, Liara walked to Doctor Chakwas’s desk, sat down in front of the terminal, and typed a message that would be sent directly to Karin’s omni-tool. It didn’t matter of Chakwas slept at this very moment, or if she was in the middle of some important meeting or presentation, she would receive the message. The Shadow Broker made sure of it.

Shepard needs help.

Message sent, Liara pushed away from the terminal, put her head on the desk, and wept. She didn’t know for how long, nor did she care if anyone saw her do it. She had to let it out before the raw pain in her soul consumed her entirely.

“What’s going on?” Miranda appeared from across the medbay, walking out of the room that used to hold EDI’s core. “What happened to Shepard?”

“You did this!” Liara all but shouted as she stood up to face the human, her eyes puffy and her cheeks soaked. “You forced her to leave this place without checking if she was ready!”

Miranda took a step back. She repeated her stern but concerned “What happened?”
The Shadow Broker moved to Shepard’s table and pointed a blue finger at the large bruise forming on her head. “She tried taking her own life!”

“What!?” Lawson became a blur of motion, almost leaping across the medbay to approach Jane. She examined the head wound, then noticed the bloody and swollen knuckles. “No, no, no. This can’t be right. Everything Doctor Chakwas relayed to me said she was stable, that it might have been time to get her to start moving forward.”

“Shepard lied to all of us. She never took her medication.” All of Jane’s confessions, about lying, made her heart crumble every time she replayed them in her head.

“I suspected as much.” Miranda said as she moved toward a medi-gel dispenser.

“You should have done something more than send a message to me.”

To her credit, the other woman did not stop walking as she spoke. “What did you want me to do? I’m not a damned therapist.”

Miranda applied a cleaning cloth to Shepard’s forehead, cleansing the worsening bruise before applying the medi-gel. They both watched as the clear fluid seeped into the small wounds left behind by the gun barrel and sealed them. By morning, the ugly colors and raised bump would recede to a small pink protrusion. She did the same to Jane’s hand before moving away and disposing of the cloth and gel containers.

“You could have talked to her about it.”

“I sent you that message specifically for you to do that. You’re her, what’s the Asari term, bondmate? Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do?”

“I tried.” Liara said, the memories of pinning Shepard down with biotics sitting fresh and painful in her mind. She visibly cringed as she tried to stuff the images away. Her anger at Miranda eroded to nothingness as frustration at herself set in. “I failed.”

“We all did.” Miranda said, an unusually somber tone in her voice. “I think we all expected Shepard to bounce back from all this like she did with, well, everything else and shrug it off like it never happened. She put on the airs of a super soldier for so long that we forgot a human being sat behind the armor.”

“And she paid for our mistakes.”

Miranda said nothing further, instead she moved away from the table one more time to grab a blanket and draped it over Jane’s almost naked body. Liara never stopped to consider Shepard’s modesty as she rushed into the medbay, another mistake. The rush of embarrassment and shame over such a simple oversight dug into her like a husk’s claws.

Fortunately, a chime from the desk terminal broke the uncomfortable silence between the pair as they stood near Shepard.

A reply from Karin appeared on the holographic screen.

On my way. ETA two hours. What is her condition?

Liara moved first and sat down, but she hesitated. It took her far too long to reach out and type a reply. The more she considered what to say, the more she lost control of her hands. Losing Shepard once, seeing Thessia invaded by the Reapers, and then those few days spent unsure if she’d lost Jane
a second time had been traumatic enough and left definite scars on her soul. But today, seeing her bondmate at her absolute lowest, ready and committed to end her own life? That new pain threatened to drag her down and never let her back up.

Her hesitation seemed to catch Miranda’s attention, who approached the terminal and typed a reply before Liara could intervene or change any wording.

*Stable. Ignored your orders about medication and attempted suicide. Fortunately, was stopped in time.*

Chakwas responded almost instantly.

*We will discuss this when I arrive.*

Somehow, those few words on a flat screen scared her more than the call of a Reaper.

***

Shepard knew she’d been standing on the edge of a cliff for most of her life. During the good times, like her first night with Liara or reuniting with her friends even in the midst of war and tragedy, she moved back a little. Not much, but enough that she didn’t feel in danger of falling off. The bad times, like her last days with the Reds or when the Reaper war pushed her to her absolute limits, were when she walked closer and closer until the temptation to jump became overwhelming.

Tonight, she leapt off that cliff.

Make no mistake, she tried to squeeze the trigger.

But then fate intervened and turned her around.

She had never been much of a poet or writer, but Shepard imagined herself no longer standing on top of the cliff, but hanging off the edge, holding on for dear life with just one finger. All the dark thoughts, the fantasies of death and the untold self-doubt, clawed at her feet and tried to pull her down into the abyss at the bottom. If she resisted, she would climb up and return to the same life she had before. To succumb and fall would mean replicating what she just tried: a bullet in the head. Or maybe a reprogrammed airlock that spat her into space. Or perhaps she could auto-start a shuttle and stand in its million-degree exhaust. It meant death.

As appealing as those scenarios were, she no longer had the heart to think about them for very long, much less enact them. She just felt drained. Empty. Like all the good and bad parts of her brain had been scooped out until a hollow void remained in her skull.

She couldn’t even call herself a coward anymore. Not because she felt brave or that she deserved to be praised for not going through with it, but because she just didn’t have the energy to think about the word and its meaning.

“Commander, wake up. You’ve been unconscious for seventeen hours and it’s time we talked.” A familiar voice cut through the haze. A rather upset familiar voice.

“Doctor Chakwas?” Jane murmured as she regained consciousness. For some reason, she expected to still be in her cabin, sprawled on the cold deck, her undergarments still bared for all to see. But she
quickly became aware of the familiar sights, sounds and smells of the medbay, as well as the feeling of the warm blanket that covered her from neck to feet.

“Commander, what did I tell you? What did I explicitly order you to do?” Karin wasted no time in hovering over the bed and barking at her.

“Take the pills.” She said without emotion or inflection.

“And why did it take a goddamn text message to my omni-tool in the middle of a critical Alliance medical briefing to learn you disobeyed that order?” Karin’s voice rose as she spoke, almost as if she wanted to slap Jane for her insubordination. “If you wanted to be this irresponsible and self-destructive, you should have told me. I would have withheld them for someone else.”

But she had been telling the truth at the time. She wanted to take them at first, to get better and move on with her life. But things changed the longer she spent alone. The more solitude she got, the easier it became to justify not taking the medication, until she came to the conclusion that she was better off alone and that she did not deserve to feel better. It felt so right to feel that way, it became impossible to consider any other options by the end.

“I was fighting for you down there, Shepard.” Chakwas said as she slumped forward, a quiver of defeat in her voice, “They want to prop you up as a hero of the state, an icon that will get statues made, parades organized, everything, in your honor. I’ve been telling everyone on the damned planet to leave you be, that you need time to heal and celebrate in private. I’ve been doing it for your benefit alone, because otherwise you’ll become nothing more than a media circus, unable to do a thing without a camera following you for the rest of your life.”

She took in a breath.

“But now I see it’s all been futile if you think putting a gun to your head was the better solution, Jane.” The disappointment that flowed from Karin hurt enough, but the fact Chakwas used her first name stung like a bullet grazing her flesh. It meant she lost something between them. The respect and admiration that had grown between them over the past several years evaporated.

She had no answer that felt worthy of the Doctor standing over her.

“I’ve taken an oath that states I cannot give up on you. But I can’t help if you’ve given up on yourself. So I will ask you, Jane Shepard, if you want to keep your current course, or if you’ll actually listen to me this time.”

What could she answer? Saying yes to either option would have been a lie. All Shepard wanted to do was lie down and… do nothing. And not the kind of nothing that meant lying around and relaxing, avoiding responsibility and obligations, but literally nothing. She wouldn’t have felt anything if she stopped breathing and her heart ceased beating. She could not care enough to do a damn thing anymore.

She clung to the edge of the cliff, and her finger began to slip.

“Well?” Chakwas insisted.

Shepard could not make eye contact with the doctor. Instead, her gaze drifted to the medbay’s huge windows, which sat opened and clear to the mess outside. She stared in the direction of Liara’s quarters, not sure if she wanted to see her or if she dreaded the sight.

Then Liara appeared from the room, wiping a white sleeve over her puffy blue eyes, now ringed with violet and a little red from her tears. She walked into the galley and got a glass full of water
before returning to her quarters.

Everything Jane said to her in the lavatory, about lying, about her intentions, it had been true… after a fashion. They were accurate in a twisted sense that required an extreme amount of guilt and self-doubt to understand. Her conclusions came from a mind that saw the world in a different way, but not a better way.

And yet none of it had been true at all. Her anxieties and fears were real, but they were just that, the scared feelings of a woman in incredible physical pain trying to lash out at the only available target. The yelling and venting helped her ignore the rising agony in her body as she struggled to remain upright in such an awkward position. She would have said anything if it kept her mind off her right limb.

Jane Shepard may not have been what her birth mother called her, but it became her name. Her real name, not just a legal one. She had other names over her life, nicknames and aliases that suited her needs at the time, or were the indulgences of other, but they were never truly her. It always came back to Jane Shepard in the end. Commander Jane Shepard.

Her rational mind also knew that all her accusations of Asari-mind-suggestion or whatever she accused Liara of were impossible. There had never been any evidence of such a thing in the history of Asari inter-species relations. And yet the rumors always circled, rumors that nobody talked about in the open, but circled in odd extranet sites and on hushed whispers. She remembered reading about those rumors when she did her research back on the original Normandy before their night together. Well, “research”.

Did it really matter in the end? Wouldn’t dying and being completely rebuilt have erased such a thing? Miranda said they built her better and healthier than before. Cerberus would have detected any major changes to her brain and corrected them, especially anything caused by alien meddling. It wouldn’t have been past their capability, since the entire Lazarus project had been a miracle in itself.

But when she came back, nothing changed about her. Not one bit. Even when Liara tried pushing her away, it didn’t change how she felt about her. Couldn’t she have implanted some kind of Asari “go away” signal at that time, if this entire mental exercise were true?

Thinking about Liara now gave Shepard something: a feeling, a… motivation. A single drop in a dried ocean. She didn’t know what that feeling was, nor did she necessarily think it made her feel good, but it prompted something in her. Did she want to figure it out? Or did she want to bury it along with everything else that disappeared the moment she tried to pull the trigger?

Karin’s eyes burned her flesh like hot coals. She loomed over Shepard like Harbinger stood before her in London, just before the end.

What did she want?

Before today, her mind would have told her to let it all go. It would have reminded her of how nobody wanted her around and how her name belonged on the memorial. It would have constructed lies about how much better the galaxy would be without her and how little she mattered in the long run. And she would have believed all of it, down to her core, and let it rot her away from the inside. Because her mind would have also convinced her that feeling so horrible was the right thing to do.

And now? An empty expanse stood where the darkness once held domain. Nothing but a desert, empty and devoid of thoughts positive or negative. Everything jumped with her in the lavatory, both the darkness that swallowed her whole and the light that kept her breathing.
Only that one singular drop of… something remained in that desert, that dried ocean that used to contain her heart and soul.

It felt very familiar to her. One spark, one feeling, one pain remained in her chest, somewhere in the void, refusing to die. Even though its voice was small, it felt mighty, an inexorable fact of her existence that could not be washed away by any depression or bullet in her head. It had been one of the few things that raged against her darkness. It… kept her alive on the Citadel.

Looking toward Liara’s quarters made it stronger, made it hurt more. But she liked the pain. It gave her strength.

She needed to discover what it was again. She could not let it die with her.

“I’ll do it.”

“What was that?” Chakwas leaned down a little and put her hand behind her ear. “The last time I heard those words, they were outright lies. I want to hear the truth from you, Commander.”

Shepard locked her eyes with Karin’s and gave her an expression she usually saved for her enemies and those she wanted to prove utterly wrong.

“Give me the medication. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

She would figure herself out again.

Her feet found purchase on the cliff and she began to climb up.

Chapter End Notes

This WOULD have been the end of this story, aside from the epilogue, had things gone according to the original plan.

But no, this monster will continue in ways I’m sure none of you will expect. "Happily Ever After" may not exist in my world, but if you work hard enough, you can come close.
Karin learned long ago to not get too emotionally attached to her patients. Getting too close caused doctors to blame themselves when their patients did not get better, and it made potentially losing a patient a gateway to self-doubt and depression, or worse. Just the potential of failure could be enough to set it off, not actually seeing a valued person die or slip away until nothing remained.

During her early school years, Chakwas was taught that healers throughout human history always surrounded themselves by death and failure. Before sterilization and antibiotic measures were perfected, every procedure held great risk. Even by the early 21st century, some hospitals carried a 1-in-3 chance of a patient dying within their walls. Medi-gel and technology had significantly reduced that risk over the last century, but it still happened. And she had to be ready to face it every time she walked into her place of work.

She never lost herself during the Shanxi reclamation. She held together during the hunt for Saren, the Collector abduction, and then the war itself. Even though she grew very fond of the Normandy crew over the years, she still managed to hold that clinical detachment close to her heart because she knew that not all of them would live to see the end of it. And she had been right, of course. It still hurt every time she heard the news or watched it happen, but she always filed it away and moved forward, never letting it affect her work or her life.

But now she stood above Shepard, who reclined on one of her tables, and her heart broke in half. The Commander used to be the rock the entire crew clung to when things got rough. When Shepard walked the corridors, it seemed light followed her, inspiring hope in everyone lucky enough to be her crew. Sometimes it seemed like she had been born to save others, to rise above all the muck in the galaxy and show there was always a better way. Such a person should have been able to ride off into the sunset like a hero of old, retiring to a life full of happiness and health as she enjoyed the spoils of a job well done.

But no, the galaxy could never be so kind. And now Commander Shepard sat, with a broken body and a mind filled with demons that could not be excised with a few kind words and an appreciative pat on the back. Her reward for doing the impossible, it seemed, had been more pain. The kind of pain that nearly drove Shepard to suicide because it was too much to bear.

It was certainly too much for Karin.

She needed to be strong, though. She had to remain vigilant and disciplined, lest the demons try to drag the Commander away again. So she put on the performance of a lifetime every time she spoke. She became a voice of authority, like a superior officer dressing down a recruit after they screwed up. And it worked. Half a life under the Alliance flag had trained Shepard to respond to such a tone, especially when it came from someone she trusted and respected. It still hurt every time Chakwas had to speak to Shepard in such a condescending and brutal way, but if it saved her life, Karin would change her entire vocabulary to accomplish it.

So now, as she stood in silence, a datapad in her hand, she had to fight the tears that wanted to flow from her eyes.

More awful things lurked in that piece of plastic and metal, but they would save Shepard’s life.
“Commander,” she began, “I need to inform you that I’m beginning the process of discharging you from the Systems Alliance Navy.”

Shepard’s career would not end with an explosion, or a dramatic speech to someone in charge, like the legendary soldier deserved. But with a signature and a list of medical reasons why she could no longer serve in the way she had been trained to do.

Another “reward” for a job well done.

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**GARRUS**

He got the message to return to the Normandy as he waded hip-deep in mud. The sole water pipe between a nearby reservoir and the Turian camp ruptured in the night, and turned a huge part of land, already covered in mud because of the constant rain, into a swamp that threatened to flood the place many of his people called home until the relays were repaired.

Garrus didn’t intend for this job, overseeing the camp, to overtake him in such a way. But so many of his people died in the war, he could not bear to see any more death, especially on a world full of things that could kill them in an instant. The constant hard work also helped keep his mind off the fact that Tali chose to remain in orbit with her people instead of with him. And it also distracted him from the constant rumors about Shepard’s horrible fate.

By the time he rendezvoused with the shuttle, the mud on his armor dried to a hard cake that fell off in dusty clumps whenever he moved. Even though the message told him to come help Shepard, he still relished the idea of returning to his little corner of the ship’s main battery and changing into something not covered in soil that potentially crawled with deadly bacteria. He didn’t hate Earth, but it seemed unusually hostile for a planet that looked so peaceful from orbit.

He returned to a ghost ship, almost empty save a few humans in blue uniforms milling about. In his few communications with his former shipmates, it seemed obvious they would want to step away from the confining spaces of the ship and aid in the reconstruction, but he didn’t expect them all to leave at the same time. Still, the modicum of privacy had been just what he needed to be able to change into another set of armor in the battery instead of finding a private place or trying to shove his bulk into the strictly human-sized male lavatory. Cerberus never really intended aliens to be aboard the ship, after all.

Knowing Shepard, he guessed she would be up in the CIC, staring at the galaxy map or reading something at her terminal. It’s where he saw her almost every day as she steered an entire galaxy to war against the Reapers.

She wasn’t there.

He had to grab the shoulders of a terrified maintenance crewmember to finally get Shepard’s location. Her own quarters. But why would she be cooped up there instead of walking around her own ship?
So up he went, riding the lift he knew all too well.

He expected to see Commander Shepard a little worse for wear. All of their battles in the past left their marks on both of them. He got away from a rocket blast with some scars and cybernetics. She came back from death itself with just a few deep lines on her face that disappeared on their own. So when her cabin doors opened, he expected new lines, maybe some bandages, perhaps an eyepatch. Humans with eyepatches looked surprisingly intimidating to him.

Instead, his eyes beheld a woman with one arm, glowing lines across her body and a head with almost no hair atop it. She sat on the large bed at the far end of the room, but as her face turned to meet his, he could tell that Shepard looked up at him. If he felt any revulsion at seeing her mangled body, her bright eyes and familiar features made it evaporate.

“Well, this is awkward.” He said with the lightest vocalization he could, to imply mock disappointment. It always seemed to relax her when he unleashed his patented sarcasm. “I didn’t expect you to take grooming advice from Jack.”

“Garrus.” She said in a flat, but not sad, voice. “I didn’t expect to see you up here.”

“When the Shadow Broker summons you, it’s best to follow instructions.” He said as he walked into the room. The message to return to the Normandy had been undoubtably from Liara, but her absence in the cabin shocked him. “Where is she?”

“I don’t know.” Shepard said as she turned her face back to the bed. As Garrus walked in, he could see she sat on top of a pile of blue cloth and small bits of metal: her Alliance uniforms and all the medals earned in her extraordinary career.

“What’s with the mess?” he asked in his most nonchalant voice. His experience told him that something seriously wrong was afoot, and he couldn’t help but investigate.

“They’re kicking me out.”

“Out of where? The ship? I don’t think anyone’s got the quad to remove Shepard from the Normandy.”

“Of the Alliance. Out of the military. Medical discharge.” She closed her eyes as she bent over the mess in front of her. Tears began to drip from her face as she held the position.

“That’s… that’s not…” Garrus Vakarian felt at a complete loss. He didn’t know what else to do but march to the bed and put an arm around Shepard as she hunched over and wept.

“I’m glad you’re here, Garrus.” She said after a long pause.

Where was Liara?

KAIDAN
Major Alenko stepped off the shuttle and into the familiar Normandy shuttle bay. He hadn’t been away for long, since he now held command of the vessel, but he also didn’t like stepping on Shepard’s toes. It would always be her ship and hers alone, no matter what name Alliance command put on top of the paperwork. For the most part, he commanded from afar, sending messages to the maintenance crew as needed and letting the ship run itself while he concentrated on other things in London, like making sure his old students were okay and throwing his council Spectre weight around to get things done that would have otherwise been buried in red tape and bureaucracy. Even at the end of the world, some people tried to halt progress because of pettiness or too-strict adherence to old rules that no longer mattered.

Shepard had been the one to teach him how to look past the letter of the law and see its spirit. Yes, most of the rules existed for a reason, but sometimes you just needed to push to do the right thing. When he accepted Udina’s offer to become the second human Spectre, he vowed he would follow her example. Use his authority not to break rules and skirt around decency to get the job done, but to show everyone the better, more justified path.

That’s why, when Liara contacted him and told him to return to the ship, even though he had been in the middle of a thousand decisions that would affect the rebuilding of London and the eastern hemisphere, he all but ran to the nearest shuttle. Shepard needed him, and he would be there. Because it was the right thing to do.

He didn’t need to go far to find Shepard, the first place he went had been the starboard observation lounge, the place he spent most of the war when not on duty. He and Shepard shared a lot of conversations in that room, some he knew helped them both get through the toughest times. Even though the Reapers made life a living hell for both of them, he would never exchange the time he spent with her there for anything.

And that’s exactly where he found her, sitting on one of the couches and staring out the large window. Earth rotated outside, the few places not covered in thick clouds dotted by huge gouts of smoke where cities used to stand. In front of the planet, the massive bulks of dead Reapers, as well as the shattered remains of countless ships that did not survive the final battle, orbited in a cruel approximation of a ring. The ruined, destroyed Citadel dwarfed them all, a mocking testament to the sturdiness of Reaper construction.

He didn’t speak as he sat next to her, nor did he turn to get a good look at the Commander. He saw what happened to her in London. Those nightmarish images would haunt him for years to come and he didn’t need to be reminded of that. Instead, he stared out the window and imagined their reflections did not resemble them as they were now, but as they had been when they first met on the original Normandy. They were both so young then, full of fire and promise. Not to mention a few pounds heavier from muscle and a diet that didn’t come in pre-packaged form. Young Kaidan stared at older Kaidan with a look that seemed to imbue all that Shepard had taught him. Do the right thing, make the better choice, even if it has a cost. You will learn to live with yourself because others depend on it.

He listened to her breathe for a while, unsure if he heard a wheeze coming from her lungs. He probably didn’t sound any better, considering the groundside conditions.

Finally, just when he wanted to look over and make sure she hadn’t fallen asleep, Shepard spoke.

“I… used to define myself in terms of what I wasn't. I wasn't a good person. I wasn't a good prospect for marriage or kids. I wasn’t a good enough soldier. Always what I wasn’t, never what I was.”

He wanted to tell her how ridiculous that mentality was, how she was so much more than that, but she didn’t seem to be in the mood to listen to him.
“But when you do that,” Shepard continued. “You start to miss things. You miss the little moments, the things that define who you are. And those moments are everything.”

She took in a deep breath. Kaidan finally looked at her and saw the redness in her eyes. She had been crying, but stopped recently. He also noticed a deactivated datapad at her side. Based on the smudges stretched across its black screen, he deduced that she had been reading and signing a lot of official documents.

“When you think you’re about to die, you get a lot of little images in your head. Revelations as your brain fights to stay alive. The vids say your life flashes before your eyes, but it’s not true. If anything, your future does. And after everything that’s happened, I realized that I didn’t want to let go. I can’t go back, but I can appreciate what I have right now and I can define myself by what I am, instead of what I’m not.”

“And what are you?” He asked, his voice shaky and unsure.

“Alive.” She said as she turned to him.

And then, even with just one arm, Shepard wrapped him in a hug. The kind of embrace that sent a chill down his spine and tears of his own to his eyes. He’d never known Shepard to be quite this affectionate, but then, he didn’t think he’d endure what she went through and come out the same person, either.

“I’m alive.” She repeated as Kaidan put his own arms around her. The embrace of a fellow soldier, a comrade who had been through the same hell, a friend, a brother, was all he could give her. But it seemed to be exactly what she needed.

Only one thought crossed his mind. Shouldn’t Liara be here for this soul-baring revelation, and not him?

TALI

The instant Liara’s message hit her omni-tool, Tali made plans to leave the fleet. They didn’t really need her anymore, and nobody asked for her Admiral’s input anyway. Too intimidated by one of the galaxy’s only famous Quarians, most likely. Most of the repairs were taken care of days ago, so the biggest issue of the day, of every day, was how much food and supplies they could send down to the Turians before a return trip to Rannoch became impossible. Other people could argue that mess, she wanted to be where she was needed, and it seemed Shepard needed her the most.

Garrus met her as soon as she stepped off the shuttle, and neither of them wasted time checking to see if they were alone before getting as close to each other as their respective clothing and armor would allow.

“It’s been too long.” Vakarian rumbled, which sent very pleasant vibrations through her helmet and through the suit. She didn’t realize how much she would miss those vocalizations.
“It has.” She agreed. “But Liara’s message said I needed to see Shepard right away.”

“Yeah. You should… go do that.” His voice lowered to a disappointed tenor, but held a promise of a future reunion in private.

“Don’t wander off, Vakarian.” She confirmed as she walked away. A private reunion aboard a nearly empty vessel would be exactly what she needed after listening to arguments about food. But first, she had to check on Shepard.

Somewhere along the line, she got word that the Commander would be in her quarters, so that’s where she went.

The door to the cabin slid open for her, which Tali did not expect, but did put a smile on her face. Only trusted people got such a private door to open without authorization, and it lifted her spirits to know Shepard felt that way enough to give her a free pass.

Two things shocked that elation away as soon as she entered the cabin.

Tali had been there in the hospital when that awful human doctor revealed what he did to Shepard, but she never went to see her in person. First because she couldn’t handle the news, then she held out long enough for her responsibilities to the Flotilla to overtake her desires to go back to Earth. But now she had no choice but to see it, and it looked worse than she imagined. Shepard without her short red hair looked bad enough, but she also happened to be wearing a shirt with no sleeves, which made her right limb stand out even more than she thought. Even with the dimmed lights in the cabin, the scar tissue stuck out like a beacon against Shepard’s already fair skin. The sight twisted her stomach almost enough to make her ill.

And yet, even more shocking than the sight of a mangled Shepard was the sound of her singing!

Shepard had her back to the door, sitting at her desk with her terminal activated and bright, letting her hamster pet run across the fingers of her remaining hand. She also swayed back and forth just a little bit as she let the lyrics move her in ways Tali recognized she did when belting out her favorite songs from Fleet and Flotilla. And her voice! She expected the tough and deadly Commander Shepard to sing like a varren with a throat full of gravel, but the human’s voice sounded nothing less than wonderful.

The words were in English and the recording Shepard listened to sounded very old, probably one of the ancient songs she enjoyed listening to. One time, on a three-hour long drive through the desert of an empty planet in the Mako, Shepard played some of her favorite Earth songs for her and Garrus. The excuse had been to “broaden their cultural horizons”, but the alien beats and strange sounds only served to give her a headache and forced her to deactivate her suit’s audio processors to preserve her sanity.

This song, however, sounded very different. She recognized the tone of the same string instruments and tempo-keeping percussion that gave her a headache that time all those years ago, but it sounded more harmonious, perhaps a bit more melancholy, than the music she listened to in the past. But even if it did make the words come slow, the combination of the male singer on the terminal and Shepard’s own voice made Tali’s translator glitch as it struggled to process them both.

But even without a reliable translation, Tali still enjoyed the first Earth song that didn’t give her a headache, and it made her smile to see Shepard enjoying it as well, even with all that happened to her.

Then, more voices joined the recording. A choir, perhaps? They, the recorded male and Shepard
joined together into a bigger mess of English and music, but it still did not sound unpleasant.

Memories of her sleepovers with friends came to Tali as she processed the beats and harmonies of the song. She tried comparing them to the music of her childhood and how her friends would take up different parts of the vocals to produce the best sounding music a bunch of teenage Quarians could manage.

Shepard’s low voice, combined with the man singing, gave her a perfect opportunity to join in with something higher, matching one of the many voices of the choir. And even though she didn’t understand the words, she could still provide a hummed, slightly incoherent, counter-melody.

She sang with Shepard for about two seconds before the human almost threw her pet across the room in shock, but she managed to compose herself and shut off the recording at the same time.

“How long were you listening?” Shepard asked with clenched teeth and venom in her voice.

“Long enough.” Tali teased. “I didn’t know you could sing, Commander.”

“No one does.” Shepard stood up on shaky legs to put her hamster in his cage. “It helps distract me from the pain in my arm. Doctor’s orders.”

“Not even Liara?”

“No.”

The Quarian raised a finger to her faceplate, trying to look serious and concerned. Behind the mask, however, her smile had become so wide that it almost hurt. Not only did this massive (and secret!) revelation about the Commander make her seem all the… better, but it also helped to know she had things to help manage her condition.

“I’ll keep your secret… if you let me sing with you.”

“What?” Even without a right arm, Shepard could still look very scary when she wanted to be. But Tali could not back down now.

“That’s the deal. I believe showed you my favorite vid before, now you show me something you enjoy. It’s what friends do.”

They stared at each other for a moment before Shepard sighed and rubbed her eyes.

“Fine. Let me bring up the translation for you.”

Fortunately for the rest of the Normandy, sounds from the Commander’s cabin did not filter through the ship. Tali made sure she got Shepard to smile at least once before she left to join Garrus somewhere private.
Ever since they first arrived in the London hospital, James Vega mistrusted Doctor Nicolo. Something about the man just irritated the shit out of him, and then it turned out those feelings were right on the money.

Vega’s instincts, every one of them, wanted to put a bullet into the head of the man for what he did. But he never did. He couldn’t, not after spending time with Shepard and her supernatural ability to make him think in different ways, in better ways. So ever since that awful night, he stood guard over Nicolo’s own private hospital room, one far away from Shepard’s and much more isolated. The Alliance would keep him alive, see if he ever mentally recovered from Liara’s attack, and throw him in prison for the rest of his life. Because they were good guys, better than the scum that tried to kill the woman who saved the whole damn universe.

His days became a boring mess of exercising, standing, and looking tough to people who weren’t doctors or nurses as they passed by the sealed room. But he would take boring over fighting a war against giant ancient robots any day.

Still, the instant Liara sent him a message to return to the Normandy, he jumped at the chance. Literally. He never got to jump very often, so he took the opportunity.

He stepped off the shuttle to see nothing but carnage and destruction. His personal space, the small slice of the shuttle bay he called his own, stood in ruins, crumpled and shattered, some of it covered in blood. His heart began to pound as he saw the desecration of all his hard work and sacrifice during the war. None of those things were cheap, and the forms he needed to sign to get them approved to the ship’s inventory? Forget about it! He never had a problem sharing them with the crew, since exercise did wonders for the mind as well as the body, but he also never let them get rough with the equipment, never let anyone do the slightest bit of damage.

And now his favorite punching bag lay on the deck, crumpled and useless. And covered in dried blood.

“The hell is this!?” He shouted to the empty space. “What pinche idiota thinks they can get away with this!?”

“Oh, hi.” Shepard said behind him.

Vega turned slowly, afraid to see the commander after what he witnessed in London. There had been so much blood. And just seeing her arm made him sick to his stomach, enough to almost vomit on top of Nicolo as he dragged the doctor out of the room.

Still, he managed to finish the rotation and take in the sight of the new Commander Shepard. She stood before him, a little bald and thinner than he remembered Shepard being, wearing her trusty N7 jacket, and supported by a shiny crutch on her left arm, but he still recognized her.

“Hey, Commander.” He said back. “You know anything about this?”

He immediately noticed that she did not follow his pointed glare at the fallen bag. She seemed to look everywhere BUT there.

“Yeah… I was hoping you’d get here so I could… apologize. About the bag.”

He should have been mad. No, he should have been furious, but he couldn’t. Not at the frail person standing right there.

“I’m sure you had a good reason to go apeshit on my stuff.”
“Not really.” Her voice carried a tone of confession.

“What’s going on, Lola?”

“Don’t worry about it, James. Just accept my apology and take this.” She held out her hand, which pulled the crutch off the deck as she raised her left arm. A credit chit.

“You trying to bribe me or something?”

“There’s enough in there to pay for a new set, a whole decent set of equipment for you.”

He took the chit with some hesitancy. As his hand made brief contact with hers, he noticed a very distinct tremble in her muscles.

“I… I’m not sure if I can take this. Besides, it’s not like there’s any stores around that’ll sell me anything.”

“Please, don’t argue. I need to do this. Think of it as a parting gift.”

“If you say so.”

She put the crutch back down and turned away from him.

“It was good to see you.” She said over her shoulder.

“Okay, the apology I understood. But the credit chit? And now this? Why are you talking like you won’t be seeing me ever again, Commander?” Worry twisted inside him until he expressed it with a little more rage than he wanted to, but he hoped it got the point across.

“You don’t need to keep calling me ‘Commander’ anymore.” She said as she turned around to face him again. “Not if you don’t want to, anyway.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m free, James. I’m honestly, truthfully free.”

JOKER

Liara pinged his omni-tool earlier in the day. She wanted him to get out of the cockpit and go talk to Shepard, who apparently had been on the ship for several days and not once come up to see him. Why should he be the one to get his brittle bones out of his comfortable seat if the all-powerful Commander Shepard refused to come see him?

He liked to sit and stew. It made it easy to not think about the gaping hole that used to be his chest, or whatever that old metaphor said it was like. Plus, it gave him a lot of time to pretend he spent time carefully considering the proposal that took up space in his mail folder. He’d say yes, after enough time passed to make it seem like he spent days agonizing over the decision and barely considered it
worthy of his time. It’s how those games are played, after all. Make yourself seem more important
than you really are or the other guy will know you’re desperate or have nothing better to do, then
he’s got you by the balls when it comes time for salary negotiations.

So he sat and stewed in anger at Shepard’s haughty ignorance of his presence on the ship. Back in
the good old days, she’d come to see him every morning. First thing, too, with a cup of coffee in one
hand and her datapad in the other. They’d shoot the shit as the Normandy woke up around them,
then get back to work hunting Saren or the Collectors or whoever else they needed to make dead.

The war made her visits erratic, but he understood. She had more to deal with than simple bad guys
and a personal quest for redemption or whatever her personal stake in things were. She had the
weight of an entire galaxy on her shoulders, and even in their brief time together, he saw the cracks
forming.

But now? When it was all said and done and she escaped death YET AGAIN? Not a peep from her.
Not even a mocking visit to come make fun of the fact it looked like he never moved from the chair.
(He sometimes didn’t, it felt better to sleep here than in the bunks. It let him pretend nothing
changed.)

Just as he felt like he couldn’t take it anymore, the cockpit door slid open and a cool rush of air hit
the back of Jeff’s neck.

“You maintenance guys really need to knock before you come in. You might have caught me
looking at Fornax or Asari Confessions 29. You know the one I mean. With the sisters.”

“That’s really gross. And yet, not at all surprising.”

“Commander!” Joker almost jumped out of the chair and landed hard enough to break his ribcage at
the sound of Shepard’s voice.

“Easy there, Joker. I’m just here to say hi.”

“Oh, is that all?” He let some of his simmering anger out, enough to block the sarcasm. He also made
sure to not turn his chair around.

“Is there… something you wanted from me?”

He couldn’t help himself, he mimed typing a message on his omni-tool, then spoke in a dopey,
exaggerated voice: “Dear Jeff, I’m here on the Normandy after almost dying and saving the whole
universe from extinction. I thought I’d come visit you and we could reminisce about the good times
while having tea and cakes because we’re best pals.”

“I, uh, I can’t exactly do that, Jeff.”

“Don’t patronize me, Commander. If you can’t face me because of what happened to EDI, you
should know I’ve never been mad at you for… whatever you did in there. But if you’re just
embarrassed to come see me because you think you’ve got better things to do-“

“Joker.” She cut him off with a very familiar, very annoyed shout. “Turn around.”

So he did. And he saw what she meant.

“Oh. Shit. Now I really look like an ass, don’t I?”

“A little.”
“A lot.” He sighed. “Go ahead, hit me with that cane of yours. I deserve it.”

“It’s not a cane.” She said as she tapped the crutch on the deck. “I’m hurt, I’m not old.”

He recognized the exact make and model of the crutch she used, of course. He used to use something similar in high school. But he still needed to change the subject before they started talking about nothing but supportive medical devices.

“So how are things?”

“Things?”

“You know, whatever things normal people talk about. It’s about time we stopped thinking of each other as the universe’s greatest pilot and the literal avatar of death and destruction.”

“So I take it you’ve heard the news as well?”

“What news?” Aside from the mail that sat in his inbox, he heard nothing from anyone. Although, it really had been his choice to isolate himself from the world. He had precious little left to care about.

“Medical discharge. Effective as soon as Admiral Hackett puts his signature on it.”

“Wow. I honestly did not expect you to be medically kicked out before me. You don’t… seem all that broken up about it.” He observed.

“I was. But then I started to think maybe it’s for the best, you know? Not like I can pick up a battle rifle and expect to do anything with it.”

“Not with that attitude.” He quipped. “Wouldn’t you be, like, top candidate for a replacement, anyway?”

The look that crossed her face scared him. Like, really scared him. Not anger, but a pain that he thought only he felt when he thought about everything in life his disease denied him. “No.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to get out of line.”

“It just makes up for the time when I screwed up with you.”

“If you mean that conversation way back when we were going after Saren? Jeez, I almost forgot about it until you just brought it up. Well now we have two things in common. Debilitating physical problems and a strange ability to put a crippled foot in our own mouths.”

“We can start a club.” She said, the light coming back to her expression. “We can call it the “Normandy Cripple Club.” How’s that sound?”

Something broke inside Jeff Moreau. Something he had been holding back for weeks. A boiling, storming mass of emotion that he never thought he’d let out again.

He laughed.

And then he laughed again.

He laughed hard enough to make his chest hurt and his throat burn. Shepard joined him soon after.

“Normandy cripple club.” He said between gasping for air. “I couldn’t make that up if I tried. I am sad that I lack the talent to make that shit up.”
She sent out the messages one at a time from her console, never paying attention to the local time or their current situations. She tried to contact every single person who used to be on board the ship, and in Joker’s case, refused to leave. They all responded as she expected they would, either with short acknowledgments or nothing at all, just showing up on the ship as soon as they got a cleared shuttle flight into the Normandy’s orbital path.

A few of her invitations went unread, but the Shadow Broker expected that, as well. Javik seemed to forget he even had an omni-tool. Wrex and Grunt were too busy destroying things and enjoying themselves to come up. Jack needed to be with her surviving students. Too many of them died in Hammer’s final push, and she seemed to be taking it poorly. The others were all too busy or unable to get a shuttle ride to the Alliance’s most famous and well-guarded frigate. Jacob, Kasumi, Zaeed, etc. Liara would make sure they got in contact with Shepard somehow, even if she only managed to get a text message from them.

Every time someone came to the ship, she saw Jane’s condition improve just a bit. Though, her well-supervised medication routine also seemed to help, but pills alone would not save her.

Before Garrus arrived, Liara and Shepard shared a nice but static daily schedule. They would wake up in her cabin and get ready for the day without saying a word to each other. Jane took much longer than she used to, but every passing day saw her develop new ways to accommodate for her missing arm. Then they would part ways, again in silence, when they reached the crew deck. Shepard would go to medbay while she returned to her quarters and began processing the night’s information with Glyph.

And then Liara would activate her camera feeds and she’d watch Jane go about her day. From the time Doctor Chakwas made sure the pill had been swallowed, to every meal time, to all of the wanderings Shepard took about her ship. She spent time everywhere, even engineering, where most of the maintenance work took place. Everywhere except her quarters, of course. At the end of the day cycle, Liara would exit her personal space, and the two of them would meet at the elevator. They’d ride up to the cabin in silence and go to bed.

They were together, but they hadn’t spoken in days. And she knew exactly why.

The image of Jane pinned down with a biotic field haunted Liara’s dreams and every waking moment. It had been a horrible thing to do, and she knew it led directly to Shepard’s attempt to kill herself. She must have felt so hurt and betrayed that it broke whatever last barriers she had in place and let the pain overtake her to the point of suicide.

All her fault.

So she accepted the silent punishment, and she would endure it for as long as it took. But it didn’t make her passive. The Shadow Broker would continue to help her bondmate even if the never knew it came from her.
Liara watched Jane reunite with Garrus as she came to terms with the medical discharge. It should have been her in the cabin comforting Shepard, but she could not be there. Not then, maybe never again.

She watched Shepard and Kaidan together in the observation lounge after Shepard signed her part of the discharge paperwork. She became aware of his feelings for Jane very early in their relationship, but she didn’t feel jealous or threatened by him. She just felt upset that she was not allowed to take his place.

Tali’s entrance happened a little earlier than expected. But even more unexpected was the fact that Shepard shared her most secret hobby with the Quarian. Liara knew something of Jane’s beautiful voice, but not the fact that she felt comfortable singing entire songs in private.

The other meetings went exactly as planned. Each one doing a little more to bring the old Shepard back from the brink. She needed the contact and the familiarity, not more isolation. And it felt good to see the Normandy crew settle back into their own comfortable places aboard the ship instead of just leaving the instant they felt their presence was no longer required. Could they, perhaps, sense that Shepard still needed them around?

She waited, and she hoped.

Joker laughed on her screen, another unexpected result of the planned meeting. But then, Jane Shepard always managed to do the impossible. His mood never really improved since their last conversation, even when he got a job offer with the surviving remnant of Synthetic Insights. (She might have let slip to them his extensive experience with artificial intelligence) crossed into his inbox. The pay increase would be substantial, and he would no longer have to chafe under military doctrine.

After their laughing calmed down, Shepard left the cockpit… and disappeared.

No, that couldn’t be right. The cameras tracked everyone.

How could a limping human just vanish from her all-seeing eyes?

Liara flipped through every single feed, every camera, even ones in parts of the ship it would be impossible for Shepard to reach.

And then her door opened on its own.

“I know what you’ve been doing, Liara.” Shepard stood there, crutch in hand, N7 hood raised, and her lips pursed tightly together.

“Shepard, I…”

“And I know you’ve been watching me the whole time. Do you really think you know this ship better than I do?”

Of course, Shepard would have known how to avoid the cameras. She would have learned such a skill when people like the Illusive Man watched her every move.

“I just wanted you to be happy again. I know how much the crew means to you, and they weren’t coming to see you, so I made it happen.”

Shepard stood in the door, stone faced and silent.

Liara stood by her console, her heart pounding in her chest. Had Shepard’s anger come out? Did
meeting her friends again give her the strength to finally confront the Shadow Broker over her heinous violation?

She would not fight Jane, nor would she run.

Shepard took one step forward.

Then another.

She shook the crutch off her arm.

They stood within arm’s reach of each other. Liara had to consciously put her biotics down before the accidentally flared in self-defense.

And then Shepard pulled Liara to her and squeezed as hard as she could with her left arm.

“Thank you.”

“I… you’re welcome.” Her hands snaked around Jane’s midsection until they met. She could feel Jane’s breathing grow shallow and her body shiver as they touched. To Liara’s great sorrow, she could also feel Shepard’s right limb rise and try to mimic her left, trying to complete the hug that she had been denying herself for days.

“Are you all right, Jane?”

Shepard sniffled, a light, pull of air through her nose. Liara could feel warm wetness on her shoulder, Jane’s tears were beginning to soak through her coat.

“No. But I will be.”
6 January 2187 – The final sweep of the Citadel is completed. Aside from a few pockets of survivors deep within the most heavily reinforced sections of the wards, the station was rendered lifeless by the Reaper takeover, the crucible’s energy wave, and the subsequent collapse. No keepers are reported anywhere.

2 February 2187 – First phase of the Charon relay repairs are completed and the element zero core is installed. Engineers consider it in a state of “partial readiness”. A Quarian ship volunteers to test it by connecting to the nearest relay: Arcturus.

10 February 2187 – FTL comm from the Quarian ship arrives at Sol: mild damage sustained from uncontrolled deceleration, but it did not collide with anything. They deem it safe for a repair fleet to make the jump, Alliance officials agree.

12 March 2187 – After weeks of repairs, the Arcturus relay is in a “partial readiness” state, while Charon is rated “safe for authorized traffic only”. Arcturus repair fleet almost destroyed by an arriving Turian ship, doing the exact same test as the first Quarian vessel did from Charon.

13 March 2187 – The “Terminus Fleets”, loyal only to infamous crime lord Aria T’loak, decide to leave Earth and head to Omega on their own power. The best estimate for their arrival at Omega, assuming constant FTL burn with only necessary stops to dump charges, is eighteen thousand Earth-years. They are not expected to survive.

19 March 2187 – A Turian relief fleet is authorized to jump from Arcturus to Charon to provide aid and evacuation for the Turians stranded on Earth. They bring the surviving Krogan soldiers left behind on Palaven with them. The exchange is overseen by Urdnot Wrex.

20 March 2187 – Seven Krogan are arrested for disturbing a chimpanzee colony in the country of Kenya. The Krogan party managed to survive the encounter, but each suffered several broken bones, lacerations and severe bruising. Doctors advise they get treated for known Chimpanzee-borne diseases before being brought to trial.

27 March 2187 – Commander Shepard’s honorable discharge from Alliance service is made official and the Alliance plans a massive farewell gathering on the Normandy in her honor. But when the first envoys arrive, including Admiral Hackett, to deliver the news, she is nowhere to be found.
29 March 2187 – The SSV Normandy is officially retired and flown to an unknown location by Alliance preservation engineers. The Systems Alliance government releases a statement that they plan to turn the ship into a museum dedicated to all those who fought in the war, those who died to ensure victory, and Commander Shepard herself. However, no dates are mentioned on the statement, leading many to think the Alliance will spend many years studying the ship and its construction before converting it into a public-friendly place.

1 April 2187 – The military vessels in Earth orbit still capable of powered flight all take part in an unprecedented “cleanup” operation. Ships ranging from frigates to dreadnoughts alike tow Reaper corpses and Reaper-specific debris into a safe orbit around Luna, to prevent the massive hulks from eventually crashing into populated areas due to orbital decay. The efforts are expected to last the entire year.

3 April 2187 – An Asari convoy jumps to the Arcturus relay, once again shocking the repair crew. They report that they have been repairing relays across their territory since war’s end, and have finally come to aid other races. With their help, humanity’s “jump zero” and Charon are restored to “moderate functionality”.

9 April 2187 – All non-humans and their fleets stranded by the final battle against the Reapers are allowed to use the Charon and Arcturus relays to return to their home systems. After two turian fleets and one Asari cruiser use Arcturus, faulty repair work causes the element zero core to go critical. The relay does not explode, but it is deemed unsafe by all galactic governments. Earth is effectively cut off from the galactic community until other mass relays are repaired.

11 April 2187 – (Shepard’s 33rd birthday.) A human woman with short red hair and an Asari are spotted walking through the repaired street of a small town on the North American continent, but nobody stops them to confirm their identity. A single fuzzy omni-tool image of the pair reaches the eyes of the Alliance.

25 April 2187 – Keepers begin reappearing on the citadel. They repair several metal processing facilities almost overnight, making it possible for much of the debris in Earth orbit to be captured and sent to the Citadel to be remade into useful materials. It is estimated that it will take 4 years to completely clear local space. Without keeper assistance, repairs to the Citadel could take a century to complete. But if their numbers continue to increase, that time could significantly shorten.

14 May 2187 – With the vast majority of Earth’s population living without homes or stable accommodations in often rainy conditions, and medical supplies running short, many people begin succumbing to mild infections like influenza across the globe. Most people fear the return of worse diseases the longer it takes to rebuild.
9 June 2187 – Rumors circulate again as a red haired woman and an Asari are spotted at one of Central America’s Mayan ruins. Again, only a few badly-taken images manage to spread around the planet, but one in particular, of the two beings with their hands together in front of one of the pyramids, sparks much debate as to their identity.

28 June 2187 – Tensions between the Alliance Navy and the Quarians rise as both fleets argue over what to do with the massive fleet of derelict Geth ships in Earth orbit. The Quarians are eventually given rights to salvage what fuel, eezo and material their ships can reasonably carry, humanity will take the rest.

1 July 2187 – The first outbreaks of serious infections hit warmer countries along the Mediterranean. Local officials have no choice but to quarantine infected individuals. Some non-humans still on Earth volunteer to aid the sick. Several Quarians become local heroes in countries like Libya and Spain for their knowledge on how to handle mass outbreaks in confined areas. The death toll is low.

11 July 2187 – Plans are set in motion to stabilize the Arcturus relay while more sickness spread across Earth’s populace. Local food supplies in areas like London and New York begin to fall short of need, prompting unrest.

18 August 2187 – Asari engineers are the first to deploy a brand new FTL comm buoy in deep space, allowing direct communication between Earth and Thessia. However, due to lingering fear of indoctrinated individuals, only approved messages and government communications are allowed to be sent across planetary borders.

21 September 2187 – The one year anniversary of the start of the Reaper War. The day the first official reports came from Batarian territory about the Reaper arrival is universally considered “day one”, even if official war declarations came several weeks later. Few humans mourn the de facto genocide of the Batarian species along with the “day one” events.

7 October 2187 – An emergency meeting among Earth’s surviving governments is convened and almost instantly ended. All of Earth’s leadership agrees in one meeting to change priority from remembering the fallen and rebuilding cities to restoring agriculture and sustainable food production.

20 October 2187 – The first food riot hits London as the starving and sick population begin to run out of rations and local edibles.

21 October 2187 – Members of the Normandy crew, including Major Kaidan Alenko, Lieutenant James Vega, and the Prothean Javik, manage to calm the worst of the rioting with biotic displays and
a call for rational discussion between the parties involved. Other violence across southeast England is not so easily calmed, however.

25 October 2187 – A cargo ship from Australia, the *Anna Columbia*, arrives in British territorial waters, carrying surplus Alliance foodstuffs from a destroyed base near Sydney. Skycars, shuttles and all manner of flying vehicles meet the ship long before it docks and load as much food as they can carry before taking it back to London to quell the fighting. By the time it docks late in the evening, half of its stores are empty, but the violence is over.

28 October 2187 – The crew of the *Anna Columbia* are hailed as heroes three days after their arrival. As news spreads about the safety of ocean travel, international trade once again starts up on Earth, delivering needed items to every surviving port on the planet.

31 October 2187 – Halloween is celebrated among many of Earth’s children, with members of the Normandy crew by far the most popular costumes. Without Commander Shepard’s presence to authorize her likeness, several versions of “her” appear across the refugee camps of Earth. The sheer number of impostors make it impossible to pinpoint the location of the actual Shepard.

6 November 2187 – Earth’s telecommunications are restored to basic functionality. Millions of omni-tools tune in to a live broadcast to a huge greenhouse in Germany, where the first crops planted since the end of the war begin to sprout.

22 November 2187 – A nuclear power station in Russia is restored to safe operating standards and reactivated, bringing electricity back to a huge part of the nation. Other countries follow suit over the following months.

2 December 2187 – The one year anniversary of the Reaper’s defeat marks a global memorial event, the first in human history. Moments of silence are observed, hundreds of ceremonies from religions across the globe, as well as secular displays of honor and respect flood across humanity and are broadcast to all omni-tools and vid-receivers, regardless of channel preference or privacy settings. Similar rituals are held on all planets in the galaxy.

25 December 2187 – Many humans, and a growing number of non-humans still on Earth, celebrate the holiday of Christmas. With no real commerce, infrastructure, or surviving retail structures, most people “return to the roots” of the holiday and just spend time with family and loved ones. The unusual weather of the past year also creates an unexpectedly high amount of snowfall in the northern hemisphere, while temperatures in the southern hemisphere are mercifully low for late December.

After months of disappearing off the proverbial map, people in a rural town in the North American
state of Colorado report the presence of the mysterious red haired human and her Asari during early evening, local time. With Earth’s communications coming back online, a single live broadcast from a personal omni-tool reaches over six million viewers as people the world over debate if it’s really Commander Shepard and Liara T’soni.

Six million viewers would eventually see an image that would become an icon of the post-war galaxy: Commander Shepard, wrapped in thick winter clothing, falling to her knees on top of a snow-covered hill. As Liara turns around to help her back up, the Commander reaches her left hand into a pocket to reveal a small black box and holds it up like a gift before the smiling Asari.

The broadcast came to a sudden end by the intervention of the broadcaster’s mother, who makes her disapproval of spying on other people’s business abundantly clear. Some of her rural and eccentric sayings become something of a "meme" across the restored communications network.

30 December 2187 – The Arcturus relay, thanks to the tireless efforts of Asari, human and Turian engineers, is stabilized, then dismantled. Deemed too unsafe to repair, the base components will be put to use in building the very first brand new mass relay in galactic history.
These Changes Ain't Changing Me

The scientist in Liara could not help but take note that, the longer Jane Shepard remained free of the military, of punishing duty and the burdens of command, the more she sang. Like a flower blooming under newly melted snow, her artistic spirit seemed to grow stronger and stronger as she drifted away from her old life. And yet, when she tried to talk about it to Jane, her pale freckled cheeks turned deep scarlet and she refused to speak more than a few clipped sentences. For her entire life, Shepard’s secret talent had been just that, secret. The people who “raised” her considered singing wasteful and something to be ashamed of. The Systems Alliance never gave her an opportunity to express herself in any way but violence. So as she devoted her life to fighting and destruction, her atrophied abilities withered until they were almost forgotten, dredged up only after terrible circumstance.

Fortunately, her devoted friends and doctors saw this ability as anything but a waste, and encouraged her to express it. It became a perfect coping mechanism to deal with the lingering agony in her right limb. Shepard could sing without thinking, mimicking lyrics and matching notes to keep her mind distracted until the discomfort passed and she could get on with her day. But as time went on, she would do it even when her arm didn’t bother her. She rarely sang with intent, probably unaware that the music in her head would often translate into the real world, but Liara never complained.

Sometimes, Jane would start a bit of her unconscious singing, but then trail off into incoherent words, becoming long whispers, which then turned to silence for hours at a time. It most often happened when they flew over a destroyed city or close to a dead Reaper, but it sometimes came out of the blue. More often than not, when Shepard disappeared into herself, her eyes would go blank and empty, just like they used to look in the hospital. It frightened Liara every time it happened, but Jane seemed to pull out of it somehow.

It took months for her to convince Shepard to sing consciously, to give private concerts in the wilderness of Earth, where no other sapient soul could hear. Her repertoire of memorized songs remained small, mostly tunes Jane explained were almost two hundred years old, but she also knew a few modern ones Liara recognized as popular both on Earth and Citadel space. Shepard explained that, as a young child, before the Reds took her in, she lived with a family that enjoyed classical music. Some of the students in the school she attended mocked her for it, but she grew to prefer the natural guitars, heavy drums and imperfect vocals of the 20th and early 21st centuries to the synthetic and alien sounds of the 22nd.

Shepard’s favorite song had been the one Tali interrupted. Like Tali, Liara’s translator had trouble making sense of the lyrics, but as she learned more English and of Jane’s native culture, she could interpret some meanings in the words. It reminded her of old Asari poetry, especially the poems about a soul trying to mature and move on from a shameful past, pleading for help from others but receiving none.

When she got Shepard to explain why she favored that one above the others, it brought tears to her green eyes. She first heard it a week before she ran away from the foster home, for reasons she could no longer remember. It stuck in her head for years, until she turned fifteen and it was all she could think about as she did illegal and horrible things to survive. She would whisper the lyrics to herself, trying to retreat into pleasant childhood memories, as her teenage life fell apart. Now and then, she’d find ways to listen to it, to keep it fresh in her memory. But she always kept it secret, afraid someone would discover her hidden dreams and desires and crush them.

She never forgot the song as she left all that behind and became the most famous human soldier in
the galaxy, but she never had the time or inclination to sing it until recently. When she felt her life falling apart again, she had no other recourse but to fall back on habits nearly forgotten.

“I’m glad you have the chance find new meaning, Jane.” Liara said one night as they camped under endless stars somewhere in the middle of nowhere.

“I’m trying.”

They had been away from the Normandy for almost a year, traveling in a “borrowed” stealth shuttle and trying to keep a low profile from everyone on the planet. It had been Lieutenant Cortez’s idea to take one of the Normandy’s own shuttles before Admiral Hackett and his cohort arrived on the day Shepard’s retirement became official. The entire crew knew the ceremony would not be for her, but for literally everyone else in the galaxy. The proceedings would eventually devolve into endless press conferences, speeches, video interviews and a complete invasion of Jane’s privacy as she tried to heal. The galaxy wanted to congratulate their savior, but the gratitude of trillions of people would have become a flood that washed the broken soldier away. So they left.

Not only had the shuttle been purpose-built to avoid scanners and conventional detection methods, Jane’s training and Liara’s extensive knowledge of Alliance protocols made it easy to reprogram the vehicle so it no longer broadcast a military code that pinged every IFF scanner on the planet. They became completely invisible as they flew over the recovering Earth, only stopping to get supplies or visit places Jane knew would interest them both.

However, both on the order of Chakwas and Doctor Eriks, their physical isolation did not mean Jane remained cut off from her friends. Liara took half of her equipment with her, allowing direct and instant communication to anyone on the planet, as well as allowing her to continue her own Shadow Broker duties. The console, a single mainframe and Glyph’s physical representation took up about half of the shuttle’s available internal space, but they both agreed it was necessary. Shepard talked to both of her doctors at least once a month, often more, both to arrange pickups of more medication but also for therapy that helped her more than Shepard knew.

She talked to everyone else as they were available. Tali’s admiral privilege got her access to a vid-comm unit on a Quarian liveship, so her talks with Shepard became a highlight. Garrus sometimes joined in, often as a surprise. Other members of the crew did text or audio talks with her, to varying degrees of comfort and success. Liara expected Kaidan to be strict and formal, and Vega to treat her like an old comrade, with vigor and exuberance. In fact, both men acted in the exact opposite of her expectations. Kaidan spoke to her with passion and fire she did not expect from the man, while James treated Jane like a fragile doll. Other Normandy crew sent messages and mail as they could, which Jane often read as Liara piloted the shuttle to their next destination.

For most of the year, Shepard directed her to Earth’s most famous archaeological sites. Together, they explored ancient cities, abandoned tombs and stone relics left behind by forgotten cultures. Most of them were so isolated and remote, often hundreds of miles away from the nearest village or small town, that they escaped Reaper notice. Life continued around humanity’s most ancient sites as if nothing had happened at all. The constant, but safe, exercise helped return both of their bodies to a shape that resembled their pre-war abilities. Shepard even used her crutch less and less until the time came she could manage a slight limp no matter how far she needed to walk.

Every time they touched down near a new location, the Shadow Broker melted away from Liara and the young archaeologist took over. She knew better than to disturb some of the already-existing preservation work and fragile structures, but she sometimes caught herself digging through dust and mud in places she suspected human archaeologists overlooked. She never found anything, but the mere act of doing what she loved made her feel more alive than she had in years. The fact she shared
the experience with Jane made her smile like a young Asari every time.

After months of travel, experiencing Earth cultures both ancient and modern, always staying ahead of the Alliance patrols no doubt searching for them both, and just enjoying life together in ways they never thought possible, Liara thought her life could not get better.

But then, like she always did, Jane Shepard surprised her.

On a cold evening in the middle of winter, on a hill near a town small enough that a single emergency generator could power every house and building, Shepard fell to her knees. Panicked, Liara turned and reached out, begging the Goddess Athame that nothing terrible happened to Jane. Visions of heart failure, a broken knee or a mysterious glitch in her Cerberus implants flickered in her mind’s eye.

But instead of sitting on the ground in agony, Shepard had fallen in a calculated and perfectly safe manner. And when Liara finished her graceful about-face, she saw her bondmate, wrapped in several layers of clothes, red hair reaching past her shoulders, and scars showing clear signs of healing, on one knee, her left hand holding a black box that contained a simple, but beautiful ring.

She had to force herself to not compare the human ritual to about a half dozen other species’ own marriage ceremonies as Jane slipped the ring over her finger. It didn’t quite fit, sitting slightly large on her blue digit, but she managed to keep it on.

Shepard said something then, but Liara didn’t listen. Instead, she reached down and pulled Shepard back up and kissed her with more passion than she had ever done before.

The next week, they took their shuttle to a town further south, so they could escape the ice and snow, which agitated Shepard’s fragile joints. The settlement did not escape the horrors of the war, but most of the cleanup had been done by the time they arrived, and many of the standing buildings showed signs of partial reconstruction, halted for the Christmas holiday season.

Jane took her to a small building that housed local priests and priestesses, though she did not get time to ask which particular human religion they followed. Shepard insisted they get married right then and there, away from prying eyes and the spectacle an “official” Shepard-T’soni wedding would become. Jane never cared for huge gatherings or elaborate ceremonies. All her life, she found ways to avoid them. She never attended any memorials on Akuze, her official induction as a council Spectre took less than an hour, and she even managed to take command of the first Normandy after a single conversation and a handshake. All of those things would have taken days or weeks out of her life if she were anyone but Commander Shepard. Why would she want her wedding to be any different?

Besides, like her “retirement ceremony”, any big wedding plans would eventually be found by the media and they’d have to deal with an even worse frenzy than the dull proceedings Hackett planned. The news media, even a postwar, barely-functional news media, would make their married life a living hell. They would never be able to enjoy their wedding night or a something Jane called a “honeymoon”.

Still swept up in the idea of being officially taking part in an official human bonding ceremony, even if a small and private one, Liara didn’t argue. She followed along with all the steps, listened to a brief sermon and even turned off her translator so she could say the words “Yes, I do” in horribly accented English.

They remained near that town as the Earth calendar marked the start of the year 2188, their shuttle parked a few kilometers away so its engines did not disturb anyone. As they had done almost every
night since they left the Normandy, they slept on comfortable sleeping rolls inside the cramped shuttle interior, sometimes hand-in-hand, sometimes huddled together to share warmth. Even if they could have adjusted the environmental controls, they preferred alternatives.

“So,” Liara sighed as she pulled Jane closer so she could run her fingers through the ever-lengthening red hair. “What should we call each other now?”

“What do you mean?” Shepard mumbled as she succumbed to the sensation.

“Well, we are now married according to your custom, are we not?”

“We are. Well, mostly custom, we broke a few traditions. What’s going on?”

“I’m just trying to think of how we should introduce ourselves now. Aren’t the official terms “husband and wife”?”

“There are no husbands in this arrangement, Liara.” Jane said dreamily as Liara lifted a few scarlet strands atop her head, then let them fall down. When Shepard stood up, her hair touched her shoulders now, a far cry from the days she had been rendered bald, or before that, when she kept it short according to military regulations.

“So just wife for both of us?”

“You got it.” It came out more of a breathy whisper than actual words. Shepard already had her eyes closed.

Liara smiled and gently kissed Shepard’s cheek before letting go of her hair. It seemed the day’s events had gotten to Jane, who still did not have the same boundless energy reserves she used to. Liara would let her bondmate, her wife, sleep, even if human traditions said wedding nights contained anything but. They weren’t traditional people, after all. They broke rules and conventions all the time, so she would let this one slide as well.

They hadn’t spent the past year completely chaste. But they both could tell something prevented the same level of intimacy they used to share. Not only did Jane’s sex drive seem to be as reduced as every other part of her, she did not, or could not, merge her mind with Liara’s. Asari needed more than physical stimulation to be truly satisfied, even if the union did not produce a child. They both understood that, and Shepard used to be more than willing to let Liara push past her natural mental defenses and let their two beings become one.

Not anymore.

Even though Shepard said she held the same consent and enthusiasm for the joining, and did as much as she could in the physical side of things, her mind told a very different story when Liara tried to go deeper. Jane mentally recoiled every single time, as if terrified of the Asari intrusion, and blocked all attempts to join together. Sometimes she mentally kicked back strong enough to give Liara a headache, which only happened in extreme cases of rejection. Shepard’s willpower and mental fortitude had always been tremendous, which is how she survived the Prothean beacon, so naturally her resistance to Asari meddling was just as strong.

She did not know exactly why Jane’s mind resisted her, and after months of trying, she had all but given up on figuring it out. Shepard never explained herself, either genuinely as confused as her, or hiding something she would never willingly talk about. Liara still had suspicions about why she could not connect, though. Perhaps Shepard felt afraid because she witnessed everything Liara did to Doctor Nicolo. Or maybe the sickness in Jane’s mind prevented her from truly opening herself on a
subconscious level. There hadn’t been much of any research on human/Asari pairings, especially those in their unique positions. Either way, she suspected the solution would only come with more time and patience. She had seen Jane recover from so much, she would heal this mental wound as well.

In times like this, Liara got into a routine of activating her console and immersing herself back into the world of the Shadow Broker, even if she had to re-read the same information dozens of times as she waited for an update from her agents. But tonight, she instead felt compelled to study the ring that adorned her hand. Almost all species she knew about made jewelry of some kind, but she never paid attention to it unless they were in a fascinating archaeological context, even her own people’s delicate and finely crafted examples escaped her notice.

But now, her entire world became a simple band of metals and a small gem set on its top. Where did Shepard ever get this? She never had any records of such a purchase and she certainly didn’t have time to go buy something like this during the war. Perhaps an heirloom? Or a gift from long ago? Too bad her skills did not extend to mineral analysis, or she might have spotted clues as to the ring’s origin.

However, before Liara let the questions bubble and stew in her brain, probably to the point she angrily questioned Shepard as to where the ring came from, something distracted her.

A melody.

As Shepard drifted away into slumber, she started singing to herself. It started as a whisper, than a familiar string of notes, one of the few songs she had memorized. But over the long minutes she let her mind work, the tune began to shift and morph. The more she drifted away from the waking world, the less her singing sounded like one of her oft-repeated versions of old Earth music.

Jane Shepard, though she didn’t realize it, had begun to compose her own song.

The words were indistinct, barely recognizable English, the melody didn’t always make sense, and she started and stopped more than once. But even through all that, it revealed something that even a person from a completely different planet and who spoke an alien language could understand.

After so much violence, pain and death, after enduring scars, tortures and permanent injuries to her body and soul, after losing her life, then almost dying a second time, Shepard’s deep down unconscious mind… was happy.

The depression and stress were not her, they never were. They were just black smears, scar tissue on a damage psyche, not the person itself. However hard they worked to obscure Shepard’s views of the real world, they were just veils and shadow.

Perhaps it was their quick marriage, or maybe a year spent together without Reapers, a war or anything to cause stress. It seemed that, even with the all problems Shepard still had to overcome, she saw the light at the end of the journey somewhere deep inside her mind.

And now Liara saw it too.
Shepard’s weak heart raced and she hummed a wordless tune to herself as she paced back and forth along a broken sidewalk, past the burned remains of a skycar and a crater that might have been a small restaurant over a year ago. All around her, the ruins of Chicago still smoldered and crumbled into blackened dust a year and some months after the war. A dead reaper towered over it all, propped up against one of the city’s gutted skyscrapers. It cast deep, huge shadows over her and everyone else in this small corner of life among a city of dead.

When the singing didn’t help, she tried to distract herself by speculating what might have been served at the restaurant before the end of the world came. Greek, maybe? Nah, not right for this part of town. Probably just a classic diner, or maybe a burger joint. Wait, wasn’t Chicago a pizza city? Yeah, that was it. She imagined the ruins at her side to be a nice, homey Chicago pizza place, not a pile of bricks and charred bodies. The perfect place to take Liara after an afternoon of sightseeing.

Her polished black cane made loud clicking sounds as she mulled over the fantasy.

She didn’t need the cane, but she liked it. A “wedding present” from Joker, after she and Liara got their act together and informed their friends of their surprise Christmastime wedding. To their shock, all of them had already seen the pictures of her snowbound proposal. Tali even had it saved to a display in her quarters aboard her ship. Shepard could tell most everyone felt a little upset at not being invited, but she hoped they understood her reasons. It had been their idea, not hers, for her to leave the Normandy under cover of secrecy, after all. A public wedding would have been just as awful for them as her and Liara.

A few weeks after they sent the first announcement, Chakwas sent the cane along with Jane’s medication. Joker resigned the instant the Alliance retired the Normandy, but he somehow fell right into a very well-paid job inside the Earth branch of Synthetic Insights. Their rather large facilities were nothing more than dust and craters at the moment, but they still paid their employees very well. And Jeff somehow managed to buy a brand new, very fancy cane from someone. “For Liara’s old lady.” He said.

The cane had become quite the source of comfort for her. As if she could physically connect to her friends even when they were thousands of miles, and soon light years, away.

Spring 2188 had come to the northern half of the planet, and that meant a lot of water. Both from melting snow and the return of the constant rain, though it didn’t seem quite as punishing as it did the year before. Jane wanted to come to Chicago, even though the city had suffered almost as much damage as London during the war, and boasted one of the only upright Reapers on the planet. Though with the condition of the tower it rested against, she didn’t think it would remain that way for long.

No city, no single group of people, escaped some kind of suffering from the war. Families were torn apart, people starved, people fought, and a lot of them died. A great deal of children were left without parents, just like Jane had been robbed of her own birth mother.

So when she heard Chicago held one of the largest populations of war orphans on Earth, she had to drop the idea of disappearing forever and come help. At least in some small way, like make an appearance and give them something to look up to in this brave new world.

The Alliance and the remnants of the local government had already done a great deal for them. The children lived in a prefab structure complex not unlike those used on colony worlds like Eden Prime.
The building had been shipped to the area to house local leadership as the rebuilding process began, but Chicago’s mayor, who survived the war, vetoed that plan. He knew it would be of much better use housing at least some of the city’s huge orphan population.

The structure sat in what used to be a park, several miles away from the nearby lake, but still close enough to see on a clear day. The entire area had been overrun with unkempt grass and weeds, but the lush green that surrounded the children kept their minds at ease. It was a damn sight better than the grey and black ruins that covered everything else for miles.

Jane paced a few hundred meters away from the "orphanage", just outside the park, trying to get comfortable in a badly-fitted suit they scavenged from a ruined Halloween store. They tried checking some of Chicago’s ruined stores for something better, but most everything had been long since scavenged or left to rot as the destroyed buildings left their inventories exposed to the elements. The costume, a women’s costume version of a super-expensive “fancy business suit”, vaguely reminiscent of the finery the Illusive Man wore, had been sealed in a plastic container and somehow escaped notice of the people who picked the novelty store clean.

She didn’t like wearing it all that much, but it looked better than the loose, and rather ragged looking, clothes she had been traveling in for the last year. The suit, even with the right sleeve folded up and pinned in place, made her look somewhat powerful and respectable. At the right angles. With the right lighting.

And she had to admit, in the brief times she didn’t feel like a complete idiot, she felt a little bit of that power and respect, something she hadn’t felt for well over a year. She used to feel that way in an Alliance uniform, but she would never wear one of those again. Not since they kicked her out. And certainly not since London… since the memorial…

The mental image of Anderson, which had left her alone for so long, flashed into her mind. It sent her already-racing heart into an overdrive of stabbing agony. Her right arm ached in response.

*No. Not right now. Fight this. Calm down.*

Why now? Just because she thought about him for a brief second?

She started singing her favorite song again, for the millionth time this month alone. She tried to whisper, to avoid any prying little ears that might have been listening, but it didn’t work.

Her breaths came in shallow, ragged puffs.

Her vision began to swim and the color drained from the world around her.

She remembered the memorial and the torturous, burning, wrenching in her back and arm. She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t think.

In the real world, she felt that pain return.

Jane pushed down on the cane, putting more weight on it than she should have, but it kept her upright.

The image of Anderson didn’t leave. It just persisted and it mocked, reminding her of everything that happened. Her fears and failures, her despair and doubts. She wanted to fall to her knees, but she couldn’t. She had to fight.

“You know you gotta help me out…” she sang out.
More words came. Louder. With more feeling.

She fought the darkness inside with the comfort she had relied on all her life. She had to do it, just like she had to bring Saren down, defeat the Collectors and save the galaxy.

“Are you okay?”

Jane stopped everything. Her singing, her panicking, her descent into memories both painful and powerful. Even her breathing stopped as she turned around to see the source of the new voice. She had to force herself to take in a breath.

A young boy, maybe around ten years old, stood behind her, arms clasped behind his back. She recognized him as one of the orphans from the shelter, one of the oldest boys, who lost his parents very early in the war. His messy dark hair and large brown eyes reminded her a lot of herself at that age, not long after finding the Reds. So full of life, and yet already hardened by awful circumstance.

“Uh, hi.” Shepard managed to croak out even though she felt nothing like talking.

“Miss Serrano says it’s time for your presentation.” He said with the same simple sincerity. “You need help getting over there?”

Part of Jane wanted to tell him no, to go back to the others and wait for her to come in. She wanted to tell him that she didn’t need help, that Commander Shepard did not need help walking a few hundred meters across a park. If she hadn’t gone through what she just did, she would have said it, too.

Instead, she nodded and handed him the cane.

“Carry this for me, will you? I’ll put my hand on your shoulder.”

The boy nodded as he took the black cane. He still had a lot of growing left to do, so he couldn’t quite use it as intended, but he managed to swing it quite well for a kid.

Jane did as she said and put her hand on his shoulder. She could feel his scrawny muscles under his thick clothing, but he had power there. Not on the brink of starvation, just enduring the lean times along with everyone else.

Still, she sent yet another silent curse at the Reapers for thinking that doing this to a child made the galaxy a better place.

Without the cane, and not willing to put any sort of weight on the boy’s shoulders, Jane couldn’t help but limp across the empty park.

“Your knee okay?” He asked. “One of the smaller kids has a bad knee and she walks like you.”

“Yeah. I got hurt pretty bad.” Shepard said. “I’m okay, though.”

The boy nodded and swiped the cane through some of the tall grass. Shepard thought about telling him to knock it off, to not damage her cane, but decided against it. He looked responsible enough to not smack it into anything hard. Besides, she didn’t feel qualified to tell him what to do.

It wouldn’t have taken very long for two normal people to make it to the “orphanage”, but Shepard took her time. To absolutely no shock whatsoever, the boy did not enjoy the silence.

“So you like to sing?”
“Yeah, I do.” She looked away from him, pretending to notice something interesting. Instead, she wanted to cover the blushing of her cheeks. She still hated to talk about it, and knowing he heard her made it worse.

“I never heard that song before. We only have a few OSD’s here, and none of them have it.”

“It’s… pretty old. From before you were born.”

He stopped, almost tripping Shepard in the process.

“Not all of us hate old stuff.” He said in an angry monotone. “We’ve had to use a lot of old stuff since they moved us here.”

“I- I didn’t mean to…” She stammered. Intimidated by a ten year old. Shepard imagined her old self from before the war shaking her head at the disgrace. And yet, her old self would have never taken the time to speak to a group of kids like this. The old Shepard would have most likely ignored any child around her as she rushed to accomplish one task or another. How many children did she remember seeing after beginning her hunt for Saren? Zero? It’s like they disappeared from her notice entirely as she focused more and more on stopping the Reapers and their servants.

And now here she stood. In Chicago, being escorted by a young man living a life very familiar to her own, having a discussion about her musical tastes. This wasn’t disgrace, this was living.

“What’s your name?” She finally managed to deflect.

“Marcus Carter.” He said as he started moving again. “But everyone calls me Mark.”

“Nice to meet you, Mark.” She said with a smile.

“You still didn’t say old the song is.”

Damn, and he was smart, too.

“It’s uh… about two hundred years old, I think.”

They had already reached the door, and Shepard felt her heart pounding again. Though, only because of nerves, not the return of her panic. She never liked public speaking, even when she had to give big speeches to her crew. But she got it done, like she always did.

But if all the kids were as nice and smart as Mark here? She could do this too.

“Did they really make music like that back then?”

“If I have time after my presentation, I’ll see about giving Miss Serrano one of my OSDs with some of my favorite songs on it. How’s that sound?”

“I like that.”

“Then let’s get this over with, Mark.”
“Kids, do you remember when we had you write those letters to Commander Shepard, to thank her for everything she did for us?” Miss Serrano had a very pleasant look for someone that survived the apocalypse, but Shepard recognized the mask the instant she met the woman. If Serrano let it drop in front of the kids, the consequences to their mental health could be disastrous. She wore the smile like Shepard used to wear armor. Necessary protection for a job with a lot of risks.

Shepard stood in the back of the “classroom”, one of the offices inside the prefab that had been cleared of all the furniture except the holo-display on the back wall. A dozen children sat cross-legged on the floor in front of her, ranging from toddlers to young teenagers. Mark sat among the older kids, though he fidgeted a little more than them, probably smug with the knowledge that he got to meet her first. Every child paid rapt attention to Serrano, likely because she was the only entertaining thing in their entire lives at the moment.

For a brief second, Shepard thought back to her history classes. The ones she took in jail. She remembered how a lot of old schools, especially in frontier towns, used to teach children of all ages in a single room. They weren’t all taught the same things, of course, and the teachers were superhuman for managing multiple lessons at the same time. Such things died as the towns got bigger and more resources were spent on education, as they were meant to be.

It felt odd, and very wrong, to see that old tradition return in the twenty second century. None of these kids deserved to be stuck together like this. They should have been in school with hundreds of other children their own age. They should have had homes and families to go back to at the end of the school day, not the stifling walls of a fabricated colony structure.

The color of the room made Jane’s eyes hurt. The kind of bland off-white that all human-made colony buildings seemed to be painted always irritated her in a very physical way. It made targeting collectors on Horizon a pain in the ass, and trying to defend Javik’s stasis pod on Eden Prime a near-nightmare since Cerberus liked to use the same color for their soldiers. But she didn’t need to stare at the walls, she had a dozen small faces to pay attention to now.

Behind her, looking through a glass door that had been closed to keep the noise of the generators out of the classroom, Liara gave Jane a smile. She stood among four other adults, the other caretakers, probably impressing their supreme need to keep Shepard’s visit to their facility quiet. Otherwise they’d have Alliance investigators questioning them and the children before they knew what hit them.

“Well, I have a surprise for you.” Serrano continued, “Commander Shepard got your letters and she’s here to say hello to you all!”

At her waved insistence, Jane moved forward, moving gingerly around the children to make sure she didn’t accidentally step on any fingers, until she stood next to Serrano. Naturally, she had no idea what Serrano meant by their “letters”, but she supposed it had been one of many lessons/exercises meant to keep the kids entertained. She made a mental note to actually see them, if they were filed away somewhere, after she finished.

The kids did not applaud or cheer for her, but they did watch her every move as she made it to the front of the class, faces full of frowns and puzzled looks. The kids didn’t like much change in their routine, and Shepard’s arrival constituted a very large change. But when she offered to speak to them for no reason other than she wanted to, the administrators jumped at the chance.

“Hi, kids.” Jane said after putting her cane against the wall and waving her left hand. Of course, she had to sound as cheesy and dumb as possible. The universe wouldn’t allow her to be dignified at a time like this.
“Why is your arm gone? And why’s your face all messed up?” One of the kids said less than a second later.

Serrano turned to one of the youngest boys. “Bradley, it’s very rude to speak out of turn like that. You need to apologize to Commander Shepard right now.”

Ah, the blunt honesty of children. Shepard heard worse things in her life, words meant to hurt her, not just plain questions from an inquisitive mind. Harbinger tried taunting her, mocking her and discouraging her at every turn. If she could handle an ancient Reaper’s attempts at being blunt and hostile, she could handle a four year old named Bradley. She waved Serrano off.

“It’s okay. I expected smart kids like yourselves to notice that.” Shepard reached deep into the pit of bravado and courage she used when giving speeches or trying to inspire her crew. It worked when she faced life or death situations, it would work for her now, just talking to a full classroom. “The Reapers hurt me a lot. But I was brave and I healed up. Just like I know you all have been very brave living here after everything that happened.”

That got some smiles from them.

“Does it hurt?”

She tried to suppress the sudden flashes of memory, but could not stop the flood. Yes, it hurt. It never stopped hurting. From the day Nicolo put his hands on her right arm, before he cut it off, to now. She could still feel him squeezing the limb even now. The agony in her chest flared again, reminding her that every heartbeat brought renewed discomfort.

Her mind conjured an image of Nicolo standing above her on an operating table, taking perverse glee in holding her right arm out and hacking it off.

Shepard blinked and, even with the images floating behind her vision, she forced herself back to reality. She wasn’t conscious during the operation, she had no idea how it went down, or even if Nicolo felt anything as he performed the surgery. Besides, that was all in the past. She had to keep moving forward. She fought too long to get stuck back there again.

When the memories faded away, she turned to the child that asked and gave a faint half-smile. “Sometimes. Like when it’s about to rain or if I move around too much.”

“Did you shoot a lot of guns?” Bradley, again.

“I did. But… you shouldn’t shoot guns. They’re really… dangerous.” And just like that, the confidence left. What kind of message would she send to the kids if she got them all hooked on violence and gunplay? She had to teach them better, even if her lesson amounted to this one visit to their home.

Fortunately, Miss Serrano swooped back in to rescue Jane from the awkward turn. “Commander Shepard doesn’t have much time to be with us today, kids. So how about we sit quietly and let her tell us a story or two?”

“Oh, uh. A story? Well…” Her mind raced, thinking back through her most publicly known and child-friendly memories. In her head, the sounds of a million bullets, a thousand screaming husks and the roar of a reaper became a deafening cacophony. Could she tell them about the Collectors? No, that would give them nightmares for sure. What about the Thorian? No, they might get scared of headaches. What good things did she accomplish? What victories could she turn into a story that would make them smile? What kind of story would she tell her own children?
“You guys ever hear about the time I helped save all the Krogan?”

A lot of heads shook “no”.

“Any of you ever meet a Krogan?” She asked, seeing if they even knew what she was talking about.

“I did!” One of the older kids. “A Krogan was with some soldiers when the war ended. He was huge!”

Shepard smiled. “Well, next time you see him, tell him that he owes me a big favor. You see, a long time ago, the Salarians and Turians made it so that almost all of their babies died.” She paused for effect and watched some young jaws drop and other small hands reach up to cover startled mouths. “But I helped stop that. Actually, a very brave Salarian named Mordin Solus did most of the work. I kept him safe so he didn’t get interrupted by anything nasty.”

She remembered Mordin as she spoke. His scarred but warm face, his eccentric and hyperactive way of speaking, his almost terrifying devotion to solving problems. Part of her snarled at the memory, trying to remind her that his death was all her fault, but she managed to ignore it.

“Because of him, the Krogan will be able to have kids of their own now, and never worry about seeing them die.”

“Was he your friend?”

“Yes. He was.”

The children seemed to pick up on the melancholic tone of her voice, because no other questions came for several long seconds.

“Did you know Admiral Anderson?”

“I- Yes…”

Memories of Anderson came back. But not of the man. She could never think of him without thinking of the memorial in London. Instead of seeing the person, all she could ever see was that damned mental image of his projected face, judging her. Blaming her.

She must have not fully gotten over the attack from earlier.

Shepard stopped breathing.

She no longer stood in a room full of children. No, she was back in London, facing down an endless horde of husks and other Reaper abominations while at the same time experiencing more pain than she had ever felt in her life. The little faces looking up at her weren’t friendly, inquisitive, poor souls left orphaned by the war, but soulless masks of rage and hatred, twisted into monsters by the Reapers, waiting to pounce on her. No, not monsters, they were the blurry, fuzzy shapes of Alliance soldiers who were capable of standing and paying proper respect to people. Not like her.

She had to get out.

Gunfire and the bone-rattling screech of banshees and harvesters filled her senses. But no, there weren’t any weapons around here. She was listening to someone giving a clipped, but emotional speech about how great those who died were. How much they deserved honor and praise for their sacrifices. Not like her.
Dammit, Jane, what the hell is wrong with you today? Get ahold of yourself!

She still had her good and bad days. Today clearly would be a bad one. Shepard needed to leave, both this horrible loop of memory and guilt, but also this stifling, crowded, oppressive room with air that was quickly becoming too hard to breathe.

The walls started to melt away before her eyes, replaced by the charred ruins of Earth’s cities. She saw corpses. She saw death. She saw herself standing on the bodies, guilty of killing them all. Geth, EDI, Anderson, everyone. Her fault. Always her fault.

“Did you think you could get away from this?” Someone deep inside her mind asked.

“Shepard?” Serrano’s voice echoed from somewhere far away in the real world. “Someone get Miss T’soni in here, now!” She could feel the adult’s hand on her back, could see her waving a hand in front of her eyes, but it wasn’t real. At least, her brain didn’t process it as real.

Her heart began to speed up again.

“Shepard!” Serrano’s mask began to fade away. Or did she imagine it?

The real world became the battlefield and her imagination became the classroom. She had no control, no sense of self. All because of a single innocent question.

She had a long way to go before she was any better.

“You need to sing.”

Serrano did not seem real, nor did the children around her, but the warm hand that wrapped around her fingers felt more real than anything.

“Sing that song again.”

Marcus somehow pushed his way through the small crowd of children and escaped Serrano’s notice as she panicked next to Shepard. She looked down to see his face staring up at hers.

“It made you feel better, didn’t it?”

Of course it did.

But she couldn’t do it here. Not now.

Her mind's eye still saw the suffering, the death. She felt her own body's pain, the horrors inflicted on her by the Reapers, by Nicolo, by her own hand. She felt the gun barrel pressing against her temple, breaking skin and a single trigger pull from oblivion...

That’s when twelve children and a few human adults learned the secret about Commander Shepard.

As the words slipped out of her and helped banish the darkness, Jane’s eyes never left Mark’s. He smiled up at her, trying to help by singing the lyrics right back.
For the first time in countless months, the skies of Earth, well, the skies of one specific part of Earth, were free of rain, clouds and smoke, leaving an achingly blue expanse over Chicago. Maybe it had to do with the lack of old factories and modern industry to pump things into the atmosphere, or perhaps there was still just enough particulate matter from the war to scatter the sunlight, but Shepard had never seen the sky look so… right.

More than that, it felt right. As if the world itself had begun to heal from the war, and wanted to show off a little of its natural beauty even though it remained scarred and pitted by the Reapers.

Shepard could not remember the last time everything around her felt this way. Certainly not her childhood. The military had been her calling, but it never sat on her heart the same way this simple blue sky did. Her service had been rewarding, fulfilling and, for the most part, everything she needed, but it just wasn’t the same. And then came Saren, her Spectre status, her death, the Collectors and then the war. She only had one silver lining in those years of pain and misery, and she stood at her left side, blue fingers twirled around her own.

She and Liara walked along the sandy beach of the lake near Chicago, far enough away from the city to avoid seeing the standing Reaper and the ruined buildings it towered above, but not so far as to violate the orders from the orphanage’s directors. Jane planned this little hike for weeks, making deals with the other adults and somehow convincing Liara to go along with it, so the three of them could spend time away from the overgrown park and prefab buildings. Marcus deserved some kind of reward for helping Jane in the classroom, and she could think of no better thing for an energetic ten year old than a mini vacation away from the stifling orphanage. No other kids, no set schedules, no classes with teenagers and toddlers, just open sky and an entire world to explore.

Jane turned to her left and compared Liara’s skin to the sapphire water of the lake (Marcus informed them it was called ‘Michigan’) and the bright blue of the sky above. She had a mental image of the Asari disappearing as if camouflaged, hidden as her natural colors blended with the lake and sky. But alas, Liara stood just a few shades darker than both, so the fantasy never quite came true, no matter how hard she squinted.

“What are you doing?” Liara asked.

Shepard’s already sun-reddened skin turned a little pinker as she realized she had been caught.

“I, uh, was just imagining… things.”

“What things?”

“If you must know, I was imagining you naked, then wondering if you could become invisible if you jumped into the water.”

That got a smile and a gentle shoulder bump, but Liara also nodded her head forward, where the young man in their charge ran ahead no more than a hundred meters. Like before, he held Shepard’s cane, though he minded her very clear orders to not smash it against any debris or rocks he came across.

“Not so loud. If I recall, this entire trip was your idea, so you of all people need to stay appropriate today.”

“He can’t hear us as long as we keep our voices down.” Shepard tilted her head and lowered her
voice just enough to carry over the gentle wind and lapping waves. “Besides, now I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Well, keep it to yourself.” The Asari said with more fire than Shepard expected.

Fortunately, Liara caught the outburst and turned her head away. “I’m sorry, Shepard. I’m just not sure how to act with such a young person nearby.”

“Well, maybe consider this practice for when we have one of our own.”

As Jane expected, her playful sentence caused Liara to pause in her tracks. Unfortunately, Shepard didn’t catch it until too late, and with their hands still entwined, her body jerked to a halt. On instinct, she shoved her right leg into the sand, wrenching her knee to the side and causing the joint to erupt into bone-grinding agony.

Jane managed to hold in a cry of anguished surprise as she registered what happened, but she could not stop herself from falling forward onto the warm beach as her right leg buckled and failed. Somehow, her hand came free of Liara’s as she descended, but she could not twist her body around fast enough to prevent a direct impact on her right limb.

The world exploded into featureless white as her scarred and amputated right arm hit the sand.

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Earth’s sun didn’t agree with Liara’s skin, but she didn’t complain. Until today, she only ever saw cloud cover and the occasional starry night, never the clear blue daytime skies Jane often spoke of in her memories. Thessia’s own atmosphere would show similar colors depending on the season and time of day, of course. But she had to admit, it wasn’t quite the same. She didn’t consider either planet more or less aesthetically pleasing than the other in an objective sense, but right now, Earth held a special significance to her. Jane was here, so that’s where she would remain. Wherever the human stood, that planet would be more beautiful than any other in the galaxy.

Her heart still ached for her home planet and the suffering the Reapers inflicted there, but she also knew her people would rebuild just like the humans did here. Thessia had always rebounded from one crisis or another, it would rebound from this, probably faster than all of the other planets in the galaxy. She only hoped her people would not take advantage of such a situation. The galaxy learned so much from the war, they didn’t need to trade one would-be conqueror for another.

What was she thinking? The Asari didn’t conquer, they hardly had a military to begin with. But then, her people were not unique in having deep ambitions and the ability to exploit situations in their favor.

Against her will, Liara disappeared from the beach and the Shadow Broker took her place, drawing plans and imagining outcomes as she contacted imaginary agents and set fake plots in motion. The matriarchs would likely get wind of her more obvious maneuvers, but they were meant to. It would give her REAL objectives total security, and allow her to find ways to control the right Asari at the right time. All she needed was the right information, and she could do literally anything. And the Shadow Broker happened to be a VERY good information broker.

The Shadow Broker did not believe Palaven or Tuchanka would become obvious threats in the near future. The Turians would spend decades at the very least rebuilding their armed forces before even
thinking of engaging in another war. They were too ingrained with the idea of brutally smashing opponents, not “fighting dirty” as the humans said. Likewise, Wrex would hold the Krogan back by sheer force of will, forcing them to rebuild their home planet before thinking of shooting a single bullet at another species.

Would Earth, then, be the next big threat after she took care of Thessia? Humans were unpredictable, savage and ruthless when they needed to be. They did not require massive fleets to fight wars, and they often astounded even the wisest of matriarchs with their ingenuity and flexibility. Their fleets suffered the most during the war, since almost every fighting-capable ship threw itself at the Reapers during the final battle, and a huge amount of resources the Alliance would have used on its ships went into the Crucible. But none of that would stop them from rebuilding. Cerberus showed just how bloodthirsty and awful a war-bent human military might be, even a small one with private funding. If humanity decided to conquer the stars within the next century, the galaxy might well fall under their boots.

Just as Liara began to think of plans on how to destabilize and control her bondmate’s government, she noticed Jane regarding her with a curious expression.

“What are you doing?” She asked as the Shadow Broker melted away. The world of information and intrigue left with it, returning her to the beach, where she and Shepard walked along warm sand, scattered debris and a very happy young human child.

“I, uh, was just imagining… things.”

“What things?” She raised an eyebrow,

“If you must know, I was imagining you naked, then wondering if you could become invisible if you jumped into the water.”

Shepard’s words brought that scenario to her mind, but she quickly erased it. She had almost forgotten the twinge of resentment she felt as she had been dragged into this walk with Jane and Marcus. It’s not that she didn’t like the boy. She very much approved of the way he brought more positive qualities out of Shepard, especially in the times when her sickness overtook the person and she had to claw back to sanity through music. He never judged or mocked her for it, he would just join in until Shepard stopped singing, and then would go on with his day.

What she resented was that Shepard had kept them here, in this city, for weeks. Because of him.

When they left the Normandy, they promised each other that they would not spend more than a few days in any one location, lest the Alliance come in force to pick Jane up, reclaim the shuttle, and drown her in ceremonies and kindness until they grew tired of her. They had never run into any close calls or even had to truly adjust their course as they toured the rebuilding planet, but that was only because Liara’s honed ability to process information kept them one step ahead of the human government. But every day they lingered here not only put them in greater danger of discovery, it also put the children at risk. She could not tolerate Shepard’s reckless attitude toward their discovery.

“Not so loud.” She said to Jane. “If I recall, this entire trip was your idea, so you of all people need to stay appropriate today.”

“He can’t hear us as long as we keep our voices down. Besides, now I can’t stop thinking about it.” Shepard’s face showed an expression Liara dearly missed, one of longing and lust that had all but disappeared from her wife ever since the end of the war.

It should have made her happy to see it. Instead, all she could think about were the months of
frustration and resentment at being unable to mentally connect, much less physically express their
desires. Being here, so close to children, killed whatever simmering embers of passion she might
have been able to stoke at this moment.

“Well, keep it to yourself.” She snapped.

But then she snapped back. Were these feelings her, or just lingering remnants of the months spent
pulling Jane back from the brink? Even as the powerful Shadow Broker, she was just one Asari,
with the same wants and needs as any other living being. And if those needs weren’t met, especially
on a constant, frustrating, basis, problems were bound to occur. Perhaps it was her time to need a
break, to set these concerns down and heal just like Jane. She made a mental note to speak of this to
Shepard at a later date. For now, she had to smooth the waters.

“I’m sorry, Shepard. I’m just not sure how to act with such a young person nearby.”

“Well, maybe consider this practice for when we have one of our own.”

Goddess, Jane Shepard always had to say or do just the right thing to shake the foundations of the
entire galaxy, didn’t she?

Liara didn’t realize she froze in place, an entirely new set of plans, plots and scenarios running
through her head, until she saw Shepard take one big, clumsy step forward with her right leg,
obviously off balance and unprepared for the sudden halt in motion.

Then she saw Jane’s amputated right limb impact the sand.

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Marcus still had nightmares most nights, but he never talked to anyone about them. Every night, he
saw the Reapers and their monsters rampaging through the streets he grew up on. More often than
not, his dreams would put him back where he was at the beginning of the war, hiding under a broken
skycar as husks swarmed around him like in a horror vid, tearing everyone apart. But instead of them
killing random people while he cowered and screamed for a family he would never see again, in his
dreams, he saw the monsters brutally and horribly killing everyone he knew and loved.

He didn’t like thinking about the nightmares, or the memories they brought up. All of the adults
around him said it was okay to talk to them if he needed to, and that nobody would make fun of him
if he ever needed to sit down and cry, but he never did. Talking would mean remembering, and he
never wanted to remember. Not while it still hurt so much.

Lately, his nightmares extended to seeing Shepard and Liara attacked in the burning streets of his
home. He heard them screaming as they died, unable to fight back because Shepard did not have a
right arm. Just like his family, he watched them get swept away by the endless tide of dream
monsters, leaving him alone over and over again. And yet, instead of waking up sweating or with a
scared feeling in his stomach like his other nightmares left him, he always woke up from Shepard-
dreams knowing how wrong they were.

He knew who Shepard used to be, all the kids knew, thanks to Miss Serrano’s assignment to write a
letter to her. Unlike some of the young kids, he remembered when her face interrupted every single
extranet site and vid. He was seven at the time, and his scheduled ‘toon vid broadcasts were all taken
over by boring news reports and even more boring documentaries about her life and how proud she
made all humans everywhere because the aliens decided to give her an award or something. Even if some of the vid footage of her fighting looked cool, he hated watching it all the time. He hated her for interrupting his vids. He even hated her dumb red hair because nobody he knew had hair like that.

But when he found out how much she had been hurt by the war, his opinion changed. When he was very small, his uncle moved into his family’s apartment for a few months. His uncle was a soldier like Shepard, and he got hurt really bad like her, though he didn’t lose any arms or legs. Instead, he would freak out whenever someone made a loud noise, like slamming a door closed instead of letting it slide normally. His uncle often locked himself in his room just in case he hurt anyone during his outbursts. When his uncle left his bedroom, Marcus and his sister would sneak in to look at the paintings he did while trying to keep calm. At the time, they laughed at how bad they looked, but that never stopped his uncle from making them.

He remembered those paintings when he saw Shepard singing just before she spoke to the other kids. It’s why he offered to help her, because even if she did interrupt all his extranet sites for a long time, he could tell she didn’t mean it. She was hurting deep inside just like his uncle did, so this time, instead of letting the hurt soldier stay alone with their embarrassing art, he decided to do something about it. It also helped that she didn’t sound bad at all, which gave him confidence to sing with her when she needed.

The other kids made fun of him a little, but he didn’t care. Shepard let him listen to songs they’d never be able to listen to, she let him swing her cane around like a sword and even showed him a few ways to hold it like a real weapon, and right now, she took him far away from the orphanage to have fun on the beach.

After raining for so long, the sun felt amazing on his skin.

Sometimes, if his dreams were lucky, he did not see his Shepard, the scarred, one-armed lady with baggy clothes and a limp, get eaten by husks. In the very rare nights he had a good dream, he saw the old Commander Shepard, the real Shepard. Her black armor would blaze like the sun and her huge rifle would kill dozens of husks with each shot. The woman he saw in the vids all those years ago would cleanse his dreams with gunfire and an omni-tool shaped like a sword, until all that remained were the two of them. He would crawl away from the skycar and she’d reach out with both hands, waiting for him to run into an embrace…

When he woke up from those dreams, he always had to wipe away his tears before anyone caught him.

Some new tears threatened to fall again as he thought about his last good dream, which happened last night, just before Shepard came to take him to her shuttle. She let him sit in the copilot seat as Liara took them outside the main city and set them down on the beach. The flight only lasted a few seconds, but it would have taken all day to walk around the broken and ruined streets. He didn’t hide his excitement at being inside a shuttle, especially one with guns. Shepard told him all about how they stole it from the military, so they got to keep the weapons and everything inside. But she also told him all the work they did to make sure the guns never worked again. They sold the ammo for one, and used the money to buy boring things like food and clothes. Liara also deleted the targeting VI, so they wouldn’t work even if he found something to fit into the ammunition slots.

To get past the disappointment of never being able to use the shuttle’s cannons, Marcus asked Shepard to hold her cane as they explored the beach. She said it was okay, since she had Liara to lean on as they walked, but he had to promise to not bang it on things, just hold it like she taught him. A few days before, she told him where she got it, and how special it was. He would never
intentionally break it.

He let the adults walk slowly at first, but got impatient with Shepard’s slow pace. After a few minutes, he didn’t ask for permission before running ahead. Not too far, but enough so he could explore all the rubble and craters without waiting for them to catch up. It also spared him from hearing their boring conversations about everything but guns and the cool things they used to do before the war.

When he turned around to check on them, however, he saw Shepard pass out, her long hair flowing around her like a fire and her missing arm crunching against the sand before the rest of her body.

***

She was in the hospital, unable to move, her heart threatening to stop beating as Nicolo gently touched her right arm. Each tiny point of contact hurt more than a lifetime of battle wounds combined.

No, she wasn’t back there. The arm was gone. Nicolo was squeezing it, trying to make her heart fail as they struggled on the floor. She thought the touches were bad? This had been a new level of hell.

Or was she in London, struggling to stand up as her entire body felt like it wanted to fall apart? More than her arm this time, her back made it impossible to breathe.

She certainly wasn’t on the Normandy, doing everything in her power to stay on her feet as she tried to summon the willpower to end her own life.

Every day, her arm hurt, even with pills and counseling from Chakwas and Eriks. They kept telling her that the pain existed only in her head, a remnant of the trauma. But that didn’t make it any less real for Jane, or any less painful.

Every day, she had to find new ways to ignore it. Singing used to be enough, but like any drug or novel experience, she had begun to grow a tolerance to it. Maybe the embarrassment at having to constantly do it in front of people had begun to sour what was once a sweet release.

When her music didn’t work, Shepard could sometimes lose herself in pleasant memories, especially those of Liara and the times they spent away from war and terror. From innocent “dates” to more… private moments. More recently, her proposal on Christmas worked like a charm.

Somewhere, even those had begun to lose their potency. There was a rift forming between the two of them, she could feel it. A lot of it stemmed from the fact they could no longer join minds together, but what could Shepard do about that? She wasn’t an Asari, she had no control over any of that alien stuff. It hurt Liara more than it hurt her, but that didn’t make it any less awful to see her bondmate turn away every time they tried, unfulfilled and disappointed. Something as big as this might have torn a human relationship apart by now, but they remained together through it all. But maybe not for much longer.

Another divide had begun to form in recent weeks. She sensed it every time she talked about Marcus. Liara didn’t seem to actively hate him, but she stiffened and breathed a little different every time she had to think about it. Could she be jealous? Did she misinterpret Jane’s intentions?

She had to talk to her about this before it got out of hand.
All she had to do was wake up.

But waking up seemed impossible. Not while her entire body felt like shutting down.

Why did it feel like shutting down?

Oh yes, because she fell over and managed to land on her right limb. Of course. And now her damaged nerves were going into overdrive, sending signals all over her body that her brain could not process. God, if she wasn’t in this weird state of not-sleeping, she would probably be screaming. At least in this semi-conscious place, she felt nothing. Not even a hint of the agony she had been living with since the end of the war. She could stay like this forever.

“Shepard!” Liara’s voice came from far away, distant and faint, like from a broken old speaker.

No, that meant she was waking up. Already, a little bit of sensation began to creep back in. Just a tingle on her right side that promised horrors to come.

“Just a few more minutes.” She made her body say.

“Jane, wake up!”

“What’s wrong?” A new voice. Smaller and filled with more terror than Liara’s. Ah, Marcus. Mark. The kindred soul found among the ashes and ruin. She should tell him she was okay.

“I’m okay.” She croaked out.

“You’re not okay, Jane Shepard! You need medical attention!”

“Liara, you sound adorable when you’re concerned.” Shepard said and made herself smile. Vision began to return along with some of the pain. Liara hovered above and to her left, much like she did in the Normandy’s medbay. Marcus knelt at her right side, holding her cane in reverent hands.

“I’m fine. Really.”

As she moved her left arm down and into the warm sand, the throbbing returned. She turned her head back and forth to see her bondmate and the orphan. She wouldn’t have awoken for anyone else.

“I’m glad you guys are here.” Shepard finished as she pushed herself up to a sitting position. Truly, even though her body ached more than it usually did, as long as she had the right people to look to, she could endure anything.

“You scared me.” Marcus said as he handed the cane to Shepard.

“Sorry about that, kid.” She said as she took it.

Liara helped her stand, though she did not seem to believe a word Jane said. They’d probably spend a good long time in the shuttle after this, going through one of Karin’s boring medical checklists, just to confirm she meant what she said. Liara seemed to be in the mood to take it extra slow as well.

As she thought about the hours of tedium that awaited her near future, Shepard paid no attention to the small hand that also helped her up. She felt it, but she didn’t pay attention because it didn’t hurt.

Marcus had been on her right side. He kept her steady by holding on to her right arm.
I'll Know My Name As It's Called Again

After dropping Marcus back at the orphanage several hours ahead of schedule, Shepard’s concerns turned to bitter reality. Liara had not just one, but two checklists full of boring, repetitive and tedious tasks meant to gauge her health and stability after the fall. She swore a million times, often literally swearing, that she felt fine and in no more pain than she usually felt, but her wife wouldn’t hear it.

“Hold it a little higher, please.” Liara said with cold dispassion.

Shepard did as instructed and raised her right limb as high as she could before the pain became overwhelming. She had her shirt off, so her limb sat cold and exposed to the shuttle’s interior. To avoid looking at the scarred and ruined bit of flesh, Jane kept her head turned to the far left, enough to strain her neck muscles. She kept herself distracted by not only humming a formless tune, but tracing the implant scars on her cheeks with her left hand. The gross familiarity of one injury helped her forget about the awful new ones.

Liara did not touch the limb, nor did she do anything more invasive than stare at it, but even her blue eyes caused Shepard discomfort. The gaze felt like it burned her skin and cut into the bone, but not in a literal sense. Even if her rational mind said the complete opposite, Jane felt nothing but shame and judgment as she displayed her missing attribute to the shuttle’s other occupant. A deep blush spread across her cheeks, then spread through her body as she struggled to keep the panic at bay.

“You’ve got some minor bruising on the end, maybe some microscopic cuts, but nothing major. Here.”

Shepard turned her entire body around to face Liara, who held out a small packet of medi-gel. It would have been smarter, and faster, for the Asari to apply it, but Shepard would never allow it. When it came time to clean or maintain the limb in some way, Jane did it herself. It always became a race against time to finish what she needed to do before the chest pains and memories became too much to bear and she shut down. There had been times in their year long vacation that she did lose herself when her fingers brushed against the wrinkled skin, or she pressed in just the wrong place to send a lance of agony into her heart. But they came less frequently as she got more used to her ruined body. By now, she had a good idea what spots to touch and which were completely off limits. Something an outsider, even one as close as Liara, could never replicate.

She took the gel and ripped the package open with her teeth, which prompted a smile from the Shadow Broker.

“A little animalistic, don’t you think? I could have opened it.”

“Wouldn’t have been as fun.”

Knowing that a horrible personal battle was soon to begin, Liara turned to her console and buried herself in information. Though they both knew that her eyes weren’t truly on the endless scrolling text.

Without looking, Shepard squeezed some of the cool gel onto the severed limb and then set the packet down. She took a moment to do nothing but breathe and feel the alien substance slither down her scarred and mangled skin. The medi-gel sapped the heat from her body wherever it touched, deadening the nerves as it tried to find any injuries or maladies to repair. It did nothing to calm the maddening throb she felt at all times, though. That came from deeper within.
She closed her eyes and repeated an entire verse of a song before raising her left hand to the end of the limb. Another verse and she started massaging the gel into it. Liara hadn’t lied about some bruising, the telltale feeling of spongy swelling and the familiar ache of broken capillaries made it clear without looking. But those minor things became white noise as her brain fought against reality. Even now, all these months later, she had trouble processing the fact that her right arm ended just a few inches away from her shoulder, and that she could touch the “inside” of the limb.

The mass left behind by Nicolo’s surgery felt no different than ever: lumpy and soft. She used to have powerful muscles in the arm, like steel under silk. But with limited mobility and too much baggage to think about exercising, her right side had degraded. Another thing to feel ashamed of. Another thing that sent a dark echo in her head, to the place that used to be an empty expanse of nothing. The past year had replaced that desert of unfeeling with most of what she thought had been lost. Feelings and thoughts for people, mostly. But a few opinions about herself as well. Not many of them good.

Each second she spent rubbing the limb increased the tempo of her heart. Though she did not clamp her fingers down or touch it with anything more than feather-like force, she could feel the agony of the Doctor grabbing her and squeezing as if he was still in front of her. Her chest began to burn as she continued, the first sign of trouble.

One second and she stopped breathing through her nose, instead opening her mouth to let tiny, panicked gasps through.

Two seconds and her heart sped up again, pumping faster than it ever did during training, or the thousand-plus narrow escapes over her career.

Three seconds and she closed her eyes and hummed louder, trying to drown out the memories.

Four seconds and she almost collapsed. The pain in her chest became a nova as her fingertips brushed against scar tissue.

Five seconds and she pulled her hand away so fast it slapped against the shuttle wall. She didn’t bother to check if she hurt herself or not.

“Shirt. I need my shirt.” Jane growled as she fought to keep her body under control.

Liara tossed a beige shirt with long sleeves into Shepard’s gel-covered hand a split second later. She didn’t care to think about how sticky or uncomfortable it would make the fabric as she caught it, she just had to hide the offending limb as soon as she could.

With practiced movements, Jane pulled the garment over her head and threaded her left arm through she sleeve. As it settled on her shoulders, she pulled and bunched the right side together until it settled into place, finally burying the limb under a thick layer of cloth.

She felt like a weight fell off her body as she went back into a state of willful ignorance.

“Isn’t the temperature going to be uncomfortable for you, Jane?” Liara asked as her eyes darted between Shepard’s torso and her console.

“I’ll be fine, Liara. I seem to recall meeting you inside an active volcano while wearing full armor. I can handle a sweatshirt in early spring.” She let the pleasant memory override the images of the hospital and the horrors she endured there.

“And I seem to recall it not being active until a certain Commander activated a mining laser aimed directly at its core.” Liara teased back.
Shepard smiled and walked two steps over to the Asari and kissed her cheek. She felt her wife stiffen under the contact, though she guessed that after the gruesome display, Liara didn’t feel like returning much affection.

“If it hadn’t been for that laser, we wouldn’t be here today.” Jane thought back to their first meeting on Therum, inside the crumbling Prothean ruins. It hadn’t been love at first sight, at least not for her. At the time, her mind had been consumed with tactical decisions and the constant worry of further Geth ambushes. Liara was the objective and nothing more. Even when they returned to the Normandy and shook off the excitement of nearly burning to death, she regarded the Asari as an accomplished goal, not really a person. Just a resource that they successfully wrestled from Saren’s grasp.

But even though her thoughts at the time had been entirely mission-minded, the march of time allowed her to think back with fondness. “Whatever happened to that lab coat you used to wear? You know, the white and green one?”

Instead of drawing out a smile and maybe a blush from the Liara, the question made her frown.

“I kept it in my closet on Illium after I settled there. After taking the Shadow Broker’s ship for myself, I moved all my possessions to a private room. I’m sorry, Shepard, it’s probably just a pile of ash in orbit above Hagalaz now.” Liara had used the Shadow Broker’s old base of operations as an explosive projectile against Cerberus. She mentioned saving her most important things when relaying that story to Shepard, but they both knew she meant her information and the equipment necessary to access it. Not personal and sentimental items.

“Well, that just means we’ll need to get you a new one.”

Liara’s lips curled into something that might have been a smile. Or maybe she just pressed them together. Sometimes, rarely, Asari expressions could be hard to read.

“Yes, perhaps when the rebuilding is complete.”

“There’s no ‘perhaps’ about it, T’soni. I think I’d like to see you in one again.” Shepard ran a hand down Liara’s back, which caused her to gasp and recoil away.

This time, she didn’t let it slide.

“Is something wrong, Liara?”

“No, I’m fine, Jane. I’m just trying to stay busy.”

“Busy with what?”

Liara sighed and turned from her console as if she had been forced away, and hated every second of it. “If you must know, I’ve been hacking into our identity cards, since you insist on remaining in this city. Do you know how difficult it is to forge official Alliance documents?”

“No. Well, yes. Sort of.” She never did any of the “real” hacking and identity theft stuff some of the Reds took part in, just some light crimes now and then. Well, if you counted stealing passwords and cracking extranet sites “light” crimes.

“You profile is so secure and monitored that if I carelessly change anything, it would ping hundreds of security alerts within half a second and the Alliance would trace it back here in an hour. I have to reroute my steps a hundred times, make changes on a quantum level, and exit the system every time a security program sweeps it.”
“So why hack it at all?”

“Because if we stay here any longer, someone with a scanner is going to show up. These children are not isolated, Shepard. They get their food and supplies from the refugee camp just outside the city, just like we do. One day, someone from that camp will come here and check our identities. And on that day, the Alliance will come.”

“How are you so sure someone in this city has a working scanner, Liara? Isn’t this a little paranoid, even for you?”

“I can never be paranoid enough, especially when it concerns keeping you safe.” Liara smiled a genuine smile, but then buried it under a stoic and grim face, “But in this case, I’m not making scenarios in my head.”

She turned her console’s readout to let Shepard have a better look. As usual, all she saw was a jumble of words and numbers, information that only made sense to an alien mind dedicated to understanding it all.

“There.” Liara pointed to a string of particularly small numbers. “While we were out, the shuttle’s sensors picked up a distinct EM signature. One that only comes from an Alliance-issue identity scanner. Someone is using it in the camp.”

She turned the display back to her and resumed typing on the holographic keyboard.

“Shepard, if I don’t do something, the Alliance will find us. We have a chance of escaping their notice if I manage to hack our identification cards and present false information, but I can’t do that while distracted.”

“Fine. Fine. I think I understand.” Jane raised her hand in defeat. “So what information have you hacked into my profile?”

“I’ve been researching names and backgrounds relative to your native continent and putting it on the hacked card. It’s tedious work, but if I went with completely random information, I might give you a nonsensical history with an alien name, and that might cause more suspicion than an unaltered card.”

“Well, obviously. I think. So what name have you chosen for me?”

Liara tapped a few commands into her console and the jumbled information disappeared. Her familiar identity card became the holographic image, including her official Alliance profile picture, an image taken a year before her assignment to the original Normandy. Her old face, free of scars and so proud of accomplishments that would mean nothing in just a few short years, stared back at her.

Underneath the old face, however, a new name had been typed.

“Rosalind Lutece? That’s really the best you could come up with?”

“It’s a valid human identity, from the same general background of your culture, Shepard. It also has very few similarities to your real name, so it will fool any automated search programs.”

“But… Rosalind? Really?”

“You’re also a physicist, with a twin brother. You were injured during the war and spent many months recovering. And now you care for Chicago’s war orphans until you can return to your real calling.”
“Liara, Rosalind isn’t really a name people use anymore.”

The Shadow Broker huffed and tapped her keys again. The profile disappeared, replaced by a long list of names.

“There are over six thousand women named Rosalind currently alive on Earth. Well, there were at the time of the last census. I checked this, Shepard. It will not arouse suspicion.”

“Six thousand out of several billion.”

“Jane, I don’t want to keep arguing about this. My research and Glyph’s algorithms have said this new information will keep the Alliance away from us. Besides, it is only meant to confuse scanners in the short term, not replace your identity permanently.”

“Oh, so you can change it back?”

“Any time I choose. Reverting the information will be much easier than rewriting it.”

“Well then, I’ll let you work.” Shepard said and turned around.

“Where are you going?”

Jane reached for her cane, which sat just below the shuttle’s door control.

“I’m gonna finish my walk.”

As she stepped off the vehicle and let the doors close behind her, Shepard swore she heard Liara mutter “Of course you are.”

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In the far distance, behind the ruins of the city, Jane noticed a dark lining in the sky. She didn’t really think the clear weather would last long, but less than a day? The way the clouds seemed to conquer the early evening sky instead of just cover it made her pause. Growing up in the middle of a huge city meant she never really saw weather changes until they were right on top of her, so the broken Chicago skyline gave her a perfect view of the storm to come.

Shepard forced her gaze back down, to the park and the prefab building that dominated it. Over the last few days, the caretakers pooled their resources and ingenuity together to repair a small grass cutter they scavenged from the ruins. Not quite one of the big industrial mowers that would have been used in the park before the war, but enough to clear the area after several hours of cutting. Mister Olin, a former skycar mechanic, covered the mowing shift as Jane approached. He waved at her with a warm smile before returning to the tedious work.

Not only did the cut grass make the orphanage look almost presentable, it provided a tangible health benefit for the children. It kept pests like rats and snakes, which had begun to plague many refugee camps around the world, away from where they lived and slept. Also, potentially harmful weeds and plants that may have taken root after the atmospheric carnage of the war could be managed or killed entirely, cutting down the risk of allergies and other maladies.

But more than that, the short grass gave the kids a chance to play outside.
Shepard had fond memories of playing outside her foster house as a very young girl, often playing soldier or other energetic and violent games with the other kids in the neighborhood. Such things ended quickly for her, but she prayed none of the kids she had come to know ever grew up to know her hardships.

She caught herself staring at six of the younger kids as they sat in a circle of freshly cut park grass, each of them holding one kind of toy or another. She made sure to stand far enough away to not get their attention and interrupt their game. She didn’t need to go talk to them, just watching them would be enough. A surge of emotion, powerful and positive, swept over her as she watched the kids do what they did best. She had to set the cane down to wipe a tear away, an action that distracted her from Mister Olin’s approach.

“Ever since you got here, you’re all they talk about.” He said with a smile. Shepard turned to see the man’s clothes covered in green residue and thousands of tiny flecks of grass. The approaching evening must have signaled the end of his grass-cutting shift.

“Doesn’t look like they’re talking about me over there.”

Olin chuckled. “I don’t think they’d mind if you got closer, Commander.”

Jane limped a little closer to see what the newly-minted groundskeeper meant, and a new tear fell down her face. But not exactly one of happiness.

The children weren’t just playing with toys, they were playing with toys of her. And her crew from the first Normandy. Even from several meters away, she recognized a little plastic Krogan in red armor, two slightly melted Geth figurines, and even a model Mako to drive the toys around in. The children seemed to be busy enacting a brand new battle on an uncharted grassy planet.

“What is this?” She asked, words almost failing her.

“I’m surprised you haven’t heard of the ‘Alliance Commander’ toys before.”

“I’ve been out of the loop for a long time.”

“Oh, they were huge a couple years ago.” Olin said as he set the grass cutter aside. “A couple months after that mess with Saren, some company got the bright idea to contract with the Alliance and sell a bunch of military toys. It did wonders for recruitment and PR. It even sold pretty well off planet because anyone with half a brain can see they’re all based on you and your crew, but they made just enough changes so you couldn’t sue them.”

“A couple months after?” She had been dead for several weeks by then.

“Oh yeah. Biggest seller for Christmas ’83. There were even riots over the limited supply of ‘Commander Palmer’ figures. Literally riots. You’d think we would have evolved as a species past that kind of shit, but people go nuts for their kids even in the twenty-second century.”

“Commander Palmer?”

“I guess that would be you. Tough soldier, the leader of the gang, good with any weapon. Her collector’s edition came with a VI that reacted to people around her. Though whoever did her voice sounded nothing like you.” He trailed off, obviously guilty of having a collection of his own.

“Uh huh. So where’d they get these?” She pointed to the mock battle in front of them.

“Some of the older kids have been poking through the ruins now and then. Totally supervised, of
course. They mostly look for things to entertain the young ones while the adults try to scavenge things we can use or trade. One of them, Tomas, found an entire collection in the back of a hobby store, most of them still in their boxes.”

“Well, you just ruined their value.” She joked.

“I think we’ll live.” Olin laughed. “Besides, you can’t put a price on that.” He repeated her pointing gesture, to see one of the younger girls roaring in triumph as she held the toy Krogan aloft. “Wrex” must have done something awesome.

“I don’t think they’d mind having the real deal join them for a while.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Shepard shook her head, a knot of anxiety forming in her stomach. She liked the kids, she even liked teaching them practical things like how to defend themselves against bullies and people bigger than them. But playing with them?

“Come on, you can set their little battle straight. They talked about you last visit for days, they’ll probably talk for months if you join the fight.”

Jane shrugged her shoulders. “Fine.”

Olin put a gentle hand on her back and nudged her forward, making it all but impossible to escape her fate.

She limped forward slower than she needed to, making sure she didn’t startle any of the kids with her mangled appearance as she approached. To her surprise, all six young faces lit up as they saw her.

“Shepard!”

“She’s here!”

“I said she’d be here!”

“Sit next to me!”

They all spoke at once, each all too happy for her to join their game.

Now that she stood directly over the toys, Jane could see what exactly constituted the ‘Alliance Commander’ set of toys. The grass circle was covered in a small army of cheaply made Geth, probably designed to fall apart after some rough play, which would force parents to buy some more. The toy Mako looked rounder and friendlier than the real thing, but she didn’t know what to expect from a kid-safe version of a fighting vehicle. The toy Krogan looked like it had seen better days, but she couldn’t tell if that was by design or rough handling.

“Come here, Commander. Sit next to me.” One of the girls, Katy, pulled on Shepard’s right sleeve and beckoned her to sit down on a clear patch of grass.

“Uh, okay. Where’s Mark?”

“I dunno.” And that was that. Marcus wasn’t part of this group, but she had no way to go look for him now.

Sitting down took a while, and she almost fell over because she had no right hand to steady herself, which caused some of the kids to laugh, but she accomplished it. After a half minute of struggling with her bad knee, Shepard managed to sit down on the grass. Instead of looking at the game, she
spent a moment running her fingers through the green blades. She couldn’t remember the last time she felt anything like it.

“Here, you should play with her.”

Katy handed a plastic doll to Jane. A soldier in N7 armor, well, a replica that followed most of the design anyway. From the way the suit hugged the toy’s figure, she could tell it was supposed to be a woman, but she had no idea who. Maybe Ashley? No, she doubted a toy company would be quite that crude and desperate for credits to dredge up her memory like that. It had to be someone else.

“Is this Commander Palmer?” She asked.

“Her name is Sarah.”

Unsure of what to do, and with six pairs of eyes on her, and probably Olin’s somewhere, she raised the doll to eye level. It didn’t match her likeness at all, with pulled back brown hair and cold brown eyes. Palmer also seemed more muscular than her, or maybe they just made the armor thicker to fit on other toys. She didn’t really know.

“Hi, Sarah.” She said and then blushed. How the hell did you play with these things?

“You don’t talk to them!” Katy said with exuberant frustration, as only a small child could express. “You make her shoot! Like this!”

The child ripped Sarah from Jane’s hand and put it on the ground. She pressed a button on the doll’s back, which caused an eruption of sound to come from a tiny speaker somewhere inside its plastic chest. The familiar barking gunfire of an Alliance rifle filled the clearing.

But Katy wasn’t finished. After she pressed the button a couple more times, she reached over to some of the Geth toys and shoved them down, rubbing them into the dirt and grass to make them definitively dead.

“See?”

Ah, this Shepard could understand. She let her confusion and embarrassment drift away as some of the other kids tried to yell at Katy for messing up their Geth.

“Hold on, you did it wrong.” She didn’t say it harshly, but with her commander voice that got people all over the galaxy listening. “You can’t have Sarah just drop into a combat zone and start shooting in the open like you did. See, she’s got no cover, no exit vector, nothing. If she dropped into the middle of those Geth like that, they would shoot back and…”

She knocked Sarah down into the grass.

Katy looked upset, but defiant. Probably too confused with her hero worship mixing with anger at her game being interrupted.

Shepard continued. “What you want to do is drop in with a Mako.” One of the kids handed her the round, friendly toy. She could see that inside, model versions of Garrus and Kaidan sat in little plastic chairs. Well, not exactly Garrus and Kaidan. The Turian lacked any face markings and “Kaidan” had a big scar on his nose.

“You drop the Mako from a few hundred meters up, from a ship or transport capable of low-atmosphere operations.”
“Like the Normandy?” One of the boys asked.

“Like the Normandy.” She confirmed. “You drop the Mako from the sky and fire the descent rockets at the same time you activate the mass effect generator, otherwise you’d go splat when you hit the ground. Hopefully, your pilot is good enough to land you on top of some bad guys before you even start shooting.”

She had some trouble showing off a textbook Mako drop while holding it with just one hand, but she managed. She set it down next to the prone Palmer toy.

“That’s when you get out and use the vehicle’s shields and armor as cover. The Mako was designed to be tough, and can take a lot of punishment before it goes down. Oh, and while you’re outside picking targets, someone on your team stays inside and uses the cannon.” She picked Sarah off the grass and leaned the toy to the side behind the Mako, trying to convey the idea of shooting from behind cover.

Katy nodded and reached out to press the gunfire button again.

“That sounds boring.” One of the other girls said.

“No it doesn’t!” Katy. “You would die if you didn’t do it right!”

Shepard “played” for another hour. She used the toys to give the children very sound tactical advice, like where to best utilize Krogan charges and how to avoid ambushes in bad terrain. They ate it up like she had been passing out candy and money to them, enthralled with her experience and battlefield wisdom.

She felt a deep pang of guilt for using the toy Geth as the villains every time, but she held it at bay. These plastic creations were not the same species she exterminated, just toys. Just props for games, nothing more. Besides, they were supposed to be the Heretics. Not Geth like Legion. She could blow up Heretics all damn day.

As the sun began to set and a cool drizzle fell on the children, they ran inside, leaving some of the toys behind. Shepard remained on the ground, holding one such Geth in her hand, remembering.
Shepard walked into the prefab with an unsteady bundle in her hand. It had been a challenge to gather all of the plastic figures of her friends and enemies together in the encroaching darkness and rain, but she managed to fit them together into a small pile on top of the toy Mako and lift the entire thing with her as she stood.

The lights inside had been dimmed, but not extinguished, for the night. Some of the kids could not sleep in the dark, and it would have been a nightmare to navigate some of the messier rooms in total blackness, so as the world outside dimmed into twilight, so did the orphanage. The only sound that greeted Jane was the humming of the generator and air circulator, not a single laugh or wail from a child.

“Oh, good, you picked those up.” Miss Serrano appeared from Jane’s right, talking in a hushed voice as she liberated the bundle of figures from her grasp. “I had a feeling the children left their toys when they ran inside.”

“It’s what kids do… right?” She made sure to match the low volume.

“All the time.” Serrano smiled. “I watched you for a while, you know. Before you arrived, a lot of us were worried you’d be a bit… overwhelming to the children. We were afraid you would be like Commander Palmer here, all fight, no compassion. But you do very well around them. It’s a bit surprising, to be honest.”

“A lot of people say that to me.” Shepard said. “I’m not sure if I’ll ever believe them.”

“About being good with children?”

Jane blushed. “No, I mean, surprising.”

“Well, you do have a reputation for saving the galaxy from impossibly big threats. It’s sometimes hard to see the person behind a reputation, even when the reputation isn’t quite as legendary as yours.”

Serrano turned around to set the toys down on a table before turning back to Shepard and grabbing her hand.

“And you, Commander, are a very good person.”

“Yeah, some people might argue with you about that.”

“They just don’t know you like we do.”

Shepard paused and pulled her hand away with gentle but insistent force. She needed to think about anything other than what other people thought of her. It brought up unpleasant memories and thoughts she worked hard to suppress.

Well, it usually did. A new line of thoughts and questions joined the old, bad ones. Something she expected to think about, but not to say.

“Is Mark here? I wanted to see him before I went back to my shuttle.”

She cared about what he thought.
“He should be asleep with the other boys by now. I can go wake him up if you want.”

“No, he had a long day, even if we did cut it short.” Shepard shook her head to cement her refusal, though part of her sincerely wished she had agreed to the suggestion. Even if she did care about him, she wasn’t his parent, or anyone special in his life beyond an adult friend who happened to share similar musical tastes. She needed to let him sleep and dream about their brief walk on the beach. If anything, she’d catch up with him the next day, or later.

“That’s probably for the best. With the way the storm’s picking up outside, we’re probably gonna have a hard time keeping some of them asleep. Best let them get as much rest as they can before the crying starts.”

“Then I guess I should go before it gets unpleasant in here.”

“You’re more than welcome to stay. They might actually stay asleep if they knew you were around to protect them.”

“Maybe another time.” Shepard eased into a smile. The thought of spending the night somewhere other than the shuttle’s floor did sound appealing, but she didn’t think Liara could stand to be away from her console for that long. Especially when devoted to a project as complicated and dangerous as hacking Alliance ID cards.

Before she could hear another word of argument, Shepard stepped outside and into the wet grass. The dark night sky had replaced the yellows and reds of late evening at last, and the rain grew just strong enough to leave tiny puddles in the footprints left behind by the children. She didn’t mind the change in weather. Over a year of near constant rain and snow had desensitized her to the images of wet ruins and the feeling of mud against her feet. All she had to do was concentrate on good things, like the way the children looked up to her, or how they still saw her as a tough soldier who would be there to protect them, and she could look past some of the things that still haunted her.

Jane took a few steps away from the orphanage when something solid struck her hand. No, her hand struck something solid.

She looked down to see one of the toys stuck to her loose shirt, right on the spot her medi-gel covered palm left a large patch of residue when Liara tossed it to her. She had to work it free of the sticky fabric, careful to not rip a hole in it while standing so close to a place where a large group of children slept. The battle took a few seconds, but she liberated the figure at no cost to her shirt, the toy’s limbs or her dignity. She grabbed the plastic figure before it fell to the dark ground below and raised it up to get a better look.

Commander Palmer, of course.

Serrano’s talk of reputation still burned in her ear as Jane started walking forward again, though she kept her focus on the doll.

She’d heard the same things from the day she reached N7. From an orphan barely surviving on the streets to an Alliance Marine of the highest caliber, she had become someone to fear and respect, and her actions always surprised someone. Every victory, even ones earned at great cost, added to the legend that became Shepard. Not just Saren, the Collectors and Reapers, but every mercenary who died by her hand, every battle against slavers and hostile aliens, even the times she had to put down machines that had gone out of control. People whispered and gossiped, typed extranet articles and made news reports about her, obscuring the facts until only the heroine existed, not the person.

She now held that heroine in her hand. Palmer/Shepard. A killer with a rifle permanently attached to
her hand, stuck in uncomfortable armor that looked just as deadly as the weapon. Powerful. Unbeatable. A savior for all peoples, no matter the planet or colony. Not human. Not a simple woman who just wanted to live her life, who just followed orders and did what she had to so the worlds of the galaxy could spin without the threat of extinction over their heads. A legend.

She should have felt disgusted by the way people thought about her.

And yet, if people saw her that way, why should she feel bad? Marcus and the other kids seemed to show her the truth of it: the legends were just as real as the person. They embraced it, they loved the toys and the stories and the mock battles. They accepted her, scars and missing limb, without disgust or complaint. She was a hero to them, not a common soldier who saw too much fighting. So why did she always seem to run away and deny their truth? She truly did have an amazing track record behind her, one worthy of remembering, even if she didn’t feel it all worth honoring.

Trying to run away from the past had gotten her nothing but melancholy and grief. The things the Reapers and Nicolo inflicted on her had been terrible, but they were dead and she was not. The things the Reds made her do had been horrible and illegal, but they were dead too.

She never saw herself as the invincible hero. But dammit, she lived and they all died. All this whining and refusing to be her old self had been for nothing. Her old self got things done. Some of those deeds may not have been ethical or justified in the end, but they made sure those kids behind her were able to sleep at night and play all day.

The dolls proved it. The kids cemented it.

She used to be strong. She needed to be strong again if that’s what made them happy. If they were happy, she could find happiness as well. She needed to throw the new weight away. The singing, the fears, and the weakness she pretended to call integrity and healing.

She could become Palmer if that’s what they wanted.

“Come on, Sarah, we’ve got an Asari to visit.”

She walked back to the shuttle with an unusually light spring in her step, as if the pain in her knee didn’t exist and she hadn’t been injured at all. The old Shepard could ignore worse injuries and still fight, she could ignore a bad joint.

She smashed the shuttle’s door control as if she still wore her old armor, and waited impatiently for the machine to respond, even though it took less than a second. She tossed the doll inside the instant she had enough room to climb aboard.

“Welcome back, Shepard.” Liara said, still working, still busy.

“Rosalind, remember?” Jane smirked. Or maybe Sarah.

“Ah yes, my mistake.” The Shadow Broker glanced up from her console and saw Shepard’s bright expression. After a momentary blush, she returned it, but tried to get back to work at the same time.

“You still working on our fake IDs?” Shepard stepped forward deliberately, the thoughts of her old self thundering inside her as the rain outside increased. The thoughts of the children fluttered away as she looked at the beautiful Asari in front of her.

“Yes, though I have some some other important things to take care of before we go to bed. You should lie down if the walk left you tired.”
“I’m not tired, but I do plan on lying down.”

“Is that so?” The sheepish grin and blush came back stronger, and Liara conspicuously narrowed her eyes.

All this thinking about being strong again, about being whole and abandoning weakness, left a powerful feeling inside of her as she looked up and down her wife’s body. It was a feeling she knew Liara shared, but rarely expressed thanks to their difficulties with the joining. The smile was all she needed to know that the time would be right for her to pounce.

The old Shepard used to take what she wanted, not sit and cry about what she couldn’t do because she lacked a right hand.

They wouldn’t have any problems tonight. She knew it. She felt it.

“Come here.” Shepard growled as she grabbed Liara’s arm and pulled her close. The Shadow Broker reached back to her console for only a brief moment before it, too, was pulled out of reach.

“Wait, Jane, I just-“

She held her bondmate close as she turned them around and away from the datafeeds. As they tumbled and pressed together, Shepard ran her hand up and down the Asari’s back, then reached up to tenderly stroke the ridges and tendrils at the back of her crest. She used gentle pressure on the back of her head to push them into a soft kiss, one that lasted for less than a heartbeat, before Liara jerked back. Not afraid or disgusted, just surprised. A sly, knowing smile crossed her face as she succumbed to another gentle crest rub.

“I assume the walk helped improve your mood.”

“I haven’t felt this good in a long time.” The strong Shepard said. She pulled away for just one second, to make sure the shuttle’s door locked and sealed, before turning back to Liara. Her hand immediately started wandering again, down from her crest, to her back and shoulder, up to her breasts and down her stomach and thighs. Asari clothing contained too many straps and locks for her to remove on her own, but it did happen to be skin tight. Not exactly what she wanted to feel against her palm, but it would do for now. They had all night to peel her out of it.

“I’m ready, Liara. I haven’t been this ready in a long time.” She moaned before leaning in for another kiss. Their lips parted at the same time, allowing their tongues to explore each other at the same time Liara’s own wonderful blue hands began to wander over Jane’s body.

“Don’t wait. Just do it. I know you need it. Join with me.” Shepard barely got the words out as Liara’s did what she did best, reaching under Jane’s clothes and manipulating her body in the way only a practiced lover could do.

“Are you sure?”

“God, yes, Liara. Do it.”

“You have no idea how much I’ve wanted to hear that.”

Jane closed her eyes as her entire world became Liara. She didn’t need to look around to see the shuttle begin to glow with biotics, or the fact that the Asari’s eyes had gone darker than the night sky outside. They happened when she got what she needed, and she just happened to reciprocate vigorously and enthusiastically with exactly what Shepard needed.
As their hands both continued their caresses and fondling of each other, Shepard felt a tingle in the back of her head. She knew it well, the feeling of her nervous system being interacted with by an alien. She welcomed it. She loved it.

As the boundaries between their minds faded, Jane felt one of Liara’s hands move up inside her shirt, caressing the skin of her stomach, then turning wide to avoid her breasts, before settling on her shoulder. Her right shoulder.

“Embrace eternity.”

Liara’s hand slipped down again, trying to touch the one place Jane forbade her to go. In a way, her presence on the limb could be more intimate than anywhere else on Shepard’s body. Allowing her hand there would be a sign of true acceptance, both in herself and their relationship. It would prove once and for all that she was ready, that they could become one person in mind and body without fear or shame ripping them apart. Strong Shepard could handle it. She had been ready for months. Right?

Wrong.

The tingle disappeared, replaced by a headache that sent Shepard reeling backward and Liara clutching her nose as a torrent of blood flowed like a river from her nostrils.

The pain forced Shepard to fall to the shuttle floor, barely catching herself on her hand before her body crashed down. Her entire body felt jittery and overstimulated as her nerves adjusted to the sudden absence of the Asari presence, which increased her heartbeat, which only made the agony in her head worse.

“Liara…” She managed to say as she tried to open her eyes, but the agony of the dim console lights proved to be enough to send needles directly into her optic nerves.

“It’s all right, Shepard. I expected this.”

Jane blinked enough times to lose count as the aching subsided, giving her a slide-show vision of Liara standing up to her full height, reaching for a white cloth, and wiping the violet blood from her face. She looked down at Shepard for only a few moments before returning to her console.

“You expected it to happen?”

“After our last several attempts ended the exact same way? Yes.”

“But I felt so ready. Liara, I tried.”

“I know you did, Jane. I could feel it just before you broke contact. But there are… other factors at work. Factors neither of us can control no matter how much we wish to.”

“I’m sorry.”

Shepard forced her eyes to open even though a lingering ache pounded in her head, which spread down to her throbbing arm and horrid knee.

Strong Shepard melted away with every heartbeat.

“You have nothing to be sorry about, Jane. You just need to keep healing.”

“But your nose…”
“A minor bleed. Don’t worry about me.”

“It doesn’t look minor.” Shepard pushed against the locked shuttle door to force herself back up. Dizziness overtook her momentarily, but it passed after a few more blinks. The pain receded a little more.

“It’s already clearing up. Look.” Liara pulled the cloth away to show the truth of her words. Indeed, the blood had stopped flowing, but the formerly clean square of cloth in her hand looked more purple than white.

“You’re not upset?”

“I’d be lying if I said no.” Jane watched her put the cloth down and resume typing at her console. “But I also understand.”

Shepard braced herself against the shuttle door, trying to calm her heart as anxiety welled from the place she almost crushed beneath the weight of her false confidence. In one instant, everything about her fantasy of returning to her old self shattered in a heartbreaking reminder that she was no longer the same person. A single touch on her shoulder had been enough to undo the entire illusion.

Following the anxiety came the overwhelming urge to vomit, to physically release the pent up frustration and fears that all consumed her at the same time. If Liara felt the same way, she did not show it, instead, she had the same impassive face she always used when lost in data.

_Damn her. And damn herself for thinking she could just will it all away._

Shepard turned to unlock the door and step outside as her stomach roiled again.

What was she thinking? As always, Liara had been right. She needed more time. Maybe she needed an entire lifetime. Shepard could never be Palmer, no matter what she tried. She had been hurt too much, kicked and pounded by her enemies until this broken shell remained. She thought being here, being with Marcus and the others, being strong for them, could excise the demons in her head.

How wrong she had been.

And then the shuttle roared with three powerful knocks. Not thunder, and not the random pattern of the wind throwing something against the hull. They were deliberate, powerful blows.

“What was that?” Liara turned from her screens, a minor miracle.

Again. _BANG! BANG! BANG!_

“It’s someone outside.” Shepard said as she unlocked the door.

The sound of pouring rain echoed into the hollow interior as the door slid open, revealing a shivering, soaked Miss Serrano.

“Shepard, is Marcus here with you!?”

Jane and Liara spared a moment to glance at each other. The queasy anxiety dissipated as she turned back to the desperate woman. A new emotion, pure terror, began to replace it.

“No. You said he was asleep with the other boys.”

“I thought he was!” Serrano’s voice rose with panic. “I don’t check the boy’s rooms unless I have to!”
“What’s going on?” Shepard moved to the side to allow the other woman to board, but she remained outside, in the rain. She felt a little relieved at the rejection. Otherwise, Serrano would have felt how much Jane had begun to tremble with horrible thoughts. Marcus in danger?

The first lightning bolt of the night scorched across the sky.

“One of the boys woke up because of the rain and said Marcus wasn’t in his bed. I thought he might have run to your shuttle you after you left.”

“Are you sure he is no longer in the building?” Liara asked, well shouted, over the storm.

“We searched it top to bottom, even woke all the kids up to help us look. He’s not there, Shepard! Where is he!?"

“Stay calm, Serrano.” Shepard’s own voice rose, but with confidence, not sheer volume. Strong Shepard may have been a fantasy, a form of self-delusion, but Marcus was real. His opinion was real. And she would never allow harm to come to him. If she had to cloak herself in more false bravado to help find him, it’s exactly what she would do. She pushed the fear back, not because she wanted to, but because she had to. She couldn’t be Palmer or the Shepard of legend, but she could be herself.

It surprised her how quickly the transformation came. Almost like she was back in her old body, during the war, giving orders and seeing violence done. It came almost as naturally to her as breathing.

“Go back to the prefab and get everyone in the same room. Keep a few of the adults with them and send the rest out in pairs. Assign everyone to search a different street. He’s only ten, so he can’t have gone far.”

“Will you help us?!”

Shepard turned to Liara, who just returned her glance. She gave no other response.

Part of her knew to stay here. This wasn’t her city, Marcus wasn’t her responsibility. He had several adults devoted to keeping him safe, and those adults would search until the next apocalypse for him. They cared just like she cared, and they all had all four limbs intact. What could she do in the middle of the night, in an unfamiliar ruined city in a downpour?

She could do just about anything if it meant saving Mark’s life.

“Yes.”

Serrano nodded and turned back, too lost in her own fear to say anything more. They’d reconvene as soon as Shepard regrouped with them.

Jane closed the shuttle door and turned around. She only had to search the cramped interior for a few seconds before finding her N7 hoodie. She slid it over the long shirt without complication, though the right side remained stubbornly loose over the shoulder.

“Liara, I don’t expect you to come help, but I could use you.” She walked to her wife and pushed her chest forward, a wordless signal they developed to ask for aid in zipping or buttoning something. “We can search around the north, toward downtown. I know that’s close to the Reaper, but if you use Glyph and your Broker omni-tool, we could cover more ground than the other teams. It’s not much, but it’ll give him a better chance.”
Liara did not turn from her console.

“Shepard…”

Jane looked up to her wife’s face, only to see a look of grim melancholy.

“What’s wrong?”

“Jane, you need to stop. This, the search for the boy. You need to stop.”

“What, why?”

“You gave Serrano a good idea. Let them handle it. They’re the ones who have devoted themselves to the child’s health and protection. They’re the ones who are responsible, not you.”

“Liara, a ten year old boy could be in danger. I can’t turn away from that.”

“You can.”

Shepard stopped trying to mess with the zipper and stepped closer to Liara. A loud crash of thunder followed her.

“Why would I ever turn my back on him?”

“Because you’re not… ready.” She mumbled the last word.

“I’m fine. I can remain in control of this .”

The Asari finally turned away from her console. Not just looked up or shifted a little to meet Jane’s face. She turned her entire body away from the world of the Shadow Broker.

“No, you’re not, Jane. They are.”

“Who’s they?”

“The children. Their caretakers. And the Alliance.”

Shepard stopped moving, anxiety and terror mixing as one.

“What do you mean, the Alliance?”

“Why do you think someone is inside this city right now with a working identity scanner, Shepard? I tried to tell them, tried to warn them about what would happen… but when you first met with the children, one of the adults sent a message to a family member about your visit. That message was intercepted by Alliance command. They’ve known about our location almost from the day we arrived.” Liara could not meet Jane’s eyes as she spoke. She had the look of a child caught lying.

“You’re just telling me this now? What else is going on?” Shepard’s commanding presence came back to her like it never left. Though she and her wife were about equal height, she felt as if she towered over her. Her expression darkened until it showed the worst expression she could manage: cold and grim disappointment. It tore her apart to use it on Liara, but she could not stop herself.

The Asari looked away for a moment, trying to return to work, but she buckled under Jane’s powerful glare.

“Jane, the day we left the Normandy, I was contacted by Admiral Hackett.”
“You were-“

“You were asleep, still healing from the damage inflicted on you.” She didn’t need to remind Shepard that some of that damage had been self-inflicted. “Hackett couldn’t track us normally, but he still had the shuttle’s comm frequency and a likely flight plan. He ordered us to return, to pretend that we never stole the shuttle. He threatened to never let you out of his sight again, and to have me arrested for stealing Alliance property if we didn't comply.”

Liara did not turn back to her console, but she did reach behind herself and moved the screen so Jane could see it easier. More nonsensical information scrolled by, but she could see some familiar human faces among the numbers and letters, as well as the official seal of the Earth Government.

The Shadow Broker continued speaking: “I threatened them back, saying I would release information that would destabilize the peace between the fleets that agreed to retake Earth. It would start a war that ravaged what was left of your planet and your few remaining ships. All they had to do was leave us alone, and the files would remain right here, locked away.”

She paused and took a breath. Tears began to fall from Liara’s eyes.

“But they made one condition. You had to disappear, Jane. You couldn’t be… yourself while you healed. The Alliance didn’t want you causing disruptions on Earth, because that’s what you do best. You mix things up and make things better, often against the wishes of those in power. They wanted to remain in total control of the rebuilding, they wanted to inspire the people on their terms, not yours.”

Shepard couldn’t stop the trembling that took hold of her hand from spreading to her body.

“You’ve been a part of this the entire time?”

“I was trying to protect you!” Liara raised her voice to match Shepard’s as she pushed the console screen back to its normal position.

“By lying to me? By holding information that could destroy my home planet!?.” Shepard turned away from her wife, unable to look at her. Realization began to dawn as to exactly why the Asari had been so distant, so eager to return to work when she had so few agents and contacts left. “Liara… you’re still speaking with him, aren’t you?”

“That lie was the only thing protecting you. You had to disappear or they would find you.”

She turned back. More emotion flooded from deep within her and she shook harder. But this wasn’t fear or panic. This was rage.

“I don’t need protection, I need a life! I need something more than sitting useless in a shuttle, feeling sorry for myself about the things I’ve lost. I need to start rebuilding myself.”

Another crash of thunder. Liara took in a short breath, her big sapphire eyes still washed with tears.

“I thought it was over, Shepard. I thought we were free to do just that. That’s why I’ve been working so hard. Before we left on that walk, Hackett contacted me again. With most of the non-humans away from the planet and the mass relay network under repair, the Alliance doesn’t feel threatened by my information anymore. I needed a new plan.”

“How could you do this, Liara?”

“Because I love you!” Liara paused and finally raised her eyes to meet Jane’s. “But I’m not sure you
Shepard raised her arm and groaned. “Are you kidding me? You’re bringing this up here and now, after saying you’ve been betraying me for months?”

“Jane, listen to me—”

“Why would I ever listen to you again? How can I trust anything you have to say, Shadow Broker?” She spat the title out, not willing to call her bondmate by name.

“How can you… Jane, because I’m right here! I’ve always been right here, with you. For five years, I’ve been by your side. And for the last year, I’ve been trying to make up for my mistakes, to devote myself to you when you needed me the most. I’ve been waiting for you to open your eyes, and see me. Just see me like you used to. And every morning, you wake up next to me and smile… but it’s not you. You’re in there, trapped behind pain and suffering I can’t heal and it’s killing me. It’s suffocating you and the only thing that’s inspired you to do anything about it is alone in this destroyed city somewhere.

“I love you, Jane, but if you care about me at all, if I mean anything to you anymore… don’t do this.”

“If I care about you? You cut a deal for my life like I was a piece of equipment for you to play with! My life. Mine! You don’t get to decide what I do with it!”

“If you go out there, Jane, the Alliance will decide for you. Maybe not tonight, but they will come for you.”

“Let them come!” Shepard roared. “They sent me after Saren, and he is dead. Cerberus and the Collectors tried to kill me and they’re dead. I killed the Reapers, and I AM STILL HERE, Liara! I’m ready.”

“Ready for what? To die? Shepard, if you fall into their custody, they will kill you. Not with a bullet, but with kindness. They’ll erase you and put a hollow puppet in your place, one they can control. Then they’ll go after the children, because it might make a good story for their news. And if it doesn’t, they’ll be forgotten and abandoned. You’re threatening to bring a war down on them for the sake of one boy. One boy that already has people looking for him.”

Shepard found she could no longer listen to Liara, she shook her head dismissively. “If the Alliance wants a war, I will bring them war. They taught me nothing else.” She sucked in a breath and held it, to force herself to not cry in front of the Shadow Broker. She had to remain tough and determined if she was to save Mark.

Liara raised her hands to her face, wiping her sobs away, before returning to her usual stance.

“If that’s what you’ve decided, Jane, I can’t stop you. You’re right, it is your life and I can’t tell you how to live it. If you want to throw your third chance at living away, go ahead. But I…”

She lowered her hands just a little, and turned back to Shepard. She pulled the ring off her finger.

“I can’t watch you do it. I’m not strong enough to watch it happen again. If this is what you want, then our marriage is over.”

The ring fell to the shuttle floor and Liara turned away, eyes turning dark violet as she lost herself to sobbing.
“I see. The Shadow Broker has to keep herself safe, right?”

She got no answer, and she didn’t feel like speaking anymore.

Shepard stepped off the shuttle and closed the door behind her.
The image of Liara dropping the ring, EDI’s ring, to the shuttle floor burned Shepard just as thoroughly as if she had been set on fire. She wanted to strike something, to rage and scream until her throat oozed blood and her muscles collapsed from exhaustion, but she didn’t.

There had been a time in Shepard’s life when she had missions to accomplish, jobs to do and assignments to complete. They kept her busy and they kept her focused, the perfect way to run away from harsh truths. Back then, she used her responsibilities as a shield against the reality that she spent two years dead. And later, she focused so much on her quest to save the galaxy that she purposefully overlooked the sheer amount of destruction wrought upon it.

But like the old days, she had a mission now, and she wrapped it around herself and let it suffice her being, otherwise she would have fallen apart on the wet ground.

Shepard walked, she did not limp, through the ruined, cracked and cratered streets of Chicago. The storm raged around her, lashing cold drops of fresh water against her face, washing away the hot saltwater that flowed from her eyes. A more rational side of her knew she should have turned back to the shuttle and found a way to settle, or at least postpone, the argument and used the vehicle instead of her own broken body, but she couldn’t go back there. Not yet.

*You need to help find Mark. Focus on the mission.*

Brief, powerful flashes of lightning illuminated her path as she moved forward, keeping her clear of the deep pitfalls and treacherous routes left behind by the war. The gutted buildings and destroyed vehicles on the roads cast deep black shadows in those brief moments of light, and each time, she peered into them, hoping she could spot the cowering form of the person she needed to find.

With lightning came thunder, a deep, booming explosion that reminded her too much of detonating ordinance. She knew storms well enough to know that the worst had yet to arrive. Loud but rumbling thunder meant it was still far off, but coming fast.

“Mark!” She called over the noise and echoes of the tempest.

She moved north, or at least she assumed she walked in that direction. She didn’t have an omni-tool to confirm anything, or the means to activate it even if she had one. If anything, she could have used the flashlight function that came with all standard models. It really had been stupid to walk into this storm at night with nothing but the N7 jacket on her back, but she hadn’t exactly been in a rational state of mind when she left the shuttle.

“Marcus!” Shepard screamed again. Her voice echoed through the burned city.

A brief flash of lightning illuminated something bright blue in front of Jane. A street sign, upended and shattered, but still displaying a cartoonish Asari holding a box. The fake alien’s face had been bent in such a way that half of it remained clean, but the other half rested in a shallow but muddy
pool on the street.

She turned away and walked down another street.

“Mark!” She yelled.

Shepard stopped and waited for lightning to come again as she gained her bearings on this new location. In the dark road between buildings, she could only see large shadows and formless lumps of debris. Dark things lurked in those negative spaces, memories and hauntings that she knew weren’t real, but still made her breaths come shorter and her stomach to knot. Part of her wanted to turn back, to avoid the potential Reaper or Cerberus ambush that obviously waited behind a slab of concrete or that fallen skycar to her right. But the other part, the stronger part, kept her in control. As long as she kept her head in the game, she could get this done.

Lightning and thunder at the same time, a loud CRACK that split the world apart for a second. The shadows became nothing, and the world became as day for less time than it took to blink. No ambushes, no dangers, nothing awaited her. But worse, no child occupied the road, either. She had to keep looking.

Jane started walking again. Her right knee scraped bone against bone, and ached somewhere deep inside, but she refused to let it slow her down. Limping in these conditions, with water pooling and flowing in tiny, chaotic rivers, would be the end of her. She had to remain sure and strong, taking definitive and purposeful steps in areas she knew could support her weight. At any time, a sinkhole could open, or the asphalt could crack, sending one of the crumbling buildings down on top of her. If need be, she had to be prepared to run, or no amount of sure footing would be able to save her.

No, Shepard could not limp anymore. The agony inflicted on her in London had almost robbed Jane of her ability to look past physical pain, but she knew that was just a mental scar left behind by the Reapers and Nicolo. She could do this. She had to do it. She had a mission.

She called Mark’s name to the empty road, but still heard nothing in reply.

The hood of the N7 jacket fell off of Shepard’s head as she skirted around a large chunk of a fallen building. In a matter of seconds, her scalp became drenched and her hair plastered to her skin. Mumbling a frustrated curse, she raked some of the stinging strands out of her eyes with her fingertips. Her gaze moved up as she made sure she could keep her hair back before she pulled the hood back in place.

Another lightning strike, this one behind one of the few remaining skyscrapers nearby. It cast a shadow over her.

No, not a building.

Shepard continued to stare upward. Her breath caught in her throat.

“Of course.” She sighed.

Under cover of darkness and rain, Jane had inadvertently walked right up to the dead Reaper.

A low groan rumbled the pavement under Shepard’s feet, and for a horrible moment, she thought the great machine had awakened. But as she fixed her gaze on it, she saw the truth. It remained very dead, but the gutted and hollow skyscraper it rested against creaked and moaned in the storm. Its exposed girders and beams were being eaten and rusted by the water, growing weaker with each passing day.
Her heart began to speed up, but it didn’t hurt. Her lungs burned, but she welcomed the pain. Her back ached as she stared upward, but it excited her. Adrenaline surged through Shepard’s body as she paced back and forth on a small patch of undamaged road like a trapped prey animal, ready to fight now that it could no longer flee. She still had her mission, her task, to finish, but she could not turn away from this. Something kept her glued to that spot, kept her eyes locked upward even though the rain blurred her vision and stung her retinas. She would not be able to leave, to accomplish her task, until she did something about it.

“Look at you.” She said to the corpse. “Look at everything you’ve done.”

Jane blinked both hot and cold water out of her eyes and began to speak with more force.

“You probably killed more people than you could ever count, but that never stopped you, did it? You’ve ruined and destroyed entire worlds, and you never cared. Do you realize how many children you’ve left starving, orphaned and terrified? Do you understand the amount of suffering you’ve inflicted?”

She paused, waiting for a reply that would never come. The building shuddered, which made the entire street quake.

“No, I don’t think you do. You probably wrapped yourself in the idea that you were doing a good thing for the galaxy. You told yourself that every life you took meant you were making the world a better place. Didn’t matter if your victim was a killer, a soldier, an innocent or even a child. You thought you were doing the right thing.”

She paused and let out an unamused, bitter, and hateful laugh.

“The right thing. Who the hell gets to decide what’s right and wrong? If you kill a thousand people here to save a million over there, is that wrong? Someone once called that kind of thinking ‘ruthless calculus’. I bet you did a lot of ruthless calculus in your life, didn’t you? Even if you’d never admit it. You killed and destroyed over and over in the name of saving the many. That’s the right thing to you, isn’t it?

“Well guess what?”

Without thinking about the cold or consequences, Shepard threw the unzipped N7 jacket aside and pulled her loose shirt down to expose her right arm. A bolt of lightning struck the Reaper as the cold rain assaulted her mangled and tortured limb. Sparks fell down the huge metal construct as Jane flexed her destroyed muscles.

“This… this is what happens when you do the right thing!” Her voice rose above the chaos of the storm. “This is the prize for making the galaxy a better place!”

She stood still in the deluge, letting the freed stump become soaked and raw. The skin on her right shoulder, around the glowing Cerberus implant, tightened and formed goose bumps the longer she let it feel the chill air. She could hear the wheeze in her lungs as she stood there, for all intents and purposes naked before the great beast.

“This is the prize. This is what you’ve done to us. You carved away what made us whole, what made us great. And what did you leave behind? Scars. Scars and emptiness. But we didn’t die.”

Emptiness. Nothing inside. The endless desert left behind after she tried to shoot herself. Even after all this time, after thinking she might have found something meaningful in the eyes of the orphaned children… she still walked along that internal expanse above a cliff.
All her life, Jane felt torn apart inside, always stuck between one extreme and another. Childhood and forced adulthood. Killer and peacemaker. Soldier and caretaker. Alive and dead. Standing on the cliff or jumping off. That battle should have been decided on the Normandy, at the barrel of the sidearm. But it hadn’t. It never would, as long as she felt of two minds about everything. No amount of pills or heart-to-heart talks with a doctor would ever truly make her whole again.

Jane Shepard would always like two people in the same body.

She looked down at her right limb. She really looked at it, even though the darkness of the night and storm obscured much of it. She could mentally picture each scar and wrinkle now, and could tell where her muscles and skin used to be, compared to where Nicolo mangled them.

“I didn’t die.”

She gently put her shirt back in place and pulled the black jacket over her right shoulder as the street groaned like a mournful whale song.

“I. Didn’t. Die.” She repeated. “You tried killing me more times than either of us can count. I took it, I suffered and I mourned. And then you just kept coming. More suffering, more death. You threw everything you had at me, but you know what happened?”

Jane reached down to grab a small piece of concrete and threw it at the Reaper. She knew it wouldn’t reach the dead thing, not even close, but she enjoyed the sense of release it gave her. She didn’t stop to listen to it impact.

“YOU’RE DEAD!”

She reached down again and picked up another rock. Her drenched hair flew back and forth at the sudden, jerking motions.

Lightning crashed around her.

“COME ON! DO SOMETHING! I’M STILL HERE! ONE LAST CHANCE TO KILL ME!”

Another throw, aimed at one of the Reaper’s legs.

She screamed. Jane roared and yelled until she had no air in her lungs and her throat burned. Then she howled some more.

She and threw her fist into the air, trying to strike at something unfathomably huge and far away. After a moment, she no longer saw the Reaper in front of her. Instead, she could see the images that refused to give her mind peace. Anderson. Nicolo. Thane. EDI. Mordin. Legion.

The ring on the floor.

Liara.

Herself.

Jane fell to one knee, barely remaining cognizant enough to avoid smashing her right joint into the wet road. Her hair draped around her face, giving her eyes, nose and mouth a brief respite from the storm. One brief, pitiful sob escaped her rasping lungs.

“No, you’re just a rotting corpse on top of a pile of bones. There’s just me left. Just me, always walking alone.”
She remained kneeling in front of the dead beast for an eternity, eyes closed, hearing nothing but her deep breathing, the crashing of water against the destroyed Chicago, and thunder.

No, she heard something else, something high pitched and wavering, a whisper behind a scream.

It might as well have been like someone called her name in the middle of a crowd, because her head perked up immediately.

“Mark?”

The Reaper above her growled and roared. Well, the building that supported the miraculously-upright corpse groaned again as she stood. She paid it no heed. In fact, she ignored the sound, the feeling of terror in her gut and her rapid heartbeat as she began walking forward. Still not limping, because she knew limping could mean death in a city like this.

Another lightning bolt of lightning struck the creature, then the ungodly crack of nearby thunder.

And she saw him.

Marcus crouched less than fifty meters away, huddling under an upended skycar partially propped up by a large chunk of debris. In the brief moment she saw him before the world returned to dark deluge, she could see he had his knees up under his chin and his hands over his ears. He sang loudly, almost a scream, as he tried to shut the world out.

She did not count the seconds it took to reach him, nor did it matter. She made it to the wrecked vehicle and lowered her body so she could meet his terrified gaze. He continued to scream-sing as he watched her approach, but his volume lowered when she finally contorted herself back to her knees and reached her hand out to him. Her right knee caught against something small and sharp, which caused her to wince and almost cry out, but she suppressed it. She had to remain calm for him.

Up close, she could see his red-rimmed eyes and how much his body shivered in the wet and cold. The debris that held the skycar had carved a small crater in the asphalt, leaving a perfect place for the constant flow of water to stream into. Marcus sat in mud and detritus.

“Hey, come on.” She said, keeping her voice as even as she could over the noises around her. She reached her hand just a little farther, almost touching his knees, but not making direct contact.

“Everyone’s looking for you.” Her throat itched and scratched as she talked, but like all the other aches and pains in her body, she ignored it.

Marcus stared at her as she held the incredibly uncomfortable position. Without a right hand to steady herself, she felt unstable underneath the punishing rain. Fortunately, he stopped his scream-singing as his tear-filled eyes locked with hers. But he did not move or speak to her.

“Kid, we need to get you out of here. This isn’t exactly a safe place to be.” To confirm her statement, the street rumbled again as the building and Reaper swayed.

“Yes it is.” He replied, just loud enough for her to hear.

“What?” Shepard pulled herself forward, again causing her right knee to scrape and tear. She moved her head under the ruined car to get her eyes out of the rain. She expected the underside of the vehicle to be even louder than the open street as the rain hit the burned chassis, but she heard nothing. Literal space-age technology sure did make for some quiet engineering. Her hair added some drops of water to the muddy pool Marcus resided in, but neither of them noticed. “Marcus, we’re right under a Reaper.”
“It was safe before.” He said, as if that answered every question.

“Before what?” Shepard pulled her hand back and steadied herself before she fell over. She moved more of her body under the car and into the cold brown mud. In a few moments, she found herself sitting next to the terrified young man.

He sniffled and turned his head away from her.

“Mark, why is this place safe?”

He did not reply. Lightning nearly blinded her as she stole a peek beyond the confines of their flooded little shelter.

What the hell was she supposed to do now? Even after all this time in the city with the kids, she had no idea what to do when they cried or threw their fits. She always found ways to let the other adults, the caretakers like Serrano, handle those situations. They were the ones who volunteered their lives for this crucial job. She just came to give one speech, then stayed because of the boy currently shivering next to her, unable to look her in the eye. She had never seen him like this before.

What was it about him that kept her around? Just their similar interest in old music? That may have started their friendship, but she wouldn’t have stayed under threat of Alliance discovery if that were the case. Until Liara revealed her deception, Jane thought she had been well aware of the risks, and assumed she could keep Marcus safe.

Why did she want to keep him safe? Did he remind her of herself at that age? Abandoned by the world, stuck in a horrible situation ready to swallow him up? He might not end up in a gang like the Reds, but there were plenty of other people out there who would make his young life hell when he left the care of the orphanage.

But then, all the other kids were like that, too. She liked them, all of them, but they weren’t… him.

Marcus began to shiver again as she sat next to him in silence.

Dammit she hated seeing him like this.

Shepard draped her soaking wet arm over Marcus and pulled him close, following some ancient instinct she didn’t quite understand. His hair brushed against her chin as he came closer, though she tried to keep at least some kind of respectful distance between them.

“It’s okay.” She whispered. “It’s going to be okay.”

“No it’s not.”

“Why not?”

Marcus shoved her away. Had she been wrong to try and comfort him? A dagger of fear slashed through Jane’s stomach.

“Because I watched you fall!”

“When did I fall?”

“On the beach.” Marcus wiped his reddened eyes free of tears, “I turned around and watched you fall.”

“So?”
“You don’t get it.”

“No, I really don’t. I just tripped, Mark. It’s no big deal.”

He angrily pulled himself back into an angry ball of arms and legs. He kept well away from her arm.

“You’re not supposed to fall.” He whispered.

“I can’t trip over my own two feet now and then?”

He turned to her, anger and frustration etched into his face. “You’re not supposed to stay on the ground like you did. I saw you there… like you were dead…”

Realization dawned upon her. The fact that landing on her right arm knocked her out for a time. “How long was I out? The only thing I remember was seeing you when I opened my eyes.” And Liara, but she didn’t feel like talking about the Asari right now.

“Too long.” Was the answer.

“But I’m fine now.”

“No, you’re not! You’re not supposed to fall like that. You’re supposed to be like Palmer. You’re supposed to be strong and save me from the monsters every night.”

Shepard jerked back in surprise. “Wait, what?”

Marcus’s face went deep red. She could see his embarrassment even in the darkness.

“Do you… dream about me?” She asked as gently as she could.

“I dream about the war.” He said with the same fragility she remembered feeling far too often over the last year. “I was here when they came for me.”

“The Reapers? You were right here?”

He nodded ‘yes’.

“And you’ve had nightmares about it every night?”

Another nod. But then he coughed a small, uncomfortable hem. “Sometimes you save me, though. But not you like you are now. The way you used to be.”

“Ah. I see. But when you saw me fall down, it made you realize I’m not the person from your dreams.”

“Yes.” He nodded, but then caught himself. “No. Not you. But… the other you.”

Shepard nodded. “You saw I’m just as fragile as everyone else, and it scared you. So you ran to where you felt safe, hoping none of it was real and you’d wake up in your dream world again.”

Marcus scooted a little closer to her, sloshing the muddy water between them. He nodded “yes”. Still acting on instinct, Shepard reached her arm out again and wrapped it around his shoulder. To her surprise, much of his shivering and trembling calmed as he settled into her embrace. To her further astonishment, he rested his head on her shoulder.

She should have taken the opportunity to pull him out of the skycar and marched him back to the
orphanage. She really should have. But for some reason, she remained exactly where she was.

Outside, the storm continued unabated.

“Can I confess something to you, Mark?” She craned her neck to look at the young man clinging to her. “I was doing the exact same thing as you.”

“Really?”

“I don’t think many people realize how hard it is to be alone. Really alone, not just being in a place with no people around. I mean living in a world where nobody cares about you. Nobody loves you. Nobody knows you exist. It eats you up inside and leaves you with nothing. It makes your insides a desert that swallows you whole.”

Shepard wiped away a tear of her own.

“You kids probably know better than anyone what it’s like. You also know that you can always try to run away from the desert, from the fears and scary things inside your own mind and find a safe place to hide. It works for a while, but then you get exhausted.”

Marcus pushed a little closer to her. Indeed, he knew very well.

“But at least you’ve got people who want to take care of you, who want to keep you safe. I didn’t. I had to learn how to run away and feel tired all my life. I’ve never stopped running, Mark, and I’m goddamn sick of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“A while ago, some of the other kids were playing with those Commander Palmer toys. The ones based on me and the old vids. And I… tried to be her again. I wanted to run backwards. I wanted to turn my back on everything I’ve become and accomplished.”

“Why?”

“Mark, you have no idea what it’s like, and I pray you never will, to have everything scooped out of you and put back in the wrong order. To have your life end, but then restart. Everyone around you thinks nothing is different, that the whole world is the same as it was, but it isn’t. Not to you. I see the world differently now. And I’m terrified of it. I don’t want to run away, I want to go back. I want to go back to when things made sense and the world wasn’t so scary. I feel like two people every day. And all the constant running just keeps me feeling… separated from something in myself. Something important.”

Shepard had to stop her own body from shivering as she said the words, something she didn’t even think she could confess to Liara.

“Maybe you need to stop running away… and start running toward something.”

Shepard laughed and she lost control of the tears she tried to hold back.

“I thought I was the one trying to help you feel better.”

“We help each other.”

“Yeah, I think we do.”

Could it have been that simple all along? Is that why she felt so attached to this place and this young
man who lost everything and almost became like her? Not just that she saw kindred spirits, or a place to do something good with her life, but because she needed their help just as much as they needed hers?

“Maybe if I find something to run to, something I can feel proud of, I’ll stop feeling so broken inside.”

“Yeah.” Marcus nodded his head again, which rustled against her shoulder.

“I’ll do it… if you promise to come back with me right now. We need to get you some place safer than this.”

Silence again, but only for a little while.

“Will you be there with me?”

“Yes, I will.”

“What about Liara?”

This time, it was Shepard’s turn to look away and close her eyes. “I don’t know.”

Before he could reply, and before Jane could start the arduous process of sliding out from under the car, the street rumbled again. But louder, and hard enough to make the car above them bounce to the left a few centimeters. The pool of mud they sat in splashed all around them.

“Oh no. Not now. Not now, you goddamn monster.”

“What’s going on?”

Another quake. The skycar jumped again. The entire street felt as if it dropped half a meter then bounced back up. Shepard held her hand up to prevent herself and Mark from hitting their heads on the car’s underside.

“I think the Reaper is about to fall on us.”
The street quaked again, knocking the ruined skycar another half-meter to the left, causing the metal and polymer chassis to creak and groan. One more shift and it would fall on top of them.

“I need you to hold on to my jacket as I pull us out of here, okay?”

With only one hand, Shepard had to let go of Marcus to free herself from under the semi-shelter. She felt his insistent but firm grip on the fabric of her soaked N7 jacket as she wriggled her hips and grabbed the edge of the tiny mud-filled crater they sat in.

Once out from under the car, the world became a riot of noise and water again. The sound of thunder and constant, persistent rain hammered Jane’s ears as the cold drops worked to wash the mud off her legs and thighs in a matter of seconds. Once free himself, the rain cleaned Marcus’s clothes just as fast.

Another shuddering rumble, and the skycar collapsed onto the puddle they sat in. Muddy water splashed everywhere, but it, too, was washed away.

“That was close!” Mark yelled over the noisy street.

Shepard nodded and took in a deep breath, which almost threw her into a coughing fit as some raindrops followed the air. She suppressed it because she had to.

She bent down to look Marcus in the eye.

“Whatever happens, you do not stop moving, okay? We’ll try to walk slow and careful, so we don’t trip and fall, but we don’t stop. Not for me, not for anything. Do you understand?” Her voice came strong and commanding, the tone she used for an entire career. She chose her words and delivery in the exact way she needed, because a single misspoken idea, a single misstep out here, could kill them both.

She could not run back to the old Shepard, but she could use the lessons taught from her old life to help ensure the survival of the new one.

His look said it all, he did not have to reply. The presence of Shepard, his Shepard, the protector from his dreams, made it possible to think and listen, even if he felt afraid.

The street rocked and pulled down, then shot back up again. It almost knocked them to their feet, but Shepard kept them both steady.

She looked up to see the Reaper swaying, bouncing against the ruined skyscraper and sending tons of dust and debris falling to the streets below.

She meant it as a bluff.
Dropping the ring, making the declaration of their marriage being over, all of it, just a bluff.

Why were humans so hard to understand?

Back on Illium, the imagined threat of Liara’s biotics and a few harsh words were often more than enough to get frightened and indebted humans to comply with her demands. They often became her best sources of information, since they would conjure up their own horrible punishments for failure based on her empty threats. Humans feared their own imaginations more than the actual terrors of the galaxy, a strange but exploitable quirk.

So when she tried to force Jane into comprehending the sheer amount of danger they were in, she committed a grand, but empty, gesture.

In her head, she knew Shepard would not be frightened, but angered. She imagined her bondmate fighting to keep their relationship intact while at the same time trying to convince her to help search for the boy, damn the Alliance consequences. They would vent a year’s worth of frustration at each other, finally communicate things they both needed to say, and start to work on healing together. She then imagined Shepard would “convince” her to take the shuttle in a few low-flying passes over the city, using the sensors to immediately locate the orphan child and relay his location to the other adults. And finally, they would leave the city, perhaps the entire continent, behind.

The Shadow Broker had been mistaken in every possible way.

Goddess, send all humans back to the depths they came from! Why did she have to fall in love with one?

As soon as Shepard closed the door behind her, Liara’s legs tried to collapse from under her. The Shadow Broker had to lower herself to the shuttle floor with the grace and gentility of a drunk Elcor, lest she fall and break a bone. She let her body descend until her face rested a few centimeters away from the ring.

And that is where she remained for an eternity.

She didn’t count time, run scenarios or wait for a call from an agent, she just sat and stared at the band of metal Jane had given her as a token of their bonding, their marriage. A gift she squandered like a child to make a point. She dare not touch it, lest she somehow dishonor the meaning of the symbol. She didn’t feel worthy of holding on to Jane’s love at that moment.

***

Her knee complained louder and louder with every step she took, but Shepard ignored it. All around her and Mark, the streets of Chicago groaned and rumbled, as if anticipating the catastrophe to come. Behind them, the sounds of the unstable Reaper had grown to an ear-splitting roar of bending metal and shattering concrete. She didn’t know which would go first, the skyscraper or the Reaper, but neither one would be a pleasant collapse.

“Keep walking, Mark.” She said as calm as she could over the furious storm. He walked on her left side, locked hand-in-hand so tightly that it almost hurt. They would not be parted, no matter what happened.

They continued their deliberate, but slow, pace through the streets, making sure to avoid cracks and
craters both old and new, and giving wide berth to chunks of debris. They didn’t need a piece of fallen building to become a rolling boulder that flattened them before they got to safety.

She had Marcus keep his eyes on the road, since he was still a few inches shorter than her, and had a better view of the war-damaged asphalt. Shepard kept her gaze locked on the buildings around them, studying the burns and cracks they all shared, trying to guess how much force it would take for them to fall over.

Another loud screech from the skyscraper. Mark almost stopped to stare at it.

“No, look forward.” Shepard said, still using her old voice. “You need to keep your eyes forward. Ever hear that old rhyme of not stepping on a crack?”

She watched him form a tiny smile as they continued their relentless march away from danger.

After a few more confident, deliberate paces, Shepard let herself fall behind Mark just enough so he could no longer see her clearly.

Because she could not stop herself from limping anymore.

***

Liara felt the world shake around her, but dismissed it. After living in a shuttle for so many months, she assumed the shuddering came from the air circulators, or maybe the eezo core adjusting. Or perhaps, with the storm outside, a chunk of debris managed to hit the vehicle.

Inside her mind, a battle raged. She wanted to run after Shepard, to pull her back into the shuttle and finish their talk as planned. But she also knew that trying to force Jane into doing something like that had been the exact trigger to push her over the edge and almost end her own life.

The Shadow Broker knew she had to get back up and get to work if she wanted to keep the Alliance off of their backs, but the entire reason she now sat on the floor, alone and in tears, was because of that work.

The ring bounced forward a distance less than the width of a human hair as the shuttle rumbled again.

For the first time, Liara understood all of Shepard’s talk about feeling stuck and caught between two extremes, two personalities, two people inside her own head. But, unlike her wife’s miraculous ability to keep standing back up and moving forward, even in the face of such pain, Liara couldn’t move.

Until her console beeped.

***

Mark ripped his hand free of Shepard’s when the falling skyscraper emitted an ear-splitting SHRIEK of collapsing, torn and spent metal, and covered his ears. Even Jane, who spent so many years
around weapons and battles of all kinds, had to recoil from the volume and horror of the sound.

With their hands disconnected, Shepard reached out and grabbed Mark’s drenched shirt, making sure he did not run off alone. Speaking became out of the question as the noise grew in intensity. It didn’t sound anything like the terrible blare of a living Reaper, but that didn’t make it less frightening.

She broke her own orders and stopped walking, which came as instant relief to her agonized knee. Mark followed suit a split second later, and they both turned to see the source of the eruption.

She wished they hadn’t.

The skyscraper had cracked in the middle, near one of the largest holes in its superstructure. Huge clouds of dust fell down the tower’s side, undeterred by the heavy rain, and probably full of debris larger than the two nearby humans combined.

As the crack widened, the noise got worse and the building tipped over some more. It didn’t appear to be falling in the direction of the orphanage, thank god, but that didn’t mean they were free of danger. As soon as the top section of the building hit ground, the impact could send debris flying for hundreds of meters, and the shockwave could cause thousands of smaller collapses from the ruined and weakened structures all around. When the Reaper fell, it would cause even more damage.

As if to confirm Jane’s fears, the gargantuan metal corpse swayed again and smashed into the tower, widening the crack.

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“What happened, Liara?!” Tali asked over the vid-comm.

The beep from her console hadn’t been the telltale sign of a reporting agent, she made sure to give it a distinct but similar sound to her other notifications after her experience just after the war. Shepard couldn’t tell the difference, which mystified her given the size of human ears.

The Quarian wore her suit, as always, but not her mask. She had moved her vid equipment to her private clean room aboard her ship, one of the perks of being an Admiral in the flotilla, and could thus speak unhindered and with more friendly intimacy than normal conversations. It had become something of a ritual for her to speak to Jane like this over the last few months, something they both appreciated.

“Something happened to Shepard?” Garrus asked as he appeared on the screen, wearing a stark white Turian-fit clean suit. Even his taloned feet were covered in soft coverings, which would have made Liara laugh in different circumstances. The twitching of his mandibles showed surprise and concern. He must have planned on making a surprise appearance during the conversation, but couldn’t stop himself upon hearing the confession.

“She’s out there, alone, in a storm. I… made a mistake.”

The shuttle rumbled again, knocking a few items around, including the ring, which remained on the floor.

“What kind of mistake?” Garrus asked, familiar suspicion rising in his voice.
“A horrible one.”

***

Shepard’s years of battlefield experience taught her how to sense the flow of chaos around her. Shards of concrete and building materials, thrown by the collapsing tower, flew around them like bullets. Dust flowed everywhere like billowing smoke, catching onto their hair, skin and clothes, only to be washed off an instant later by the increasing fury of the storm.

“Get down!”

Lightning crashed as Jane pulled Mark into a shallow, flooded crater. She shoved him down into a crouching position as a large piece of metal debris, big and heavy enough to have easily decapitated them, bounced from building to building, skidding on the cracked street with enough force to send sparks flying around them.

Behind them, the sounds of the Reaper swaying and colliding with the tower had become a regular pattern of nightmarish sounds, but the regularity gave them exactly what they needed. Shepard could time when they needed to limp forward, when to find cover and when it was safe to stop and take a breath. Each impact not only sent deep, powerful vibrations through the streets, but also signaled the arrival of new debris. But each impact event didn’t last long, and it gave them ample time to clamber out of cover and move a little bit further away.

Mark shivered as he kept his head down, but Jane noted how otherwise calm he seemed in the face of these circumstances. She felt… proud of him.

“Come on, I think we’re almost out of range of stuff like that.” She said, nodding toward the still-bouncing metal debris. “Maybe just one or two more stops and we’ll be safe.”

“Um…” Mark stood and, before Shepard could react, glanced backward again. “I don’t think so.”

Jane turned.

As if the universe somehow heard her confident declaration, the Reaper swayed back one more time, but the tower did not remain in place for it to crash into.

The entire structure, not just the top section, toppled over like a drugged Krogan.

“Move!” Shepard yelled, shoving Mark out of the crater.

***

The shuttle rocked, and this time much harder than before. Liara had to place her foot next to the ring to keep it from moving too much. She didn’t look down, or up, or even at her console. She kept her eyes on the shuttle door, still praying to the Goddess that Shepard would return to her.

She told Tali and Garrus everything about their fight, and what Liara’s intentions had been, wrong as they were.
To their credit, they did not yell, lecture or cut communications with her. Instead, they all remained silent, stewing over a problem that none of them could fix. In a way, it made things worse.

Liara had some files open on another screen where the other two could not see. Files about Shepard.

They were the pictures and notes sent during those first few weeks after the war, images she now knew were sent by Nicolo in an attempt to curry favor with the Shadow Broker. The works of an evil man, who did more harm to Shepard than an entire fleet of Reapers, had also given Liara more hope and strength than anyone else in the galaxy. If it weren’t for his early communications, she would not have been here today.

It took a great deal of mental strength to turn away from the door and return her gaze back to the collection of images and messages.

The shuttle quaked again.

***

They ran, heedless of the approaching danger or the physical discomfort of feeling her right kneecap scrape and tear inside her leg. The world had been thrown into chaos as Chicago died around them, choking the rain-slick world with dust, ash and debris. A shard of metal flew from behind and hit Shepard’s neck, scraping the skin and drawing a trickle of blood. Marcus fared little better, and almost lost his footing as a large, jagged shard of concrete impacted the back of his leg.

Fortunately, they had resumed their tight hand-hold, and Jane managed to pull him back to his feet as small pebbles and detritus pummeled them both.

“Are you okay?” She shouted.

“I’m fine!” Marcus returned with the same volume.

“Then keep running!” She shouted.

They zigged and zagged as buildings around them cracked and bent, sending more dust and damage their way.

“This way!” Shepard pulled Marcus to the left again, barely pulling him out of the way of a toppled statue that shattered when it hit the broken street. Bits of stone and plaster showered them both, bruising and cutting their faces.

The vibrations under their feet grew worse, as the huge skyscraper crumbled. How bad would things get when the Reaper finally lost its balance?

Another chunk of debris slammed into Shepard's shoulder, knocking her forward, but she kept her balance.

They ran, even as the city started to chew them up and swallow.

***
Liara scrolled past the early notes about Shepard’s recovery and pictures of the handwritten paperwork, including the English word “amputation”. She wanted to see the worst of Nicolo’s communications: the text messages he sent after the Normandy reached Earth.

**Subject** Shepard remains in unstable condition, but returning Normandy crew presents complications. I will need time to formulate a plan that will absolve us both of suspicion. No reply necessary.

Have cut off Shepard’s supply of anesthetic. Her body is weakening, it should only be a matter of time before total failure. No reply necessary.

Shepard’s crew took her to the Alliance memorial. Expected heart failure during the ceremony, but she is still alive. Have convinced most of the Normandy crew to convene elsewhere while Shepard sleeps. No reply necessary.

I will take this time to manually induce cardiac arrest. No evidence will trace back to you. Reply necessary.

She deleted them all.

And then she closed the connection with Tali and Garrus without a word.

Shepard had been right, the Shadow Broker needed to protect herself.

“Glyph, tap into the shuttle’s sensors and the Alliance satellite network, I need a report of all nearby movement. Then ignite the engines.”

“Are we preparing to depart, Doctor T’soni?” The eternally cheerful VI manifested behind her.

“Yes, Glyph. We are.”

***

It became impossible to see, well, even more impossible than the dark night and oppressive rainstorm already made it. Dust became Shepard and Mark’s entire world, choking and debilitating them, making it almost impossible to keep running.

They still shoved each other from side to side, avoiding obstacles as they could see them, but their field of vision had diminished to almost nothing. Shepard’s right foot caught on cracks and debris more than once, but she recovered, even if said recovery required her to slam her right leg back down and scream in pain.

The street rocked and quaked back and forth as the skyscraper tumbled and the Reaper swayed, its tentacle-like appendages lifting into the air several meters, only to slam back into the ground with untold force. Even as a corpse, the Reaper existed to cause pain and destruction.

Even in the world of darkness and dust, she could see the Reaper when she looked back. It was too huge not to see. In the darkness, it haunted her, followed her, even leered at her from beyond the proverbial grave.
As she and Marcus ran across a blessedly empty stretch of street, Shepard couldn’t help but notice the last time she ran through a ruined city street with a Reaper standing over her.

Last time, she ran toward one, Harbinger, and toward a final confrontation that left her body and mind broken. A conflict that, by all rights, should have killed her.

This time, she ran away from a Reaper. But not like she ran away from her old lives and internal conflicts. She ran away because she had a reason, something else to run to. Not a conflict, not a battle or a war that would end in one death or another. She had a life to run toward.

Marcus coughed as his lungs filled with dust.

“Just hang on, kid. We’re almost there.”

“You’ve been saying that forever.” He shouted above everything.

“Well it’s true!”

As she limped and ran at the same time, Shepard looked down at the coughing young man. A life to run toward.

That’s when the street below them fell apart and sent them both tumbling into the black abyss.

Mark screamed. She screamed. Her back smashed into the concrete that fell with them.

Then something hard and sharp hit her head.

And all came to silence.

***

“I have tapped into Alliance communications and networked myself into the shuttle’s sensors, Doctor.” Glyph said as Liara settled into the shuttle’s cockpit.

“What have you learned?”

“Please state a more specific query. There are currently over seventeen million different Alliance operations running through the satellite network, and this shuttle contains a full suite of sensors. I can bring up the infra-red cameras, visual-spectrum cameras, a radio telescope, gamma radiation detectors, an FTL communication scanner….”

“Thank you, Glyph, I understand.” Liara interrupted as she tapped commands onto the shuttle’s controls. She felt the vehicle powering up around her. “Please look into any Alliance communications centered on this part of the continent, then extend the infra-red scanners to the city. Locate any human signatures not in the orphanage. I want their movements tracked.”

“At once, Doctor.” Glyph hovered to the co-pilot’s seat as it worked, though it didn’t need to. Still, she felt glad to have “someone” at her side.

As the machine worked, Liara’s hand moved to a pocket on the front of her white coat, near her heart. She made sure a familiar loop of metal sat securely there before the shuttle lurched upward in awkward takeoff.
Dying wasn’t supposed to hurt, Shepard knew that. But for a moment, she could not help but feel mortal terror clawing into her stomach as her eyes and ears refused to work. She saw nothing and she heard nothing in the abyss that swallowed her. For a long moment, far too long, she sat still and panicked, worried that her life had come to an end, finally, at the hands/tentacles of a Reaper. Even a dead one.

Then the pain came, sharp and hard, into her left side. A piece of metal stuck into her flesh, not enough to break the skin, but enough to rouse her back into the waking world. Her head began to pound and ache next, a testament to the rock that hit her as she fell. As she tried to move, her back wrenched. Not like in London, never like that, but still sharp and agonizing. She rested on something hard and angular, and her spine did not like it at all.

As the world came back to Jane, she realized her eyes worked just fine, but the darkness of the night and storm made the sinkhole she fell into pitch black. Sound came to her as she let out an involuntary groan against the throbbing pain. Her voice echoed for a brief second, which let her know she didn’t sit at the bottom of a massive pit or a deep cavern. Did Chicago even have caverns? No, she didn’t think so. The sinkhole had probably just fallen into a sewer or utility room, not very deep and not very large.

Still hurt to land in it, though.

A few drops of rainwater hit Shepard’s face now and then, but she didn’t feel the constant deluge of the storm like she had been just moments before. Did something fall on top of them, sealing the hole? That could be a problem, but one she would solve after making sure she wasn’t alone.

“Mark?” Shepard called into the darkness as she regained her faculties. Her fingers and toes, all five and ten of them respectively, wiggled without complaint or delay, or any major pain. Aside from her right knee, which tore and ripped like she expected it to, her other limbs and joints felt merely bruised. Nothing broken, sprained or torn in the fall, thankfully. She felt no drafts or spots of warm wetness seeping across her skin, either, so she didn’t have torn clothes or massive bleeding. Just aches, bruises and some shock from the head wound. Lucky.

Her right limb… felt nothing. Good. She could do with some numbness from there right now.

“You there, Mark?” She said again.

Jane reached her left arm around, trying to orient herself. She knew she landed on her back, thanks to the pain that erupted from there when she moved, and that her feet ended up more elevated than her head, but she still had trouble figuring her position inside the darkness. For the most part, her hand ran over sharp metal, dusty concrete and other pieces of destroyed civilization, nothing that felt like another person. She reached out as far as she could, trying to feel for anything other than debris, straining her shoulder until it felt like popping out of its socket.

And then she felt something.

Not the warm hand of Marcus, but something cold. Very cold. And wet.

And rising.

The sinkhole had started to flood.
“Marcus, say something!” Shepard said as she pulled her hand away from the freezing tide.

After eternity in near silent darkness, a tiny, echoing moan came from her left. Shepard pulled herself up, which tore at her back and stomach muscles, but she didn’t let it stop her. She pulled herself, crawled really, along the debris pile, careful to not send any of it, and thus her, into the icy water below.

“Come on, keep making noises. I can’t see you, but I know you’re close.”

“I don’t feel good.” Faint and weak, but it came from the same direction of his previous sound. Good, that meant she wasn’t chasing an echo.

“That’s okay. I’m here. Just stay strong and I’ll get you back home where you can rest and get better, okay?” Shepard crawled over sharp and broken debris, cutting into her hand and left knee with every forward motion. Her right knee trailed behind her, limp and useless, in too much agony to move.

“Okay.” Marcus agreed. He sounded a little louder.

Shepard could feel herself descending the pile of broken building parts, not ascending. That meant the water would be upon her sooner.

“How are you feeling? Can you move?” She asked.

“My leg hurts.”

She pushed against something wet and solid, but could hear his voice just behind. “So does mine. It’s okay, we’ll get through this together. Can you move it?”

She reached around the large piece of damp debris, trying to find something to hold on to and pull herself around it. It felt huge and flat, a wall between her and Marcus. She kept her hand extended as she wiggled forward.

“No.”

“Is it stuck? Can you wiggle your toes for me?”

Finally, she found an edge to the huge slab. Shepard began pulling herself toward it, trying to keep herself steady on the pile of sharp things. Her single hand could barely find purchase on the slick concrete, making her every move a potential disaster.

“Mark? Did you wiggle your toes?” She asked the darkness.

“No.”

Bad sign. Very bad sign.

“Are your arms okay? Can you move anything else?”

Shepard held still as she listened for Mark’s reply. She thought she heard the telltale sound of rocks and heavy objects sliding against concrete, but they were drowned out by the sloshing of approaching water.

“My arms hurt, but I can move them.”

“Oh that’s great.” Shepard rounded the corner of the slab and pulled herself in the opposite direction. She could hear Mark’s shallow, frightened breathing now. It joined the gentle push and pull of the
rising flood. “I think I’m close to you. Hold your hands out and I’ll try to find you.”

Her right leg slipped as she tried to scoot past the wet slab, sending her plummeting a meter down the broken hill. She shifted her weight in a heartbeat to her left side, letting the less-painful limbs take the scratches and bumps. Shepard grunted as she felt some of the skin in her palm break.

Unfortunately, with her right leg extended and limp, she could not stop her right foot from splashing into the icy water. The shock of the sudden temperature change hit her more than the scrapes and blows she just took, and she finally cried out.

Shepard flexed her horrid joint enough to pull her foot out, but could not keep it that way for long.

“You still reaching?” she asked as soon as her left foot found solid purchase and she began climbing again.

“Yeah.” She could still hear him breathing, which she used as a beacon to keep crawling forward.

“Sounds like water.” Marcus continued.

“We’ve got a little pool down here. Don’t worry about it, though. You just keep doing what you’re doing.”

On a bloody hand, Shepard pulled herself forward and now a little upward. She fell to her stomach and braced her weight against those muscles, taking some of the heat off her arm and left leg. The more she climbed, the more her hand slipped as she spread her own lifeblood on the rubble pile. She had to find him now.

“Hey, wave your arms a bit, I still can’t find you.”

She heard more scraping of stone against stone right next to her ear. Shepard whipped her hand to her right, reaching and clawing until she felt something. Anything.

Nothing.

Panic began to settle again, pulling Shepard’s stomach down with it. What if they were on different elevations, or the blow to her head somehow damaged her ability to sense directions and echoes properly? What if she spent too long looking and the water caught up to them?

If Marcus couldn’t move his leg or toes, that could mean a broken leg. But even if his limb weren’t broken and just trapped under the rubble, he wouldn’t be able to escape the rising water. The mental image of him drowning raised her heart rate, but also raised her determination.

“I’m cold.” Marcus said.

“Then wave ‘em around some more. Go nuts. Good physical activity can get you nice and warm.”

“But my arms hurt too.”

“I know, Mark. I know. But as soon as I find you, the sooner we can get out of here.”

She could hear the sloshing sound of his wet clothes rubbing together, as well as the constant echo of scraping rocks.

So close…

She made contact with Mark. Or rather, he made contact with her.
She felt his hand slap against her right shoulder first, hard enough to send an echoing THUD into the flooding and dark chamber. She shrugged the minor pain away, too overjoyed at the contact to make note of it. She turned her body toward the impact, letting her left arm brace against the hill of rubble and sliding toward Mark’s body. She reached out, knowing she’d find him in less than a minute.

But then his hands kept waving as if they hadn’t just touched her, as if he wasn’t really in control of his own limbs anymore.

And they hit her again.

And again.

In the right arm.

Hard.

All of Shepard’s panic, distress, pain and sorrow disappeared in a single breath. Her heart continued to beat, but she imagined it covered in broken glass as the familiar feeling of complete sensory overload came over her. She wanted to faint, she needed to. But she didn’t.

*He depends on me. I can’t pass out, or we’ll both drown.*

She leaned over and grabbed Mark’s cold hands with a stiff, robotic grip, and put them down, which stopped his frantic waving without a word of complaint or compliance. Her breathing became too ragged and loud in her ears, drowning out all other sounds, especially his shallow breaths.

If a pitch black room could become hazy and blurry, it most certainly did for Jane. She had to force herself to keep breathing as the slight pain of repeated impacts against her amputated limb spread through her chest and down her stomach. The broken glass on her heart became long, sharp needles that stabbed into the taxed muscle all at once. Then, the agony in her back returned, followed by the muted sounds and the tense muscles, as if frozen by inhibitor drugs. All of the sensations from London came screeching back to Shepard as if they had never left her body and mind.

*Don’t pass out. Not now. I have a job to do, a life to get started.*

The sensory overload grew worse, forcing Shepard to hunch forward as her back exploded in agony. A thousand metaphorical knives ripped into her muscles again, tearing into the nerves and overwhelming them all with electric jabs.

She couldn’t move, and the water kept rising.

*Please not now.*

“And why not now?”

A second voice assaulted her ears, but Jane couldn’t pinpoint its source.

*What?*

“Oh, don’t worry, this is all in your head, Shepard. You’re fighting so hard to stay awake for that kid’s sake that your nightmares are coming, well, to life.”

She saw the white lab coat first. Then the face, a blurred oval with no detail. Clothes with no form, just color, and a blurred rectangle of metal she recognized as a very old medical chart.

She never had the chance to see him before Miranda repaired her eyes.
The blurry, hallucinated nightmare of Doctor Nicolo walked in front of Shepard and knelt before Marcus.

No. No, you can’t be here. You’re not real. She mentally said to the projection. Her thoughts, of course, made no sound, so she could hear the flood getting closer.

“You’re absolutely right, on all counts.” The blurred figure said, then nodded his head down, toward Marcus. “He doesn’t look very good, does he? Well, I mean, neither of us can see him very well. But we can guess, right? Go ahead, put your hand on his head.”

Shepard’s heart raced harder than it had in months, and her back got worse as she threw her weight a little higher, just enough for her legs to brace against the debris so she could free her hand. With stiff, trembling and aching muscles, she managed to put three fingertips on Mark’s forehead, wary of the blood seeping from her palm. She felt dizzy as she worried about spreading blood on his face.

He’s ice cold. She said to the hallucination. And he’s not moving. Why did he stop moving?

“Going into shock from a broken leg, most likely. Made worse because you forced him to wave his arms around like a lunatic. If we had some medi-gel, we could fix him right up. But you didn’t take any with you. You’re such a bad protector, Shepard. Don’t you concur, Admiral?”

A second hallucination joined Nicolo, walking next to him as silently as a hologram. Unlike the blurred doctor, she saw this one in full detail.

Anderson, his young face glowing just like the London memorial’s holographic image had, but casting no light on the room, put his hallucinated arm on Nicolo’s hallucinated shoulder.

Anderson tsked his tongue in disappointment. “You just had to leave that shuttle as fast as possible without thinking about the consequences. You went off alone in the middle of a lightning storm to find a boy lost in the middle of a ruined city. No backup, no medical supplies, not even a flashlight. No wonder Liara’s lost respect for you.”

That’s not true! Shepard fired back as she readjusted her position. Her hand brushed down Mark’s stomach and leg, trying to find the damaged limb. Part of her hoped that he hadn’t broken a bone, just had it trapped under something. If that were the case, she could find a way to lever it off of him, and start climbing back up.

“Forget about it,” Anderson said, “You screwed up again, Commander. You got into that boy’s head and made him think you were a tough hero, when you’re nothing but a broken down old soldier with nothing left to live for. And when he understood how much of a disappointment you are, he couldn’t take it. All this happening right now? Your fault.”

Jane tried to shut the hallucination up, to ignore it as her inflamed chest burned with every motion of her heart. Even though she couldn’t see anything in the darkness, she could feel her eyes losing focus, losing comprehension of the world.

“Oh, that’s not good.” Nicolo said as his imaginary body stood up. He moved to sit on the huge wet slab that previously separated Shepard from Marcus. “Your brain’s in a really sorry state right now, did you know that? Of course you did, you saw all the medical reports. This is all in your head, but you’re making it real because... well... you’ve driven yourself mad.”

Shut up! She yelled at the projection. Her hand found Mark’s left knee, undamaged, good. She then kept shuffling down to find the source of his pain. She focused on the tactile feelings in her hand, instead of the wrenching, pulling, and tearing suffering that ruined the rest of her body.
First, she just felt the cold and wet cloth of his trousers. Then she felt warmth. And more liquid. And then something sharp.

Bone.

And beyond that, a something solid, heavy and metal. She’d never get it off of his leg before the water caught up to him.

“No. No. No. Not you, Mark. Not you. Don’t do this.” Her lungs, barely able to push air through her throat, caused her words to come out as a hoarse whisper.

Behind her now, the Nicolo hallucination hissed and winced. Well, as much as his blurry face could wince. “Ooh, compound fracture. Can’t fix that with a packet of medi-gel. That needs a real doctor.”

As her fingertips brushed back up and accidentally skirted against the bone, Marcus groaned. Shepard gasped and yanked her hand away, which made her back spasm and the world to disappear for a second.

“That must have hurt.” Anderson said as he leered down at her. “Didn’t you used to be somebody, Commander? I can’t believe the woman who killed the Reapers is this pathetic pile of skin and bones. The smallest touch on that stump of yours turns you into an invalid.”

Jane didn’t mentally fight back, but she did let an inadvertent growl escape her lips. Her legs began to spasm on their own as the agony moved down her back and into other muscles. She forced her arm to remain steady, though. She would not lose herself completely.

Nicolo appeared next to Anderson. “What did you expect from homeless trash like her? Did you really think she’d rise above all that dreck and become somebody worth remembering? I bet she slept her way to N7. It’s how she kept clothes on her back before she turned 18.”

The fake admiral laughed. “I bet she doesn’t even feel the quakes and tremors going on around her. Isn’t that right, Commander? Your body must be pretty far gone by now. How much can you move that one hand of yours, I wonder?”

In an attempt to banish the mental demons from her presence, Shepard raised her arm and swung it at the glowing-but-not-real image of Anderson. It passed through him, or more accurately, there was nothing there to hit in the first place. It caused the hallucination to laugh and her hand to slam into hard debris.

Jane’s heart began skipping beats. She could feel it waver and tremor in her chest when the pain lessened enough to notice. She crushed her burning and tear-filled eyes shut, trying desperately to banish the panicking, overwhelming pain and nightmares around her.

“That’s never going to work, Shepard.” Nicolo said. “You can’t run away from this.”

Her back gave out, causing Jane to fall onto Marcus. Though, she retained just enough control of her left arm and stomach to not crush his body. Her head bounced against something rough, but dull. No real damage, but it made her headache much worse.

“If you were worthy of my advice, I’d tell you to stop running away, Commander.” Anderson stepped in front of her. The vision of his face moved stare into her bleary, unseeing eyes. “Even if you were, I don’t think you’re capable of doing much of anything anymore.”

“I’ll show you what I can do.” She said to the nightmare.
“Oh, watch out, Doctor.” Anderson said with a mocking tone. The hallucination raised his hands in a defensive posture. “She might actually start doing something other than sitting and crying.”

Nicolo laughed. “How can she? Can’t you tell that her nervous system is starting to shut down? My surgery was so beautiful, elegant and brutal.” The blurry man moved to her right side and brushed his intangible hand over her right limb. “One touch is all it takes to turn her into this. I wanted her own body to be what killed her. Not suicide, not murder. Just clean, painful death. And Liara would have rewarded me so well.”

"No.” Shepard whispered through clenched teeth.

“What was that?” The nightmare doctor leaned down, putting his blurry hand up to where his ear should have been. “Did you try to say something? Must be rather difficult considering your lungs don’t have much air in them. Can you even breathe, Shepard?”

“I… will… not.” Jane forced the words out.

“You won’t what, Commander?” Anderson replaced the doctor, as if the hallucinations teleported, “Do you honestly think you’re getting out of this? A ten year old kid just sent your body into shock. A ten year old who is going to die right along with you because you can’t do a damn thing about it.”

“I… will not… stop fighting.” Shepard made herself breathe, even though each ounce of air burned her insides.

“You said that before, and then you tried putting a bullet in your head.” Anderson walked away.

“Screw you.” She said to the mental image of the man she used to look up to, before her mind turned his memory into something horrible.

“Oh, that’s funny.” Nicolo again. “You think you’re still a fighter. But deep down, we all know the truth. You’re not a fighter anymore, not a soldier. You can’t even protect this kid, how can you expect to stand up to anything else?”

“Watch me.”

“Watch you do what? Where’s your warrior spirit, Shepard? Hmm? Where’s that spark that made you such a relentless and unstoppable force? I’m pretty sure the Reapers and I squeezed it out of you rather thoroughly.”

Jane picked her hand up again and pointed it down, directly at Mark’s face.

“It’s right here.”

Shepard remembered, and thus the hallucinations remembered, what Marcus told her underneath the car. He dreamt of her fighting spirit. Not just of violence and wanton slaughter, but protecting the weak and helpless, standing up for the right reasons, and never, ever giving up. She may have built a career out of killing, but she would be remembered for doing anything but.

She was not Sarah Palmer, full of strength, rage and warfare. Nor was she the legendary figure that people around the galaxy all but worshiped, who accomplished impossible deeds with divine favor. No, she was just herself. Jane Shepard. Former Commander. But still the Savior of the Citadel, destroyer of Reapers and now… a survivor.

And that survivor would be the woman who saved Marcus Carter’s life and get them both to safety, no matter the cost. Because that’s who she was, and always would be.
No more running away, no more turning her head from things that made her hurt and afraid.

Instead of ignoring it, Shepard concentrated on her right limb. She felt the constant throb, the endless, maddening soreness that followed her every day, but nothing more. Nothing extreme, shattering or agonizing emanated from the mangled flesh. Nothing that would send her body into such horrific depths as she felt now.

If Jane wanted to make good on her promise, she had to realize that her pain did not exist, not in the same way her bruises and cuts from the fall were real. The feeling in her back, the needles in her heart, all of it, were just memories from London, memories she carried with her and would likely never lose entirely. But she could manage them, which included realizing when she allowed the fear and pain to take control.

On the Normandy, Liara had once been able to pull Shepard back from an attack like this, by making her concentrate on something other than the pain. But she wasn’t here right now, and Jane wasn’t sure if she’d ever be back. Shepard had to do this on her own.

She still hurt all over, god she felt horrible, but she managed to take in a breath that didn’t set her lungs on fire.

Her chest ached, but her heart calmed.

Her back began to rest and the pain dulled, though it did not cease.

The hallucinations, because they were just mental images that were never there in the first place, disappeared.

Only she and Marcus existed in the hole.

“Who were you talking to?” The boy asked as Shepard’s eyes and ears returned to normal. His voice sounded even weaker than before, with the waver of someone teetering on the edge.

Shepard wiped new tears from her eyes with the back of her hand as she sat upright, so she could hover over Mark’s prone body.

“Nobody. Nobody at all.” She smiled.

“Okay.” He sighed, as if falling asleep. She heard another small scrape of rock and concrete, as if he turned his head to the side.

No. He couldn’t do that.

“Hey, Marcus, stay awake for me.” Jane put her hand down and brushed her fingertips down the boy’s cheek. She felt the telltale signs of tears, though she guessed they were from his rather… extreme discomfort than anything else.

“I’m tired, Shepard.”

“I know, kid. I know. But you need to stay awake with me. I… don’t like being alone in the dark.” She didn’t exactly lie, but she’d say anything to keep his attention.

“Just a few minutes. I need to sleep.” He breathed.

Shepard tried to say something, but a terrifying feeling of liquid cold brushed against her left leg. It sapped her strength and made her gasp in shock. It felt cold enough to burn.
The flood had reached them.

Shepard pulled her leg back until she sat cross-legged on the rubble pile. She ran her hand over her right knee as gently as she could, trying to pass some warmth into the joint as it started to ache from the awkward positioning.

“No, you need to stay awake, Marcus.” Shepard commanded. “That’s a direct order.”

She heard his head turn back, slowly. Far too slowly. “What?”

“That’s right. You remember your dreams? How you see me fight? I must be wearing my armor, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, when I’m in my armor, I’m in charge. That’s how it’s always been. And right now I’m ordering you to stay awake.”

“Are you in your armor right now?” His words came hushed and slurred, lazy, as if he was sleep talking. Shepard didn’t want to imagine how much blood he had already lost from the compound fracture.

“Yes. Yes, I am, Mark. And if you want to see me in it, you have to stay awake until help arrives. They’ll light this place up like daylight and you’ll be able to see everything.”

“Can I hold a gun?”

Shepard couldn’t help but smile and let out a single, pained chuckle. She imagined the difference between reality and the fantasy she began to conjure for Mark. The stark difference between the way she used to be and the person she was now might have been startling not too long ago, but she didn’t mind it much anymore.

She wasn’t being pulled in multiple directions, not anymore. She could see herself be multiple things at once. Soldier and caretaker. Fighter and victim. Broken child and powerful adult.

She could be all those things because she knew they weren’t extremes that threatened to pull her apart, but mere facets to a greater whole. A whole person.

The water rose again, pushing against Shepard’s leg. It wouldn’t be long before it touched Mark’s head.

“Come on, kid. If you won’t stay awake lying down, you’ll definitely stay awake if you sit up.”

“But I can’t sit up.” He drawled.

“You can, because I’m going to make you.”

She could feel the water pooling around her feet and thighs.

With her body braced against the cold rubble, Shepard pulled Marcus up into a sitting position, which caused him to scream.

“I know it hurts. I promise, I know. But this is going to keep you alive.”

“PLEASE STOP!” He screeched at her.
Shepard kept him still as she adjusted her position, turning her body around until she sat back-to-back with Marcus. She propped him up with her back and shoulders as the water rose up to her waist. It froze and it burned at the same time, but at least she bought him a few minutes.

Marcus stopped screaming after a moment of adjusting. Then his head lolled back on her shoulder. If it weren’t for the faint sensation of his breathing against her sensitive and aching back, she would have assumed the worst.

The water began creeping up Shepard’s stomach.

“Hey, you still there, Mark?” She turned her head to face him in the darkness. He groaned so faintly that, had his head not been on her shoulder, she would not have heard it. But that groan meant everything. He was still there.

“Don’t give up on me, kid. We’ve still got a life to look forward to.”

The black room shuddered and quaked.

The water rose.

“Mark, Mark, listen. What’s your favorite song?”

A faint exhalation of air was her answer.

The freezing cold in Jane’s lower body made her shiver uncontrollably. She could feel it rising to her chest. She knew some of it had already reached Marcus.

“Come on, Mark, let’s sing something.” Shepard’s teeth began chattering. She couldn’t stop them.

Another quake. Dust fell onto Shepard’s head.

Shivering, chattering and propping up the rapidly deteriorating Marcus, Shepard started humming to herself. A simple song, but not one of the things she had memorized from long ago.

It was something new, a melody she intended to one day write down.

The one she began composing on her wedding night.

The water rose above her chest.
This One's For Believing

This is for the ones who stand
For the ones who try again
For the ones who need a hand
For the ones who think they can

Greg Laswell

Shepard began to lose feeling in her legs around the time the flood reached her neck. Behind her, Marcus moaned with every weak and pained breath, his fading body reacting to the agony of having a horrifically broken leg submerged in freezing water. She tried to keep singing now and then for him, going between different songs and verses like a broken omni-tool, randomly selecting which musical phrases to sing before moving on to another one. Her constant shivering made it difficult to make words, so she hummed more often than not.

If she could take one comfort from the cold, it was that, for the first time in months, she didn’t feel anything in her right side. No aching, throbbing or discomfort came from the limb as it, too, succumbed to numbness. She didn’t pretend she had two arms anymore, but she felt a strange sense of peace at the lack of discomfort. Even if that peace would end all too soon.

At the same time, Shepard could not stop mentally kicking herself for getting Marcus into this situation. She didn’t hallucinate again, but she could feel Nicolo and Anderson’s painful claws raking across her thoughts as she realized that the boy would die alongside her. She fought as hard as she could for him, but this one particular problem had been too much, too fast for Commander Shepard to solve. She wouldn’t give up, but she had to fight a new battle now. A battle to communicate how she felt before oblivion came.

“Mark, I don’t know if you can still hear me.” She said when she could find the strength to keep her body still, “But… I just wanted you to know that…”

The tiny cavern rocked and thundered again, splashing freezing water over the debris and onto Jane’s face. The Reaper’s constant swaying must have gotten worse in the storm, sending bigger and bigger shockwaves throughout the ruins of Chicago. She didn’t want to think about when it fell, but she knew it would be soon. It had been a sheer miracle that it remained upright so long without the tower to support it.

After the water stopped splashing, Shepard raised her hand to wipe some of it off her face, then reached back to do the same for Marcus. He tried to unconsciously cough out some of the liquid that dripped into his lungs, but he no longer had the strength to do more than a few weak sputters.

“I just wanted you to know that I’m glad I met you. You helped keep me going, and showed me what I’ve been missing all this time. When we get you back home, I’m going to do everything in my
power to keep you safe.”

Jane flashed back to her last conversation, her last argument, with Liara. The Alliance would be upon them any day, probably sooner if they caught wind of the collapsing Reaper. The Shadow Broker had been right, the Alliance would use the orphanage in their propaganda, since they were now very intimately connected with Shepard’s life. Had the world not ended, civilian oversight and the regular workings of government would keep military hands far away from the kids. But until all such things were rebuilt, Shepard feared the military could do whatever they wanted with whoever they wanted, if it suited their goals. The children could be robbed of all of their agency and freedom if it meant inspiring the billions of other starving and desperate people around the world.

Damn that wonderful Asari, always being right about things. Why did she have to fall in love with one?

She would be furious at Liara for weeks, maybe months, for removing the ring. But right now, as the flood crept up her neck and numbness spread from her lower body up to her stomach, she didn’t think the gesture was all that important. Maybe Liara really had meant to throw their entire relationship away and sulk entirely into the world of galactic secrets and information trading. Maybe she wanted or needed to move on.

Jane didn’t.

Out of everything said on the shuttle, “I’m not sure if you love me anymore” was what hurt the most, because it was so completely wrong. Of all the facts and truths Shepard knew about the universe, one would always stand above the others: she could not exist without Liara T’soni. That blue skinned alien had been the reason she got up in every morning during the war and ensured they had a future together. It had been that singular Asari that kept her alive in the awful months after the war’s end, and it had been that Asari that kept them safe from prying hands ever since. Shepard died for her, and would do it again every day if it meant keeping her safe.

If only Jane’s sick and troubled mind let her express such things, and not just think about them as she lay dying in a dark pit somewhere. Maybe she could have said or done something in the shuttle to prevent all of this from happening. She could have said a lot of things back there. No, she SHOULD have said more before she left. Much more.

Liara.

As the water moved past her neck, Shepard raised her hand behind her and tilted Mark’s face upward and held it there with a bloody palm. She would give him all the time she could, even if keeping his nose above the rising water only bought him a few seconds longer than she had. It’s what any good protector would do.

The tide covered Jane’s mouth, and she pursed her lips together as tight as she could. Talking became impossible.

It moved up to her nose, and she held her breath.

It began creeping up her cheeks, sapping all of the strength from her body, making it all but impossible to support Marcus. But she held on.

Shepard closed her eyes in anticipation of being totally submerged.

Liara, I’m sorry.

She felt the water rise past her hand, millimeters away from running into Mark’s upturned nose.
For the second time in her life, Shepard’s entire world became blue.

The huge debris that blocked the top of the sinkhole flew away as if tossed aside by an impossibly strong wind, momentarily sending a new torrent of cold rainwater onto the top of Jane’s head.

Light followed the rain, cerulean and pure, like the fury of a blazing hot star. It turned night into day and despair into hope.

The water around Shepard went away next, gently pushed back by a bubble of biotic energy that surrounded her and Marcus. In no time at all, they sat in a sphere of pure light and energy, created by an Asari that gently floated down from the sinkhole’s edge, only to land gingerly on top of the rubble pile as if she weighed nothing at all.

“L-Liara” Shepard stammered as her still-freezing body continued to shiver.

“Shepard!” Laira shouted as she scrambled down the rubble. “Are you hurt?”

The shivering continued, and probably wouldn’t stop until her clothes dried. So instead of speaking, Jane reached her cold, shaking hand behind her back to indicate the debris that broke and trapped Mark’s leg.

“Goddess.” Liara whispered as she lifted the piece of metal up and away with a powerful biotic throw. Marcus squirmed against Shepard at the change in pressure, which made her lips curl upward in a smile. Still alive.

Once she determined the debris landed safely and wouldn’t disrupt the pile of rubble, the Asari stepped down a few more steps to come closer to the nearly frozen and drowned pair.

“How did you find us?” Shepard managed to eke out.

“You cannot hide from me, Shepard, no matter where you go or which hole you try to bury yourself in.” Liara smiled. “I also might have been tracking your movements with an infra-red scanner.”

“Sneaky.” Shepard smiled and stared into Liara’s blue eyes. “Thank you.”

“We’re not out of here yet.” The Shadow Broker said with all seriousness. She activated her omni-tool a second later and spoke into it. “Glyph, lower the tow cable.”

A second explosion of light filled the sunken room, white and powerful, as the shuttle roared overhead. After a few seconds of orienting itself over the hole, a thin, black cord extended from somewhere inside the vehicle.

Liara extended her arms to help pull Shepard up in a slow, controlled movement so as not to disturb Marcus. With the two of them working together, Jane got to her feet at the same time the unconscious young man slid back into a sleeping position. Under the harsh shuttle light, the full extent of his fractured leg could be seen. Bone did indeed poke out of the ruined leg of his trousers, but it had broken cleanly and without any other grievous trauma to his muscles. If they got him to safety soon enough, they could save him and his ability to walk.

“Be careful!” Shepard yelled over the roar of the shuttle’s engines as Laira tied the cable around her waist. The Asari nodded as she adjusted her biotic energy. She still kept the water at bay, but let it
creep up nearly a meter as she concentrated a great deal of glowing energy around Mark’s body. She planned to lift him just like she did for Jane in London.

After testing something with her biotics, Liara activated her omni-tool, which caused the cable to tighten, then pull her upward. Marcus moved with her, gently floating upward with grace and immense precision.

Of course, with the Shadow Broker so distracted with the incredibly difficult objective of keeping a horribly injured child safe in a biotic grip, she lost control of the shield keeping the water at bay. It crept back up Jane’s feet as soon as she saw Mark’s body disappear above the hole.

Shepard scrambled upward, walking on increasingly painful legs to get away from the water. Her bloody hand stung as she touched everything she could to keep balance, struggling to keep her grip as she climbed. Every step returned a little more warmth to her legs and arm, which decreased the numb feeling left behind by the water. Her right knee stiffened as scraping, tearing agony became her reality again.

One step. Two steps. The water nipped at her heels.

It would be great if Liara did something.

Left foot on something solid, Jane lifted her right leg until she found a chunk of heavy concrete, then put a little weight on it, ignoring the feeling in her knee. At the same time, she threw her hand upward, intent on grabbing a long shaft of wood that might have been a decoration or piece of furniture before the collapsing city tore it apart. Just a few more centimeters…

…Reach…!

Her foot slipped.

Shepard fell backward, toppling over until she started falling head first into black, cold and debris-filled water.

Except she never touched it.

Just before her head touched the freezing liquid, Shepard felt the tingling, electric sensation of a biotic field enveloping her, then the unnatural gut-sinking sensation of falling upward against gravity. It took her brain a second to come to grips with the sudden change of direction and the fact that her body did not recoil at the shift. The biological mass effect field handled that for her, keeping her whole and uninjured as Liara lifted her out of the sinkhole.

The biotic bubble dissipated as Jane lifted into the air, showering her again with rain, but the water did not get past the energy field around her. Still, she oriented her head upward to stare at the dark clouds and incessant precipitation. Even an oppressive sky looked wonderful after being buried alive and almost drowned.

Liara stood at the threshold of the hole in the street, her face contorted into a deep scowl as she extended one arm in front of her, another behind. The arm before her moved with Shepard, pulling her up and toward the shuttle, the other kept Marcus in place, laid on the shuttle’s floor on top of the blankets and pillows they used every night. His body glowed like hers, though it did not keep him in the air, but secured to the shuttle as if he had a thousand little straps and locks keeping him in place. He would not move until Liara willed it.

The biotic ride ended as soon as Jane’s feet touched the shuttle, and she had to quickly reach for a wall before her right leg gave out again. Her reflexes were not what they used to be, but her left
hand, sore and bleeding as it was, still managed to keep her steady. As soon as she moved inside, Liara shut the door, and sealed the storm away.

For a moment, the two of them stood still, dripping wet and shivering, in the stillness of the vehicle. One of Liara’s hands had let go of her biotic power, but the other held its powerful blue glow in place, which kept Marcus safe and immobile. Instead of talking, they stared at each other, though Jane had no idea what was going on behind the Shadow Broker’s eyes. Her own head, however, rung with clear and concise thoughts.

“Shepard, I-“

“Liara, I-“

They both spoke at once, then returned to silence, sharing a blush of discomfort.

“Doctor T’soni, you wished for me to inform you when the Reaper corpse’s angle of descent reached forty-eight degrees. It has now reached and exceeded that number.”

Liara blinked some of the embarrassment away and returned to her usual calm, dispassionate face.

“Thank you, Glyph. Now, extend a mass effect field around our passenger back there, but keep it a millimeter away from his skin. Then raise the ambient temperature under the shield by two degrees, but monitor his body heat.”

“Right away, Doctor.” Glyph’s spherical form floated by Shepard as it moved to Marcus. After a moment, Liara’s biotic field disappeared, but his body did not stop glowing. Instead, the shuttle’s mass effect generator started up and created a new shield around the boy. Not quite as refined and gentle-looking as Liara’s expertly manipulated energy, but it would free her hand and mind for other tasks.

“Now, Shepard, I trust you can take care of yourself while I prepare for takeoff?”

“Yeah, yeah I can.”

A spike of disappointment struck Shepard as Liara moved to the cockpit and sat down, leaving her to remove the heavy and drenched N7 jacket from her own shoulder. It hit the floor with a disgusting plop. Her shirt felt just as cold and uncomfortable, but she left it on, concerning their young guest. Instead, she reached down to grab a blanket and threw it over her shoulder, not caring that she smeared a little blood on it. She could use it to staunch the bleeding at the same time she warmed her body temperature. Not very sanitary, but she didn’t have many options with just one hand in a tiny shuttle.

With Marcus and the protective field taking up much of the shuttle’s remaining floor space, and Glyph hovering above him, Jane shrugged her shoulders and settled into the copilot seat. She adjusted the blanket over herself, something she had done many times before in their travels, and took in a deep, calming breath. A lot of the aches and pains in her body came back as her temperature returned to normal, but not all of them quite as strong and awful as she expected.

She felt surprisingly normal, considering what just happened. Only her overriding concern for Marcus kept her grounded with worry and fear.

However, Shepard didn’t have much time to sit and think before the shuttle lifted off the ground in a jarring, sudden and awkward movement. The takeoff shoved her body into the chair and smashed her head against the soft headrest.

“You might know the mechanics of flight, Liara, but I’m not sure you’ll ever understand that you
have to feel the craft take off, not just punch in the numbers.” She let out a little bit of her worries and frustration out in a teasing barb. Not meant to hurt, just lighten her own mood and keep her mind off of Marcus. They would get him back home, she knew that, but she still hated to think about his terrible injury.

“Oh, I don’t think I need any piloting advice from you, Jane. I would bet that you did not feel a thing when you repeatedly drove the Mako off a cliff.” The glint in Liara’s eye let Jane know the verbal spar had come from the same source, and not meant as a real argument. They’d have their actual fight later, after they were safe from the-

“Doctor T’soni, the Reaper has begun to fall.” Glyph interrupted.

Jane preferred to keep the shuttle’s external camera view activated when in flight, providing the illusion the vehicle had glass windows instead of a flat panel of armor and a holographic display. It made for a lot of great morning and evening views for the two of them over the last year.

Now, it showed the true horror of the destruction of Chicago, and of the colossal corpse that had finally begun to descend on the shattered ruins below it. The Reaper did not follow the tower’s path of descent, but it, too, would not land near the orphanage. However, its alien construction meant it would not fall apart into dust and smaller pieces as it fell down, meaning it would produce a much stronger shockwave. If the city had not already been an evacuated husk, the devastation would be incalculable.

“I haven’t touched the controls of a Mako in years. When will any of you let that go?”

They burst forward at incredible speed, dodging past crumbling buildings and bouncing past rubble as it flew above, below and all around them. The “window” before them filtered out the falling rain as it hit the shuttle, giving the pilot a much clearer view of the dust and obstacles before them. However, clearer did not mean better.

“After the trauma you put the entire Normandy crew through? Never.” Liara jabbed the controls, which sent the shuttle into a brief nosedive below a collapsing multi-story structure. When she pulled back up, Shepard’s stomach plummeted to her feet.

“I don’t know where all this talk of me being a bad driver came from, but one of these days I’m going to invite everyone over and we’re going to talk this out. I’m not a- Look out!” Her warning came a half second before something large and black nearly landed on the shuttle. Fortunately, another chunk of building hit it in midair, changing its trajectory just enough to bounce off one of the cannons harmlessly.

“Jane, we’ve already talked about it. Without you present, of course. Because we knew you’d try to drag us back into that infernal vehicle to prove your ability.”

“The hell is that supposed to mean? Are you saying I’m over-competitive?”

“Not at all. Well, actually, yes.” Liara smiled as she yanked her right hand across a control panel, which sent the shuttle into a careening right turn.

Right into the path of the falling Reaper.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. You see that? You do see that, right?” Jane’s voice rose as her stomach continued its journey downward and into the realm of sickness. The huge metal construct grew inexorably bigger as they sped toward it.

“Would you turn?” They remained stubbornly on course. “Would you turn!?” She said again. The
Reaper’s bulk, though still half a kilometer away, loomed above as if it were about to crush their tiny shuttle any moment. Its huge tentacle appendages crumpled and snapped as they lost their ability to hold the body up, sending more dust and debris right at them.

“Dammit, I do not need a rear-cockpit pilot right now, Shepard!”

“Rear cockpit… do you mean backseat driver?” The shuttle rocked to the left as something big and heavy smashed into it, but it did not deter their course.

“Do you want to fly this shuttle!?” Liara’s volume rose to meet Shepard’s as her fingers raced over the controls.

The dead Reaper fell on top of them. Dust swallowed the world. Debris rained.

“Pull up! Pull up! PULL UP!”

Both women let out a terrified yell as everything momentarily went black. Again, in Shepard’s case. Light returned a split-second later, and Shepard could see that Liara had deftly piloted them around and above the Reaper’s main body, skirting it like a space vessel would slingshot around a planet, and then shooting into the sky and above the storm cloud.

“You did that on purpose.” Jane said as soon as her stomach returned to normal and she no longer needed to vomit all over the blanket.

“A little.” The dark blue smirk returned, “Though the computer did give me an optimal flight path.”

“The optimal flight path for escaping a collapsing city is right through it?”

“Well… no.” Liara’s adorable violet blush returned. “The optimal flight path for… sightseeing… is flying low through a city.”

“Sightseeing? You took us on a sightseeing tour of Chicago while it fell apart around us?”

“I didn’t have much time to choose an escape vector!”

“Up, Liara!” Jane raised her hand like a child trying to get a teacher’s attention. “Up is the optimal escape vector for most things.”

Shepard couldn’t tell which of them broke first, but their stoic, frustrated expressions did not last long. As the adrenaline and terror faded away, and the shuttle flew in a calm, serene path, leaving the storm and ruin behind, they both began to laugh. Just a small flitter in the backs of both of their throats at first, then a louder series of chuckles, finally ending at a laugh that came from deep in their stomachs. Jane laughed until her bruised stomach muscles ached. Relief, comfort and pure joy had come to banish the horrors and terrible thoughts, and gave them the gift of mirth.

“Sightseeing.” Shepard repeated as she used the back of her hand to wipe happy tears away.

“The controls are complicated!” Liara shot back.

They did not remain that way for long. Nagging, powerful concern dragged the mirth away as Shepard turned around to look at Marcus, who remained unconscious and still beneath the mass effect field. Glyph hadn’t moved a centimeter during the flight, and Jane knew the drone would have reported something the microsecond Mark’s condition changed, but she still couldn’t stop anxiety from clawing back up as she stared at the scene.
“I’m just going to take us around the worst of the storm, Jane.” Liara said, “We’ll get him back to his caretakers in time.”

Shepard turned around after staring at Marcus and Glyph for a moment longer. She held on to Liara’s hopeful words as she turned her gaze to the “window” in front of her. They flew several kilometers above the city and storm, black and covered by the darkness of night. And yet, over the horizon, the first few golden rays of sunlight peeked over the thick clouds. Where the illumination touched, serenity followed, eating the storm from the outside in. Soon, it would be gone forever.

“What a beautiful sight.” Shepard whispered as the sun rose over their corner of the world.

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By the time the shuttle landed next to the orphanage, all of the adults had returned from their futile searches for Marcus. Despair and sorrow clouded them, as well as the children, who thought they lost a brother to the horrors of the night before. The prefab building itself seemed to share their cloud of sadness, having been covered with mud and dust and showed several dents from debris impacts. And yet, nothing managed to break the walls or shatter the windows.

The inside of the building remained much as it had been before the storm. The children were kept distracted from the quakes and collapses by constantly cleaning up fallen items and belongings, while the adults activated emergency shields and kept the power running as best they could in the face of disaster. Both efforts had been successful, and the orphanage had been kept an island of stability inside an ocean of madness.

Shepard stuck close to Liara as she biotically carried Marcus into the orphanage’s tiny medical room. Being a facility that handled a great deal of children, they naturally had all the tools and supplies necessary to handle things like broken bones. They, however, did not have the room or patience to handle Shepard as she tried to hover over one of the nurses as he tried to reset the bone and apply medi-gel treatments. She had to be gently dragged away, then reminded that she had injuries of her own to tend to.

Once back in the shuttle and the door locked, Liara ordered Shepard to remove her clothes, which had become warm and damp thanks to her body heat, and set them aside. Jane sat on a stool as the Asari cleaned and bandaged her hand, then treated the small head wound from the rock that hit her as she fell into the sinkhole. Head wounds normally bled profusely, but Shepard somehow escaped that trouble, a lucky break in a litany of misfortunes.

“Maybe I just have a thick head.” She joked as Liara finished her work and set the medi-gel and bandages aside.

“Perhaps.” The Shadow Broker’s gaze moved away from Shepard’s right side as she reached for more medi-gel and placed it in Jane’s bandaged hand. “I’ll let you take care of the rest.”

Liara moved away and walked behind Jane, back to her console. Her sharp and precise movements, though brief, spoke of the same tumultuous battle raging in her alien head that thundered inside Jane’s.

Shepard sat still for a long time, alone on the stool, even though someone else stood less than a meter behind her. Their last fight tore through her, echoing in her mind just as painful and powerful as the
hallucinations had been. A single tear dropped down her face as she realized that maybe, just maybe, this would be the end for them.

She replayed the image of Liara dropping the ring over and over. And when she could no longer stand to remember it, she re-lived the moment she turned away and left the shuttle.

Again, she fumed on the idea that perhaps their relationship really was over.

But Jane Shepard wouldn’t give up on it without a fight.

“Liara.”

“Yes, Shepard?”

“I… know haven’t been very easy to live with,” She spoke slowly at first. “And I know I made a lot of mistakes over the last few months. It can’t have been easy for you, seeing me like this, and knowing I wasn’t getting better. I’m sorry for everything I put you through. So, I just want to say, that if you want to leave, I would understand. I love you, and I don’t want you to go, but I also understand.”

Jane smashed her eyes shut and let a rush of heat blush over her cheeks as she spoke. She felt just the same as if she were waiting for a bomb to detonate. The thought of Liara’s next words terrified her more than the approach of a living Reaper.

The silence of the shuttle became a living companion as she expected the worst to come.

Instead of words, however, Shepard felt a warm hand brush her left shoulder. She forced her eyes open to see the source of the contact: a hand that had a ring adorning one of its sapphire digits.

Shepard shot up and stared into her wife’s eyes, achingly blue and full of joyful tears.

“I never want to leave.” Liara said as she pulled Shepard close, crushing their bodies together in an embrace that nearly forced the breath out of their lungs. Jane felt limp and shocked at first, letting the two Asari arms hold her up as her legs turned to gelatin. Soon, though, her brain caught up with the shock and she raised her own hand, rubbing it against Liara’s back with desperate force.

Maybe they weren’t finished after all.

“I’m still mad at you.” Shepard said, which caused the Asari to smile and laugh into her shoulder. “But, I think we can figure out ways to make it right again.”

“I hope so, too.”

“There is something… something I should have done a long time ago.”

Jane pulled away just enough to look back into Liara’s gaze, and held there for a moment. She could sense her bondmate wishing to draw in for a kiss, but she held her head away. Not out of anger or anything hurtful, but because she had other plans.

Shepard’s heart raced, beating hard enough to hurt, but not like it ever had before. It fluttered more than it ached and tore inside of her. Breathing became shallow again, but it left her feeling weightless instead of half-dead. The world spun around in her mind, but like a carousel ride, full of happy memories, instead of a sickening tailspin.

She reached down to hold Liara’s hand, the one with the ring.
She looked into those big blue eyes again, not breaking contact, not even blinking. She had to do this now, before she lost the nerve. She held her breath and mentally took the plunge.

Shepard put Liara’s hand on her right limb.

Not just on the limb, but directly on the scar that had been left behind. The warm contact from her blue palm spread over Shepard’s body, sending waves both unfamiliar and well-versed into her very soul. She closed her eyes again as she pressed her head into Liara’s shoulder, unable to look at the world as everything changed around her.

All at once, she felt dizzy, elated, nauseous, blessed, disgusted, hurt and comforted by the contact. She swallowed a dry tightness down as her mouth went dry, but she remained on her feet, heart racing and head spinning. Liara held still as well, unwilling to make a move that would hurt Jane or cause distress. Her fingertips brushed against the remains of Shepard’s right arm as if she held the most valuable and rare artifact in the galaxy. The touch spoke of nothing but love, and felt as gentle as a warm afternoon sun. It banished all memories of Nicolo squeezing the life out of her.

Jane put her hand down and let her wife touch the limb at her own discretion. Instead, her bandaged palm went back to where it had been before, holding on to Liara as desperately as she could, because the Asari had always been her port in the storm.

Trying to hold back a few sobs, Jane pulled her head up again and put her lips on Liara’s. A gentle, warm kiss that spoke of everything between them, and the promise of what could be repaired in time.

As the storm above Chicago dissipated under the sunlight of a new day, the shuttle remained locked and isolated from the outside world. Distant, faint thunder echoed now and then as Jane Shepard and Liara T’soni found themselves again, becoming one mind but two bodies.
The very next day, the Alliance found them.

Shepard and Liara had gone back to the orphanage at sunrise, invited by Serrano to partake in a lavish breakfast in celebration of Mark’s triumphant rescue. The food consisted solely of toasted bread and eggs, the ingredients donated by a farm outside of the city that had just resumed production. And yet, even with the simple fare, it had been the best meal Jane could ever remember eating.

Marcus, though swimming in anesthetics, antibiotics and medi-gel, with his leg bound into a tight cast, managed to stay awake long enough to hold a fork and take one bite before slipping back into unconsciousness. Without Cerberus technology grafted onto his body, he would need several weeks to heal, though the nurse said he would make a full recovery in time. Jane helped carry him back to his bed, though she was quickly shooed away to make sure he got plentiful rest.

To make up for his absence, Jane and Liara spent time with the other children, both during the meal and after. Shepard told stories of past battles through the medium of toys again, though she made sure to edit many of the details to protect their ears and shield her heart from the memories. Liara turned her translator off and spoke to the kids in her uniquely alien accented English, which delighted them almost as much as war-playtime. She tried giving them lessons on her native language, but once they started having trouble forming some basic sounds, they gave up.

Just as the younger kids were to set down for a mid-afternoon nap, the walls rumbled and the children’s decorations and belongings, painstakingly reset multiple times during the collapse, fell over yet again. Some kids screamed, other panicked and ran around in terrified circles, while others tried to keep some semblance of order. The adults tried to help, but as the shaking got worse, they felt at their wit’s end. Hadn’t the city done enough to them?

That’s when a familiar deep and gravelly voice spoke over a megaphone:

“Commander Shepard, step out of the building alone and with your hands up. I will not ask you again.”

“Hackett.” Shepard hissed as the pandemonium inside the orphanage quieted.

The adults leapt on the opportunity and herded the kids deeper into the building, into bedrooms and storage alike. The well-drilled operation only took a minute, but the closed bedroom doors did not muffle the crying and terrorized voices at all. Only Mister Olin remained by her side.

“What do they want?”

“Shepard, come to the window.” Liara did not stand directly behind one of the building’s windows, but far enough away to avoid being spotted by someone outside. She raised a blue hand to indicate where she had been looking.

Outside, Hackett had more than just a few soldiers around him. At least six Alliance shuttles had landed in the park, each of them spilling a dozen marines into the open space. Two gunships hovered overhead, their weapons clearly visible and locked, though Shepard suspected they weren’t armed.

“Shepard.” Olin grabbed her arm, worry driving his eyes wild. “What do they want?”

“They want me, Olin.” She said as she pulled free of his tight grasp. “They’ve been following me
from the beginning.”

Jane spared a glance to Liara, who turned away and did not speak.

“Why now? Why so many soldiers?”

“You should know my reputation better than anyone, Olin.” She tried giving the terrified man a smirk. “Would you try to arrest me with anything less than an army? I did just cause a Reaper to crush half a city.”

“That wasn’t you! That was the storm!”

“But I was nearby, that’s all that matters. The story is all they care about.”

Olin wasn’t done putting his hands on Shepard. Still consumed with fear, he grabbed her by the shoulders. “You have to get rid of them! I don’t care what it takes! Go out there and make them go away, or so help me, I’ll-“

“You’ll what?” Jane said, and then she put her hand around Olin’s wrist, twisting it off of her and causing him to recoil in pain. Even with one hand and months away from the military, she still remembered a few things.

“I’m sorry. I just… I saw those guns and I freaked…”

She let go of his wrist and nodded. She understood that fear now. Her heart thundered like it had before, but she didn’t pay attention to the pain. The adrenaline that pumped in her veins did not shut her down, but energized her. After all that struggle, all those months letting it destroy her, she finally rediscovered a way to channel it. Nothing would stand in her way.

She just needed one last boost of confidence.

“Where’s Marcus?”

“I’m here.” Came a weak and fragile voice a moment later.

Shepard, Liara and Olin turned as one, toward the rear bedroom. Marcus sat in a wheelchair, leg sticking forward awkwardly, being pushed by his attending nurse.

“The noise outside woke him up, and he heard Shepard speaking.” The nurse clarified, “I figured you could help him go back to sleep.”

Jane nodded and walked over to the boy. The world disappeared around her as she did, until it seemed that nothing existed except the two of them. She did that while they were trapped in the sinkhole, though she hadn’t been conscious of it at the time. It kept her focused on the one person she wanted to talk to.

“Hey, kid.” She smiled as she knelt down beside him. “How are you holding up?”

“Tired.” He admitted. “But I can’t go back to sleep.”

“Are you in any pain?”

“No.” He said, though the slight shifting of his eyelids said otherwise. He was forcing himself awake to speak with her.

Jane put her head down for a moment, unsure about what to say. Her hand rose to her face as she
wiped a single tear from her eye.

“You should go back to sleep.” She said, keeping her voice even. “You’ve got a lot of healing to do.”

“What about you?” He asked, and raised a weak hand to point to her bandaged palm.

“I do, too.” Shepard moved her hand from her face and put it on top of Mark’s. She spared a glance at the nurse, who glared at her, but did not raise an objection.

“Listen,” she said, “I think I’m going to be gone for a while. And I don’t want you to think I’m leaving forever, but…”

“They’re here to take you away.” He nodded toward the window, where a gunship hovered in plain view.

“Yeah, they are. And I’m going to go with them if it will keep you safe. But I promise I’ll try to come back.”

“Will you call?”

“Yeah, I’ll try, Mark. I really will.” Another tear fell down Shepard’s cheek and landed on the orphanage’s floor.

Before the nurse could complain, Marcus surged forward and pulled his arms around Jane’s neck, wrapping her in a tight, but welcome, hug.

“I’m glad I met you, too.” He whispered before the nurse pulled him back with a gentle tug.

“Commander, I’m giving you one minute to surrender yourself.” Hackett called from outside. His brusque voice and clear threat caused the other children to scream again.

Liara moved to Jane’s side and held out her hand to help her back up. Jane took the aid, but she did not turn away from Marcus.

“You be good, and heal up, understand? That’s a direct order.” She hitched her shoulder to show off her N7 jacket, which clung proudly off her body, much like her armor used to.

“I will.” He smiled as the nurse drew him away.

Jane watched him go, and kept staring as he disappeared behind a bedroom door. She didn’t want to move, even though she knew she had to. Duty above all. She had a responsibility to not only the injured boy, but all of the children who now stood in direct danger because of her decision to come here.

“Jane.” Liara said, pulling Shepard's concentration away from the door with a soft caress on her cheek. “We can try to run, if you wish. They would not fire on children, we can sneak out and try to make it to the shuttle. My biotics could-“

“I will not use these kids as a shield.” She said with all the fire and force of the old Commander Shepard. “I am their shield.”

The Asari nodded and lowered her eyes again. “I’m sorry, I know I shouldn’t be so callous. But… I don’t want to lose you again.”

Jane put on another one of her smiles, the kind they both knew were fake, but were excellent masks
to hide the sorrow and terror lurking inside of her. “You won’t lose me. I made a promise to you that I would always come back, and I’ve always kept it.”

She paused and took in a deep breath. "Liara, the moment I met you, my life became extraordinary. You saved me more than once, and I will spend the rest of my life trying to be worthy of that gift. I love you."

Before she could speak another word, Jane pulled her wife into a kiss. A deep, powerful embrace that removed as much fear and doubt as it could, and told Liara the things she could not speak.

"I love you, too." Her bondmate whispered in English the moment their lips parted.

“I’m still mad about the ring.” She said as she pulled away, “But this makes us a little more even.”

“A little.” The Shadow Broker smirked and reached behind her, then turned back to put something in Jane’s hand. Something long, black and cold to the touch.

Her cane.

“You do what you have to do.” Liara said. “And then come back to me.”

Shepard put the cane down and thumped it against the prefab floor. “I will.”

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The wind thrown up by the gunships sent Jane’s hair flying as she stepped out of the orphanage door. She limped again, thanks to her misfortunes in the city, but she didn’t make it look weak. Her N7 hoodie’s right sleeve had been folded and pinned in place just before she and Liara left the shuttle for breakfast, so it, too, remained strong and steady in the face of overwhelming Alliance firepower. She may not have been wearing her armor, but she walked like she did. And she hoped she looked like it to the crowd outside.

She felt as if she were walking into a firing squad, but she did not stop moving forward.

Hackett stood a few dozen meters away, surrounded by four marines in full gear, and a man in familiar blue armor. His intense gaze betrayed neither sorrow nor regret as he looked at her.

“Shepard.” Kaidan boomed over the noise.

“Commander.” Hackett said. “I seem to recall the three of us being in similar circumstances some time back. Something about a Batarian colony and an imminent Reaper invasion.”

“What’s with the arsenal, Hackett?” Shepard fired back as she got close enough to speak.

“A necessary precaution, given your history.” He smirked. “But you already knew that.”

“Pointing them at kids!?” Her voice rose, though not to the point of manic screaming, just a powerful shout. Her heart physically ached in her chest from beating so strong and so fast, but she did not let it overtake her.

“It was your choice to come here, Commander, not mine.” His impassive, smug expression made her want to smash her cane into his stomach and make a pass for the nearest marine’s gun, but she knew
that effort would be futile. Violence would not solve this problem.

“Call them off, and we’ll talk.”

“I’ll call them off when I feel there is adequate reason.” Hackett said, matching her blow for blow. “Right now, I feel very threatened by the presence of your partner.”

Hackett did not indicate the orphanage window, but the stolen shuttle that sat a hundred meters away. Soldiers surrounded it, and seemed to focus on the door’s complex lock. Shepard had to suppress a laugh when she saw them. It would take at least a decade for the best Alliance codebreakers to crack Liara’s security measures, if any survived the war.

But still, with the Alliance in firm control of the shuttle, it meant the Shadow Broker was all but dead.

“She had nothing to do with this. You leave her out, just like the children.”

“You’re in no position to make demands, Shepard.” Kaidan interjected. “You don’t have any choices, here.”

“We always have choices, Kaidan.” She said to her former comrade. “I thought I taught you that.”

“You did. And we both know there’s only one way everyone walks out of here.”

A horrified tingle shot down Jane’s spine. “You wouldn’t dare shoot that orphanage.”

“No, we wouldn’t.” Hackett growled, “But if you make yourself a nuisance…” He raised his hand, which caused his bodyguards to train their weapons on her. “We all know you’d make a terrible prisoner, but one hell of a martyr for our cause.”

Shepard let out an unamused snort. She had a feeling these “negotiations” would turn out like this. Hackett might have been her friend and ally before and during the war, but that had been when their interests aligned. Now that she withheld something from him, something he wanted, her life, he had no problem becoming a very dangerous enemy.

She could be just as dangerous, if not more so.

“How’d you spin the story? That you finally found my body after a year of searching? Maybe that I got indoctrinated just before the end, but still managed to somehow kill the Reapers and escape into the wilderness?”

“Something like that. But only if you force us to take that route.”

“Why, Hackett? Why go through all this trouble for me? Why can’t you let me live the rest of my life in peace?” She turned to Kaidan. “And you. You’re a council Spectre. Why are you taking orders from him? You could have overturned this entire operation with a single word, considering one of your fellow operatives could be in danger.”

“Shepard, you have to understand.” Alenko began before the Admiral cut him off with a curt wave.

“Commander, while you’ve been… recovering, the situation on Earth has deteriorated. The people need you now just as much as they needed you during the war. They need a reason to keep waking up in the morning and get to work rebuilding. There’s food shortages out there. Rioting. Disease is spreading in some of the equatorial countries. They’re losing the hope you gave them by killing the Reapers.”
“And you think sticking my face in some vids and printing a few million posters of me will fix that?”

“Yes.”

The simple, pained and plain response sent Jane aback. She expected a threat, maybe another speech about doing the right thing, or perhaps she expected him to draw his sidearm and end her right there for being difficult.

As the gunships roared above, Shepard stood still. The longer she looked at Kaidan, the more she saw the desperation behind his stoicism. Hackett looked much the same. In fact, behind the facemasks of all the soldiers in eyesight, she could see similar expressions. While top dogs like the Admiral and Spectre looked relatively healthy, she could see the prominent cheekbones of the grunts behind them. How loose was the armor they wore? How many meals had the soldiers skipped so less fortunate people could stay alive?

She really had been disconnected for a long time, hadn’t she? Her disappearance had been from more than the Alliance, but from her people, and her duties.

Even if Marcus healed and got back on his feet, how many years would it be before the orphanage sent him out and into a cruel world full of starving refugees and a collapsed society? If she did nothing, and the two men in front of her were telling the truth, he could very well die on the first day of his adult life. Or he could slowly die as he scavenged around the unfinished cities and wastelands that used to be his home planet.

If the citizens of Earth truly had lost hope, they would lose their will to keep rebuilding what had been lost. She knew that feeling, she had lived with it for so long, and it nearly became her entire being.

To think that the entire planet shared in that despair…

Shepard had been lucky. She had Liara with her to pull her out of the darkness, figuratively and literally.

Who did Earth have, but their Shepard?

“I’ll do it. I’ll go with you.” Jane looked the Admiral in the eye. “But I have terms.”
Four Years Later

After what felt like an eternity of waiting and staring at the watch, and actual honest-to-god watch, on her wrist, the school bell rang, and hundreds of students piled out of the brand new Jane Shepard High School in downtown Chicago. The afternoon sun baked the back of her neck, since she decided to pull her hair up for this occasion. Liara had enjoyed the challenge of doing something other than brushing it for her, even though it took about three hours of stuck and broken combs, and a lot of swearing in English and Asari before she got it right.

A large crowd of parents stood outside of the school’s main doors, ready to greet their children and take a lot of pictures to commemorate the first day of regular education since the war’s end. All over the world, similar informal ceremonies were being held, for families of all types and ages. And almost all of the schools celebrating the occasion had her name on them somewhere.

Shepard kept her sunglasses on tight, and stood far from the crowd as she watched the young teenagers file out of the building. Her trained eyes kept watch on people both in the crowd and walking around the nearby street, as well as standing near her armored skycar. They all wore nondescript black suits and sunglasses similar to hers, but their postures all screamed military to the non-casual observer. Her guardian angels. Or her jailers, depending on how she felt that day.

The Alliance had given her this day to be with Liara, instead of shipping her off to Palaven to start the third wing of a book signing tour for a book she didn’t actually write. But it had her name and face on the cover, and told a heavily edited version of her life story, so she had to be the one giving autographs.

At least the last book tours had been more pleasant than the constant vid chats and interviews with reporters that had consumed her life for the last few years. Her deal with Hackett, which stipulated that children would NEVER be used in any Alliance propaganda efforts whatsoever, also included the fact that she was no longer as mobile as she used to be. She would not do any walking tours of facilities, ship launching ceremonies, or even go near the Citadel, no matter how much better it looked with each passing year. That did not stop her from sitting in the same chair for days on end, answering the same questions and providing the same government-issued responses until her throat cracked and she was no longer capable of speaking.

Book tours included a lot of sitting down and, more importantly, not as much talking.

Once this day ended, Jane knew she’d barely get time to say goodbye to Liara before heading to Palaven. Then, after that, she’d come back to Earth to attend some kind of gala event in the repaired section of New York. Probably a play. Based on her. Because every fucking thing was based on her these days. But at least a dark venue meant she could catch up on some sleep, or perhaps sneak away with Liara to do things they didn’t have time to do at home.

“There he is!” Liara tugged on Jane’s right sleeve, folded and pinned as always, as she pointed out a specific young man in the crowd of teens. He turned his gaze upward as his brown eyes adjusted to the bright outside light, and it didn’t take him long to spot Jane’s fire-red hair and Liara’s waving
hand. It also could have been that her wife chose to wear bright yellow, a color she only wore on special days to remember her mother.

Jane watched as Marcus tore his way through the crowd of young people, then the larger group of parents before them. She also watched as his eyes locked with a young woman with jet-black hair for longer than half a second.

“Who is that, I wonder?” Shepard asked under her breath.

“Way ahead of you.” Liara said as she brought up her omni-tool. The glowing device already had a list of Jane Shepard High School’s students and faculty.

“Don’t look too deep into her history this time, okay?” Jane said. “Let’s allow him to spill some of his secrets when he feels ready.”

“That’s no fun.” Liara teased as she continued her background check of the black haired girl.

In no time at all, Marcus made his way to Jane and Liara, and greeted them both with a hug.

“Hi, Mark.” Jane said with a smile. Her wife said the same. In English.

“Hi, guys.” The teenager’s smile cocked to the side. He shrugged his shoulders at the same time, adjusting the position of his brand new backpack.

“Enjoy your first day at school?” Shepard said as she began walking to the skycar. Her cane clicked against the fresh pavement with each step, a signal to the black-suited guards that all was well.

“It was… weird. Last time I was in a classroom, we were learning about shapes and spelling.”

“And what were you learning about today?” Liara asked as she subtly deactivated her omni-tool.

“Not much. Today it was mostly paperwork and orientations. The school’s nice. You’d like it a lot, Jane.”

“You know, I actually never went to school. Well, not high school.” Shepard said as she put her hand on Mark’s arm. She used him for support as he took the cane in his growing hands. “I think I’d like a tour. You know, on a day slightly less crazy.”

They approached the skycar after making a little more small talk. The black-suited guardian moved away as smoothly as he could, which meant he drew quite a bit of attention for walking away from a family vehicle just before the owning family entered it.

“So we going back to the apartment?” Marcus asked as he set his bag beside him in the back seat. Liara took a few seconds longer to get into the driver’s side than she normally did.

“No, actually.” Shepard said, unable to contain her grin. “You’re going to help us shop for some stuff for your baby sister.”

“Baby sister?”

Neither of them responded. Instead, Liara pulled Jane’s hand over her stomach, then held it down for a long second before returning to the skycar’s controls.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone for reading this monstrous story that was supposed to be about 20 pages long and serve as a momentary one-time diversion from another project. I hope you enjoyed reading it, as I quite enjoyed writing it all down. :)

For some quick answers to questions no one has asked (yet):

Shepard's favorite song, which she began singing just before she left the Normandy is 'All These Things That I've Done' by The Killers

There is another epilogue that I wrote on the same day I wrote the first chapter. I'll post it one of these days after editing it to fit better with the last part of the story. It was meant to fit with chapters 1-36, so posting it now would be cause quite a bit of literary whiplash.

The choice of Chicago for the final setting was totally random.

Shepard grew up in Toronto, which by the 22nd century had grown into an overpopulated mess.

Much like the experiences with depression and loss are based on my own life, Shepard's life as a teenager, described mostly in chapter 35, were based on the experiences of a real person. Fortunately, this person also managed to move past that and joined the Coast Guard as an adult. As far as I know, she hasn't saved all known civilization... yet. But she's still an amazing person and a huge source of inspiration.
Jane knew exactly the last time her body felt so beaten down, sore and broken. Those memories would forever haunt her, sending random shocks of self-loathing and doubt into the most random and innocuous thoughts and ideas. Fortunately, ten years of therapy, rebuilding, and her infamous Shepard determination always found ways to move past the old wounds and endure the worst her scarred mind could conjure. She had too many reasons to never succumb like she almost did in those dark days after the war. Far too many.

So when her body felt like reverting back to the old hunched, aching and agonized mess it used to be, she fought harder and harder until the impulses went away. She would never go back to that, not by choice, not ever. No matter how loud her disorders screamed to let go and submit to the darkness, she would never listen. She earned her happy ending, and she would always fight to keep it.

“Come on!” Shepard whispered through gritted teeth as her right limb throbbed harder than usual. Unlike most days, the scarred lump of flesh that used to be an arm had been covered by a tight sheath of black-and-red alien cloth instead of sitting bare and exposed. The manufacturer promised it would protect the sensitive and damaged nerves from stress, absorb sweat better than anything made on Earth and provide an aesthetically pleasing garment at the same time. She also liked to think it prevented anyone from gawking at the mangled flesh left behind by a single monstrous decision and an equally monstrous doctor.

Shepard mentally moved away from the discomfort in her right limb and focused on her other aching and screaming muscles, finding old and familiar comfort in their strain. Her lungs and heart were in equally dire straits, but ten years of living with them in such bad shape had forced her to ignore them as well. She just needed to focus on the muscles and pains from her undamaged body, the parts that
hurt just like they did when she was a kid, a cadet, an N7 hopeful and finally a savior.

“You can do it!” A deep voice shouted from behind Jane.

“Woo! Let’s get this done!” Another supportive person shouted from somewhere.

“Shepard! Shepard! Shepard! Shepard!” Came a loving and enthusiastic chant a moment later.

She could do this, no matter how much it hurt.

Even though her body wanted to give up and never move again, Jane forced her muscles to contract one more time, pushing herself past a limit she never thought possible.

With just her left hand, she lifted the 95 kilogram bar above her head as if it weighed nothing at all.

The feat would have been impressive enough if she had just walked into this Alliance veteran’s gym, fresh and eager to show off how much she could do without a full set of limbs. But the fact she had just spent two hours running, climbing, training and sweating at near N7-levels of activity with just one arm made it a near miracle.

All around her, people in various states of mental and physical damage cheered and shouted their support as they watched the heavy weights balance in Shepard’s left hand. Many were just like her, missing limbs, eyes, ears, or large swathes of skin that had been hastily or poorly regrown thanks to the limited medical capabilities of a post-apocalyptic galaxy. A great deal more showed the marks of bullets, burns and other horrific wounds that would never be healed in the same way they could have been if the galaxy hadn’t been nearly destroyed by the Reapers. And all of them shared the same mental and spiritual scars that would never go away. It’s why they were here, supporting each other instead of in places full of civilians and people that would never understand.

It took quite a lot of arguing from Liara to convince her to use this gym. After Chakwas signed the medical forms that discharged her from the service, Shepard found she had little desire to set foot in an Alliance base or anything directly controlled by them. Of course, the deal with Hackett, which gave her a nice paycheck and the relative freedom to live in peace with her wife and family, made it impossible to avoid the ubiquitous blue uniforms and arrowhead-logo all of the time. But she tried to distance herself from it in her off hours as much as she could.

At first, Jane had to fight the dark thoughts that formed every time she approached the gym. She felt judged, watched and hated by everyone who glanced in her direction. Soldiers and comrades who had bled, suffered and nearly died thanks to the war used the same equipment, facilities and therapy she did. She felt utterly unworthy to be in the presence of such men and women, since much of their deformations had been the result of her inability to convince the council about the scope of the Reaper threat, then her later inability to find the Catalyst in time to prevent the near-disaster in Earth’s orbit.

That changed when she had been forced to sign her very first autograph. A former soldier with a crude metallic arm, instead of a biosynth prosthetic or even a clone-tissue replacement, begged her to sign his fake limb. He said he marched right beside her in London and had taken a direct hit from a Reaper explosive just before the battle nearly ended in failure. He was honored, not disgusted, to be in her presence.

As soon as that ice broke, the gym had almost descended into a maelstrom of Shepard-related hysteria before good old-fashioned Alliance discipline returned the soldiers, and former soldiers, back to their duties and physical therapy.
In the months since that initial surge of positivity, Jane tried to be as anonymous as possible to keep the other soldiers focused on their own recovery and not on hers. Still, the savior of all intelligent civilization still got her share of attention every time she used a machine, weight, or water cooler. It had become an inescapable part of her life. Like now, as she held up the heavy weight.

But like all things in this world, nothing could last forever. As soon as she knew her body could take no more, she hunched forward and began to lower the bar until it caught on her shoulder, then let it drop to the floor as gently as she could manage.

If the gym had been full of shouts and cheers as she lifted, it practically exploded as soon as she stood back up and shook her arm to relieve the new round of aches that flared up. The noise had become deafening, and echoed through all parts of the building. Which in turn drew more people toward her, curious about the noise.

"Thanks, everyone!" She said over the din as soon as it showed the slightest hint of calming. Fortunately, even though she had a small army of onlookers, nobody tried shoving their way forward or invading her space. In fact, the crowd itself seemed thinner than a normal mob of fans trying to crowd around a celebrity. Keeping the sanctity of each other’s personal space was rule one of this facility, and had been literally laser-etched into the walls to remind everyone. Soldiers respected rules like that, well, most of the time.

Unfortunately, even though she was not overrun by well-wishers and Shepard-fanatics, she still found herself surrounded by people who wanted to show their support for her last-minute feat of strength.

"No, really, thanks, guys. But I need to hit the shower. I got plans-"

They didn’t listen. A few people inched forward, not out of malice of disregard for the rules, but because the crowd continued to grow in both size and intensity.

Shepard raised her hand forward. "Um, guys?"

Another surge. Happy faces and exuberant body language surrounded her, but a spike of anxiety mutated it in her mind to something less than joyful.

"HEY!" A new voice rose above the cacophony, full of rage. "Leave her the fuck alone!"

Then, like from a passage in an old religious text, the crowd parted. Not by their own will, but through the hand of smouldering dark energy, controlled by a person with astronomical power. Fortunately, the biotics were gentle with the wounded soldiers, and nobody saw themselves pushed to the ground or crushed against anything.

The sudden display of power silenced the gathering as every single eye in the building turned to the source.

"Jack?" Shepard asked as her own green gaze settled to the gym’s entrance.

As always, the human biotic kept a great deal of her tattooed body uncovered, though the passage of years had increased her modesty yet again after the last time Jane saw her. While her stomach, shoulders, arms, neck and hips were exposed, showing off the intricate inked designs, the rest of Jack had been covered by a modified set of civilian clothes.

"Who the hell else, princess?" The infamous human said as she let go of her powers, and thus the crowd. Behind her, two young people shuffled into the gym. Shepard knew most of the students she met from Grissom Academy, who bravely endured a Cerberus siege, had not survived the war. But
that did not stop the woman formerly known as “Subject Zero” from continuing something that might have been called a “life’s work”, caring for biotic kids and teaching them how to handle their abilities in a constructive and positive way.

“What are you doing here?”

“I promised these guys,” Jack nodded to the kids behind her. As they got closer, Shepard could see they, too, had some old injuries on their bodies. More scars left behind by the war. “I said if they passed their finals this semester, I’d take them to the best fuckin’ simulated rock climbing on the planet. I figured the place would be empty today of all days. But you tend to throw a big wrench into everyone’s damn plans.”

As Jack moved forward, the crowd of soldiers dispersed. Naturally, their good cheer in front of Shepard had evaporated into frustration and anger at Jack for interrupting their merrymaking, but they did nothing but grumble and complain. A few soldiers approached Jack’s students instead, and gave them appreciative high fives and pats on the back.

“I thought this place was reserved for Alliance military only.”

“Yeah, well, screw that. I promised them the best, they’re getting the best.”

Though she would never admit it, Jack probably cared more about people than anyone else in the galaxy. Shepard’s early life had been paradise compared to the horrors the other woman endured every single day, but their shared traumas had been a common ground they managed to find in those early days on the Normandy SR-2. Only people from such awful backgrounds could truly understand empathy, but only if they let themselves. Jack took longer to learn the lesson, but she seemed to have taken it more to heart than Jane ever could.

“Well, don’t trash the equipment or anything while you’re having fun.” Shepard grinned as the two kids made their way to her. With a well-practiced motion, she shook both of their hands and smiled at them, even though her upper body muscles complained about it. The eyes of both kids all but sparkled as they made personal contact with the woman who saved the galaxy, and their grins made her aching heart flutter with genuine glee. It was one thing to weather the endless ocean of gratitude from the adults in the galaxy, but every smile and show of thanks from the younger people always made her day. It took her back to those early years just after the war, when the world had just been her, Liara and a few kids just trying to make their way in the rubble.

The instant her mind drifted back to those times, she snapped back to reality.

“Sorry, I just remembered that I gotta head out. Lots to do today.”

“Oh yeah.” Jack smirked. “Not like any of us little people have shit to do on Victory day.”

Shepard smiled and clapped a sweaty hand on Jack’s shoulder before heading toward the showers.

“Good to see you, Jack.” She said as she bounded away on sore legs.

***

Jane’s skin prickled the instant she stepped outside the gym, especially the skin on her now-uncovered right limb. A strong winter breeze had begun to sweep across the rebuilt city, reminding
her that, for the Northern Hemisphere, the war had been won in the dead of winter. Fortunately, the area remained free of snow and ice for the time being, just chill wind and dead leaves from the millions of trees that had been planted in areas that used to contain rubble and the remains of urban sprawl.

“Ah, Commander!” the cheerful voice of her driver said as he deftly landed the skycar in front of the building. Liara had her hands full with last-minute preparations, not to mention a young Asari, and thus could not chauffeur Jane around the city like she normally did. Such days were rare, but they had long prepared for it.

“Always on time, Conrad. You spying on me in the shower?” She quipped at the blond-haired man as he shuffled out of his seat and stood next to the passenger side like an old-time attendant.

“Uh, what? No.” Conrad Verner stammered as Shepard took her seat in the skycar. “I would never… Why did you ask…?”

“Relax, I was just joking.” As always, jokes, barbs and even the slightest bit of sarcasm went completely over the other man’s head.

“Oh, of course you were.” He forced a laugh as he made his way to the pilot seat. “One day I’ll catch that.”

“Maybe.” Shepard smiled as the vehicle lifted off the ground.

Conrad had been on the Citadel when the Reapers took the station and moved it to Earth. In less than a solar day, the machines and their forces rendered the colossal structure lifeless, save for a few pockets of life hidden deep inside of buildings and shelters. Millions died in a single horrifying attack, including some people very near to Shepard and Liara. And yet, people like Conrad and a few others managed to lead people to the aforementioned shelters and places hidden deep within the Citadel’s construction. Such quick timing and deft leadership did not save very many, but any signs of life from the Citadel post-war were causes for celebration. True, Shepard’s recovery had been the only one people talked about, but she would never forget all of the others who survived both the Reapers and her horrible choice that ended the war.

It was for that very reason she tolerated having him drive her around.

“So, big day, huh?” Verner smiled as he turned toward the skycar traffic lanes that crisscrossed the rebuilt skyline.

Shepard took a deliberate moment before responding. Instead, she chose to stare out the window and gawk at the reconstructed life around her. Where there had once been blackened ruin, piles of corpses and utter devastation across the planet, now stood gleaming towers, huge gardens and the return of glorious human occupation. Yes, there were still a lot of blights on the skyline, like a half-deconstructed Reaper corpse sticking out of a nearby river. But such things were being quickly disassembled by mechs and automated drones, leaving the people far away from possible indoctrination and free to pursue others methods of returning life on Earth back to the way it used to be.

“Yeah.” She managed to say.

“I’m gonna meet Jenna at one of the old pubs downtown tonight.” Conrad beamed. “We’re gonna watch the fireworks and parades from a big vid-projector imported from Sur’kesh. It’s gonna be great.”
She shared a grin with him before he continued speaking, as Conrad Verner was wont to do.

“You have any plans, Commander? I imagine a big hero like yourself has a lot of stuff lined up for tonight. Gonna give a speech in London? Maybe tour some hospitals or schools? Or-or are you gonna take a trip to Thessia and meet all the Asari?”

“Actually, I think it’ll be best if I leave it a surprise.” Shepard said as they flew over a particular building. One that still had several months of construction yet to go, but had enough finished for a few select people to move into.

“Oh, sure. Say no more, Shepard, say no more. I understand you gotta keep a few things under wraps, especially since you can’t go out in public without being mobbed.”

“So you are spying on me.” She gave him another slight barb as he began to set the vehicle down on the building’s roof.

“Well… no. Not really. I just worry about your safety. I wasn’t hacking anything, I’ve got permission to view public security cameras when I’m responsible for…”

“It’s okay, Conrad.” Shepard placed her hand on his shoulder, which caused his worried expression to vanish. “I was-“

“Joking, yeah.”

Jane didn’t wait for the skycar’s engine to shut off before she tapped the door release and stepped out. “You enjoy yourself tonight, Conrad. Today is just as much about you as it is me.”

“Do you really mean that?”

“Yeah, I do.” She did. Though, she suspected after the two jokes in such a short amount of time, Verner would have a hard time believing anything she said. At least today. “Go have fun.”

“I will, Shepard. You too.” He said as he closed the skycar’s cabin and sped off. Shepard watched for a moment, to make sure he rejoined the traffic lanes safely, before turning around.

***

The apartment still had its “new building smell” about it, which Shepard enjoyed taking in every single time she returned home. By which she meant the aromas of freshly cut wood, the slightly intoxicating smell of setting adhesives and the astringent punch of packing materials that needed to be thrown into a recycler. The strangely pleasant cornucopia emanated from several walls that had yet to be finished and large swathes of floor that still showed the dull grey of bare concrete, not the polished tiles and wood that would come later. Of course, hardly any furniture filled the space, since it wouldn’t be practical in a construction site. But her small family still had a few amenities granted to them by the Alliance as crews hurried to finish the space.

Today, none of the sweaty workers filled the rooms of the building, given the anniversary about to be celebrated. Jane made sure to learn all of their names, but still felt glad that she didn’t have to greet another small crowd as she returned to the place that would one day be her comfortable, and private, home.
“You’re late!” A voice she very much enjoyed hearing echoed from a distant room.

“Sorry, I got held up.”

“You were showing off again, weren’t you?”

From the other side of the half-finished space, came the huffing form of Liara. Even as ageless and graceful as all Asari were, when they were upset, they looked just as angry and plodding as any human.

“I may have lifted a few things.”

“Always with the lifting.” Shepard’s wife sighed as she approached. However, instead of the same greeting they had shared a thousand-plus times since the war’s end, a gentle hug and brief kiss, Liara held back. Her scowl only deepened. “Do you know how hard it is to cook human food and monitor a young Asari at the same time? Not to mention the fact that my agents have sent more information in the last solar day than the last month combined, thanks to all of the governmental celebrations. Oh, and I’ve had to scrub your extranet account six times today, SIX, because it kept getting flooded with invitations to every social gathering in the galaxy…”

“Slow down, Liara,” Jane said as she took in the vision of the woman in front of her. The instant Liara began to rattle on her worries, Shepard began mentally preparing the right choice of words to calm her down and get her ready for the night’s activities. All she had to do was dredge up the old Shepard charm and… wait…

“Did you say you were cooking?” Was all she could think about.

“Yes. I’ve been studying hundreds of Earth foods in preparation for today. I was hoping to find something from your culture that would celebrate the occasion while at the same time remain simple and easy to prepare.”

“No such luck, huh?”

“Why is it that humans must always prepare the most elaborate and costly meals for their celebrations? It makes no sense, Jane. You’d think humans would be sensible, like Asari, and spend as much time as possible with their family and friends, and thus only cook simple meals that need very little time and attention.”

“It’s tradition, I guess. I don’t know why you’d ask me. I’m happy with a ration pack and some water. You know that.”

“I think we’ve both eaten enough ration packs for several Asari lifetimes.” Liara finally managed to smile.

“I dunno, I was hoping for a couple more here and there.”

Instead of replying, Shepard’s wife finally moved forward and wrapped her arms around her waist. Their foreheads made gentle contact just before they simultaneously reached forward for a kiss.

“So how are the kids?” Jane asked as soon as they parted.

“Marcus is… gone. Again.” Liara said with apprehension. Shepard understood, though. He wasn’t the ten year old with a broken leg anymore, nor even the bright-eyed teenager attending a school with her name on it. He was in his twenties now, and needed to find his place in a rapidly-changing world.
Well, at least, that’s what Jane told herself to feel better.

“And the little one?” She asked, shaking the doubt about the young man away.

“A nap. Finally.”

Shepard took a few steps away from the door and pulled Liara along with her. Though she had made good use of the gym’s shower to relax her muscles and remove the sweat, she still needed a bit of time off her feet before the night started. The bedrooms of the apartment had been finished and furnished before anything else, mostly thanks to the Shadow Broker’s ability to schedule construction and order people around. Their family needed a place to sleep, so they got one, even if the rest of the house needed a lot of work.

“Was it a fight?”

“Fighting Cerberus was easy compared to that struggle.”

As they walked forward, the pair tiptoed past the closed door that held their daughter’s room. A brief pang swallowed Jane’s heart as she walked by. Of all the horrors she had seen and inflicted in her life, the young Asari fast asleep behind that door almost made it tolerable. One time, long ago, her friend Thane said something similar to his son. Back then, she had been so full of rage and haste to finish her mission that she dismissed his words as an empty gesture to calm the hurting young Drell. But now, so many years later, with a child of her own to love and care for, she finally understood. God, she understood.

The bedroom made specifically for Liara and Jane sat a few meters away, a walk just long enough for her overworked legs to complain about. She didn’t realize she had begun to slump into her wife’s strong blue arms until they passed the threshold.

The room set aside for them was nothing less than spectacular. Wide and open, with a single glass wall that overlooked the rebuilt city beyond. A few towers here and there blocked small parts of the horizon, but most of the view of the world Shepard saved remained unobstructed and beautiful. The furnishings remained somewhat Spartan, but Jane knew it would one day be filled with the clutter of living. It just needed time. For now, she felt content with the medium-sized Alliance-issue bed, a few shelves to hold trophies and gifts from various worlds, and a closet for their modest wardrobe. A perfect start for a perfect bedroom.

“So what did you decide to cook?” Shepard asked as she pulled herself onto the bed. She did not lie down, just took the time to relish the feeling of sitting.

“It’s a surprise.” Liara said as she turned back to the bedroom door. “Get comfortable, Jane. This night is for you.” And then she left.

Shepard felt like she understood the subtext of that message.

In exactly four hours and thirteen minutes, ten years would have passed between now and the moment Jane Shepard stood alone on the Citadel, broken and bleeding, and made the choice that changed the galaxy forever.

Ten years since she ended a war a billion years in the making.
Ten years since she did horrible things in the name of peace and survival.

Ten years since she exterminated the Geth and killed her friend EDI, who had just begun to understand the concept of living. EDI, who had fallen in love with a man, only to have that love ripped apart by her choice, and not theirs.

Ten years since she died for a second time, only to come back by sheer chance, Cerberus cybernetics and unbounded stubbornness.

Ten years since she woke up disfigured, broken and ready to put a bullet to her head.

Ten years. So many things had changed since that one instant of time. All she needed to do was look out the wall-window and see living proof of her deeds. The Catalyst had been correct in one thing: the rebuilding process had been swift. Well, swift from the perspective of an immortal god-computer that had no comprehension of the suffering it had caused the galaxy. It had no concept of how brutal, grating and frightening that rebuilding had been. Not just for the buildings and technology, but for the people left behind. People like her. People like Liara. People like Marcus.

The soldiers back at the gym showed nothing but love and support for Shepard, but they, too, would eventually all go home and think the same thoughts that swirled in her head. The entire galaxy made sure it was impossible to forget what happened on this day, ten years ago. It made it impossible to not relive the memories.

It’s why she had spent so much time at the gym, and pushed so hard long after she should have ended the session. Anything was better than sitting and thinking about everything that happened during those horrible months in 2186.

Outside, the afternoon sun bared down on New York. In London, where the battle had taken place, the light would last just long enough for the counter to hit zero, just like it did all those years before. The stories from soldiers on the ground, who had witnessed the black skies parting in the wake of the Crucible’s explosion, had become the subject of art, vids, song and popular culture. They say the sunlight from those early moments shone brighter than physics deemed possible, as if Earth itself celebrated the end of the fighting. Naturally, neither Shepard nor her crew witnessed the events, they were elsewhere, fighting to survive. Or, in her case, slipping away into death.

Jane didn’t feel herself moving further up the bed until the back of her skull hit the wall behind her. Still sitting up, she stared at the blue sky and white-grey towers around. On the ground, where there had once been a hell of urban development and decay, gardens and fountains stood. Impossibly tall buildings had taken much of the population into the air, leaving the ground free to breathe and grow like it was meant to. She wondered what her own home city looked like all these years later. She knew Tenth Street had been renovated and turned into a minor shrine to her memory. Even some “former” members of the Reds took up shop maintaining the stores and buildings Jane used to frequent as a young woman. The formerly run-down area was probably the most financially successful part of Earth, thanks to the millions of pilgrims that visited the site every year.

Shepard sat and stared for what felt like hours in the stillness of her bedroom.
She didn’t realize her wife had re-entered the bedroom until a gentle blue hand touched her right shoulder, brushing against the awful scar left behind in the operation to remove the limb.

“You were singing again.” Liara said with a smile.

“Was I?”

“Yes. I’ve missed hearing it so much.”

“Well, just remind me when you want to hear something.”

“I’ll do that.”

As Liara entered the room, Shepard noticed one of the Asari’s hands desperately clasped onto something large, flat and metallic. A plate. A plate covered by a dome of metal.

“What’s that?” Jane asked as she scooted to the side, allowing her wife to sit down next to her.

“Well, I didn’t get around to telling you that I did find the perfect food for human celebrations. And very easy to prepare.”

“It’s hot dogs.”

The former archaeologist gasped, some of the blue draining from her face. “How did… maybe it’s…”

“Liara, I can smell them.” Shepard smiled as she reached over to pull the dome away from the tray. Sure enough, a plate of perfectly arranged tubes of meat sat on perfectly cooked pieces of bread.

“I did a lot of research into your culture, Shepard. I wanted to surprise you and make something you found comforting. If I did something wrong, just-“

“Liara.” Shepard put the serving dome down and raised her hand to her wife’s cheek. “It’s absolutely perfect.”

“Oh.”

Jane kept her hand where it was for a long moment, relishing the change in her perspective from the city, to the face she clawed back to life for. Twice. A few tears had begun to form in the Asari’s impossibly blue eyes, spurred on by the momentary embarrassment of possibly cooking something wildly inappropriate for the night. Shepard wiped them away with a very gentle flick of her thumb.

“So what’s the plan for today?” She asked.

“You’re looking at it.”

“What… this? Sitting in bed and eating?”

“Well, that’s not all we’ll do tonight, but for the most part.”

Shepard reached for one of the prepared slabs of food before turning to her wife. “What about all of those invitations to every social gathering in the galaxy?”

“Ignored.”

“What about Kaidan? Or Garrus? Tali?”
“They have their own celebrations to attend. They also understand why you need to be here. With me.”

“Thank you, Liara.”

Shepard didn’t exactly know when the fireworks and celebrations began, but she knew they lasted all through the night, and well into the next day. She, however, saw none of them.

As soon as they finished their meal, Liara activated her omni-tool. The bedroom, which had been open to the vista of New York and brightly lit by the sun, became dim and cozy. The windows themselves had turned opaque and thick, shifting from an unobstructed view of the skyline, to a massive vid-projector screen.

Instead of joining the galaxy in celebrating ten years of victory and peace with loud noises, explosions, alcohol or grand displays, the woman who personally saved them all enjoyed a quiet evening with her wife, her daughter and a few recorded vids of times long past.

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