Shepard's Grace

by briannetoma

Summary

When Captain Hannah Shepard faces Court Martial with the Alliance, Commander Jane Shepard must utilize every resource to save her mom's career, but when Shepard discovers The Illusive Man is involved, it's not only her mom's career on the line, it's her life, and the future of Commander Shepard.

An Illusive Man and Jane Shepard action romance.

All things Mass Effect belong to Bioware.

Chapter 1 officially started 30 May 2018. Posted as cleaned up first draft.

Notes

ORIGINAL Characters:
Captain Jimothy Robertson - Human, CO of SSV Kilimanjaro
Judge Vaughnus - Human, AJAG Corps, Judge for Captain Shepard's case
Lieutenant James Castleberry - Human, AJAG Corps
Mandy - Human, store owner and seamstress
Bart Roberts - Human, man on Roe Station
Hanish Zhadny - Human, contact on Bekenstein and host of Exhale
Chris - Human, man on Gellix
Umino Rin - Drell, Henry's head keeper
Anake Driak - Drell, emergency medical technician
Loti Quis - Drell, spiritual guide
Neon - Drell, former sniper
Alandyra - Hanar, pilot and priest
Shalla - Drell, koto musician at party
Lilas - Drell, daughter of Umino

ORIGINAL Names/Places:

AJAG - Alliance Judge Advocate Group (official JAG is Judge Advocate General)
Mandy's Fineries - store
ACID - Alliance Criminal Investigations Department (official)
Roe Station - Cerberus project location
Exhale - environment/animal charity gala in Milgrom
Zaliokuz Sky Hotel - resort on Illium
Calamity - a pirate ship
SSV Patton - Henry Shepard's last command
Henry's Island - unnamed island on Kahje
Chapter Summary

Shepard nurses a hangover from her second day of leave after the events on Horizon. She receives a seemingly casual phone call from her mother. Shepard visits the Citadel and gets more than she went shopping for.

Chapter Notes

Song: "Spaceman" by The Killers
Two headache pills with a glass of water and she still barely survived the hours of debriefing in the head after what might have been the best night of her life if she had gotten laid. She squints from her half-buried face in the pillow and sees her aquarium blasting harsh blue light. At least she made it back to bed. Her bedside table screams spiritual intervention, as it holds an empty bottle of what once was glowing green, an open container of headache meds, and an untouched glass of water. It would've helped if she actually took the pills.

Shepard attempts sipping at the water to prep the throat for medicinal relief when her clock beeps at her--call waiting. No one calls her on her private line except people she keeps private. So, like a proper commander of the SR-2 Normandy who knows any phone call to her is important, she ignores it.

She jumps awake, staring at the clock, reading five missed calls. Shepard rubs her eyes; she doesn't remember falling asleep, but the water is gone, she didn't spill it on herself, and her head doesn't throb like it did. She pushes herself up; every muscle sore, dry, and groaning at her as she forces
them awake. For a while she just sits over the side, staring down at her feet. She didn't even bother taking off her boots last night. This morning? Whatever. She at least needs to change her socks. No need to change underwear as she recalls they disappeared. A bet, maybe. With who, though? It would have to be someone she trusted. She stretches then shoots her arms back down.

"Oh gawd," she winces.

When she manages a shower, and buttons the last piece of her uniform, her clock bleeps again. And this time, as if her computer sensed her walking around, lights up, and bleeps too.

Someone's insistent. Shepard hits the comms button on the table. It goes to speaker and the blue holoscreen pops up, scrolling three letters she didn't think she'd see today.

"Hi, Mom," Shepard says.

"Why didn't you tell me you were dead!?"

"Ah, Mom. Not on a Sunday."

"I may be a busy woman but I'm not that busy; to schedule some time with me is not hard."

Fresh socks, boots back on, Shepard walks out, grabbing her comms device, and hooking it around her ear. Her room system disconnects but now she can talk and show her face about the ship. She takes the elevator down.

"All you have to do is say 'Mommy dear, I wanna see you.' And I'll fly over, or you fly, since you got that new ship. What's it called?"

Shepard swings by the galley and Cookie already has a cup of coffee for her. Black, as she likes it. Not too hot, so she can drink it right away. She raises the mug and her brow in gratitude.

Shepard sips caffeinated turpentine, then says, "The Normandy."

"Galaxy's Smallest Diversity Convention."

She skips another sip.

"Mom!" she snaps.

"Kidding, kidding. Mostly. Didn't take Cerberus for alienosophes."

Cookie wraps a to-go bag of food for her. In routine, she always asks for the kiddie's meal, which to the cook is a delight because it's easy to prepare. She's all for cultural food, but sometimes a simple, Earth boxed lunch is all she wants. Brings back the comfort foods of home. Plus it makes great hangover food.

"They're not anti-alien, Mom."

"Of course not. Keep an eye on that Jack Harper."

"Who?"

"You know. The Illusive Man."

"Mom, you know his name!? Liara couldn't even tell me."
"She's not me."

"Clearly." An impressed tone slips out.

"What do we say?" Mom says singy-songy.

"Thank you, Mommy," Shepard sings back.

Cookie snorts. Shepard makes a jesting sneer at him and walks off with her joe and lunch back to the elevator, and toward CIC.

"You're welcome. I hope someone was around to hear you. It helps your crew to know you're still human."

"I am human."

"You know what I mean."

"Was scolding me the only reason for this call?"

"No, I—actually just wanted to hear from you. When I got the news I didn't believe it."

"You sure that's all? Mom, you know I've been around."

"I'm sure. Don't worry about me—fate of galaxy 'n' all that."

"Right, Mom."

Helm in sight. Shepard walks down the passageway. Most of the crew members along the computer lines are combat and communication specialists. They monitor the radar systems and make sure no blips show; they also send evil mail through the ship servers with attachments containing annoying video with catchy tunes. Some, not all, get forwarded to her by Tali or Garrus. Mostly Tali. Silly, silly Tali.

"Just don't forget how it used to be. When you go on leave, you stay with family, not sleep on the ship."

Shepard stops just behind Joker, who's logging in diagnostics, and arguing with EDI.

"I am with family."

"You're a great leader, daughter."

"Thanks."

A small burst warms her chest and flushes her cheeks.

"You must get that from me."

Warmth chills.

"Oh geez."

Joker turns in his chair. "Hey, is that—?"

"No it isn't," Shepard cuts him off.
"Hey, Mom!"

"Was that Joker? Did he get my recipe?"

In a kiddish tone: "Yes, Momma Shep. I did."

"What did he say?"

"If you wanna talk, patch into the pilot house. Then he can complain to someone else about his girlfriend problem."

"Girlfriend?"

"It is NOT my girlfriend. Ugh. I wouldn't even consider it, commander. Blegh. Bad enough women already get in your head. But an AI?"

"See what I started? Now I gotta give your adopted son his binky."

"I should go too, hon. You two play nice."

"Will do."

"Miss your cottage pie, Mom!"

Clicks comm off. Shepard glares at him.

"What?"

She shakes her head and skips ahead. "Did you hold a room near Neon Market?"

"Yeah. Got an extra key too. But I lost it. I might remember where it is if I don't have to do any 3Ms for a month."

"Bribing your CO?"

"Absolutely."

"Fine."

"Aha." Pulls card out of pocket and Shepard snatches it out of his hand.

"But for the rest of the year you'll do them with me." Shepard leaves.

"Ah, come on!" He protests.

EDI chimes in. "You've been had."

"Hush, not-girlfriend-material-you." He calls back as Shepard disembarks. "Have fun on another day of leave! I'll just be here, with the skeleton crew, and this AI, and a week straight of watch. Don't do anything you would do!"
Like question how her mom heard about her death and never freaked out? Never, Joker. Still. The thought rummages noisily as the two quarians hashing it out over a dress they found on a mannequin in the back corner of the shop.

Shepard made it to a lesser known ward on the Citadel, where she can find high-end styles for half the price. Not quite a colony market, but still honoring the sales, like Cyber Monday, only she likes to call it Shepard Sunday. (Not really. She just made that up.)

The fashion trends these days. What are they going to do to the dress? Cut it up and reuse it for—yes they are. They are going to cut it up and use the fabric to integrate it into their suits. Quarians use everything.

“This dress has a tear!” one cries out. “I’m not paying five thousand credits for this!”

“It wasn’t torn before you ripped it outta my hands, bosh’tet!”

They have great taste. The dress is a dark blue and bright red accents, something the Quarian would pride in: the boldness and flare. Shepard would have a hard time choosing which color is best.

The incredible need to shop takes her to a more quiet store.

It’s been two years since Sovereign and she can still smell the smoke and ash when she almost didn’t make it out alive. Kaiden’s voice was the first good thing she heard after that. The medics came second. Ashley’s funeral was the most peace Shepard saw. They had her wake at Shepard’s favorite bar on the Citadel and, to her surprise, a lot of aliens showed up. Classy, respectful aliens. And to think Ashley might’ve been paranoid. She could have cared more than the rest of them to have so many clink glasses and tell a short story. Shepard’s couldn’t make her tale, long, or short; she didn’t know what to say despite having a knack for rallying speeches. Maybe the hurt in her eyes was enough because everyone in the room understood the silence. She, at last, had said, “To Ash. To family. To sacrifice.” After several toasts—the seventh one was to Ash’s unscathed chestplate, the tenth was for her armory—Shepard believed people were toasting excuses to drink. Shepard then toasted Ashley’s hair products. “To silky smooth even on the battlefield!”

“To silky smooth!” everyone had cheered back.

That was her twelfth shot.

In the end, before Shepard made one of the hardest decisions in her life, Ash took a liking to the adopted crew. After five or six or ten drinks, Shepard fantasized about Garrus and Ash gambling on who would be the better shot. It would happen. Kaidan had agreed. Even though Kaidan hated Shepard later.

Horizon’s still fresh. Frozen faces staring into the sky—terror etched into them. Mordin’s force field to camouflage her strike team. And Harbinger talking like he’s monarchy. We are Harbinger. We are a douchebag glass cannon that hits like a bitch. Except when Mordin got hit. Shepard needed several medpacks that day. Don’t tell Mordin she kept him down for a while during the last
stand with that laser-shooting UFO. It was for his own good.

They finally got to Illium last week and saw Liara, who looked a little ruthless for wear. Something about Shepard must have rubbed off on her, or...that’s the real Liara coming out of her shell. She briefly mentioned how she was involved with Cerberus. She didn’t like hearing it. Maybe she should let Liara know The Illusive Man’s name. Maybe she’ll wait.

A small store enthralled her.

She’ll wait.

Mandy’s Fineries has a narrow opening with a holographic sign posted on the wall, moving with elegant, gold beams highlighting the white-toned name. When she walks in, the space is open and well-kept. Quality clothes revolve on wall racks. On the floor, Shepard inspects a fixed rack of black suits in the men’s section, with availability in Turian, Drell, and Salarian upon request.

A human with pink and white ombre hair pops out from her counter space. She wears enough foil and glitter to replace a warning light.

She says, “May I help you find something for your…husband? Father?”

Shepard glances at her. “Uh just browsing. Thanks.”

“You’re Commander Shepard, right? You forgot this last night.”

Shepard finds herself stroking the arm of a sleeve, and jerks away. “What?”

The girl hands her a wrapped box in a customized tote bag.

“Yeah, you paid for it, then ran off.”

“Was I with anyone?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Great. Well...thanks...uh...”

“Mandy. If you’re ever in need of my services again, you’ll always have a discount here. You deserve only the best.” She grabs a card from the cashier counter.

It seemed primitive in the holo-age, but vintage. How the store’s set up, Shepard likes vintage.

Mandy adds, “I also do military uniforms and ribbon racks. Whatever you need.” She winks.

Shepard slips the card in her cargo pants after the exchange. The battle dress uniforms (BDUs) always had great pockets, so when she’s out in town, it’s all about the pockets. She doesn’t have to carry a purse or bag, and everything is against her skin in case shit goes down.

She walks out.

Two Citadel officers stand in the way.

“Commander Shepard. Please, come with us.”

Shepard turns—the store’s empty—and turns back. “Look whatever’s in this bag, I’m innocent.”
They glance in the bag.

“Please, ma’am,” the left says.

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Shepard took a liking to Captain Bailey the first time they met over the security dispute. Has she thought about grabbing drinks with him? Every time she swings by. Has he noticed her staring in places other than his eyes? She wouldn’t know; she wasn’t looking. He’s a bit of a rebel with enough wrinkles to tell her he’s been around, and done things. Seen things. She’s never asked. But when she’s taken into a black room, some of that liking fizzes. They put her purchase by the door, out of reach, and almost out of sight with Bailey as a blockade. He leans on the table between them, one leg resting, and dangling his boot. He writes a note on a small paper piece, then sets the pen down for the mug beside it. He holds it against his bottom lip—it should be coffee, but it smells like whisky—and sips before speaking.

“Sorry about the cloak and dagger nonsense. I requested my men not mention anything in public.”

“What’s going on?”

He attempts another sip; it dribbles over the side—“Damn,”—and he wipes the sides with his shirt, then sets the drink down on paper. “Captain Shepard has asked to speak with you.”

Shepard thinks back on the incessant ringing during her hangover, then how her mother wanted to “hear her voice.”

“We just spoke this morning,” she says.

“I don’t see how that’s possible, Shepard.”

“How?”

“She’s detained until further notice. I have people looking into it, and it seems, so far, the Alliance has arrested her…for treason.”

“Treason!?” She jumps out of her seat but he waves her back down. It does nothing to her rushing blood, a need to punch something, kick something, anything.

Bailey mentions the Alliance requested to contact the nearest authorities immediately, but the nearest authorities would have been her omni-tool, or her ship. EDI would have mentioned something if Chambers hadn’t.

“How come I didn’t know about this when I was on the Normandy? How long has it been?”

“About twelve hours now. They have her confined to quarters. If she was my responsibility I’d let you see her. I’m sorry, Shepard.” He picks up his mug. Paper sticks to the bottom.

“No, no, no. I just spoke with her. How come you’re the one to tell me she’s in trouble. Unless…”
“You think this is a trap? I don’t know what to tell you, Shepard.”

He takes another sip, longer this time. One word faces her on the paper; it’s stained in liquid, but visible.

*Presidium.*

“Would you like me to get in touch with Admiral Hackett? I’m sure he can clear things up.”

“No.” She stands. “Thank you. I’ll talk with the Alliance myself. See what I can do for them.”

“Your call.”

On their way to the exit, Bailey hands her the bag.

“Uh if you need anything else, I’ll be here.” He pats her elbow, an acknowledgement appropriate among comrades in the Alliance, and with most species in general, but there’s something else to it.

Affection.

Bailey’s tactics aren’t transparent but he is a part of the bigger scheme of someone’s subterfuge. When Shepard leaves, officers stare at her from their desks, but once she stares back, they shoot attention to whatever paperwork they have to finish if they want to have their smoke break. Or whisky break, if they’re anything like Bailey.

So it’s not a trap but it’s a work-around trick to pull Shepard in certain directions. She doesn’t like to be played, but her mother arrested must have some people worried as much as herself, and that’s cause for secrecy. Shepard hasn’t realized her hands are shaking until she tries to contact Joker—she stops. Maybe using her omni-tool isn’t the best idea. No. She needs to keep up appearances.

“Joker,” Shepard calls, “contact the Citadel coordinator for AJAG and tell them they’re expecting me.”

“I’m sorry,” Joker says, “you were off-ship for an hour and you’re in *trouble*?”

“Not me, Joker. *Mom.*”

“Momma Shepard? Oh shit. On it, commander.”

The mug says to go to the Presidium. Can’t argue with Bailey’s mug.

*For fuck’s sake, Mom, what did you do?*
Shepard gets help from likely characters and new help arrives. Shepard learns more about AJAG, all while doubting the legitimacy of their charges against Captain Shepard.

Chapter Notes

Song: “Namir - Trailer Edit” - Deus Ex: Human Revolution

It’s as blindingly perfect as she remembers it a couple months ago. She takes a glass elevator, looking out over a crystal reservoir bordered with tree parks stretching out like wings. Shalta Ward has been able to adjust the day/night schedule but the rest of the Citadel is fixed in daylight hours. For aesthetics in Shalta, it’s mostly night. Presidium could have done it first after reconstruction, but higher-ups found workers more productive, and pliable in permanent day. People rest as needed, otherwise work continues. And if they have good pay, they don’t feel as overwhelmed. It certainly helps C-Sec but due to fixed lighting, criminals do not just come out when it’s dark. They make due in the fake sun, or they move to Shalta, where Silversun Strip is. She hears it’s lovely, though she doubts she’ll ever make it over there any time soon. Lovelier than all this white and… white.

Shepard presses her sinuses with her thumb and finger.

Anderson paces in front of his desk, reading something over when he notices the elevator doors close behind Shepard as she walks in. Her boot soles don’t click on the shiny floor unlike the last time she was here, in her dress blues with her constricting dress shoes. Bootcamp instructors ring in her ear: *if you can feel your toes, you didn’t tie them right!*

“Shepard!” Anderson drops his datapad. “Admiral Hackett’s filled me in. This is a serious offense.”

“What do you know?”

“As much as he can send me. Hackett has been gracious enough to confine her to his condo in Alliance housing. I can take you there after her hearing.”

“Who charged her?”
“Her CO, Captain Robertson. But, Shepard, there is solid evidence, and they plan on presenting it full force at this hearing.”

“They?”

“The other admirals. Hackett agrees with me that there is no time for this nonsense. The Reapers should be priority, but you know the Alliance. They left you in cold space. I cannot deny that they’ll deny this reality as much as the Council does.” He rests a finger under his lip, his elbow rests on his arm. “How did you get wind?”

“Bailey. I was told I needed to see you.”

“See me? I would have thought you’d go directly to Legal, not me.”

“That was the plan but I’m getting…messages.”

“Messages? Covert? That’s odd. Unless it’s a way your mother is communicating with you.”

“I don’t know. But someone wanted me to come here.”

“It’s just me, Shepard. I haven’t seen anyone or anything else here all day.”

“What about yesterday?”

“Fishing at Bachjret’s virtual pond. Sorry, Shepard, I don’t know anything more.”

“Think you can take me to see my mom?”

“Absolutely. But I must warn you. You being with Cerberus will severely limit your involvement, if you’d be allowed at all.”

They walk to the elevator.

He points at the bag, “Mandy makes some great suits. You got good taste.”

“I hope so.”

The doors open. An Alliance officer stands in the cab, flashing glances at Shepard and Anderson with dull brown eyes.

“Commander? I’m Lieutenant Castleberry.” He speaks as if half his mouth is glued shut. “An honor.” They shake hands when they meet him in the cab. “I took the expedient liberty of finding you. Please follow me.”

Castleberry presses for bottom floor, then the door lock frantically.

“What’s the urgency?”

The elevator descends.

“Captain Shepard’s hearing starts in five minutes.”

Anderson says, “Already!? Who the hell moved it?”

“Captain Robertson. Hackett’s trying to delay but he’s tied to the rules. We all are. There’s something else. Captain Shepard has requested Councilor Anderson as her counsel.”
“First time I’ve heard it,” Anderson says.

“First time Hackett pushed to allow it. It adds more people on Shepard’s side, which isn’t much, but quality over quantity. Not many like the prosecutor.”

“Where are they now?”

“Captain Shepard is being escorted to the court hall.”

Shepard moans. “I hate today.”

“And mine started so cheery,” Castleberry says. “Sunday morning, about to binge my sitcom, and I get a call to come into work just as I heated my frozen dinner.”

“Where is it?”

“Probably still in the microwave.”

“The hearing, Castleberry!”

“AJAG—not far from here. I will assist Councilor Anderson.”

“Were you the lawyer detailed to this?”

“Hackett chose me. I’m your second chair.”

“Quality over quantity.”

The elevator descends to the lower numbers, meaning court would be the same level as the gardens, which is pleasant. She turns and sees the wings of trees lengthen and grow taller. Her omni-tool chimes.

“Shepard,” EDI hails, “there is a squadron of unlisted personnel closing in on Captain Shepard’s location.”

“Friendly?”

“I read multiple unregistered weapons. I believe they intend to stop the hearing permanently.”

Joker chimes in. “That means get in there and save the day! And save my pie!”

Shepard calls C-Sec. “Captain Bailey.”

Bailey answers, “I’ve mustered my people and they’re heading toward the court hall. Hurry, Shepard. I don’t know what kind of threat we’re dealing with but if it’s about your mother, it’s big.”

“Good work, thank you.”

“Just get your ass over there; I’m not losing any Shepards on my watch.”

Anderson pulls his M-3 out—“I think he likes you.”—and Shepard copies, missing her M-98 Widow, but content with this short barrel.

Shepard ignores him. “How’d they get passed Citadel defenses and C-Sec?”

Castleberry offers, “When we kill ‘em, let’s ask ‘em.” Shepard stares long enough the brain light

The elevator VI says, “Presidium. Ground Floor.” The doors shift and Castleberry takes point.

Shepard has no time to enjoy the view. But the function has her on edge; open bridges, multiple doors, and sharp corners. She can’t see anything beyond a few feet, and when Castleberry gets them to the reservoir, she’s vulnerable. Representatives and desk clerks get startled as they move by, guns drawn, aimed down. Sorry, children. Adults at work.

“Through here,” Castleberry takes them across a bridge.

All’s silent. She checks the sky. Empty. For good measure, she checks the water. She can feel the presence of her battle with Saren everywhere, repaired and covered up as if it never happened. Politics, as Ash would say.

“Any readings?” Anderson says.

“None,” Shepard says.

Castleberry takes them through a door, into a lobby of confused and—now—scared workers.

“Sir?” An Asari receptionist squeaks.

“Precautionary,” Castleberry waves her to sit as they leave the lobby and into a mezzanine. Across the way is AJAG, a small label above the doors reads Alliance Judge Advocate Group.

Oh that’s what the G is for.

“They’re closing in, Shepard,” Joker says. “Readings from east entrance.”

Shepard’s blood throbs. Her mechanics cool the sizzling adrenaline coursing through her, but it doesn’t stop her racing heart. It beats strong and loud, as if every courtroom would be able to hear.

Shepard whispers, “I don’t see anything.”

Then she hears it. A commotion. Angry.

She taps Castleberry and moves ahead. She lines herself against the door frame under the AJAG sign. Ear toward the wall.

“That’s a lot of people in there,” Castleberry says.

“Easy, lieutenant,” Anderson says. He motions him to get behind him as he takes the other side of the door.

Shepard tightens her grip, careful not to get her finger into the trigger (cage) until she’s ready. She breathes in slow, taps the door access—it opens—she peeks in, head to wall, one eye wide. The noise bursts out of the hall.

Several citizens hold up posters on makeshift poles and holo-banners that creatively tell the Alliance where to shove it, but more importantly, support for her mom.
“Is this how you treat grieving mothers, humanity!?” A Turian female shouts.

She failed to mention to the public that she is alive. It was safer to stay dead, but now it’s quite inconvenient.

Shepard relaxes off the wall and holsters her gun, then hails the Normandy. “It’s a group of protestors. EDI, what kind of unregistered weapons did you pick up?”

“C-Sec allowed me to acquire a large database of potential threats, however, I could not scan precisely what.”

“EDI, they’re sticks.”

Anderson and Castleberry holster their weapons now.

EDI delays her response. “Unregistered sticks.”

Bailey calls. “Shepard, false alarm. But I dunno how they got passed security. No one but officials are allowed in that vicinity.”

C-Sec has the crowd surrounded now and starts pushing them back slowly.

“Don’t let this drop your guard,” Shepard says.

“Will do.” Bailey disconnects. “My people will get them out of there.”

“It could have been a distraction,” Shepard says to Castleberry and Anderson. “Eyes open.”

“Ma’am, the Councilor is due in court. We gotta go.”

Conflict tears her in two, one to stay, and one to sit in on the hearing. Both help Mom, but which is more survivable?

“I’ll stay with C-Sec.”

Castleberry transfers something from his blue omni-tool. “Here. Access to live feed.”

“Is that legal, legalman?” Anderson inquires.

“Oh I’m sure there’s a loophole somewhere,” Castleberry winks and walks Anderson ahead of him into Courtroom 3.

Shepard snatches a glimpse through the door: Admiral Hackett and who she assumes is Captain Robertson, and female dress blues with a neat bun of dark hair.

Her heart jumps. Blood races and light-headed rush floods her head.

*Mom!*

She steps forward—

Mom examines the room, the opening door attracts her eye, Anderson and Castleberry approach her, she nods, she looks back at the door, through the door, right at her.

—and the doors close.

She stops. It’s the first time in years since she’s seen her. And two years are void.
Hang in there, Mom.

Shepard curses. She left the bag in the elevator.

“Councilor Anderson.”

Hackett’s voice locks her attention to her omni-tool as she resteps toward the elevator. If she had worn her visor this’d be easier. But the audio feeds into her ear device to ensure privacy.

“I apologize for my tardiness, Admiral.”

“No apologies necessary, Councilor.” They shake hands between tables. “Traffic can be hectic this time of day.”

Someone looking like the bailiff announces to the room, “All rise.” Everyone in screen remains standing but at attention. “The Honorable Judge Vaughnus presiding.” A grim, beastly man in sharp dress blues steps behind the bar, and sits in the judge’s chair. He wears his hair tighter than Bailey’s.

Shepard almost makes out the prosecutor’s table. That must be the commanding officer of Mom’s ship.

The judge orders the tables to sit.

Judge says, “Hearing for Captain Hannah Shepard, Case 404-1, proceeding. Captain Shepard, you are accused of treason in the highest offense, by Captain Jimothy Robertson, Commanding Officer of SSV Kilimanjaro on two accounts: (1) destruction and the unauthorized distribution of federal property and (2) espionage, the selling of military information to the paramilitary organization known as Cerberus. This Article 32 is to assess the grounds of a General Court Martial trial. Who represents you?”

Councilor Anderson acknowledges. “I argue for the trial’s dismissal on grounds of no valid evidence.”

“Very well. The Investigative Officer may proceed.”

Lieutenant Castleberry traverses the well. “Thank you, Your Honor,” he says.

Anderson looks at him the same way Shepard looks at her screen.

“Well that’s something,” Anderson says.

Castleberry ignores him and the stabbing glare. The judge slides his fingers across his desk, more likely the case file. Castleberry waves his omni-tool, transferring it to a projection between the defendant’s table and the bench. It’s a collage of memos, e-mails, and classified photos. The photos look like petri dishes, tubes, and a shipping manifesto and receipt.

Castleberry talks, “Captain Shepard is accused of maintaining an exchange of information with Cerberus on account of her late daughter, Commander, and Former Spectre, Jane Shepard of the SSV Normandy. This evidence proves the exchange.”

“How does it prove anything, Lieutenant?” Anderson says.

“The letters were encrypted. Alliance CID worked on a key and one of the key signatures in that decryption belong to Cerberus exclusively.”
“Someone could have planted it there!” Anderson squeezes his fist and points it at the coding in the screen.

The judge allows the evidence and Castleberry continues, rotating to the photographs.

“CID received this an hour ago after extensive digging on behalf of the prosecutor. Not only was Captain Shepard in communications with Cerberus but also donating unfertilized eggs.”

Shepard stops, a room away from the elevator. She leans against an unoccupied desk.

“Those are potential human beings, Your Honor,” Mom says, “not federal property!”

“So it is true?” the judge says.

“Request validation of how exactly these photos were acquired!”

A young, blond paralegal emerges and scans the files with her datapad. “It’s legitimate,” she says.

“You have no right to bring this into the case,” Mom says. “That is personal.”

“As personal as your ties with Cerberus after your daughter died,” her commanding officer states, after being silent the entire time. He leans over the table, then turns his head to her. “All of this, to you, is personal.”

“That evidence you have has nothing to do with this hearing! Drop it, Jim!”

“See?” Captain Robertson folds his arms and leans back in his chair.

Admiral Hackett says nothing.

The judge warns, “I advise you against raising your voice and to keep the honor of the courtroom.”

Mom sits back down. “However, I agree with the defendant. What’s it to this case?”

Castleberry swipes to the memos.

“Within the communications, Cerberus and Captain Shepard agreed to a shipment of parts, along with the information Cerberus obtained from Captain Shepard—the final location of the SSV Normandy, forwarded e-mails about the Alliance’s denial to recover the Normandy between her and Admiral Robertson, up to the knowledge of Shepard’s remains, which were in constant transit, and constant radar without the Alliance’s knowledge.”

“Her knowledge of where her daughter’s body went will be in question, but what about this present evidence?”

“Article 108. When Captain Shepard, owned by Alliance Navy, placed her genes up for shipment without proper authority, with the receipt digitally signed by her, in Document Material One—” He swipes to DM-1, “—she willfully, and knowingly, shipped Alliance property to Cerberus. ‘Precious cargo,’ she states in DM-5 and DM-6, then twice in DM-7, followed by ‘save my baby.’”

Mom sits through the accusation, staring at nothing but the table, and her glass of water, one document sliding through the air until the judge is done looking. Then, she looks up, and when a silence falls on the court, she speaks.

“What if it had been your daughter, dead in space, and the people, the place you put your years into, told you there’s nothing they can do?” She glares at the judge, tears brew in her voice—it’s all Shepard can sense from what she sees.
Her mom is breaking.

The dress doesn’t matter. She should be in that courtroom. Shepard pushes her hand against the pressure in her chest—it’s hard to breathe. Shepard forgets the dress and makes way to the courtroom again.

Castleberry avoids eye contact but the judge watches her, tapping his finger.

“What took these photos?”

“The eyewitness, Your Honor.”

“No shit.” He taps his finger faster, faster, then stops. “Who ever took these photos needs to be a part of this hearing or I will throw it out. It is not enough for this case due to the seriousness of the prosecution.”

“Eh, Your Honor, the eye witness covertly brought the evidence to CID on behalf of egregious conditions that the Alliance would not be able to comply with.”

“That is my call, lieutenant, not the Alliance. You brought the evidence into my courtroom. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“I need the name and contact information and bring him in.”

“Your Honor, if he were alive—”

“What do you mean if?” Now his knuckles rap on his desk. “Do you have a witness or not?”

“The facility was attacked just after these shots were taken, which means who ever attacked must have known of the defendant’s contraband. He most likely did not survive, nor the evidence.” Castleberry looks at Mom longer than usual.

She shakes her head.

The judge squints. “You’re trying my patience. Get up here. Now.” Castleberry hustles to the bench. “Has the Alliance looked into this attack? Do we know if it was an intentional assault on the ‘government property’ contained?”

Shepard tries to hear the bench, but the audio is stronger at the table, and she overhears Anderson and Mom.

Anderson says, “Or he did survive and the evidence is there. But wouldn’t you want to know what happened…again?”

Mom turns to him. “He could clear my name and my intentions but not the memos.”

“It’s your call. This witness is a wild card. It could go either way.”

Judge dismisses Castleberry, then says, “CID has confirmed the attack on the Cerberus cargo vessel outside the Voyager Cluster.”

Anderson says, “Alliance has probable cause to investigate. I can dispatch—”

The judge raises his hand. “Pirates are swarming the area. Too risky.”
“But my defendant needs that witness.”

“This might be more beneficial to not have him. On numerous burdens.”

“Burdens of what?” Anderson says. “She has a right to fairness and justice, including all evidence available. If he is still alive, we need to rescue him.”


“Easy,” Judge warns—

“Cerberus held no expense to recover my child, lieutenant! Just like any parent would have! But what would you know? You wreak of dorm room meals.”

“—Order—”

“You sure you want to ask Cerberus for a favor like this, even if it’s your AWOL husband?”

Shepard stops in her path, feeling five hearts throbbing in every other place except where one is supposed to be. A dizziness falls behind her eyes and she slowly lets her arm rest; the screen turns off; the audio remains. She can see the door to the courtroom as the last of the protestors exit with a mix of human and Turian security officers. She passes them, knocking into one, not apologizing, staring at the door, memories lost and coming back, then swirling around wanting to make her puke. She focuses on the door, then focuses on solving this sick feeling, the only way she knows how: a fight.

She barges into the courtroom, although she wishes the door had more dramatic flair. “I’ll do it!” Everyone turns and looks; the only one she cares about is—was—in tears. Mom wipes her eyes. Shepard aims for the bar.

The judge jumps to his feet, flailing his gavel and throwing a fat finger toward her. “Bailiff, get her out—Commander Shepard?”

The bailiff storms over.

“Stop!” the judge orders. “Shepard, you—how—of course you know.”

“I’ll get Captain Shepard the witness.” She eyes the bailiff next to her. “And I’ll do what I can to salvage the remains of your so-called Alliance property. No expense to the Alliance.”

“On who’s authority, commander?” Castleberry says. “You are no longer a Spectre and Cerberus won’t let you rummage through their stuff.”

Shepard was going to ignore Castleberry altogether, be on her way out to blow up some pirates, and save the day. Was. She turns and when she faces him, he begins to tremble, and she closes in, enough to smell that week’s worth of TV dinner trays sweat out of him.

“That’s my dad you kept from me.” She feels her knuckles taut against her pale skin. Everything throbs. Her ears swell and her arms pump with malice. She hears a faint ringing but resists. “Think about whose family you’re screwing with.” She turns back to the judge and the ringing fades.

The judge proceeds, “Commander Shepard, if you can provide evidence, this hearing is granted a continuance until further notice.”

"What?” Captain Robertson protests. "She's a conflict of interest! She might coerce her father, taint
the evidence. Need I remind everyone he's wanted for desertion."

"So Alliance won't mind to confirm his death or bring him back into custody." Judge finishes conclusion, "Captain Shepard will remain confined to quarters. If I don’t hear from you in five days, I will waive this hearing entirely and move to trial. I will not wait forever. And neither will the Alliance."

“No, they’ll just wait two years.”

The judge bites his cheek, then cracks the gavel. “Good luck, Shepard.”

Both Shepards answer, “Thank you.”

Shepard looks at her mom’s shackles. “Mom—” The bailiff walks in front of her and takes the captain toward an approaching company of guards. At least four, including a salarian with a few scars. Bailey’s men.

“Sorry, Jane,” she says before she’s all but pushed away into the center formation.

Shepard watches her go. The guards about-face through the side door. It opens and two fresh uniforms hold the entrance and the formation gradually disappears. Shepard blocks out Anderson’s verbal support, but lack of pull in the matter. Just like before. Hackett wants to stay informed but her mother’s words careen off the thought train tracks. That’s two Shepards feeling betrayed by their military. They do everything for the Alliance; the Golden Geese. And when the golden geese stop laying golden eggs?

Let’s say they dealt with Shepard’s death the same way her dad dealt with Mom.

And now he might be Mom’s ace in the hole.

They got the a-hole right.

“Joker, prep the Normandy. Chart course for Voyager Cluster.”

“Garrus! Get that tu-tu on because I told you so!”
Shepard thinks to locate a cab as she leaves the courtroom and surveys the main hall. C-Sec did their job, including keeping the press out. She can see Al-Jilani outside the windows talking to her metal turd. Her best bet is taking the elevator, but the other floors might have even more press. Admiral Hackett’s home, (one of many probably), shouldn’t be far. He might have a private car. Or he might have a private word seeing as he’s on the prosecutor’s side by military requirement. She’s about to take the elevator choice when she notices the three officers take her mother into one of the armored patrol cars located on the other side of Courtroom One. Shepard moves toward them as she feels an off-putting sense, like when her shirt doesn’t sit right on her shoulders, but it’s her insides.

The Salarian opens the door—she can’t see his scars this far away—and he speaks to the driver wearing a matching uniform but human with white hair.

Tingles graze her neck.

Shepard lengthens her stride. Mom gets into the the back seat. Shepard's a room length away when the doors close and the car flies away, leaving an officer behind, who walks back toward the courtroom, not even glancing toward Shepard’s direction. Another car pulls up—no one inside—a cab. She glances back—the officer is gone but Castleberry approaches, not noticing her at first with his head down, reading over a file. He’s two arm lengths away before he looks up and stops, and rolls his eyes.

“I truly wish you would have trusted me, commander.”

“You lied about your position and you lied about my father.”

“Did not—”

“And you threw horrible accusations in the judge’s face and you want me to trust you!”

“Yes!” He’s careful not to touch her as he passes to crack open his cab door. He stops and turns
when she keeps talking.

“You think this case will put you in good graces? Get you a promotion?”

“Time in Service, commander. I have nothing to gain but apparently your faith. Here,” he offers the door. “Take my cab. I’ll hire another one.”

“Pass.”

“I insist.” He opens the door further—her bag from the store sits in the passenger seat.

It entrances her, pulls her into the car, and Castleberry leans in before letting the cab go. “You surprised me, though, Shepard. I would’ve punched me in the face.”

After she hears the shift-lock of the automated car, a voice—her voice—tells her to check the bag. It wouldn’t have a bomb in it. This bullshit is too complicated for that. It rests at her feet now so might as well. A loosely folded black dress lined with red accents lies in the open box on her lap. Peeking out of the open zipper seam is a card. She opens it.

Wear me.

“Hard pass,” she says.

Shepard scans for cameras, then checks outside. Castleberry’s gone. And the car isn’t moving.

“Admiral Hackett’s home.”

Nothing.

Well, she is on leave. And someone did get her something pretty.

She rotates her boots over her uniform after putting it into the box, back in the bag, then zips the dress down to close the back, not up like most dresses. Ooh. Extra sexy. Nothing else was in the bag so she supposes she’ll clash military with civilian until she buys the set.

It’s a midi bodycon and accentuates her best features, and freeing her chest with an angled neckline. The fabric appears leathery but it’s lightweight and sleek; when the light catches it at certain angles she can almost see reds and greens in the threading. A ghostly holographic print. She strokes the highlights, seeing if she can bend the color—a bright blue VI ball pops through her fingers.

A male voice emits, “It’s good to see your priorities aren’t materialistic.”

The car prepares, warming the systems, locking in coordinates, then gently takes off.

It’s not a chill up her spine; it’s a heat. “Illusive Man,” she says.

The spinning ball floats from her chest and projects her investor and, she supposes, her mission coordinator, but she’ll die before she calls him her boss. He’s just the one with the money who happened to have enough of it to bring her back to life. Whoopie-doo. Mom had called him Jack Harper. It would sound odd if her daughter started to without a base. Illusive Man fit him. His projection sits him in the driver’s seat, but his legs don’t match the angles; he must be sitting in that chair he likes so much.

She eyes him as she speaks, “Sorry to say it, but Moms before Proms,” watching him take a sip
from a glass she can’t see, “Why are you in my dress?” then taking a drag from between two fingers.

“I needed a way into the Citadel Tower unnoticed.” He exhales. “Mandy is the best seamstress I know.” The projection keeps looking ahead, as if he’s driving with his mind, or just avoiding eye contact.

“Castleberry one of yours too?”

“He is your Miranda in Legal. He may not be good with a firearm, but ruthless with a book. You can trust him.”

“He’s a lying dick.”

“And he won’t be the last.”

Shepard looks out the window; they’ve left the Presidium. “Where are we going?”

“Where no one can track us.”

“What the hell?” She’s headed toward a reconstruction area. “What is this? What did you do with my mom?”

“Everything to keep her alive, Shepard.”

“How much danger is she in? Is this about Henry?”

“We can speak more where it’s secure.”

“Like hell. You could have mentioned this on the Normandy. Used your satellite phone, or even shown up in person to prove good faith. But no. I’m talking to one of your blue balls and yes that means two things!”

“I have everything—” He glitches out, then flickers back on. “She—pard?” Interference distorts his voice, mixed among digital tones.

Shepard speaks to her omni-tool, “EDI, can you clean this up?”

“I will do my best,” EDI says. “I’m reading another signal. It’s trying to narrow your location but I cannot block it.”

Illusive Man attempts to talk to EDI, but his signal cuts out most of his words, leaving half-consonants; clicking sounds now. After a few seconds, EDI scrubs the interference.


“Wha—who!?” Shepard jumps into the Illusive Man—’s lap. She takes the Haptic Interface and Illusive Man retracts into the ball. It returns to her dress.

She zooms upward. The gyroscope freaks out, she ignores the readings, then veers left around a tower. Then forward into traffic. Day becomes night outside the Presidium ring. Bright lights with skyscrapers and trucks coming to, from, and above-across. Shepard takes in the view of wards wrapped around her, and buildings blurring past, like flying through New York City but this time with clearance.

“There,” Illusive Man says. He resets in the passenger seat, leaving her dress. Shepard lowers the
shuttle, toward an epicenter of heavy construction. “The old convention center.”

A mile ahead, the size remains daunting to most; once a popular place where she’d see aliens cosplaying as humans, and humans cosplaying as who-knows-what. It was the first time she saw an Elcor in make-up, though.

“I hope there’s enough parking,” Shepard smirks with a side-glance.

“Pre-paid meters,” he says.

It’s abandoned, locked until Illusive Man hacks in and the parking gate opens. She heads for it.

“Are you sure this is—”

Illusive Man’s gone. She pats her dress down. Ball’s gone too. She glances about the cabin. Nothing. She looks forward—the car glitches. “Shit!” It goes black. It falls toward the garage, a wall of glass panels for each floor. Third floor meets her skycar and glass shatters everywhere—the car fishtails down a ramp to the second floor, and over the side, passed an elevator, nose first. Shepard bangs her head on the roof, the tail slams into the ground, bucking her out of the seat. The car skids further down, and down to water—first floor is flooded.

Splash. Murky water creeps up the car and breaches the cabin—it shocks her. Like jumping into a pool after lying in the sun. Shepard finds the emergency hatch and turns it. She pushes. Door doesn’t open. She kicks it. Her bare foot throbs on impact. So does everything else. She lies back and kicks with both feet, using leverage from the seats. The door pops open partially—that’s all she needs. She uses her shoulder to push it up the rest of the way, and wades out. The flood is rib-deep, but only in certain parts of the bottom floor. She lifts herself onto the dry walkway, now soaking in the water spilling off her.

“EDI?” Shepard says, checking her omni-tool. After a breath, “Joker?” She gets her feet under her and carefully stands. A dull ache unveils across her head. She patches it with her palm but it won’t do anything without some meds and a stiff drink.

Shepard looks ahead; in the darkness are darker silhouettes. Dull illuminations from the outside fill through the glass panels and bounce off the disturbed water in front of it. Amongst the dark manifests a blue light. The VI ball finds her and out comes his image.

“I apologize for the deception,” Illusive Man says, “but I had to ensure our security.”

Heels click and echo throughout the garage. They stop just before the shadow’s edge.

“By drowning me?” Shepard snaps.

“Not you, the car. The VI created a small EMP, enough to shut down you and the car and anything following, but not the Citadel. Minor harm compared to what you deal with.”

“I’m sick of your shiny…” She walks up to it. “Blue…disco ball!” She swings through it—it flickers and retreats toward the shadow’s edge. Illusive Man’s holo-image stares at her. “Always risking other’s lives but your own!” She walks up to it again.

If thermal clips can destroy virtual drones, she can smash this virtual bug. She pulls back her arm and throws her fist into the ball—it strikes something firm, and clothed. The blue Illusive Man shuts off and glowing blue eyes stare back at her.

Shepard steps back.
Heels click and echo throughout the garage. Illusive Man meets her in the haze gray light. Water ripples dance across his skin and suit. Another silhouette moves out—she’s old but ages like wine.

“Mom!”

Hannah Shepard embraces her. No shackles, no C-Sec. She squeezes. Shepard squeezes tighter. She remembers her smell. It’s warm, it’s sweet, it’s home. Even in a dank place like this, wherever Mom is feels safe.

“Do I have your faith now?” Illusive Man says.

Now it begs more questions.

“Why are you here?” she says after Mom lets go.

“Dear,” Mom says.

“Oh no, Mom. Don’t start with that.”

“He’s helping me, Jane. I needed my own proof that I’d be safe and wouldn’t help him until he helped me. I didn’t know how safe until he showed up personally. I feel good about it.”

“Doesn’t answer my question, though. Why. Is he. Here?”

Illusive Man turns. “Maybe I’ll answer that when we’ve found your father.”

Shepard folds her arms. “Is what they’re saying in the court true?”

Mom paces. “In a…way…yes. It’s true.” Shepard rolls her eyes. “But!” She points. “But. I did it for you. And I only traded secrets pertaining to you, nothing else.”

“Nothing else!?” She scolds. “Mom!”

“Ms. Lawson needed your memories. I was there to verify.”

“And Liara? She recovered my body.”

“Yes I might have helped with that as well. A little bit.”

Shepard puts her head in her hands. The bump throbs worse now. “So when you called me, you were…?”

“Making sure what I did was the right thing.” Mom pauses. “And I wanted to hear your voice.”

“How did you call?”

“Hackett has a good heart. He knows this is all bullshit compared to what’s out there.”

“Dad’s out there.” She crosses her arms again and looks at her feet.

“He needs our help if he’s still alive.”

“I thought you were done with him.” Shepard adjusts her damp dress; it sticks like extra skin.

“I am. Now I need him to turn himself in.”

“I heard but I don’t believe it. He went AWOL?”
“After reports of your death he…went missing. Him and his crew.”

“And emerges taking photos of your shipments. What’s going on, Mom?”

“He must’ve found out,” she says. “I can’t…I can’t lose our family.”

“So you froze some eggs?”

“It sounds sick when you put it like that. I was…I was just trying to help.”

“You did,” Illusive Man says.

He takes her mom’s hand, and caresses it, which makes Shepard’s face burn. She could grow a horn where the bump is, and maybe impale him on it.

“We’ll get them back, your cargo, and your ex-husband.”

“Thank you, Jack.” She hugs him. …Hugs…him… “If it wasn’t for you my daughter wouldn’t be here.”

Shepard rolls her eyes again. “You better get going before Hackett notices you’re gone.”

“I’m sure that won’t be a problem. But yes, I should get back.”

The crew posing as C-Sec appear on an upper level, including Mandy, with the skycar.

Shepard glances at the car. “It’s gonna look strange hailing the Normandy from here.”

“I’ve got it covered,” Illusive Man says. “Hannah, we’ll see each other again soon.”

“You’re not—” Shepard uncrosses her arms.

“I am. I swore to your mother.”

“Don’t tell me you want her recipe too. God, let’s just find my dad and go home.” She looks him over. He stands tall, with a hand in his pocket, and the other resting at his crisp, smooth side. “Crew’s gonna shit themselves.”

A chill comes over her now that it’s just the two of them and the busted up shuttle. Shepard holds her arms and closes her legs together, and she overlaps her naked toes.

Illusive Man says, “EDI, pick up, please.”

EDI responds, “Right away.”

Shepard shoots a look at him.
Reasonable Doubt

Chapter Summary

Shepard and Illusive Man take on their first mission together. They learn their battle synergy and fight pirates!

Agebinium rests outside, a scarlet orb in black space that illuminates Joker’s field of vision. Shepard stands behind him as he turns his chair 180.

“Usually when people come back from leave they bring back ethnic coffee or homemade goodies. But not you. No. You bring back the puppetmaster. Is this going to be normal, Shepard? What would Momma Shep say?” He squeaks into a mock female voice. “‘You brought home a boy for me to disapprove? Why can’t he be like Mr. Moreau’s boy?’”

This is the last known location of the Cerberus facility named the “Roe” station. She says the word and their shuttle goes off to fetch her father’s corpse—it’ll be frozen if the facility’s power is off, or it’ll be rotting. EDI had reiterated, after going over the mission until Shepard felt comfortable with the plan, that it is more likely Henry Shepard has been captured, and the pirates will demand ransom. The Roe Station hovers starboard off the bow, listing in the right view panel. It’s nothing special. A straightforward facility like Lazarus, with two main docking areas, and one is already occupied with a repurposed transport ship.

“Maybe threaten em a bit?” Joker continues. “Tell em I’m only in this chair 24/7 cuz my balls are made of steel and it hurts to walk?”

And no hull code. Two turian cannons, Batarian guts, and Alliance shell.

Shepard swipes her omni-tool of the report and signals it off. “Joker, make sure that ship doesn’t leave.”

EDI chimes in, “There’s still a little time, Shepard.”

“They’ll be in a hurry once they figure out we’re here.” As she leaves the bridge, she adds, “Don’t threaten Illusive Man, Joker. He sits all day in a chair too.”

Joker combats snorting with laughter and makes several inaudible comments under his breath until she hears nothing but crew and tech as she passes through CIC and down the elevator to Miranda’s office. But one comment she did hear, and it repeats over in her head as loud as a raid siren.

“Hope Jack doesn’t find out.”

Tight quarters like a frigate leaves little room for secrets. Eventually, the denizen of the deep will hear about it, but that’s nothing compared to the image seared into her remade brain.
They hugged.

Things don’t add up and when she thinks she thought of two-plus-two another number pops up and she’s back to counting on her fingers. Her disheveled reflection catches her off-guard when she faces the door to XO’s office. Shepard reaches for the door interface—

“Sir, it is dangerous,” Miranda says, on the other side of the door, “I think you’re letting your emotions get the better of you.”

—and pulls her hand back.

“Your concern is appreciated but unnecessary,” Illusive Man says. “EDI has already covered our bases.”

“We can handle this side operation ourselves. With you here—if something goes wrong—no. Not on my watch. Shepard is a target enough with the Collectors.”

“I trust Shepard.” There’s a bite of sincerity.

Someone steps across the room. Their shoes click.

“So do I,” Miranda says, “but if I lose either of you…”

“You know what to do if that happens…but it won’t.” A pause lingers. Not even footsteps or a chair turning. Nothing. “Is my suit ready?”

A chair’s leather scrunches; someone’s shifted their weight or they sat down.

“You’ll find everything you need in the Armory locker, right next to Shepard’s.”

Her heart bounces against her chest. Shepard backs up and hugs—terrible word—the wall into the galley. Gardner stares at her. He’s leaning by the scullery full of recently washed dishes, stacked in rows. He finishes drying his hands after he acknowledges her.

“Howdy, cap’n. Got some cabbage rolls in the chillbox.”

“No thanks,” she says. “Not hungry.”

“That’s too bad. They make for a delicious excuse.”

That’s when the office doors shift and Illusive Man walks out, his steam-pressed back to her, heels clicking along the floor as he adjusts one of his cufflinks. He rounds the elevator and is out of sight when Shepard asks for a cabbage roll. She turns—neatly-wrapped foil greets her face.

Gardner grins. “Did you want sauce?”

Jacob always has her favorite guns ready for check-out, so when she gets to the Armory, it can be a fast transaction. Shepard signs the forms, focusing strictly on using Jacob as a curtain, and not the Illusive Man changing in the corner.

Shepard says for close-range listeners only, “Take my gear to Airlock, Mr. Taylor.”

Illusive Man pulls his white shirt off, revealing his bare back. Disgust jolts her mouth into a sneer.
“Ugh.” She swallows cabbagey bile. “Please.”

Jacob nods.

Shepard hasn’t changed in the airlock since the space program. A history lesson of how astronauts once prepared for outerspace. She’d change in her room if Jacob wasn’t so gungho about protocol. And she wasn’t about to pull rank over ship security. That’s just douchebaggery. (I’m looking at you, Ms. CDO who refused to wash her hands before entering the chowline.) But Jacob’s all right. And now she’s dressed and customizing her weapons.

She coos at Snippy-Boom-Splat, her new rifle, when Miranda walks in.

“Shepard, may I speak freely?” Before Shepard can answer, she says, “I don’t approve of this. I certainly don’t approve of the Illusive Man coming aboard without me knowing beforehand! He is my boss. It is my job—”

“Whoa, Miranda,” Shepard lies down Snippy. “I understand. This got thrown at me too.”

“Then you know—”

“I know you wanted to see Oriana safe. And…?”

“Point taken, commander.”

“I’ll bring your boss back whole.” Shepard pats Miranda’s arm.

“I just wish you could understand my point,” she says.

“What do you mean?”

Miranda’s attention turns to the footsteps coming up the neck of the ship. She must know the walk, because she crosses her arms and steps back into a corner. The room is cozy enough for two. Now the doors open and it’s three.

Illusive Man stops in the airlock frame, catching the aura that he’s interrupted a moment. Shepard looks for words to describe how ridiculous he looks. He’s wearing dark-plated armor, specialized for soldiers who aren’t shocktroopers, but still need flexibility to run like in the Kestrel gear. It’s a play off the Cerberus assault armor he sent her, but all black with lined white accents, blue lights, and a gold visor, with a touch sensor for manual tinting. His Cerberus insignia rests over his heart with an added design of three dots making a triangle.
“Hey,” she says. She’s still looking for them.

He taps his visor open. “Commander.” He strolls up to the weapon bench almost before Shepard could get Snippy out of the way. “Ready when you are.”

“Dr. Chakwas said you refused to see her.”

“It’s a waste of time. We need to do this now.”

“I insist. A pain stim will curb the pain you’ll feel long after this.”

“I may be older, Shepard, but I can hold my own.” He turns with a smooth adjust of the hip and she tries not to notice. “More than you know.”

“All I’ve seen you do is smoke and drink and boss people around from your ivory tower. Now’s a perfect time to be humble before your weak ass gets me killed or worse.”

Miranda tries. “Can we please not fight?”

Shepard’s convinced she can break that helmet with her own—she only needs five inches. She steps up to him. There’s the five, now she needs force.

“Enough chest-thumping, Shepard,” he says, not moving, “We both know you have more of it.” He
flashes a smirk.

“Guys,” Miranda says.

Shepard checks her plating. “Clearly less than the one in front of me.”

“Guys!”

“Th—that’s what I said,” Illusive Man says.

Miranda gives up. “Joker, ready the Tweedles for launch into the station.”

Shepard hears her leave. His blue face orbs enrage her and she wants to rip them out of him, but something has her stuck, invisible, and she can’t look away.

“I’m your slackman, Shepard. I won’t overstep your command.”

“We’ll see when you’re getting shot at.”

Before the shuttle departs, EDI initializes a temporary heat sink. Shepard’s unsure what that entails, but the gist shows when they leave the Normandy, and the stealth field lingers. Enough time to breach without being noticed. Roe Station shines silver in the scarlet light of Agebinium. A recent station because she doesn’t remember it. As they approach, she gives herself a mental overview.

Snippy: center mag-sling.

Main: left center.

Side: hip.

A meditative tactic before her adrenaline kicks in and she’s forced to battle her insides. She checks Illusive Man, who sits across from her. He would have made it easier if he allowed another squadmate. Or four. This must be some secret.

Joker radios in to their helmets. “Isn’t that the planet with that ay-hole pirate who tried nuking you?”

“That’s the one,” she answers.

Illusive Man looks at her.

Joker says, “Whatever happened to the ol’ sea salt?”

“He died, Joker. Just like everyone else who screws with me.”

Illusive Man doesn’t blink. He’s abnormally quiet. But the shuttle signals them and she readies her semi-auto rifle, Garrus’ second favorite, and the bloodrush kicks in her fingers, and the shuttle feels hot but there’s a chill on her neck. She takes in a deep breath, nods to Illusive Man—he stacks beside her, Cerberus rifle ready, visor down with dense reflective gold tint—she slaps the holog latch, and the door shifts open.

A long shaft into the station is empty. A railing reaches halfway and meets the white top cover of the shaft. It’s a short walk but dangerous—no cover but a small frame around docking small bay
doors.

EDI says, “All exterior clear. I detect movement inside, however.”

Shepard says, “Good to have you in range.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

Illusive Man squeezes her arm firmly where part of her armor is fabric. He’s old school. It almost surprises her. She understands, though, and goes ahead. They jump out and the shuttle breaks away, once inside, the airlock shuts, and Shepard switches her ammo. Pirates have a tendency to wear stolen gear, usually expensive plating. They also are varied in style. She takes up the Warp, Illusive Man switches to Cryo. He keeps a space between them as they approach the second door with her muzzle up. They cover both sides. Tight space. She waits. EDI says nothing. Space can mess with your head. If it wasn’t for the station’s generator, she wouldn’t hear anything at all, then her mind would start hearing things regardless. As long as she remains grounded, he’ll make it.

She’ll make it.

Visor reads heartbeat in the 70s and climbing; it feels like she started a race three miles ago. Another deep breath. Finger on trigger, boot against door frame. She slaps the door. It opens.

Station runs, electricity inside on; their first room is a vacant waiting area, an office takes the far half, with desks, chairs, and a couple computers. Nothing moves, no shadows underneath, or on the walls. A few papers lie on a table. Shepard confirms her sector along the wall is clear, then moves to next sector, then EDI calls in.

“Shepard, I’m detecting movement in the starboard wing.”

“The hangar bay,” Illusive Man says. “They’re still hauling the cargo.”

“These are larger containers than Captain Shepard’s cryogenic egg supply and three times the capacity.”

“They could be cleaning out the place,” Illusive Man says. “This is a medical research facility.”

“We’re here for the evidence. No more, no less.”

He nods and follows behind for the next door. Left boot against wall, she switches to left shoulder, and right hand support.

“Shepard,” he points his rifle at a datapad two arm-lengths away from the wall on an L-shaped desk. She flicks up her helmet at it. He gets it and reads it over.

“No Henry but we got something interesting. Logged two days ago by Norma an Ganda, head of labs. ’New patient today. Bart Roberts. He claims he sustained heavy damage after his ship was commandeered by pirates. No sight of the pirates, or his ship, but docking crew logged a small vessel. It’s a piece of junk. But Mr. Roberts is charming and even if he is lying, those wounds aren’t going to heal themselves.’”

EDI calls in. “Bartholomew Roberts was an infamous pirate who was captured during his time in the Navy, then elected pirate captain. Later, he fought a British Naval captain to the death. He lost.”

“So he manipulates Norma to get inside, a medi-gel as a bonus, but that doesn’t explain the ship.”
“Perhaps that is the ship currently docked,” EDI says.

“If it’s a piece of junk, Normandy won’t have a problem.”

Illusive Man says, “I’d rather it not come to that, Shepard.”

Shepard slaps the door. Another white corridor, one ceiling light flickering—gunfire damage. Burns mark up the bulkheads. Shepard takes point and moves down to smell the residue; incendiary tech. It smells like an electrical fire collided with an organic, Mordin’s specialty. Up ahead is a crossing path, and leaning against the wall is a charred body. Her helmet can only filter so much stink before it overwhels, so she lengthens her stride, checks each path, and makes it to the next room. On the other side, automatic rounds shoot off—Illusive Man grabs her by her back plate and pulls her away from the door. She smacks against the bulkhead, probably his hand too, but he’s not showing it, and he rechecks his sector, then squeezes her arm.

Blood hammers against every rib in her chest. Deep breath, slap, muzzle up, wait for break in fire, and cloak. Her armor rematerializes her shield into a virtual mirror, rendering her and her rifle invisible. She watches the microscopic triangles lift away the color of her arms into everything around her, a silver-liquid nothing. She steps into the frame and counts.

One-one-thousand…

A mess of humans in Alliance and Cerberus uniforms takes cover in the elongated lab, using the machinery and counters to block most shots. There’s a chillroom to her right, medical beds with testing structures, and things that would poke and prod, one small hallway down the left, and a path between all the tech toward the bays. Shelves are filled with labeled glass. One is already knocked off its screws and shattered, liquid spilled everywhere.

Two-one-thousand…

A woman lies dead behind the nearest counter—easiest cover for Illusive Man—and a man with two pistols is stuck in the middle behind the poking machine. She takes the spot left of the body, along the open path.

Three-one-thousand…

She aims. Eye to glass, sees the top of someone’s head, tugs the soft trigger, and feels little kick as the gun fires, blood spurts, splashes on the glass room divider used as a writing board, and ducks down.

Illusive Man meets her side. He scoots the body all the way to the floor, out of his way. She looks like she’s sleeping.

“Stay in cover!” Shepard yells enough for the guy to hear. “Do NOT move!”

Guy responds, “Not moving!” The Cerberus medical uniform lessens the tension, but she can’t trust him yet. His response is a start.

The pirates sporadically fire. Illusive Man takes a shot, ducks, and Shepard checks—one more down. Shepard moves her muzzle around the corner, gets behind the gun, and fires. If she had done that with Snippy her arm would be dangling out of its socket. She can see why Garrus appreciates the finer makes.

One pirate shouts back, “You’re not getting out alive, Bart!”
Illusive Man squeezes her arm as she cloaks (One-one-thousand…) and part of him vanishes. He pulls back and the cloak peels and fades.

“Whoa,” he says and she glances back to see his fingers reemerge.

“You good?”

He nods.

Three-one-thousand. She plunges bullets into two targets closest to Bart, and three bullets into another target, further back behind a block. She scans her sector. One target remains and her cloak fades.

“Contact!” Illusive Man shoots between cover points, a narrow slit on his left, a man in blue and gray falls dead just as they flanked Bart from the bed.

“Room clear,” Shepard and ‘slackman’ say together. She flashes a look at him, then moves toward bart, muzzle down.

“You’re Bart Roberts?” Shepard keeps an eye on the room, but it looks like Illusive Man—she really needs to make him a short call sign—is doing his job.

“Who’s—” Bart gets it when he checks the Illusive Man. “Cerberus? You’re not from this station.”

“Are there any more?”

“Survivors, no. You’re lookin’ at it.”

So Henry’s gone. Nothing new.

“She meant pirates, Mr. Roberts.” Illusive Man—TIM?—tilts his head, then maneuvers behind Shepard, and pats her spine.

“Oh, all back in the bay still. I got as far away from them as I could. A lot of us didn’t make it.”

“All of them except you.” TIM casually mentions. (TIM better than putting his real name on her minty tongue.)

“I didn’t kill them! We were suppose to just steal supplies and go! Then the ship mutinied and everything went to hell, so I got outta there.”

“What’s the quickest way to those supplies?” Shepard says.

“Quickest way to the storage bay is through this way.” He points at the forward-facing corridor.

Joker radios in, “Shepard, you are already on the fastest route.”

“Are you sure?” Shepard says to Bart, but also Joker.

“Hell yeah, I’m sure. Just promise to take me off this nightmare.”

EDI grows concerned. “Shepard…”

Shepard extends her arm back and pushes him back, so she gains space. She raises the gun, shifting back to right shoulder, finger on trigger, shooty-end at Bart.
“Whoa!” Bart brings up his palms.

Two muzzles at him now.

“We’ll take you off the station right after we show us the bay.” She motions to the far door. “That way.”

“You’re crazy! They’ll kill me on sight!”

“Shepard will protect you.”

Terror strikes him. “Shepard!? But—oh shit!”

Bart nearly drops his hands—“Up where I can see ‘em!” yells TIM.

“Easy, easy!” Bart complies.

“You pass as a shitty Cerberus agent,” Shepard says, closing in, feeling up his back. She confiscates a loaded pistol. “Tsk, tsk. Up and away, Bart. We gotta meet your friends.”

EDI chimes. “Shepard, I’ve detected engine systems engaging.”

“Move it!” Shepard shoves Bart.

They break for the doors at the far end of the lab. TIM yanks Bart out of the way so Shepard can breach. He holds him by the scruff of his stolen uniform. Bart keeps his hands on his head, but sweat beads down his nose. Eyes wide, pupils dilated. He looks how Illusive Man should be, but he’s an eye of a storm.

Shepard calls herself out, then tells Bart to open the door. He slowly reaches for the panel, his arm trembles—

She yells, “Hurry!”

—He slaps the door open, Shepard walks in, but it’s too late to turn back around when she hears Bart roar “I’m not going back!” then the click of a small arm, and TIM shouting, “Gun!”

Her shield breaks with the first blast, the second blast shocks her. Pressure hits her back and she falls forward. TIM unloads, each bullet making a unique sound where ever they land, and Bart’s body falls. Shepard watches black boots scurry across the floor to her, then a tug from behind, and the tiles move underneath her. It’s another corridor, smaller than before, with a door reading “Bay 1-A, 1-B.”

“Shepard!” TIM says. He scoops under her shoulders and rolls her over, eyes bulging, fixed on finding the hole. He freezes, stuck in his mind for several shallow, quick breaths, and he sees something, and she cranes her neck down—nothing to see. TIM rips a pack of medi-gel from his armor compartment. He stabs her with it. That’s not gel—it’s a pain-stim.

She glares at him.

“You wore the dress,” he says.

“Did not,” she says.

TIM pinches her back, she would wince, but the stimulant works fast. He pockets what he finds and stands up, pulling her up at the wrists with his momentum, and steadies her until she shakes off
“Ready?”

Shepard nods and the hallway bends. Did he give her a dose for an elcor? She slaps her helmet and welds her rifle into her shoulder, then moves forward. TIM opens, Shepard storms in. The bay is three times the size of Normandy’s, with less stuff, and a crew of pirates firing at them. Not them entirely. A human wearing brown Drell clothes fires over the stacks of leftover containers that fortify his cover, but block him in.

No choice. Shepard chances their meet and ducks down, TIM copies. Her visor reads as long as she stays put, ricochet off the cargo won’t hit them, and keeps them behind the stranger. She doesn’t need another Bart.

“You should have stayed in the hallway!” the man yells over the gunfire.

“That ship cannot leave!” Shepard says. She sprays over cover without looking.

Across the bay, she spots a strip of clear panels looking out toward an empty dock.

“That ship has sailed, sweetheart.”

Her ears roar and she swears she feels her suit vent the steam. “EDI!” she yells.

Static.

“The lucky ones left with the cargo but I’ve trapped the rest of them here! Unfortunately I didn’t think of my own escape so we’re stuck here.”

Illusive Man tries opening the door.

“You can get in but you can’t get out. Heathens hacked the console to the entire room and drew me back here, but not empty-handed.”

“How do we get out?” Shepard says.

“That’s the fun part.” He waves a detonator he had by his feet. “But I can’t set the charges from here.”

“Charges?” Shepard looks at the bay. “That’ll kill us. All of us!”

“Just ride the wave, sweetheart, you can do it.”

She clamps her teeth down until her jaw almost feels the ache, then darts her eyes to the stack of explosives, and focuses on finding a way around without them noticing.

“I’ll keep ‘em busy.”

Shepard cloaks and jumps over the barricade. One-one-thousand.

“Neat trick!” She hears behind her.

Upon reaching halfway around the room, she glances back, Illusive Man fires a few shots and a pirate falls, but he keeps his gun primarily fixed on the man. He wears a breather mask with shades, which makes him sound Drell, but overcompensates.
Five-one-thousand. She hides behind the lone office desk in the corner, just another couple seconds away from where she wants. The airlock to the dock and the hinges along the panels prove weakest and she waits for her tech to recharge, before bracing the open space. It reaches one hundred again and she activates it, then jumps, and runs for the airlock. Only a pirate would think of blowing a station up; she nevertheless plants them on either side of the lock, and one up top, closest to the window. They materialize out of her invisible field and the man throws up a thumb, which almost gets shot off.

“Joker, if you can hear me, I need emergency evac!” The row of buttons light up on the charges’ primers. “NOW!”

She books it to TIM. Three-one-thousand…four-one-thousand…TIM leans over the barricade and holds out his arm. For once she’s happy to reach it. A symbol on an elongated container catches her eye. TIM snatches her hand.

“To the sea!” The man shouts.

The explosives detonate. All she hears is the violent suction of air as the boom resounds then falls to silence with the drop of air pressure. She’s lifted off the ground by the vacuum but TIM refuses to let go. He grapples the container with his whole body, folded over the top, gritting his teeth, but the container shifts with the pull. Shepard looks behind her and where the airlock once was is a giant hole, and broken off panels peeling into space with the last vestige of water vapor from the initial blast, and the last bit of pirates drifting into the black. One last one holds onto the edge of the lock, then mouths a scream she only hears in her head, and he’s spaced.

The man’s breathing mask grew into a full helmet. He’s flat against a piece of barricade that slides past her, all while he appears to be smiling with his eyes. He gives her another thumbs up, then when he’s close enough to the hole, he rolls off the cargo, and he’s blasted out. Shepard’s heart plummets into her stomach and she tries pulling her other hand up, but the pull is too strong, and all she hears is that horrible man’s voice in her head.

She hopes she doesn’t hit her head on the way out. The container gives and TIM crashes into her and the room blurs white, gray, then black and red. After the spinning stops, she catches sight of the Normandy closing in, but in space, 1000 feet is an ocean away. She holds herself, but there’s another suit in the way. Realization drains the heat from her face; her view has been over the Illusive Man’s shoulder. She leans away and sees the hole and the lights of the bay reflecting in his gold visor. She can’t see his face, but he turns his head, and she darts her eyes back to the Normandy, now only a pond away. The airlock opens and the rescue pole extends out.

“‘Follow the explosions,’ she said,” Joker talks passively about EDI, who had explained once they got inside, that she was temporarily jammed when they traversed the hacking signal. “Hey, look! Raining pirates! Is it my birthday?”

Not far from where the Normandy picked them up, she spots the man drifting along with his hands folded over his stomach, his ankles crossed, and eyes closed. Shepard snatches his arm but really wants to snatch his helmet, and pulls him into the shuttle. She’s sorry Joker missed hitting him, but Joker said he didn’t want pirate scum dirtying up his windows.

Joker pressurizes the airlock from the bridge and Miranda bolts into the room as the inner lock opens. “What have you got? Who is he? Where’s the cargo?”

TIM steps between her and Shepard. “Relax, Miranda. We have this under control.”

“Like hell,” she snaps. She points at the pirate. “I’m taking him to the brig.”
The man eases himself to this feet after contently sitting on the floor after his surfing experience. “Whoa, hey. No one needs to put me anywhere nice but I don’t deserve the brig. I helped you guys.”

“We don’t know that. For all we know you sabotaged the station and Shepard knows what I do to those people.” Before she raises another hand, Illusive Man braves her up close and personal, and mumbles that she can do what she wants later. Then says, turning to Shepard, “But for now, he belongs to Shepard.”

The man bows his head. He looks like he’s praying, but then he unlocks his mask, the helmet shifts into the plate, and the shades retract. He takes it away, revealing a face almost impossible. Ten years added, a long-worn tan, a clean shave, rough skin, and mossy green eyes.

“Hey, darlin’,” he says.

The mask no longer distorts his voice. With the Drell disguise gone, all that’s left is the past she wanted to forget, but instead it stares back, and all she can say is…

“Henry.”
Chapter Summary

Miranda peers into the past, Tali and Garrus drink, and Shepard hates a lot of things at once.

Chapter Notes

Song: "Heathen" - Halestorm

(Before...)

Illusive Man falls back onto the pillow, his lips parted, skin reddened, and damp. Besides the naked blue alien passed out next to him, the naked human who won her third medal just about earned her fourth. The Skyball champion slides away to rehydrate at the bar. Though none of them have acknowledged the fly on the wall, Miranda doesn’t make an effort to announce herself. She holds a report and remains just inside the door of Illusive Man’s private quarters, a spacious suite with the minimum essentials only her boss would deem essential. The bar being one of them.

“Can it wait, Ms. Lawson?” Illusive Man wipes his brow then reaches for a cigarette.

The girl turns her hip as she finishes her drink, measuring up Miranda with a curled lip.

“I wish it could,” Miranda strides over. “But you wanted to know immediately.”

He sits up and moves to the edge of the bed. Without blinking she hands him the file. He stinks of bourbon and sex and looks it too. As he reads, she watches his composure. She’s never seen him angry nor happy. Just once she might see that today.

He puts the report to sleep and hands it back.

“Whatever it takes,” he says.

“Sir, this isn’t one of your sex toys.”

“Miranda, whatever it takes. I trust you.”

The girl climbs back onto the bed and caresses his chest, then curls her way around him.

Illusive Man looks at her. “What are you doing?”
“I thought I could take the reins for a bit, babe.”

Miranda turns away, but she hears a squeak, and a gag. Maybe she walked away too soon. She’s almost through the door when something urges her to look back.

Illusive Man has the girl pinned downside, his pelvis pressing against her ass as he chokes her. Snobbery gone to shock.

“I told you I am in control,” he hisses in her ear.

Being loyal has its ups and downs but despite what other personnel might think, she’s never been under his control. Nor would she. The years she’s grown accustomed to this pernicious normalcy has taught her that her perfection isn’t nearly as desired as a woman who knows her place.

And it’s not on top.

(Now...)

Tali watches the straw spin in her drink’s centripetal force. She had docked in the lounge after finishing—would she believe it—calibrations with the human engineers. By now she was supposed to be up in the battery but got too hot in the suit and changed course. Fortune, or subconscious timing of Garrus’ predictable work schedule, smiles on her when she hears the door open. Her suit gets hotter and she sips deeply.

Garrus stands in the doorway. “Hold on, The Illusive Man was here and I missed it?”

He walks in and takes the stool next to her. Right next to her. His knee rests twenty-two centimeters—approximately—from hers.

“Spirits, damn me,” he says.

He leans over the bar and their knees touch.

Damn me.

“I need a drink,” he says, and self-medicates.

After sitting in burning silence, Tali says, “It’s almost like he wants Shepard to himself. Did you hear about the brief? A two-man breach! Is he trying to kill our Shepard?” She tilts a look at Garrus. Turian mouths don’t seal on human glasses well. “Try the induction port. It takes in the alcohol faster.” She slides an extra straw over and Garrus cheerily takes it with dancing fingers.

He’s down half a glass when he speaks again. “Or he wants fewer witnesses to whatever scheme he’s...scheming…” His mandibles twitch when he hears the door open, but he doesn’t check. Maybe his visor already read her.

Miranda stomps in, straight behind the bar, snatches a bottle, a tall shot glass, and pours. She slams
the drink and pours again. Tali and Garrus stare from the other side. Tali slurps through her straw
to squelch the unnerving quiet. Miranda downs a third, slaps the glasses on the table. She stares at
the counter before EDI’s voice is on the 1MC.

“Medical Response Team away. Bridge Airlock. Personnel stand clear of area. Medical Response
Team away. Bridge Airlock.”

Miranda storms out.

Garrus inspects his straw. It’s pink. “Tali, am I a man?”

Her suit reacts to the sudden temperature climb and sends a refreshing chill up her back.

Keelah.

It’s been years since Shepard has seen her father, much longer than Mom has, and they have not
been kind. She remembers the strong warmth of his hands as he walked her down the passageways
of her first ship. She remembers him saying to step high over doorframes, but he never called them
that; they were knee knockers. It’s hard to forget when she was the only one short enough to get
knocked in the knees. One time her dad missed and it got him in the shin. She learned her first
swear word that day. Nowadays the ships feel more civilian-engineered; practical, still secure, but
with far less knocking. She was older, but not too old to want to still hold her dad’s hand. His latest
ship had returned from the longest tour and while hundreds of families waited on the pier on Earth,
only sweet-sixteen Janey stood there for him. She wore blue like everyone else, but when Dad
appeared, he wore white. He stood in front of her, a king in his royal dress uniform, and his
princess who ran up to him to remind him he’s still Dad to her. He smelled like the ship. And he
took her hand once again and walked with her. Strange he hadn’t asked about Mom’s absence then.
But two years later, she would realize why. It was after her graduation and receiving her first set of
orders at age eighteen that she saw her parents quibble in the stands before walking down to
congratulate her. It was a large room. Her division was dismissed. Liberty called. And she met up
to Mom and Dad after her first few months of being on her own. They hugged. Janey was proud of
herself. Other parents cried streams of pride. Not hers. They just smiled and sighed with relief. And
in their little triangle, they squeezed her hands, a family link that bonded them forever to the
Alliance and each other. After that day, Dad said he had to go back to work, and couldn’t stay for
her liberty. He let go of her hand—his fingers slipped off hers, and she said “okay.” One month
after that, she got a visit from him. They stood in the p-way of her own ship. When he said he
wanted to tell her in person that “your mom and I are getting a divorce” there were no knee
knockers to stop him from walking away. He walked. She watched him walk. It was the first time
she had heard about it. Then, her phone rang. It read “Mom.”

She didn’t answer then either.

Time deteriorated his fatherhood to a mere man who deserted everything. She eyes him behind her
helmet—despite his peaceful facade, his eyes are worn with lack of sleep, and his mouth wrinkles
aren’t as prominent. They used to ripple when he smiled. Shepard keeps a large distance in the
small space, where being next to Illusive Man feels more secure; next to Cerberus.

Miranda is the first one on scene but Dr. Chakwas and Security arrive shortly and the doctor begins
body scans for triage. Security stands by the doors and their new ship rat.

“Henry?” Miranda says. “Shepard, Henry?”

Dr. Chakwas’ omni-tool blips at Illusive Man. She moves to Shepard. It blip-blips. “Shepard, I
Miranda requests, “Hold on, doctor.”

She notices the other Shepard. “Or we’ll do it here. Suit off, commander.”

Shepard says to Henry, “You’re needed to testify on behalf of Captain Hannah Shepard.”

Henry pockets his helmet—security team aims at him—carefully. With palms up, he says, “Jane, that cargo is worth more than my word.”

“True, given you’re one of people who tried stealing it.”

“Shepard,” Dr. Chakwas insists.

Shepard detaches her helmet and pulls back strands of hair caught on her damp skin. Color thickens in Henry’s face. “I ran into Bart Roberts.”

“And is he…?” Henry mimics the click of a trigger and muzzle to his head.

“Yes.”

“Pity. I was going to do that.”

“He said pirates were after him.” Her suit’s VI assists with unbuckling her arms. She pulls off her gloves and opens the armor locker to start throwing gear in.

“No, Jane. He was my Second. Trusted him with everything. I should not have trusted him with this. The pirates were not after him because he was one of them.”

“So are you. Your entire crew and ship went missing.”

“We’re not pirates, Jane, we’re contractors. They were loyal to my cause.”

“Cause? What cause could possibly be worth more than free dental?”

He looks at her as if it’s obvious. “Well, yours.”

Shepard drops her leg gear. “So they weren’t that loyal then.”

“When they found out this heist was more than medical supplies, Bart took up a new cause. I didn’t see it until I was pinned down and the entire station was murdered.”

“How did your ship dock at the station? If the entire station was killed…”

“We acted as Bart’s missing ship looking for our lost crew member. A bit ironic, really. He took a trip through space to get into the station just as we did getting out. Huh. Anyway, deep space was probably the last straw and he did his job all the way up to the point of mutiny.”

“I don’t blame him. You spaced him so your ship wouldn’t be detected.”

Shepard holds her neck, remembering. Suffocating, every blood vessel expelled of oxygen, and the exact pitch of her voice as she counted how long it took until she was wiped from the universe. Then being forced to do it all over again. Only she wasn’t alone.

“You spaced us.” She takes away her chest pieces, leaving on her skin suit she detaches from the
VI’s hardware. The doctor gets handsy but easily ignored.

“He killed innocent people. Now my crew must pay for their actions. Help me take them down, I’ll help you retrieve the cargo, and you can use that in court.”

“Sure but you’re coming with the cargo.”

“I cannot do that, Jane.”

“Then I’m turning you in now.”

“Wait! You don’t know where the cargo is going!”

“You can dangle that card in front of my face for ten seconds before I leave you in the airlock until the next de-pressurization. Ow.” Chakwas digs into one of her many sore muscles.

“Pain is the assurance of living,” Chakwas says.

“That’s lovely prose, doctor,” Henry smiles sweetly. “But your patient is threatening me.”

Shepard snaps, “Tell me, Henry!”

“Take me with you.”

“Give me the best reason you have because I can find it on my own without you just fine. All Mom wanted was you safe!”

“Because you have five days and I can do it in one.”

“How did you know…?”

“You’re not the only one she called.”

She shakes her head. “You’re lucky.”

“Luck cheapens the blessing of the gods.”

A sharp sting rockets up her back. “The hell?” Chakwas steps away when Shepard jerks to.

“LCG off. Now.”

She grabs for the collar and stops. Illusive Man watches intently. She about-faces and proceeds to remove her second skin. Underneath is the black dress, formed into a shirt she found weightless and in sync with her biology and tech. The second she got on board she had done two things: (1) called for an emergency briefing; and (2) requested EDI to have a look at the merchandise. They had found that it doubles as armor and changes to fit the needs of the wearer. For this mission, she needed insurance, and the dress provided.

Shepard’s neck tingles when Illusive Man nears, and says behind her, “Did too.”

Only Henry sees her face contort until she exhales as a bull sees a red flag.

Chakwas inspects closer, then lifts the hem.

Illusive Man reports, “That’s the impact of the bullet.”

“You were shot!?” Chakwas publicizes the injury.
“In the back,” Illusive Man adds the insult. “With this.” He places a hand cannon on the bench, far from Henry, close for Shepard to shoot him with it.

“Oh, honey,” Henry says, “that’s not healthy. …Is that why I didn’t get my chance with Bart?”

Shepard stares until she hopes fire shoots out at him. “What’s our next assignment?”

Henry says, “How familiar are you with Bekenstein?”
Miranda took on dadsitting duty for Shepard when Dr. Chakwas insisted The Illusive Man and her sit in medical, but it led to more problems than the doctor wanted. For instance, when she took his vitals, he just sat there, and pestered her with questions about her day, and asked about work, then, if she needed anything, he threw Miranda under the bus, and said she could get it done. He even went as far as to remove his suit and joke about dropping his pants.

“Did I just see a smile?” he says.

“No,” Shepard says, slouching. “Are we done, doc?”

“Hardly,” Chakwas says. “What would have been a bullet wound is still cause for caution. You’ll have bruising above your iliac crest for a few days, but I’ll need to run more scans to make sure there’s no major damage.”

“Doctor, this is nothing compared to what I’ve brought home before.”

“Granted you keep showing up on my doorstep. Wait here.”

Chakwas dismisses herself and the words “did too” cross Illusive Man’s face when Shepard glimpsed at him before attending to her empty hands.

“Why did you keep the dress on?” he says.

She shuts her eyes. Just a few seconds without the world or who’s in it is fleeting bliss.

“Shep—”

“I don’t know,” she snaps.

“You scanned it and found it more useful than you thought?”
“I said I don’t know.”

“Maybe you trusted me a little more than you admit.”

“I wasn’t going to waste time stripping down!”

Shepard wishes she saw them sooner, the eyes behind the glass. Her crew appear to be eating food, but they keep looking over their shoulder. Others are confident, or careless, and stand on the other side, glancing at her for a second but eyes locked on Illusive Man. Tali has been fanning herself, using Garrus as a leaning post. When she realizes Shepard’s caught on, she all but prances away. Garrus stands alone, looking left then right, pointing for direction, then marches toward the battery.

She slaps the privacy tint on the window panel and it silvers out the mess hall with mirrors, same technology as her cloak and visor. But now’s there are two Illusive Mans and two of her. She sees his back in the mirror. It’s flawless. When she thinks he’s not looking, she looks down at herself, and is thankful she doesn’t have to strip now.

Doctor Chakwas returns. “Okay, commander. Lose the fancy shirt.”

Shepard bounds off the table and walks out. “I’m done.”

Normandy - Cabin

Commander Shepard folds over her desk and plants her cheek on the cool surface, staring at her empty aquarium. Shepard has never had an incident involving her father. Her childhood was great. Her parents were supportive. And when she finally found her passion in life, her dad found his own passion, and had to pursue it on his own. Mom understood. Shepard remembers the calls. Being a captain gives you entitlements to free time whenever you want, and Mom had a lot of it at one in the morning. She knew her daughter was up for whatever reason. Being young meant she could sleep four hours and still pack in a fourteen-hour day. Shepard answered for her mom’s sake, but after a few weeks, she had to break it to her mom that her current division officer was tired of being his underling’s secretary. Of course, no one could deny a captain, but they could add on their child’s workload.

“You don’t have your own office, yet?” Mom had said.

No, Mom.

Years later, she has her own everything, but the tank is still empty.

Bubbles rise from the filter and dance along the surface and she remembers the image on the cargo. She hastily gropes her desk for a stylus and forgets it to use her finger on a datapad, scribbles the logo down, then takes the elevator down the Engineering.

If anyone knows where it’s from, it’s Jack. She doesn’t look up when Shepard’s boots clink against the metal steps descending to the room’s shadowless red light.

Shepard extends the datapad. It’s a poor sketch of an upside-down, equilateral triangle framed by two curves that fork into sharp, upward claws.

Jack has her own pile and she hasn’t stopped reading.

“I want to know something,” she says.
Shepard lowers her arm. She squeezes the frame harder, either to steady herself, or prepare to throw it as a distraction.

“Cuz something doesn’t add up and I know you’ll be straight with me.” Jack stares up. “How certain are you Illusive Man didn’t know about Pragia?”

She eases her grip. “You heard the logs. Those scientists said it.”

Jacks stands, kicking one of the datapads. “He knows every damned thing about every damned one.”

“He likes to think so.”

“So why wouldn’t he know about the facility? About the kids there?”

“He ordered the shutdown.”

“Doesn’t mean he didn’t know, Shepard!”

“You’re…right. But it’s behind us now.”

“I still can’t trust Cerberus, Shepard. I keep reading over all these files and the more I read the more questions I have.” She paces a bit before settling on her cot. “But a deal’s a deal. And you helped me back there. Thanks.” She glances at Shepard’s sketch. “What the fuck did you wanna show me?”

Shepard offers it and Jack takes it.

“Is this a shitter?” She turns it up and down. “What is this?”

“You ran with gangs. I hoped you could tell me.”

“It’s no gang sign that I know of. But punks always spring up out of nowhere and get fried just as quick.”

“Between your reading and brooding, think you could find out for me?”

Jack puts the sketch on the myriad stack of crates, away from her mess.

“Yeah sure,” she says. “Fuck off now.”

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Normandy - Lounge

Shepard takes in the view from the starboard observation lounge, sitting on the couch with a glass of water in her hand. Joker had just passed the final mass relay and the stars blurred less. There was a time when ships rocked and listed. She can’t feel a thing. She misses it. She misses the unpredictable tosses. Or during GQ drills when they’d test the high-speed turns like they used to on the water. She takes a sip and stares at the glass. She rolls it around before setting it back on the arm. She misses the smell. She misses Earth. She’d feel awkward without her crew, though. To be surrounded by humans, knowing there are galaxies out there with so much more, she couldn’t go back to that. It’s an itch; an unwanted tag on her shirt, and feels wrong. As wrong as hearing Illusive Man’s voice celebrate humanity and his cause and how humans come last to the Council. We don’t. Anderson is on the council. Not a Volus, not an Elcor, not a Drell. A human. Yeah there are technicalities in why but the Council saw humans as capable, not that humanity needed their
approval. And her “alien” crew like her. And despite Cerberus’ well-deserved prejudice, everyone’s getting along with Illusive Man.

She puts the glass to her lip and watches the stars pass. Left to right. No waves crashing, no yellow sun, or blue ocean. In a pocket of black, where no stars burn, she gazes in, then beyond it. She can see the shoulder plate of black armor reflecting the Normandy’s hull as it approaches. A silver horizon upon solid metal, and then a golden hemisphere as she tries to tear herself away, but she can’t let go. She can’t feel alone again. She can’t die like this again. She can’t.

“Shepard?”

Miranda’s voice slings her back onto the couch, where she’s been waiting to take another drink but she never poured.

“Yes—” her voice scratches. She clears her throat and takes a lingering drink before repeating herself.

“We’ve arrived,” Miranda posts herself by the window. She observes the rearrangement of furniture but says nothing.

Shepard finishes her water. “Thank you.”

“That bad, huh?”

“What? Oh. This isn’t vodka.”

“Maybe it should be.” She smirks. She’s pretty when she can be herself. “Shepard,” she stops, though.

Shepard drops off her glass on the coffee table. Gardner hoarded the detergent for the galley so he’ll eventually make his way in here to clean up.

“What’s up?”

She’s thinking. When she looks left she reroutes her aggressive statements into polished introspects. She is kind but she doesn’t have to be; Shepard likes her tactful ruthlessness.

“It’s okay, Miranda.”

“Are you going to be okay?”

“Absolutely. Bekenstein hasn’t been hit by Collectors.”

“That’s not what I mean. I know you’ve been dealing with everyone else’s baggage, including mine. With your dad here—”

“Hold on. Nothing has changed. It’s just my dad.”

“Oh I just thought, maybe you’d need someone to talk to.”

“It doesn’t bother me, Miranda. It’s okay.”

“Good,” she says.

“Good,” Shepard says.
“Then I’ll just, like usual, tell you to be careful. Like usual.”

“Like usual, I will.” Shepard watches her twirl a strand of hair around her glove. “Illusive Man’s a pain in my ass, though.”

Miranda’s shoulders drop off a metric ton of tension and she glides over to the bar and sits. “Commander, about Illusive Man…” She combs her fingers through her hair. “You need to be cautious with him.”

“Oh I am.”

“I think of you as a friend, and—” she slips into a memory, dazing off at the wall. “—he can be very persuasive.”

“Wh—wait, do you think—?” Shepard sneers. “Oh gawd no. No. I’m good, Miranda. I’m good on that front.”

“I just wanted to make sure.”

“Sure, sure. Thanks, Miranda.”

“Any time.” She taps the empty glass. It resonates. “Next time with me?”

“Absolutely.”

“Not water.”

“Not water.”

“Good.”

Long after Miranda’s gone, Shepard remains staring at the glass. Her throat itches.
At His Bekenstein

Chapter Summary

Three's a crowd even in a bigger crowd. Jack and Jane learn more about each other, Jane and Henry learn more too. There's dancing.

Chapter Notes

Background Songs: "Tainted Love" (Bleeding Love Club Edit), Lower Afterlife ("Techno Madness") by Jesse Allen, "Stampede" - Dimitri Vegas

Dance Song: "Giants (feat. Carah Faye) [Festival Mix]"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hackett's Condominium

Hannah’s teacup rattles on the plate when she raises it for a sip. Lemon and chamomile. The smell can’t even calm her anymore now that two admirals sit with her in her luxurious cell. Hackett’s vaulted living room isn’t the largest, but it’s the coziest, with framed photos of every ship he’s served on lining the dark walls that bring together the white flooring and red-cushioned furniture. Hackett’s couch has been her security blanket for the past few days, though he has offered the guest room, she can’t stand any room without a view. She scrunches her toes in the shaggy rug hoping the fabric dries her nervous sweat. She watches the teal waves unfurl onto the white sand; a common feature in panel windows, though she knows on the other side is nothing but Citadel and space.

Admiral Hackett sits across the coffee table in his favorite reading chair. His cover lies upside-down on the table, but Hannah stares at its up-right reflection as he rubs his eyes before the talk.

“I’m sorry, Shepard,” he says, “but your daughter’s XO reported on her behalf, and states that the cargo has not been found.”

“And Henry?”

“I haven’t heard anything.”

“Are you sure?”

“Hannah…I’m sure.”

Anderson paces the room. None of them look like they’ve changed clothes in two days. Or slept.

“This is an outrage,” Anderson says. “What they’re doing is accusing her of trafficking! What’s worse is they’re playing the slave card! And they’re getting away with it. How is this possible? No one in their right mind would dare call military dependents government property. They’re children!”
“The product is unfertilized and Shepard’s been in communications with Cerberus. I have seen the documents that give them grounds for this case and it is not in Hannah’s favor. But you’re right. Someone is not in their right mind and I want to know who.”

Hannah sets the tea down. It slops off the side and splashes the saucer. She doesn’t look up.

“I’m not the only one,” she says.

Anderson stops behind her. “Not the only one what?”

She breathes in deep and lifts her head, eyes full, and glossy. “I’m not the only one.”

Milgrom interlaces Asari and human infrastructure with intelligent, passive violence; an industrial city filled with crime without the pull of a trigger. Residents are the planners, the executives, the mob bosses, and anyone under them barely exist. Perfect and not so perfect for people like Shepard and Illusive Man. Shepard’s dead to these people, but Illusive Man’s a legend, an untouchable tycoon. And now—

She glances over. He walks the outer path, her at the inner, Henry in the center. They’re walking by a strip of tree holograms. Beyond that is a colossal formation, possibly a drilling rig, or used to be. Illusive Man looks at her and she gapes forward.

—his physical company will be a challenge, though he doubts anyone would think he’d show his face. Just in case, they have a plan and, no, it doesn’t involve his disco ball.

The riverside of the city reminds is lined with a wide boardwalk. Piers are lit like birthday candles and mainland is the cake. Nightlife swarms the exorbitant towers full of people who never sleep, or at most don’t sleep at home. Those who do sleep are far out of downtown, in the suburbs, or the high-end life on the cliffs, far from everyone. Like that ass she spanked with Kasumi.

Now she’s with her father and benefactor, and she wonders if she’ll wake up. She’s already slapped her arm twice and said she felt a bug. They had taken a shuttle to the outside of town, and then the metro to the waterfront. Shepard remembers the strips of light over her skin, and the flashes through the windows as they veered through tunnels at freeway speed. She couldn’t see where they were going but she felt it.

That was when she checked her outfit for the dozenth time before Henry said she looked fine.

She recalls EDI’s report: her dress’ fabric—armor made of attonytes, a newly-developed prototype VI fabric from Cerberus—can shift over her body like a fast-action blast shielding. It can go from catsuit to bikini, and it will protect her entire body; espionage’s highest fashion ensemble. And she went with its original cut. Red suits her.

They arrive at the party, a red carpet charity event concerning animals, and the environment, called
Exhale. Henry flashes invitations at a large Polynesian bouncer, who checks them over. They pass. The Waterfront is packed with uppy-yups, and some are driving overhauled classics that still have wheels that turn into the body, and double as electro-magnetic force. The building is a castle of white and gray exterior, smooth and modern, decorated with environmental slogans, appropriate for the theme.

\[ \text{Save the greens, save the future} \]
\[ \text{Pass the trees, please!} \]
\[ \text{Can't we all just right a wrong?} \]
\[ \text{Feed more trees: exhale!} \]

Wild animals cruise the boardwalk. Shepard almost jumps seeing a bear sitting on the curb with someone moving its head with his omnitool. A mother duck waddles by with a line of ducklings. Even the feathers look real. Shepard reaches down for one of the ducklings. It cries and scurries away, but not before Shepard felt how soft he is. Maybe not all the animals are fake.

Henry and Illusive Man escort her inside, her arm around Henry’s now to make it more official. It’s an oval room as large as the metro’s central station mingling with a floating forest, grounded bushes and flowers, and soaring exotic birds. There’s a triangular design across the tile, meeting a dance floor, several banquet tables for every species, and a double staircase, with a VIP elevator roped off with added security. The second floor is scattered with asari and human, mostly. She catches Illusive Man’s silver hair illuminating in the ambient light trails passing over and then notices the girls ogling him. She looks away. Girls at the bar ogle her father.

Oh for feck’s fuckin’ snake’s sake.

“How’s the leash?” Shepard says to Henry.

Before they disembarked, Miranda locked him down with a fancy device at her happy request.

“Fits like a collar,” he says. “Weird.”

“Don’t draw attention to it.”

“You don’t have to worry about me, Janey. These are my heathens.”

“That’s what worries me; I don’t think I fit in here.”

Illusive Man says, “Relax, Jane. What do you see?”

“I hate this first name rule,” she says, but surveys regardless.

Henry says, “First names hide who we are as icons, and we won’t slip up fake ones.”

Party guests stand tall with noses up and drinks limp. They never look at the servers, but take from their trays. The bartenders are entertainers and get minor attention if they juggle, but many are blasé about the whole party—it’s like Monday morning to them. Ones that stand closer to the dance floor are more eager. When the music changes its beat into a heavy synthesizer, it fills the castle, and guests flood the tile to move like they lost all their bones. If Shepard tries, it’ll look like
“Don’t overthink it,” Illusive Man assures, and then he offers his arm.

He stands in profile.

She stares at the sleeve creases, then him.

“Just act like you own the world,” he says with eyes obliquely on her.

Shepard gets it…and his arm.

There’s an aura of carelessness in the blue and green. Among the river of light above, to the holotrees encircling the pillars and framing the room, to the random animals prowling the stage, no one sees the Collectors as a threat. It’s beyond them. They’re untouchable; as untouchable as they were when the Citadel was attacked; not them. It would never happen to them. That’s their delusion. An easy facade to replicate because it’s far easier to party against the truth than to fight proving it. If there ever was a happy medium, she could be it. She holds her past and her present in her grasp and her future lies in taking the first step, and demanding refreshments.

Her new mask straightens her back and pouts her lips with a subtle nudge of her tongue. She pulls her shoulders back until her collar is taut, her neck long, and slender. She remembers she’s wearing her sexy underwear and no one else knows but she shaved. Everything. A tiny smirk curls devilishly. Be Miranda. Shepard struts forward, leading the men across the threshold, toward the standing tables nearest circular, where the majority of uppies eventually catch onto fresh meat, and sniff the air before locking eyes with Jane. When one finds her, more turn; a herd of deer who’ve heard a wolf.

A server promptly offers a platter of amuse-bouche (a commander after a dozen receptions learns things) when she situates herself in view of the cheerleaders on the dance floor. Asari who remain in their cages to inspire the crowd. She turns to the man and looks him in the eye.

“Thank you,” she says, and takes one.

The platter shivers, his arm trembles, but the man smiles and nods, and vanishes as fast as he came. Someone nearby mutters. “Is it true what they say about women who go for the food first?” They didn’t mutter quiet enough. As they glance over at her, they look like they pissed themselves when she stabs them with glare daggers. She pops the garnished cracker in her mouth and crunches down, as an animal gnawing bone.

Henry leans in. “It’s been a few years but I know my way around. The guy we want, Hanish Zhadny, is upstairs.”

Shepard glances through the crowd. A northern stairwell with ornate carpeting and marble pillars is guarded and gated.

He continues, “There’s a bathroom window that’ll divert me to where he is.”

She nods once.

“I’ll get you what you want.”

“All I want is that cargo,” she says. “Nothing more.”
Henry bows elaborately until Shepard eyerolls and shoos him off. She watches him snatch a champagne flute, take a sip, and somewhere in his twirl, he plates the drink on a table, and she only sees his coat tail disappear behind a waterfall room divider.

“If he bails,” she says to Illusive Man, “I shoot him.”

It’s easy to keep an air of malice where her frustration is a constant. Her and Illusive Man sit at the bar, half a chair separate, and the bartender comes over.

“Water,” Shepard says.

Illusive Man looks at her. “Four Roses.” She must have made a face. “For your water.”

Bartender pours, sprays, and two glasses meet them in hand. Now they’re alone. He tosses out the straw before he sips.

“Oh,” she says, “it’s a drink.”

He meshes his lips together, taking in the sting of alcohol. “A precise drink.” He sets it down. “For a precise occasion.”

The music changes songs to a slow start that elevates into an upbeat techno with steady bass. If the crowd cheers for it then it must be a fan favorite. More populate the floor and soon all she notices are swaying arms amidst gleaming bodies. She remembers her ‘broken bones’ and will take conversation if it avoids dancing. Illusive Man leans against the bar, one leg long to the floor, and
watches the room. He strokes his pinky nail with his thumb.

“So long as you keep your eyes sharp,” she says, slamming the mere eight ounces, and waving for another.

Illusive Man looks at her.

“How does no one recognize you?” She squints.

“Legends do not walk amongst peasants. How does anyone not recognize you?” He reaches into his breast pocket.

“Peasants swimming in money, maybe. Don’t your eyes give it away?”

Out comes a vintage cigarette and lighter. “Many don’t know what the Illusive Man looks like. Here,” He pops the filter between his lips and lights the tip. “I’m just Jack.”

“Not to me.” A dryness scratches her throat and she consumes the refill.

“Still no trust?” He exhales smoke. “You don’t think we’re synergistic?”

A whiff curls her lip and she waves the stink away. “That was one mission.”

Henry comms, “Guys, we got a problem.”

Illusive Man takes his glass and scans a tip with the bar’s interface.

She stands with him. “And it did not end well.”

Henry insists. “Men’s bathroom. Please-now-thank-you.”

“Any fight we can float away from,” Illusive Man says, now arm-in-arm with her as they advance to the bathrooms. He balances a glass and cigarette in the other hand, the pro of luxury.

“You could float away now but I forgot you’re a real boy.”

He smirks. “You’re convinced now, with how tight you held me.”

Shepard vocalizes her contempt. And in case she’s doing it now, she unfastens her grip.

When they activate the door, Henry is standing at the other end with his hands on his belt, facing a blank wall. The bathroom is columned with urinals, closed stalls, and a community sink with several faucets. A guest in a white suit with black shoulder-boards dries their hands and leaves, muttering about the man talking to himself. Henry hears their shoes clicking across the tile and he turns around.

“What’s the problem?” Shepard says.

“This.” He waves at the wall.

“What’s this?”

“This! This!” He waves frantically.

It’s a wall without a window.

“They must’ve remodeled. I hope the courtyard’s not gone too. It was lovely in the spring.
Cherryblossoms.”

Illusive Man inclines, “Don’t choose nostalgia over the end goal, Mr. Shepard. We need to look for the alternate route."

Henry pinches between his eyes, mutters about the cherryblossoms, then “I’ll go back out and look.”

He walks to them—Illusive Man stops him.

“You’ve been gone long enough,” Illusive Man says. “Have a drink, Henry.” He hands him the glass. “On me.” And asks Shepard, “Are you gonna be okay?”

Without a beat she says, “Yup. Good. Absolutely.”

“Good.”

Jack checks his pack of smokes with the lit one dangling in his mouth again. He shakes to hear the number. Shepard deeply inhales, and tries counting with him, but she can’t hear the rattle when the voice in her head screams to run, and the more she attempts to breathe through it, the faster her heart beats. The faster it aches. The faster it tells her to bolt. Head and heart have it locked in but she exhales, and inhales again. Fighting, forcing her feet to stay. Illusive Man thrums the pack—

One, two, three.

Dum, dum, dum.

He pockets the cigs. “I’m going for a smoke.”

Wait.

“Two at most.”

Alone!?

Illusive Man turns away—she snatches his hand. She doesn’t feel herself do it. A snakebite; an impulse; defense against circumstance. He glances at it then her.

Without a twitch in his cheek, or a flicker on his brow, he stares, and says, “Five minutes.”

He squeezes her hand and slips away.

And for one long moment, the longest moment that lasted less than a blink, she forgot to exhale.

Henry says, “Hoo, what a nasty habit.”

She walks out. “There are worse things.”

Shepard skips an order of top shelf H-two-O and goes immediately into glowering in a quiet corner booth. Black leather C-couch with a circle coffee table and a blue holo-fire.

She expected him to pull away. She examines her hand, the impression lingers beyond her skin; her nerves memorized the feeling. They’re as confused as her.

Henry scoots the empty scotch glass forward, away from his boot resting on the edge of the table, then he interlaces his gloved fingers, probably looking at her, or toward her. She can only see so
much peripherally.

“How’s Mom?” he asks.

She waits to make sure the first words aren’t offensive to aliens.

“How’s me,” she says.

“Pardon?”

“Since you haven’t spoken to me lately. At all.”

“I’m…I’m sorry, Janey. You kinda surprised me.”

“I surprised you?”

“What am I gonna say? What am I supposed to? I spent two years learning to accept that I would someday see you when I die. And I’m alive. And so are you. So what? What am I gonna say?”

“Maybe whatever you said to Mom when you talked to her before me!”

“You were dead before!” He sighs. “You wouldn’t want to hear the things I said to her.”

“That bad?”

“Worse.” He lets the word hang in the air. “You know you look tense. I could recommend—”

“Don’t start me on your damned pills, Henry. Medication is exactly why Mom divorced you!”

He twiddles his thumbs and after looking at him once, she crosses her arms, and jerks her body away, ensuring every front of her can’t see him. The crowd jumps up and down as the DJ hums into her mic. The booth on the other wall harbors a group in gold and white fashion, arms around each other, drinking, laughing. An asari with rosy skin in a bikini lies on the table. A man starts a line along her torso. He snorts it from hip to belly button, then up to her breasts, then meets his mouth to hers, and Shepard grows disdainful. She envies the oblivion. If one piece of her suit broke she could have ended this predicament before it was a possibility. Second death by suffocation is preferable to sitting here, watching a pair of scantily clad girls approach her father, giggling, and asking if he’s doing anything—or anyone—right now. Shepard wants to plug her ears but she’s too proud to budge. She stares off into the lights. A spotted feline crosses the pathway, glittering emerald and sapphire.

“Ladies,” he starts, “how would you feel starting your life over?”

“What do you mean?” They giggle.

“If you could do anything in the world, anything, what would it be?”

What a stupid come-on. Does that shit work?

One girl answers. “I—I really want to take my dad’s money.”

Good job, Henry.

“And use it to bolster Bekenstein defenses. I hate that he spends it on fake charities to make himself richer. I don’t feel safe here. I think I could do some good…maybe join the Alliance.”
“Is that your deepest desire?”

Shepard turns just enough to see.

“Yes.”

He takes her hand. She’s blond with bright eyes and tanned skin.

He says, “Then do it,” and she smiles, and walks away. Her friend remains, staring at him. He takes her hand now. “And while you’re at it, you can give up seeking out meaningless sex and focus on your education. Men like an established women, not gold diggers.” He pats her and she follows her friend. He snatches her drink out of her hand before she’s out of reach and sits back. “Moscato? Cheap but sweet.” He sips.

“How did you do that?” Shepard asks.

“The art of persuasion.”

A deflective lie. He was good at those.


“I stopped taking the medication because I found a better way and your mother saw fit to distance me from you. I don’t blame her. I’m sure I sounded crazy.”

Her father was on anti-depressants and emotion-balancers. Pills that manage hormones and stimuli. Common meds in the Alliance, up there with Motrin, the bandage for all problems so you can continue doing your job while the military pretends the problem doesn’t exist. It’s also why he was the ship counselor. He knew more about psychological issues than most and could solve others before solving his own. For a while he cared. He cared about his patients and helped them, with medications being a last resort. Then Sovereign happened. And Alliance pushed Henry and the rest of Medical to keep personnel sane by any means. How to do that in the fastest way? Pills.

“Is that why you left?” Shepard asks.

Henry answers, “I left because I signed on to uphold my oath. I didn’t see the push for medication as a means of control to be in my patients’ best health interests. I found a way around it, a solution. And they denied me. Said my theory was impossible. Little did they know I had been off my medication for a few months and they saw no change.”

“You tried this theory on yourself, then. What is it exactly?”

“Energy Hypnotism. The rebalancing of your inner self.”

“How does it work?”

“I…talk…to what makes you you. Your energy. Your soul.”

“Yup. Sounds crazy.”

Henry smirks. “Sure does.”

“As crazy as Reapers.”

Henry looks at her, then above her, and slams his wine before saying, “You get lost?”
Cigarette stench hits her nostrils.

“Asked DJ for directions,” Illusive Man says, sitting on the edge cushion. “There’s a service door behind the stage curtain on the eastern wall. No security but everyone can see who goes in and out through that curtain. We’ll need a seamless transition.”

“How?” Shepard says.

“Through the dance floor. It’s heavily populated and if eyes are on us they won’t be for long.”

“A mass object illusion. Eyes too busy on many things they can’t see the real problem.”

“With an added bonus.”

“Ooh.” Henry takes his boot off the table. “What did we win?” He leans in.

“Shepard’s cloak.” He explains. “At the station her suit took me as a part of her when I touched it. She can get us in.”

“Aren’t you the little rogue!” He stands. “Shall we dance?”

Shepard questions if she’s already under his hypnotism, because she thinks back on her mom, and how they have less than five days, she still feels thirsty, and wishes she could be the man high off tummy toot, but somehow finds her hand in her father’s, and she’s moving toward the stage. She watches her shoe step onto the floor, and girls squeal when they see the trio enter. Emptiness greets her hand and Henry’s gone. Glowing blue eyes watch her through the bouncing heads, waving arms, and swaying hips. Henry’s voice carries in her ear, but she barely makes out the call. Bass throbs in her body, pulsing against her chest. It’s in her head, her ribs, her gut. Lyrics spring in her ears. The DJ sings and the crowd begins to clap in beat.

We can fall like bottom feeders

And we can rise stay above the waves

We can stroll, we can pump the brakes

So slow it down, speed away

She sees how security could be confused, but it’s not easy for her to be lost when her beacon stands close. Now a little too close but better than a stranger.

“Well, hello, beautiful brunette in the red dress,” Henry’s voice catches in her ear.

So far they don't know your name

But don't stop trying to find a way

Don't stand polite, be brave

Hold tight, spit it out
Shepard looks for her. Henry is at the center, pinned against a woman a decade younger than him, with pouting red lips she bites when she twirls around him. Thankfully the crowd ignites during the chorus and blocks the nauseating view. Not so thankfully, security strolls nearby, and watches her in suspicion. If she doesn’t start flailing she’ll stick out like an Elcor. But when she tries feeling the music, her limbs remain frozen.

Say what you want, say what you want

And stomp ’till you break through

And move like giants do

’Til everyone hears your demands

Stomp ’till you break through

And move like the giants do

Illusive Man grabs her. Half his voice reaches her comm, pseudo-radio, but right next to her, his day-old shave against hers. She feels his breath in her ear.

“The beats are bullets. They’re firing at your feet. You have to avoid them. What do you do?”

She steps back. He steps forward.

“They’re firing in intervals of four. You stand still, you die. Start counting.”

One, two, three, four.

He slides his hand down her spine to the small of her back and if the bass didn’t give her chills, that did.

Back, back, forward, forward.

Illusive Man’s eyes don’t have just one pupil. There are four, but far away it only appears to glow. There is a design she hadn’t noticed; something in the back of her mind tells her it’s Prothean, and they’re linked together somehow in thought, much like how Asari meld, but different. Like his eyes are trying to tell her something but it can’t show her. She’ll have to ask. And if she does, he’ll know what she’s thinking. The more she thinks, the more she’s alone in the blur of sweat and noise. Yet he remains cool, not even flushed.

“Sector clear. Move!”

You can face any kind of creature

And anyone on any day

You can stare down the eyes of evil
And send it back where it came
So far they don't know your name
But don't stop trying to find a way
Don't stand polite, be brave

He grips her hand and turns her 180 on a heel. “Intervals of two! Quick!”

Back, forth, back, forth. He spins her the other way, he snatches her hand, her arms cross over, he spins her back, and a thrill rushes over her. Her hair whips across. He catches the strands in her eyes.

“The enemy is underneath you.”

She stomps her heel down.

“He’s alive.”

She stomps her other heel.

Hold tight, spit it out
Say what you want, say what you want
And stomp ’til you break through
And move like giants do

“There’re more.” He pulls her away, spinning her into a frenzy of people leaping higher in the center. He changes the steps—left, left forward, right, right forward—and moves her through an array of cascading, fans of light; beams trail over their heads in time with the synthesized melody. Spheres of white pulsate with the beat. He pauses, turning her slowly with every third slide. He brushes his fingers through hers and she watches the lights paint an outline along their skin, and his face—his unmoving face. At some point she lost which pounding in her chest is the music and which is her heart, until she finds it tightening her throat. Heat climbs up her back and swells in her head, seeping down her forehead, and pooling in her cheeks. A bead of sweat trails down her sternum and catches in her fabric but in a fleeting thought, it felt like someone tracing her figure. In a dizzying, fleeting thought, she wished it was, and she sees why he hasn’t looked at anyone else but her.

It can’t be.

Clapping is getting louder now. Cheering turns to screaming. Plumes of color burst from fists throwing ground chalk. Lights bounce through the clouds of pink and blue.

It is.
“I’m in!” Henry comms.

What?

“Now, Jane!”

Lights pierce the chalk pluming around them. She sees the stage, she flutters her eyelids, and remembers. Shepard slaps her cloak on and Illusive Man disappears in front of her, but not his hold. He pulls her passed the stage, through the curtain, with Henry holding the door.

“I can’t tell if you’re here,” he mutters.

“We made it,” Illusive Man says, taking a breath. “A good plan.”

The cloak fades and they reappear at the beginning of a long corridor with many other doors, cement walls, and nothing as pleasant as the lobby and banquet hall.


“How ever you got in without us is proven a success.”

“Yeah. Well, that girl was really high, so I showed her to the waiting lounge. She’ll be in there for hours, contemplating her decisions. What about you? How’d it go? You look a little…”

Illusive Man answers quickly, “It was hot. Out there. A lot of people.”

“Lot of people,” Shepard echoes. “Where’s this Hanish Zhadny guy?”

“This way.” Henry glances down at something between them. “We’ll take the stairs.” He takes the lead.

When Illusive Man walks forward, her arm tugs, and she catches her balance, and looks down.

He’s still holding her hand.

Chapter End Notes

"Four Roses" is a real bourbon.

I feel I should explain myself on the dance. We have club music and everyone doing their own thing but doing the same exact thing. And then you have Illusive Man, who values the old luxuries like cigarettes and scotch, and he chooses a freestyle ballroom cha-cha with a techno beat. A man that marries synthetic vibes with old time Earth dancing. I thought it would bring out his character, perhaps the person he was before he was Illusive Man, because as he said, "Here, I'm just Jack."
**Chapter Summary**

Shepard meets Hanish Zhadny and reveals her true morality.

**Chapter Notes**

Songs: "2 Gether 4 Ever (Clubraiders Edit) - NDS vs Tom E; "Mirrors (Radio Edit)" - Empyre One

When she jerked her hand away there had been the longest uncomfortable silence since she died. But it was the first time she had wanted to be closer to her dad, literally. She had kept less than a pace behind him as they snuck up to Hanish Zhadny’s office. The journey was a stroll through any other corporate building, but when they get to the executive doors, the sound of commotion breaks the mundane.

“He’s at it again,” Henry says, ear to the door.

Illusive Man reaches for the small of his back but Henry hisses him down.

“Calm down. Not everyone needs rescuing.”

Shepard says, “Then where are his guards?”

“Hanish doesn’t think he needs them. They’d only be in his way.”

“Why?”

“Hanish believes he’s psychic, therefore the need for no guards.”

That’s stupid, but she says, “Then I guess he knows we’re comin’.”

“Be nice, okay? It’s probably the one endearing quality he has.”

Illusive Man keeps his gun holstered, adjusts his jacket, and Henry makes his entrance.

Bright screens face them in a black room. Several people in tall-back chairs watch a game, their backs to the door. The one in the center, the largest recliner chair with a food tray, mini bar, and three screens linked in front of him barks orders as his fingers dance across the orange interface. The only way he could be heard over the loud music are the headsets on his crew.

“Tank, pop your shield! Healers, restore your mana. I need Debilitate! Who has it ready? Shut that damn door! How many times—”

Henry shoos Shepard and Illusive Man in, and it shifts back, and locks.
“—Thank you! Where’s my—good. Fire mages, use your CDs!”

Headset on the left moves. “We still have ten seconds!”

“You’re hopeless, mages! I’ll do this myself.”

Shepard gets a closer look at his screens. It’s a realistic online game and each screen has a different character. His crew fights an ice giant who should have flattened all of them already after that last attack. She assumes the big chair belongs to Hanish. He’s only light blue because of the screens, but the warmth from his interface balances it out, and she can almost see his light brown skin. Two tubes stick out of his long, messy mohawk and his visor wraps around his shaved sides. Hanish sends all his characters at once to the giant, tapping on the keyboard like Joker would in daring maneuvers.

A blond girl on his right calls out, “Hanish, we’ve reached 500,000 credits!”

“Awesome!” His finger-fighting doesn’t miss a beat. “Who broke our milestone?”

Another screen pops up and a surveillance camera cuts to a group of cheering girls in cocktail dresses in a booth. That explains why he wouldn’t need security on his floor.

The girl player continues, “Carla Leche with a donation of 5,000 credits and a flight of Deep Azure Action shots for her squad.”

Hanish hits a button. “Congratulations, Carla Leche! Thank you so much for your generous donation for Exhale.”

“Oh my gawd!” Carla fans herself. “It’s him! It’s him!”

“Shut up!” One of her friends says. “Hold your bracelet still! Hi, Hanish! Oh my gawd I love you!”

“For being such a dedicated patron to our cause, we are refunding your drinks, and you now have access to our VIP section. Just speak with one of our servers, and they’ll hook you up. Any music requests, Carla?”

She squeals. “Oh my gawd! Okay, okay. Um um um ‘Liquid Sands’ by Our One True Empire!”

“You got it, Carla!” Then he hits another button, still fighting the giant with three characters, and the girl cuts the camera to the main dance floor. “Every credit toward Exhale is another tree planted, and an animal saved! The more you give, the more I give you, and your chance to receive a personal call from me. If you’re not on our broadcast, get on it at Loki-612 to watch our live feed of all the partying and sweet ass animals on the floor! This is Hanish Zhadny and you’re at Exhale!” Hanish slaps the button again. “All right, let’s send the credits through.”

Hanish orders the blond to transfer the donations. In the third screen, a fund report appears: 5,000 to Galaxy of Fantasy.

“Just enough for a new upgrade. Ice giant at thirteen percent and how is my sage out-DPSing the DPS?”

Shepard traces the wires back to one power hub. All she has to do is walk up and pull, but she contemplates how bad the situation would turn.

“What a load of shit. Rogues, get in here after mages cast their CDs.”
Guy on left says, “We just did!”

“Again!”

“Hanish Zhadny!” Shepard shouts.

Blond calls out, “Nine percent!”

Hanish says, “Fine! But next time wait ’til I give the order!”

Shepard shrugs at Henry.

Henry taps his ears, then points to desk. There’s an empty seat and headset. She puts it on—spellcasts and whooshing sound effects with roars, slashes, and explosions zoom from left to right ear. The ice giant roars, stomping his feet, and cracking the ground. Mystical chimes float over her head, or it sounds like they do.

“Mr. Zhadny,” Shepard says again.

She hears his answer clearly over the battle fantasy. “Can’t talk right now, commander.”

“You know who I am?”

“I’m psychic. Another Debilitate!”

“Five percent!” The girl announces.

“Is psychic another word for hacker?”

He scoffs. Shepard watches his hands dance. His characters run around as separate beings, casting, or attacking in different ways, and nothing says this guy can’t pat his head and rub his belly while writing calculus with his toes.

Girl shouts, “One percent!”

Hanish shouts, “Push it! Push it!”

Shepard eases the headset off her ears—usually her helmet muffles the battlefield, but this sinks her into it as if war had speakers. She watches the ice giant fall to its death and everyone but Hanish jump out of their chairs, punching the air, and cheer. He sighs in relief and disconnects the tubes from his skull, and stands eye level.

He waves a finger at her while pulling his bottom lip. “You’re here for something.”

Ooh he’s astute.

He decreases the music. “Something big but something small.”

Vaguely correct as a fortune cookie.

“Because you respected my game, I shall respect in kind. What do you—” Henry steps up beside Shepard with a big grin. “—oh no.”

“Hanish, my heinous anus! How are ya?” He nudges her. “We go far back.”

“Not far enough.” He crosses his arms. “No deal. Whatever you want I want nothing to do with it.”
“Hold on, anus, we just want information.”

“It’s HA-nish. HA and NISH for the hundredth time. It’s Arabic for frick’s sake.”

Any excuse to yell at her dad. “You’ve been making me say it wrong this whole time?”

Hanish nods. “He’s a real AH-nus that way.”

“Yeah no ahnus.”

“Who’s that?” He points at Illusive Man.

Illusive Man says, “You’re psychic, Mr. Zhadny. Tell me who I am.”

Hanish smirks. “I’m not a parlor trick.” Behind him, the game switches over to his surveillance camera; it rewinds to when Illusive Man went for his smoke, only he’s not smoking, but talking to the DJ. Camera zooms in to the DJ’s holoscreen and it shows the song title they had danced to. “Is this a sting or a date?”

She stares at the exchange; the DJ points to the back door. He didn’t even have to bribe her. But he says something else, something longer than a thanks. And she reads her reply: good luck. And she kisses his cheek. Warmth drains from her face and sick squirms in her belly.

He cuts to the moment when the Shepards sat in the booth. “Weird you brought Dad to chaperone.”

“Some cargo went missing,” Shepard says over the knot in her throat, “from a Cerberus facility near Agebinium. We need to find it.”

“Got a ship name?”

“Calamity,” Illusive Man says.

Hanish stares at him. Then snorts. “Seriously?”

“What’s so funny?” she asks.

“God, Henry, what have you gotten into?”

“What can I say? They stole my ship.”

“I told you they would bite you in the ahnus. Next time, stick to cab driver.”

“I am!”

“Cab driver?” Shepard says. “Those are automated.”

Hanish hasn’t stopped smirking. “Not this one.”

Henry Xs his arms. “Can you find it or not?”

“Sure.” He sits and hooks himself up to the tubes again. The screens black out and Hanish’s gloss over. “It’s in the Minos Wasteland.”

“Can you narrow it down?” Illusive Man says.

“I can’t. I see something but it’s like…it’s making figure eights around the Arrae System. I’m sure
your fancy gadgets will figure out the rest.”

“Thank you,” Shepard says.

She turns to go—the green door light turns red—and she rolls her eyes. The chill of a fight bites at her neck.

“Nothing is ever easy,” she says.

Hanish says, “Nothing worth having, anyway. Right, Henry?” He disconnects himself again. “I don’t just give information for free, just like I don’t let anyone walk into my parties without paying. You will pay, Henry. You will pay more for my sisters.”

“Sisters?” Henry says, brow raised.

“My sisters that you brainwashed.”

“Oh no I didn’t—”

Hanish shows the feed at the booth again, to the girls who approached him, and then left him.

“—do that. Maybe I did.”

“Maybe you did. Where are they, Henry?”

“Out? Changing their lives for the better?”

“Shepard, you and your friend can leave. Henry’ll be your payment.”

“I can’t just let you do that. He’s—”

“—a crappy father. Don’t worry I’ll keep him alive. But I need his…charm…to get my sisters back.”

“Why do you need them back? They’re free people.”

“I’m the youngest brother of a legacy to a business I hate. All I want to do is play my games.”

“Business? I thought this was your business.”

“It’s my father’s. I just use it to expand my name; run parties. My sisters are in charge while he’s away. If they’re gone I can’t play, and I’ll be forced to be executive of lettuce until I die.”

“I’m sorry. Lettuce?”

“Yes! My family came from Yuma. So what? Once my sisters return, you can have your dad back.”

Illusive Man says, “Shepard, we don’t have time for this. We got the info. We need to help your mother. Remember why you’re here.”

Henry exchanges worried looks with her, then Illusive Man, then her.

“Bye, Henry.”

“What!? B—but you need me! I need you!”

Shepard glares him down and it says exactly what he thinks it does.
Henry rubs his scruff, then exhales a chuckle, then he looks dead in her eyes, and says, “Pirate.”

“I take back my thanks,” Shepard says.

“You’ll thank me again later,” Hanish says. “Our future foretells it.”

The doors open and the long hallway lies in wait. Shepard doesn’t look back. She just walks without a word and tries not to remember how it felt when she was on the receiving end of abandonment.

Shepard descends the stairs with Illusive Man, where it forks into small cases to the banquet hall, and lobby. A guard offers the elevator and she takes it. It’s a bird’s view of the stage, where she didn’t fail at dancing, and it’s still live and bright, but the place where she first took Jack’s arm glues her attention to the triangular tile, and how the stairs wrap around the oval room like tentacles.
Realization wafts over her in a hot flash, but when she turns to leave the elevator, two pistols are primed, and aiming at her, and Illusive Man. It’s amazing no one has noticed, or cared. Security stares them down as the elevator descends like a snail. If it was a box, she would have scrambled for her gun hidden by the attonyte fabric, and chanced a couple shots just to get her kill.

Shepard keeps her arms neat at her side, fingers still. When she’s out of sight, she will jump to cover, and Illusive Man will have to play along, unless he figured it out too, that the room is the exact design as the logos on the cargo. It was Hanish all along. Fecking pirates. He used her callousness to dismiss her father; maybe he is psychic. Or maybe he’s just a great people reader. Either way, Henry is in more trouble than Hanish let on. And she’s gonna have to take every guard out in order to reach him. If Hanish wants to live, he’ll keep Henry alive, so she can take the violent approach this time. No more playing nice.

“That’s right, Shepard. You can’t do a damned—the hell?” Security looks ahead, beyond them. One gulps his last breath, the other falls silent over the banister. Before the second keels over, she notices the bullet wound.

Shepard turns—glass shatters from a central, concussive blast, throwing people across the room. Screams permeate the music, the DJ cuts the song, and bolts with the hundred other people fanning out to escape.

A woman, steps through the glass, holding a large rifle, barely able to lift it, and shouting over the hysteria. “The party is a scam!”

Security rush her and they’re down before they’re halfway across the room.

“Shepard!” Illusive Man shouts.

He jumps from the elevator railing to boost him up, and catch the banister before the elevator is too far down. Shepard copies but misses. She hurries again—Illusive Man’s climbed over already—and jumps. He snatches her wrists and hauls her up and over, falling onto his back with Shepard on top.

“How the hell did you make that?” she says.

“Years of Skyball,” he says, breathless. “You’re heavier than you look.”
“Shut up,” she says, and digs her knee into his stomach as she stands up to run.

Illusive Man follows, skirting the wall, pistol drawn, the same one that shot her in the back.

“Maybe you should lead,” Shepard says.

He declines. “I like the view from here.”

“Do you ever stop?”

“Until you want me to.”

They return to the hall and a lead of guards take the choke point; Shepard slaps her cloak, Illusive Man hides by the corner of the crossing hall, he distracts with gunfire, and she fires her tech, incinerating two unlucky fodder, and she takes to Illusive Man’s side.

“Now they show up!” she says.

Burning flesh wafts down the hall; without her suit, sick pools up her throat, and warms her face. She covers her mouth, swallowing the bile.

“That does not smell like pork,” Illusive Man says.

Shepard doesn’t even shake her head; she can’t chance vomit; she can chance Illusive Man taking point. She cloaks again and touches him. He watches the little triangles turn over his suit and he takes advantage; one more guard down. Three to go. Shepard remembers her secret compartment in the dress and hovers her hand over the spot; the attonytes push a compressed sidearm to her palm. She grips it and it expands to the full Locust sub she named Lenny.

“So do you?” he says, retreating to give her lead.

She blind fires and hits somebody. They cuss.

“Do what?” she says.

“Want me to stop?”

“This is not the time!” She cloaks, fires—one more down.

“Your dad’s not around.”

Seething tingles run through her. She listens to for the break in bullet fire and takes her turn. The guard stares at her through his gun and she knows it’s too late to bounce back. He fires and shoots her in the shoulder just as she pulls the trigger.

“Ah!” she yells.

Shepard pins herself to the wall, breathing heavy, a numbing sensation up and down her arm and chest, as if the dress responded with her own biology. Illusive man rolls over her, a slice of bread and she’s the jelly, and he unloads the clip long after she heard the man fall. She holds her breath, any way to control the racing beat in her chest. There’s not much to see except him. His day old scruff roughens his skin with a hint of silver. He lowers his weapon and moves for Hanish’s office. Her body follows and her mind lingers on the feeling he left of him pressed firmly against her.

“What about all that shit you said?” she says. “‘Don’t let anything distract you from the end goal.’ That shit.”
“That shit specifically?”

“Yes that shit.” She leans on the doorframe, Lenny pointed down.

“You’re not a distraction.” He hacks the door, it turns green, he enters with weapon up.

He goes for the left corner, then turns center, she takes right, and turns center. Chairs are spun about, one tipped over. Surveillance feed shows every angle Shepard took, including the one in this room. Illusive Man looks for an exit.

“Gone,” he says, finding nothing.

But he attempts the computers, swiping and typing through nonsense she can’t explain as she’s never been that techy. There’s combat and there’re computers. Maybe it’s good he’s along for this frustrating mission.

“There,” he says. “Your dad left us a parting gift.” He swipes it to the big screen. They’re coordinates with a note: ‘Happy Birthday, sweetheart!’

“Is it?” Illusive Man says.


The building shakes and she knows it’s not an earthquake.

“Let’s go before they collapse the place,” she says.

“Hold on,” he says, and another screen switches. “Hanish alerted the authorities and guess who he dimed out.”

Four photos spring up on the active wanted list of every media channel. Henry’s hypnotized girls and two blurry but seeable shots of one Jack and Jane.

“We don’t even know them!”

“Henry left breadcrumbs but Hanish poisoned the trail.”

“He played me!” Shepard punches the haptic interface. “He read my body language from the cameras when Henry was talking to me; he knew I’d leave him.”

“You made a mistake.”

“And you haven’t.”

“I’ve made a few significant regrets.”

“Henry said they’re his Heathens. What’s to say Henry didn’t willingly go with him?”

“He did willingly go with him.”

“You know what I mean! He must be working with Hanish. The cargo, the logo—they’re pirates! They always have a back-up and a backstab plan.”

The building rattles; the floor vibrates. The electricity shut down and a nearby generator whirs on leaving dim lighting in every corner, and a blue, emergency strip marking the exits.
“We need to clear the trail,” Shepard says. “But how do I know my calls will reach the Normandy?”

“You don’t,” he says. “We can’t chance it. But you know who we can.”

“I don’t exactly have Liara on speed dial.”

Illusive Man moves for the back exit. “That’s too bad. I do.”

The staircase leads outside to an alley—there’s no one but the party trash. Sirens wail down the street. They illuminate the walls briefly then disappear. Someone stumbles from behind the dumpster fifty feet to their left. It’s the food server.

He freezes, stuck in a sneaking, fumbling position like he was caught in headlights. She probably looks the same.

“I never saw you two,” he says.

Shepard sighs in relief and waves with her unarmed hand. Would’ve been awkward otherwise. The server points at the opposite street, the block behind the tower, and mentions a foot traffic underpass through the city’s river, leading out on the other side of the waterfront. The far side.

“Thank you,” he says as distance grows between them. “I’m going to watch this place burn.”

“One of her contacts is meeting us,” Illusive Man continues. He leads her through the shadows, along the back of the waterfront. “She’ll take us out of the city.”

“You just love to be in control of everything, don’t you?”

“I don’t like being wrong. And when someone tries to make me wrong, I’m not.”

They back track around a bridge he thought would lead them to the next block. Instead it leads to a street with a crowd of people gawking at the tower beyond a police line. He dips into a stone, arched underpass, hidden from the mayhem, and lingering with familiarity. It’s gray, painted by shadows that grow darker further along the egress. In the center rests a series of advertisements, and an intricately designed floor contoured by the old architecture. It feels safe but possesses more danger than a crowded street near a car chase. If they were found now, they’d be caught. But all the commotion seems a lightyear away to the mute calm. Even the river sounds distant. Bridge lights above dimly fuse with the walk lights along the river’s edge. Illusive Man rests against the inner wall and the city’s luminescence softens the shadows on his face, leaving only a dark shadow strapping the side of his neck, and down his suit. He wears light and dark with confidence; she’s only felt honorable remaining on one side, not both, but how she treated her father…it was the first time she had control over him staying with her, or leaving. And she chose what she never wanted when she was his little girl.

Every time Illusive Man had ordered her around, hatred brewed behind her diplomacy, because that meant he had a confidence she never did. He had control where she never got to. She knows now she’s jealous of his abilities, his ability to manipulate, to control. She looks back on the day her dad walked away and she just stood there. She let it happen. She didn’t say anything.

Fault aches in her bones and it’s not the bullet impact in her spine. If she had control she wouldn’t have had regret. But she can’t change the past. She can change the now, but she threw her dad under a krogan tank. He’s seems delighted by it and that angers her more, as if he expected her to pull the shady stunt, to be selfish; vindictive. Exactly what he is: someone who walks away.
Shepard wants to claw her chest out until her manufactured heart shows and she can ask Illusive Man to yank it out. If control and feelings can’t cooperate, she wants nothing to do with one of them. She looks at Illusive Man and he’s been looking at her this whole time. She’s lost in thought and he’s staring. A non-existent sun burns her but a feeling kind of person would call it blushing. She supposes she’s that kind of feeling-person. His stare is intense. If it’s deliberate or not, it stirs exhilaration or fear, or both. Who ever Illusive Man is she can’t shake that off-putting skepticism. People like him are bad people with good intentions. So why can’t she look away? Why is he not the disgusting creature she saw changing in the armory?

“Why are you here?” she chokes out.

Illusive man doesn’t roll his eyes, but his voice does. “While I enjoy our chats, I do not like to repeat myself.”

“Was Liara’s contact that DJ or is she one of yours?”

“Both.”

“Professional or…?”

“If you’re implying if I have a romantic relationship with her—”

“Any relationship, really.”

“—she plays for the other team. Not that it’s any of your concern. You are concerned, aren’t you?”

“Not at all. Just wondering if she’s a viable source.”

“She’s reliable, Shepard. I let her choose our song.”

“Well,” she searches for words, “good.”

“Yeah, it was a good song.” His eyes tell her he’s not talking about the song. At last, he looks down, and plays with his pinky nail. “You’ve known me your entire second life, Shepard. Since when have I left you? Derelict ship doesn’t count; I misled you, didn’t abandon you, because I trusted you whole-heartedly.” He pockets his hands. “I’m here, Shepard, and I won’t apologize for it due to your predisposition of me.”

That’s right. He’s here. The man immune to Henry Shepard’s charisma. The man who told Henry to stay—who told him off, but he didn’t have to. He gave her time with Henry though she didn’t want it. And when she didn’t want it the man knew she needed it. Why is he working so hard to bring them together? Why, if all he says is he brought her back to stop the Reapers, the threat of humanity. One small family in the scheme of humanity’s interests cannot be enough to put his personal stake in her affairs. Yet here he is, leaning against the stone with one foot pinned back, hands fidgeting in his pockets, and looking into the distance, waiting for their rescue, his neck taut by the muscle from his collar bone to that angled jaw. He’s always been here, in the shadows, and the light, in every message, and call. For the ruthless orders he makes, he’s been dependable. He resurrected her and didn’t leave her on her own.

He didn’t walk away.

Illusive Man searches for a fresh cigarette in his jacket. He fixes it between his fingers but senses her burning stare. A new type of burn, one that’s not meant to hurt.

When he looks at her again, it takes her a second to realize she’s moved in, sharing a stopped
breath, their noses almost touching. A magnetic force stops her lips. A nerve-wrecking signal penetrates her mind, whispering one hundred reasons not to, and bringing up a barrier between them she feels pulling at her chest. It aches and she’s shaking and she needs to stop the pain. She should run—her feet don’t work. She takes in the musk of day-old aftershave, adrenaline, and sweat. Her lip quivers, resisting the last thread of reason before the snap. His short inhale trembles. He doesn’t move.

“I’m on to you, Jack,” she says.

He drops the cigarette and leans in. His mouth brushes against hers—the whirring sound of a car halts nearby and a woman yells into the tempestuous quiet.

“Get in!” she says.

Shepard had expected the DJ but it’s no one she knows, and no one from the party. She clenches her teeth hard.

“The hell are you?” Shepard snaps.

A blue head leans out from the driver’s side.

Liara!

“Shepard!” she says.

Fury dies instantly and Shepard runs for the car. Illusive Man jumps in last and the car takes off before the door shuts.

“What are you doing here?” Shepard says. “How come you’re not on Illium?”

They veer upward into the skyway.

Liara glances back. “This seemed more urgent given your circumstances.”

“Seems everyone’s taking a personal stake in this.” Shepard says.

“I heard about Hannah. And your father. How are you holding up, Shepard?”

Illusive Man says, “Let’s discuss this later when we’re out of planet jurisdiction.”

“Illusive Man,” Liara says, followed by a pause. “Perhaps you’re right.”

“Where can we go?” Shepard says.

“I’ve set up a shack for emergencies like these. You’ll be safe provided you don’t stay too long.”

“We really shouldn’t rest,” Shepard says. “I need to get my dad.”

Liara assures. “My sources tell me they’ve stopped for fuel at a nearby planet and will be there just for the day.”

“Refueling doesn’t take a day.”

Liara smirks. “It appears someone rigged their ship before take-off and they lost all their reserves. They won’t meet with the Calamity until later.”
“Henry…”

“He is quite the quick-thinker.”

Shepard doesn’t take the passive compliment but she’ll accept anything that might have something resembling a shower.

“It’s good to see you, Liara,” she says.

“I wouldn’t miss helping a friend,” Liara says. “I’d regret it if I did.”

Illusive Man looks out his starboard window. Shepard looks ahead, watching the other skycars. Between them, his little finger rests alongside hers. She doesn’t move her hand.
Conflict of Interest

Chapter Summary

The afterparty.

Chapter Notes

Song: "Plastic Heart" - John Wick 2 OST

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s only been a year but Shepard’s body shows promise as Miranda’s work progresses. Hannah needed only visit the station once to verify the body, but when she glimpsed her report, she knew she had to extend. Insight into Shepard’s psyche has boosted the science team’s morale, as well as hearing stories of a childhood Miranda never had. The team’s concluded that Hannah should be a permanent consultant for the memory back-up design. If something is wrong, her mom would know. And if her mom didn’t know but it’s true in other reports, then her mom gets to learn more about her daughter. Science shares.

When Miranda isn’t at Lazarus, she’s at Cronos, only briefly. It keeps her sanity, to be able to leave her duty station, even if it’s for business. Though if she’s honest with herself, it’s more to be close to the man who took her under his wing.

Miranda walks in to the lair of despair as the cleaners call the place. Usually there are cleaning mechs but Illusive Man likes it thorough, and entrusts the job to the human crew, someone who can spot the smallest detail. Illusive Man stands, walking around his holo feed, exhaling smoke as he listens to a vid of Hannah and Jane Shepard playing cards.

“What is this?” Miranda says.

“Research,” he says between drags.

He holds out his arm and Miranda gives him the file. She almost forgot she had one.

“It doesn’t pertain to Shepard’s qualifications for our purpose,” she says.

“Everything that is in Shepard’s memory qualifies.” He swipes through the reading.

“Sir, I have taken every precaution to not make this personal.”

“Yet you have. Shepard is your creation; Hannah’s recreation.”

Miranda observes the ash tray; eight fully extinguished butts; one still smoking.

“How long have you been here?”

He extinguishes the tenth cigarette. “My case is empty.”
The average person could take a ten minute smoke break; a person on edge could suck one in five. Illusive Man is known to indulge every drag, and drink in between. It could take him a half hour to fully enjoy one cigarette. If he used the modern smoke devices he would be at it for hours with less rubbish.

“Should I be concerned?”

Illusive Man rubs his temple. “No, Miranda.”

He masks his lips, rubs his jaw, then picks at his pinky with his thumb, staring at the screen. Jane Shepard slaps her hand down and cries out, “Finally! Fair and square I beat you!”

He says, “I should.” He taps the arm chair and the feed pauses. “What’s so important you came here in person?”

“It’s Hannah,” she says. “She’s calling in the favor.”

“Very well. Encrypt her itinerary and get her to Roe station, in and out, if possible. We don’t want the Alliance becoming suspicious.”

Illium

The strictest, most regulated world, and Liara gets them through no problem. They had changed transport outside Milgrom and took her shuttle to an ExSolar private transport ship, where she docked in their hangar bay. Someone at the security checkpoint entering the planet let them through, but Shepard was stuck on blackmail while Illusive Man thought Liara bribed them. If she knows her biotic princess, it was blackmail. Liara hired a taxi soon after and half of the ride into the asari metropolis was spent arguing over her methods, and she was a good sport up until the argument circled around a third time, and she threatened them to eject the back seat. They knew that was not a safety feature for this model but they shut up regardless.

Liara parks the car in a resort called the Zaliokuz Sky Hotel and can’t get out of her seat fast enough. She breathes in her homeworld, deep and slow.

Shepard steps out; this is the tallest atmos-scraper she’s been to. Her own little joke inside her head: atmos is Latin for vapor, so instead of skyscraper, it’s really vapor-scraper. She doesn’t tell anyone; just a bad joke she loves to hear for herself. It helps ease the tension in the air as they follow Liara inside and she checks them into a matriarchal suite, located at the topmost level.

“This is the shack?” Shepard says.

“Criminals run from Illium to get away from authority,” Liara says, “so the best place to be is where no one would think to look for you.”

The one-hundred and sixty-fifth floor has one long hallway, and only one door. They have the place to themselves.

“How many Cerberus terrorists do you know on Illium?” Liara adds and Shepard blinks once. “Precisely my point.”

Liara unlocks the door and lets them through. Shepard first notices the panels of windows with a
view of the city. A blue ring glows underneath the king bed on a dais, fitted with white sheets. A long sofa divides the room between sleeping and dressing. It’s firm and a faded slate, facing the vanity and bathroom. The bathroom, rectangular, rests adjacent on the other wall of the vanity, and has a second access to the dining and full kitchen. Like a naval base she once trained on, there’s a wet side—shower, jacuzzi, toilet stall—and a dry side—handwashing station, bench, and small locker with a laundry chute. Kitchen takes a quarter of the entire room while the bedroom takes half. It has a full fridge and cabinet set with plenty counter space and an island that duals as a bar. She notes the controls along the wall to activate a sound shield, which manufacturers claimed was to stop smells and waking up sleeping guests. More like a gossip curtain for vacationers who spend too much time around each other.

The view of any place she’s been to has always been spectacular, but this one has particularly taken her back. The second of the tallest buildings mirrors the hotel; between them, an active fountain spraying varying designs through dancing holographs. She notes a large coast below the horizon line, and it reflects the late moon.

“I was saving this room for such an occasion,” Liara says, “though I had hoped no one had to use it. It is yours for the night.”

“Thank you,” Shepard exhales, gawking through the kitchen window.

“Shepard,” she pauses, looking for Illusive Man, who’s checking the drawers in the vanity. He walks into the bedroom. She continues, lowering her voice, “I know it’s none of my business.”

“It’s okay,” she matches the volume. “You’ve earned an explanation.”

“No, Shepard. I don’t need you to explain anything. I’m giving you this because we are friends.” She leans on the island. “But as your friend, I want you to know that I care a great deal, and don’t want to see you hurt. I’m here for whatever you need.”

“I appreciate it but what about the Shadow Broker?”

“I’ll find him,” she says. Her mouth stiffens. She takes Shepard’s hand with both of hers and gently squeezes. “I’ll be down a level. No need to knock, just don’t run up behind me when I’m working.”

“I promise I won’t scare the biotics outta ya.” Shepard smiles.

“Well. We all need some rest so—” Liara knocks on the drawer near the bathroom door. “—There’s a gun in here,” she points, “there, in the pistachio bowl, and in the shower. Good night, Shepard.”

“Good night, Dr. T’Soni,” Illusive Man inspects the abstract painting, a steel blue and bright red mix of fluid textures. “I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

Liara glares. “You too.” And the door shuts behind her.

Silence lies heavy, as crushing as deep space, smothering, and making every fresh thought thunder between her ears. Every memory is lightning and her blood is fire caught in the heat of what she wants and what she needs. Even if her words were directed at Illusive Man, Liara spoke to her. She sees what Shepard can’t even if it’s staring her in the mirror. Shepard moves to the vanity, a perfect place to holster her jewelry. When she sits, a portrait light turns on, lining the mirror. Illusive Man sits on the couch, crosses his leg, and watches her.

Shepard begins with her necklace, a cool silver chain that stops at the top of her sternum. The latch is stubborn.
She could unlock it if she stopped thinking about everything. She left her dad when she just got him back and it's gnawing at her. Her mom, loved by all, is paying the price for one mistake.

Her finger slips off the hook and she pulls. It’s stuck. She grumps about it and tries again. It’s frustrating trying to find peace when he makes it so... so...

No one can battle this morass without becoming the victim of overthinking. How Illusive Man brainwashed Mom into liking him. She recalls the shock of watching them hug, but then Shepard’s back in the collector ship, and she hears Joker’s words: “he knew it was a trap?” And that was when she knew he couldn’t be trusted. Then he goes into battle with her and he’s not just a corporate putz, which makes her wonder who he was before he was Cerberus. He took her arm and brought out her confidence, then told off her father, and taught her to dance. In business, he’s ruthless, and irritating. She wants to punch him in the face. Punch him in his whisky glass and then his face. But then he’s with her in person and he’s different. There’s an aura engulfing her to aspire, to be better than she is. He’s calm under gunfire as if he never left those conference calls. And when everyone is around them, he makes her feel like she is the only one there. And if she hadn’t dealt with Henry, she’d think the same about him. She doesn’t know if it’s the need to release her anger, a way to stab every sliver of hate into him, find a way to process the addlement, but she has to let something out. Maybe if she can beat herself up instead of thinking it, because physical pain is better than this crap. If she gets it out, it’ll go away, even if it’s just for what’s left of the night.

She tugs the necklace; nothing.

“Why won’t this damned thing come off!?” she roars and slams her elbows on the desk, she hides her face in her palms.

A hand rests on her shoulder, he traces her collar—she shivers. She peeks through her fingers into the mirror. Illusive Man stands behind her. He effortlessly frees the chain and leans in low, because he can’t just throw the necklace on the vanity. He clings her cheek to his, breathes her in, skims the chain down her arm, to the desk, and lets it go. It clinks with a metallic slither as it coils into itself.

He takes his time straightening out, then turns for the door. He checks the console and re-locks it. It gleams red. Shepard breaks from the stool and the frame turns off. It’s the first thing Illusive Man catches before she pins him against the door. His heart beats against her hand, she presses into him, sliding her finger up the stitching of his suit. It’s a simple path, leading to his neck, and opening the way to where she wants to be. He reads her anger brewing beneath the surface, his eyes flickering bright, then he springs his mouth onto hers, and she forgets what’s wrong. He snatches her around the waist, her back, and pulls her in, touching her, moving upward, gripping her neck until his fingers slip through her hair, and he grips it like reins—she moans.

He grows insistent, parting her lips from each other to sink himself into her, entangling their tongues in a fight without a loser. It’s clean, precise, and hotter the longer he keeps her in his hold. She finds the closure to his jacket and unbuttons it to fondle the white shirt beneath, and pull the tails from the pants. She feels the V of his abs, and rubs her palm along the crevice, and up his sculpted back. Warmth stirs between her legs and she drags her nails down his wings. He voices pleasure with a groan—he shudders, and takes her dress. It unravels itself from the false seam at the back. Either from her will, or his knowledge, both wanted it off, and it knew it. He kicks it across the floor, and for one heavy breath, he admires the view, and she almost sees his cheeks flush. He rips off his jacket, his shirt—it’s stained with trickles of blood—and picks her up, and throws her on the couch. He kisses her, harder now, as if he’s leaving her. He does leave; he descends her body, kissing her breasts, her stomach, her hip. Shepard shakes the dizziness away,
then a burst of hot sensation rolls through her, and she realizes her womanhood is on his face.

She grips his graying hair, biting back the string of curse words, until he finds the spot where she can’t hold it anymore.

“Oh shit!”

And he stays, stroking her with his tongue, invoking tremors up her arms, and suddenly she can’t feel her lips. Her eyes tingle, soon her entire face.

“Holy fuck!”

She can’t help it. She’s fallen in an abyss of nerve-melting ecstasy and it’s cushioned with white upholstery. It feels like minutes but he’s been there for longer according to the clock she briefly glimpsed before she rolled her eyes in the back of her head as he finger-teased her holes. She refuses to finish, and so soon, and admit he’s that good, that she pulls him up before he has time to wipe his face, and tastes herself on him. He grips her ass, and lifts her up, spinning her around to the vanity, planting her on the desk, and moving the chair away, where his kisses become a distraction as he unzips, kicking off his shoes, his socks--she feels the edge of his pants, then the bulge stretching the linen. He inhales.

He drops the pants. The body of fifty years looks too perfect to exist. He leans over her and pushes her into the mirror; it shocks her skin with a chill, but she’s too hot to hate it. Shepheard gapes up at him when his sex touches hers, Blood hammers in her ears. He looks into her eyes and just as fast as they started, her wet slit brings him inside her, and they gasp.

He’s here and he’s real. And he’s the first person to ever make her feel alive. She was a vessel of violent tactics on the field, taking orders from one person or the other, and barking them down the chain. A husk with a title. Now, she feels the reason to fight instead of being told there is one. It used to be just solving problems there’s purpose. Even if this feeling dies, it’s here now, and she feels whole. And she doesn’t want him to stop.

A bead of sweat catches in the stubble as Illusive Man pushes himself, taking all of her. He holds her ass on the edge of the desk. He draws back, the gleam of her fluid coating him forces her eyes elsewhere. Pumping veins along his neck redden the damp skin. She finds a depression in the muscles with her mouth. He tastes salty and smells like the bar. Part of him lingers with a musky cologne, but events leading to now eroded the strength. She imagines his view of her, how he can see her curves, and her reflection moving with each thrust. She wants to see. And just as her tailbone starts to numb from the hard surface and pressure of the ride knocking the vanity against the wall over and over, Illusive Man turns her over onto her feet and her knees go weak when she sees him watching her watching him. He puts his hand around her neck and caresses her jaw where his finger meets her lower lip and she nibbles the tip. He massages her breast, and bites her shoulder before bending her over; she holds the mirror up, and moans louder than the first when he thrusts again.

Minutes become an hour, split into several changes of scenery, and positions. She’s most aware of each other when he takes her to the window, back still immune to the chill, and hoists her up as she fastens her legs around his middle. Sometimes he enjoys the drag before the push; he’s most fun when he drives it fast, and she watches the strain in his brow. She won’t blame him if he drops her but he maintains, all 170 pounds of her.

Not a corporate putz.

It empowers her want to return the favor, to show she doesn’t just take; she gives. Sex is a battle;
let her have the field.

She loosens one leg and he balances out her descent; she doesn’t have to say anything as she leads him to the bed. It’s untouched, unravaged, and she plans to make it the centerpiece of the second longest night of her life. Illusive Man reaches for her when he falls back on the sheets and clamps his mouth to hers, but then breaks away when she climbs over him. He moves back, blue eyes fixed to her face, seeking words, but can’t, or won’t speak. She straddles him and panic flickers across his face. She eases onto him, she lowers herself until their noses touch, and she pushes her lips into his until everything wants to taste him, and she rocks forward, listening to the bed resist. She rocks back. Illusive Man’s breath quickens. He brings his fingers over her and they clamp gingerly around her waist. The blue ring around the platform wanes, thinking they’re going to rest. Now only the light from the city shines through, of silvery-blues and full violet. His eyes glow brighter with the room asleep. Light shifts across his body, shining the traces of moisture on his chest, trapped along the crevices where hair retains it. Heat rushes over her in waves, a warning. He must feel it too, her muscles spasming, her breath quieting. She rocks forward, weakened by the approaching end, and buries herself in the crescent of his neck. His breath brushes across her ear.

“Come for me,” he says.

Fire ignites throughout her head, wafting downward, and meeting the swelling tempest below. She fights it but he’s trapped her in a wrap where she’s stopped, but he’s going, and knows where. She tries to say no and he claps a hand over her mouth—her moan whines. How dare he.

His stubble scratches her, she smells sex on his fingers, his musk mixing with the slapping of their bodies. Her mind stills and she focuses on the breath, the pressure of his grip, and how her body floats above him, like she’ll reclaim heaven if she hears him call for her one last time. One great demand. She realizes why she for all this time he rubbed her the wrong way, because it was the right way.

She liked him telling her what to do. And now she acts on it instead of being caged by a virtual conference.

“Oh my gawd,” she mumbles through his hand.

Hot billows of passion curl into her limbs, shooting tingles in her fingers, and numbing her thoughts to keep her grounded, grinding her mound against his body as he reaches the angle that sparks her revelation.

“Come for me, Shepard,” he orders.

He frees her mouth.

She looks at him before they touch brows and she bites her lip.

“Jack…” she says. “Jack!”

He impales the fire and nothing stops the eruption of the sun. He pulls out and she arches without containment, every sector of her being ignites, and she screams, sultry tears pool, and fall in the overload. Waves stagger up her body in continuous sweeps of uncontrolled gratification. She drops onto him, unfurling in the euphoria of their afterparty. Jack collapses his limbs, now a dead, clammy star, but relieved. They don’t move. Instead, she listens to his heart calm, and his body chat with itself.
At some point she must have passed out. When she comes to, the sky is a lighter violet, and the sheets lie over her. Jack stares, his arm a kickstand as he outlines her body with the other. And when she closes her eyes again, she drifts off into the deepest dream, and wishes her dream was as vibrant as her reality.

Chapter End Notes

You look for me Inside the dark
I am the ocean
You are the shark
You hunt me like
Your last goodbye
Oh fallen angel
Of the night

Just take my heart
Just rip it out
This holy skin
It's falling out
I lay my body
On the bed
One day, someday
You know I will see you again

I put my hand against your plastic heart
No, suicide is not the plan
Stand far
Even the stars are trapped inside
Oh my There's nothing left to hide
There's nothing left to die
There's nothing left to die

I put my hand against your plastic heart
No, suicide is not the plan Stand far
Even the stars are trapped inside
Oh my There's nothing left to hide
There's nothing left to die
There's nothing left to die

Plastic heart
No, suicide is not the plan
Stand far
Even the stars are trapped inside
Oh my
There's nothing left to hide
There's nothing left to die There's nothing left to die
Silver Hair and the Ginger Bear

Chapter Summary

We learn the why and the consequences thereof. Liara maps their plot in more ways than one. Shepard eats.

Chapter Notes

Song: "Do You Feel It?" by Chaos Chaos

Then

Perhaps it’s the situation of Oriana weighing heavily on her, or Illusive Man taking a turn after withholding the false signal from the derelict ship, but she’s been in a mood that’s grown resentful in a matter of hours. With Shepard on liberty for armor and weapons upgrades with Garrus on Illium (not to help her with Oriana in the slightest), Miranda takes a business trip across galaxies, back to her work-away-from-work. It hasn’t changed but the aura feels colder, grayer, not as much life as on the small confines of the Normandy.

Miranda struts into Illusive Man’s private quarters. Another day, another…empty bed? She scans the room and no one but Illusive Man looking out his window. A cigarette burns itself out in the ashtray on the bedside table. He’s managed to wear pants but nothing else and doesn’t turn around when he hears her say, “An opportunity has come up.” He stares out at the red and blue swirling orb. She meets him—his profile remains calm, perhaps blank. She tries to pull him into the present.

“Hannah Shepard’s private medical services have been compromised. Alliance admirals are suggesting her arrest, and court-martial.”

“Contact Henry Shepard,” he says.

“Henry Shepard? Isn’t that a little close?”

“He’s a smuggler and a good one. Once he hears about his family, he’ll be onboard.”

“He can’t be trusted.”

“Who can? Besides, I need his expertise. Have him see me as soon as possible.”

“Is this public knowledge that you know Henry?”
“No. Let’s keep it that way for now until I know how to deal with…what’s happening.”

What’s happening is not something anyone can fix because it’s a human trait. A hormonal urge, carnal, and hard to ignore unless it’s fulfilled.

Miranda folds her arms. “Unbelievable.” She throws the datapad on the bed and grabs his biceps, forcing him to look at her. “Fuck her.” Gawd, she sounds like Jack.

Illusive Man blinks.

“When I was growing up I knew this boy. I became obsessed; I wanted him so bad, I wanted him forever. We had sex and to my great disappointment I didn’t feel anything after that. This is how you deal with it and two things can happen: (1) You don’t love her and just wanted to play with the shiny new toy, or (2) you do.”

Jack taps the arm chair. “And if I do?”

Miranda says, hard and clear as glass, “Then you have your answer and a horrible, lifelong condition.”

“People like you and I can’t afford that. That’s not us—that’s not who I am.”

“Then you have my sympathy.”

“I don’t require it, Miranda.”

“You will because love cannot be controlled.”

Now

Sunlight stirs Shepard awake but it’s painful to open her eyes. She stretches, moans—

Jack lies underneath her and shudders, then pulls her in. He tells her to—

—her eyes shoot open to the other side of the bed.

The sheets are folded over the pillow. It was a dream.

An impression remains where someone once sat. Or not.

Someone slept in her bed.

She scratches her head and feels the ginger nest sticking in mad directions. Rubbing her eyes to get the remnants of sleep away barely makes them function. She wobbles to her feet and shivers. There’s a robe lying over a reading chair. Anything’s better than naked.

A magazine and digital newspaper lie on the side table. Somebody’s been updating their worldly views.
Shepard makes it out of the bedroom as she ties the plush rope. A coffee aroma hits her. Somebody’s been in her kitchen. Still squinting around, she fumbles for the bathroom door and meets warm steam. Somebody’s used her shower and likes the fan turned off.

She finishes up her business and walks to the kitchen. She spots the coffee pot half full. Somebody knows how to make coffee—she inhales—and it doesn’t smell like charred beans.

“Morning.”

She freezes. Her heart ricochets off the ice and what was blurry is sharp and bright. Jack sips from a black mug, looking up at her from across the island.

“Fuck,” she says, catching her breath.

He slides his mug over, his fingers tipped on the rim. The same pronounced tendons once taut holding her against the glass now offer her another pleasure.

“The pot’s cold,” he says, and gets up for another mug.

Shepard curls her fingers around the ceramic; it’s warm. She puts it to her lip and Jack’s shirt ripples back and forth against the lower back as he maneuvers about, pouring, placing, then starting the microwave. It’s the first time she’s seen him out of his suit.

Well, not the first time.

In clothes, she means.

Different clothes.

“I don’t drink my own poison,” he says, and she realizes she hasn’t sipped yet.

The way he turns to her makes her want to do everything last night on top of the counters. She tries to tucks the wish away and blows on the coffee.

“Don’t wanna burn my tongue,” she says.

She drinks, breathing in a mellow aroma, tasting a livening flavor that’s mellow enough. Jack has people who wait on him hand, knee, and foot, but when he makes coffee…

“How is it?” he says.

She interlaces her fingers around the cup.

“Just right,” she says.

They don’t say much else apart from her stomach grumbling shortly after finishing the pot. In truth, she’s content in the silence because her head rages along its tracks, picking up every thought and mashing them together, trying to make sense of them, interrogating them over and over until she tries washing them away in the shower, only to turn off the faucet ten minutes later, and her head is now raging, and drenched. She towels off and finds her dress in the stand-up locker, or closet. This is a hotel, she reminds herself. It feels strange not pulling out her BDUs, or something like them, but it’s Illium. She can pull off the commando look for now. The attonyes file into a sleeveless catsuit. Shepard puts on the shoes and her feet begin to ache. All that dancing and the pressure from these mating ritual shoes repulse her body into a whole new soreness. She misses boots but it’s a happy distraction from the emotional battle inside.
Illusive Man searches through the directory on the fridge and asks her if she’d like breakfast.

“Breakfast?” Shepard says.

Her feet throb, every memory recalls itself, louder than the party speakers. His eyes glow, the kitchen glows, the sun beams through the second tallest building in the city, and it fills each panel across the wall, carrying her father’s voice: “Happy birthday, sweetheart!”

Jack says, “Can’t catch pirates without breakfast.”

Shepard shields her eyes and the warm orange illuminates her hand. Jack turns around. His hair’s perfect, his clothes are ironed, shoes shined. He had his towel tri-folded, and pillow fluffed. Her side is a mess, with her robe bathroom floor, towel thrown over the bar, and she just shook the water out of her hair, and threw on yesterday’s dirty clothes.

Her side?

“Liara’s waiting,” she says. “I’m—uh—gonna go check how things are…going.”

Before she can hear a response, she’s out the door, and down the hall, tapping the elevator’s interface.

It’s a private elevator but she only assumes that when no one between one-hundred-sixty-fifth and Lobby stops the car. And when she gets out, there’s armed security on either side of her that greet her.

“Liara T’Soni is waiting for you in the cafeteria.”

Zaliokuz’ lobby opens from the check-in and elevator hall into an atrium holding a crescent of food places, and a large dining floor domed by the cinematic view of its fountain, a courtyard with a garden, and Nos Astra as the backdrop. In a human setting, it would be easy to find Liara in this beehive, but now everyone’s some shade of blue, but only a few wear white as well as she does.

Liara has taken a table near a cafe with small but enticing portions of baked goods. She’s reading from her datapad, and looks like she ordered for a full table. When Shepard makes it down the stairs, Liara notices, and discreetly waves. Shepard makes sure she smiles. It may be the last time she sees her for a while and quality time counts.

“Good morning, Shepard. Help yourself. I didn’t know what to get you, or—um—Jack, so I got a little of everything.”

“Thanks,” Shepard sits and starts on what looks like skirt steak and eggs with a red dot on them. “I think he’s ordering in.”

“What’s wrong? I heard things were going well between you.”

Maybe this is the chance she can use to organize her thoughts, with a second pair of eyes attached to an intuitive mind.

“You heard huh?”

“Oh yes,” Liara says. “All night long.”

Dread washes down along with a drink of milk. “How? You slept on another level.”

“How else am I supposed to keep you safe if I don’t know what’s going on?”
“You spied on me?”

“It’s The Illusive Man in the flesh. I’m sorry, Shepard, but I couldn’t take any chances. I wanted to make sure you weren’t taken advantage of. Looks like it was the other way around.”

“I…” She folds her hands. “…I don’t know what’s gotten over me. Am I crazy?”

“Perhaps a little. But you wouldn’t have those feelings for him if there wasn’t something your instincts tell you wasn’t there. During the trouble on Bekenstein, calling me wasn’t The Illusive Man’s afterthought.”

Shepard sorts the platter of fruit and sticks mango, strawberry, mango to her fork. “What do you mean?” And eats it.

“I was his emergency contact. I know he doesn’t trust me, Shepard, but he trusts you.”

“He also prolly knew you’d rescue me no matter what.” She skewers two strawberries this time.

“Well, there is that. I wasn’t friendly when he got a hold of me, though, and I regret it now.”

“How so?”

“You may not see it, Shepard, because you’re trying not to look. For how little I know of him, but how often I’ve seen him, I have never seen him look at anyone without some ulterior motive. When he’s with you, it seems he’s there just to simply be there. Nobody that important takes the time with anyone to do nothing.”

She stabs the mango—the fork tings as it hits the plate.

“We’re not doing nothing.” She looks at it and aims again.

Liara eats a square cut of salmon and cream cheese, probably marinated in eezo. It might not be cream cheese. Or salmon. Shepard stares at the mango she failed to harpoon but Liara nails what Shepard’s been trying to solve. Shepard fists the fork and impales all the chunks she can fit on it. Jack could easily fix all this behind a computer, ordering people around like he does with the Collectors. Saving her mom is nothing in comparison. Liara doesn’t have to say it; her eyes say it.

“I know,” Liara says, “and I can’t blame your mother for what she’s done. I wasn’t quite sure what to do with myself when you died.”

“You told me about the Shadow Broker,” Shepard says. “So did J—the Illusive Man.”

“We’ve all had our hand in the chocolate box, Shepard. None of us have faced the consequences just yet.”

“Except Mom.”

“She seems at peace with it, but you say you have to free her. Shepard, she knows you’re alive. Don’t you think she already is?”

“I can’t just let it be.”

“I know. I see how you help your friends.”

Liara snacks on a fruit that looks like sliced tomatoes, then finishes the small plate of salmon after Shepard stacks three empty plates, and goes for something resembling pudding. She’s stuffed her
mouth when Liara glances up and mentions T-I-M. Shepard turns—his jacket is a new cut, new
design, new him—and swallows the baseball-sized bit of food.

“What is he wearing?” Shepard wipes her mouth.

“Breathable Asari linen with close impact absorption, so don’t push his buttons.”

“Hardy-har-har.”

Jack doesn’t come over until he speaks with the attendant serving small pastries. Moments later he
carries a folded bag over to their table and sets it on the edge.

He says, “Morning, Dr. T’Soni. Shepard.”

Shepard eyes down the bag and wonders if she’ll need to cut the blue or red wire. “What is that?”

“My breakfast,” he says. “Dr. T’Soni, I’m not saying I’m ungrateful for the hospitality. I
appreciate it beyond words. But we need to go.”

Liara nods. “I understand.” She transmits data to Shepard’s omni-tool.

“Hold on,” Shepard reads the data; they’re headed to the Arrae system. “We’re still wanted
criminals.”

“Didn’t I mention?” Liara says. “I’ve cleared the mix-up on Bekenstein and you should be safe to
ride in style with the Normandy again.”

“How’d you manage that or do I want to know?”

“Relax, Shepard. All you have to do is get the cargo and your father back.”

“Nothing is that straight-forward. Ever.”

“Well, at least you have someone along for the ride.”

Jack snatches his bag and walks away. “EDI…” His chat fades the further he gets. Shepard stares
at the table’s edge. Ground zero.

“What was that?” Liara says.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Yeah.” Shepard flexes her fists, watching the knuckles change color. “Thanks for everything,
Liara. I’ll catch you later.”

She stands.

Liara stands.

“Shepard?” She touches Shepard’s hand along the tendons. “Happy birthday.”
Chapter Summary

Coffee, breakfast, the cake is a lie.

Chapter Notes

Part One of the Gellix facility chapter. Didn't want readers to wait longer than I scheduled, so here's this.

Gellix is a warm gray and brown pearl of this galaxy. Shepard dabbles through her omni-tool, trying to get a read on their landing zone. EDI warns them of the low pressure and expects snowfall. They’ll know for sure when they pass the atmosphere in a few minutes.

While on the Normandy, Jack and Shepard had kept to themselves, armoring up, checking out their guns, and keeping a peaceful distance so they didn’t upset the crew, but the silence did worse, and heavy air followed them into the shuttle, where Jack has kept a bench apart, staring at a corner. The bag remains next to him, unopened. Shepard knows bad blood will ruin a mission, but she doesn’t know how to start, or if it’ll end, but it needs to. Liara hit so many nails on the head that she made a picture frame. Shepard steps into her gallery, and stares at it until she has to look away. None of this is as worrisome as making the same mistake her mother did. She can control the battlefield, control her fear of the enemy, so why couldn’t she have stayed in for breakfast?

Before she has a guess at what to say, Jack breaks the dead air. “So did you like the coffee or not?”

“What?” Shepard holds the support bar. “I did like the coffee.”

“But you didn’t want breakfast.”

“I did but—”

“Instead you had breakfast with someone else.”

“I didn’t know she’d order food! Are you really upset about this?”

“It’s a big deal.”

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry.” Shepard sighs.

“Hey, commander?” Joker comms.
“Not now, Joker,” she snaps.

Jack slaps his hands to his knees. “I need to clear the air.”

“Okay.”

“Be honest.”

“Okay!”

Jack removes his helmet (Shepard takes hers off in kind), then he stands, and he asks, “Do you want to have breakfast with me or do you just want coffee?”

“Uh, well, what do you want?”

He invades the space between them. “Answer the question!”

She fires back, “I want to have breakfast with you!”

“Good!” He steps back. “That’s all I wanted to know.”

“What the hell do you want to do?”

“I just wanted to have breakfast with you!”

“Fine!”

“Fine.”

“Tomorrow, then! We’ll have breakfast!”

Jack turns for his bag, then tosses it at her.

“What’s this?” she says.

“Commander?” Joker comms again.

Jack just flicks his head up. She guesses she’s supposed to open it, and when she looks inside, it’s a small, frosted cake, rounded and layered with fruit. She wishes she kept the helmet on because it’s hard to hide flush in her cheeks, and the grin spreading like a flash sickness.

“Commander!”

She snaps, “What?”

“Picking up some weird signals, commander. Oh, and there are pirates in the area too! Check radar.”

Shepard reads the screen on the shuttle.

“They’re swarming a Cerberus facility,” Joker says. “Papa Shep likely inside.”

“How many?” Jack says.

“All of them?” Joker answers. “Honestly, you’d be better off with another squadmate.”

“Out of the question.” He primes his main weapon. “We find Henry Shepard, and secure the
Shepard balances rifle and cake in her hand while putting on her helmet. And yes Snippy’s weight matches a baby krogan. The flash flood of information suddenly registers. “What is Henry doing at a Cerberus facility?”

The shuttle breaches the atmosphere. It’s a pale sheet over the jagged snowcaps and flurries. When they hit the mountain’s elevation, flurry slows to trickles of snow. It shouldn’t harm her aim and when the shuttle circles the facility, she has at least a dozen chances to find out. The Gellix facility haunts the mountainside and braces the constant windchill. The dry snow passes across the landing zone, and when they hover over, it kicks up in a spiraling curtain. Shepard opens the door to the sound of nearby gunfire.

“Move!” Shepard jumps out and grabs nearby cover, a crate at the perimeter of the helo-pad. Jack posts next to her.

“Shepard, did you seriously bring the cake?” he says.

“Life’s uncertain!” She bites down on half, crumbs stick to her mouth.

“Would have been true but you had your meal.”

“Then here!” She smacks the side of his visor, it opens, she stuffs the other half in his mouth, and he didn’t have time to dispute.

He chews quickly, and pushes some to his cheek. “‘ow I go’ fros’ing in ‘y hel’e’,” he tries to say, swiping bits out of his visor before he closes it.

Shepard cloaks and scopes the entrance with Snippy. It’s obscured but the returning fire isn’t from Henry. “He must be inside. Who else could be here?”

“Just a small security team,” Jack says, finished with the cake. “Gellix is not a main operation. No one should know about it at all.”

“They do. Let’s get to those doors. Maybe inside we’ll find some answers. And Henry.”

It’s easy to move Jack through the sectors, now that she knows his dance steps. They go from cover to cover, counting under her breath. Her VI manages her heat, keeping it off radar, and her attonytes keeping her warm, and stable. Getting shot is survivable but still hurts like hell, and she won’t chance anything risky, except maybe having more than coffee. Breakfast with the Cerberus boss. That’ll go over well when the crew finds out. Small ships—no secrets.

Walkways form a T and the bottom is the entrance. They meet the long line going to the doors. A line of pirates with their backs to Shepard fire at it from behind a wall of shipment, with Cerberus, and Hanish Zhadny, defending the area.

“Watch your aim,” Shepard says and Jack nods.

“Let’s get in close,” he says.

Shepard disagrees. “Cerberus might hit us; they don’t know we’re here.”

“A distraction then?”

“I’m not gonna dance the marigold.”
“No more dancing. Just watch.”

Jack sifts through an ornament of data, swirling in his hand as he types in a code via omni-tool. He swipes it forward and the data disappears, transferring to some other place. Shepard doesn’t see it at first, then something pops up across the facility’s outer bulkhead. A scrolling holo-sign in big, bold letters.

The pirates cease fire and Cerberus ducks back down. One stands half behind cover, reading aloud as slowly as the scroll.

“W—ar—ning: th—is…is…ju—st…”

“Get the hell down, you idiot!” a kneeling pirate hisses.

“Shuddup! M’tryin’ ta read!” He looks up again. “…a…dis—track—shun.”

Revelation washes over the crew but it’s too late. Jack exploits their backsides and shoots the right side with his rifle and the left with his pistol, instantly killing ones who took it in the head, and peppering the rest down like her target sheets in infiltrator school. Jack pins the poor reader face-down, and executes him, and moves toward his people. Hanish Zhadny’s hands shoot up after he drops his gun.

Shepard follows Jack, and glances down at the dead reader—there’s a perforated C shape in his armor.

Cerberus explain to Jack that Zhadny helped them when his men wanted everyone to pay for Henry’s treachery.

“Well,” Zhadny says, “this is unfortuitous.”

“You started it,” Shepard says.

“At which point?” He exchanges looks between her and Jack. “Your father is a disparate hack.”

“Don’t try to get on my good side,” she says.

“Shepard,” Jack says, “He can’t be trusted.”

“You’re with these pirates. Why were they shooting at you? Why are you out here and not in there with Henry?”

“He locked me out! And he didn’t care who else was with me at the time.”

Shepard sees bodies of pirates lying sporadically from the door to Jack’s pile behind them.

“The Heathens want revenge. And they want what Henry promised them which is broken anyway!”

“What did he promise?”

“Immortality.”

“Pfft.” Shepard almost snorts.

Jack lowers his pistol but not his rifle.
“He blocked me ’n’ my men in, and when they wanted to kill the bystanders, I tried to stop them, but they kept coming.”

“Where’s the cargo?” Jack says.

“Honestly, I wouldn’t be too caught up in this cargo deal. I’d be more concerned with why Henry is here in the first place. And since his ship hasn’t left, I foresee he’s still looking for it.”

“Where’s the ship?” Jack asks next.

“Docked. You know where since this is your domain.”

“It is. You’re a smart man, Mr. Zhadny. How many more ‘Heathens’ are there?”

“You get us in and I’ll show you.”

“You tell me now. In good faith.” Jack takes two steps back.

“All right, all right. There’re more on the way, maybe ten minutes out. But you need to get to Henry fast. And you need us.”

“You’re wrong there.” Jack says, cheek to stock, staring with both eyes wide, pupils narrow, the blue brighter than she’s seen.

It’s like watching a car wreck, where, in just the one second, she can recall the light orange sun peeking through the mountaintops, and the twenty-one rays thriving through the haze, reaching across every flat surface; the blood spurting through the light angles in slowed time, the bursts of white with each shot, and the look of surprise from Hanish Zhadny as the bullets penetrate his chest; the bullets move across Cerberus, a hose of death, a live wire, but intent, direct, until all of them fall, and their end pools out the back as assurance. What she doesn’t remember is moving. Because she didn’t. She stood there, she let it happen, and all she sees now are the sun rays lying across the bodies.

Shepard shakes herself aware. Aware of Jack and the mess on the ground.

She yells, “What the hell did you do!”

Jack steps in the red and straddles one of the Cerberus bodies; he pulls off his helmet. A Batarian.

“Any Cerberus employee of this facility would have access to the building. They couldn’t get back in.”

“Because they’re not Cerberus,” she says.

Jack doesn’t scrape off the blood from his boots as he goes for the door. “We need to get the cargo before the others arrive.” He beeps and boops the omni-tool. The door eventually opens and the rifle returns to his shoulder.

“How’d I not see it?” Shepard says.

“Could be birthday blues,” he jokes, leading them down a hall.

“Yeah. It was that cake I ate.”

Which she knows is a lie.
Jack locks every door they pass through, and just like Roe station, they’re cautious, and clear each sector before moving on, but her helmet picks up nothing, and no one. Jack must see the same when he slacks his rifle, and his posture. They take on a ramp to the next level, a squared-off, O-shaped room with side rooms. There are control panels for random things, mainly radar, and basic defense. Down to their left is Jack’s focus, a medical room with exam tables. He looks through the glass, pressing his hand against it, then sighs, and traverses the door. Shepard looks in and sees a pile of bodies, their uniforms stripped.

“Jack…”

But he walks passed them, looking on at a trauma table with an attached imaging system, something she figured out from Dr. Chakwas. He taps the crescent neck of the machine.

Instead of asking the obvious question, she asks another obvious question, “What is this place?”

“My misshapen fight against the inevitable,” he says. After a moment, he adds, “They were my most trusted scientists. I should have thanked Mr. Zhadny.”

She bit. “Why?”

“My darkest secrets are dead with them; secrets that should stay hidden.” He glances back.

“Is this why Henry’s here?”

“He’s here for the Calamity.” He takes a deep breath. “This place is small so we’ll find him.”

“Where’s the hangar?”

“Non-existent,” he marches toward a computer, “but if the ship’s parked somewhere, it’s hidden well. You check that other computer. See if we can’t locate a timestamp relative to an unauthorized port access.”

Shepard takes on the machine on the other side of the room, reading through files, but she can’t gain security footage from here, or watch logs. “EDI, can you filter through these?” Static. “EDI? Damn.”

In one file reads the permission granted to an outlandish experiment pertaining to Indoctrination. They kept extensive studies on Saren and other victims exhibiting familiar indoctrination traits. One T.I.M. holosigned for a series of tests run on his eyes in year 2184. Jack determinedly stares down his own screen, focused on his search. Shepard scrolls to another strangely accessible secret: a new consultant, Dr. H. S.. She bites the inside of her cheek, re-reading the file.

*Dr. Henry Shepard is granted authority to our Gellix facility resources.*

*I want him in comfortable living quarters by the time I arrive.*

- *The Illusive Man*

Jack didn’t seem worried about the bodies on the floor, so much as the table where only he would know what happened, and her father. Shepard shuts down the screen.

“You find somethin’?”
She almost answers Jack only it wasn’t his voice. Henry stands in the doorway holding a datapad casually, and conspicuously. Jack acknowledges it, then Henry, and pushes from the computer.

“You knew,” Shepard says. “Before all of this.” She scowls. “You knew each other.”
Chapter Summary

Shepard works with the devil but can't decide which one he is. Then she finds herself between two ends of a pier. Enter antagonist behind the piracy. Mako!

(Extra scene dedicated to Martin Sheen, who knows every Frank Sinatra song by heart.)

Chapter Notes

Song: "SOS New York" - Crysis 2 OST - Borislov Slovov
Pier scene: "Hunted" - Transformers: Extinction - Steve Jablonsky

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Henry remains smugly still, as if he’s prepared for his daughter to rage, and spit every nasty word the Alliance taught her. I bet he wants her to. She wants to. The consonants line up on her tongue, ready to leap, and free fall until they hang themselves by the vowels left lingering in the air. A smoldering heat flashes underneath the suit and the helmet stifles, but she refuses to uncover the flames escaping her eyes, and the repugnant wave filling up her twisted insides. She could hurl, but she swallows the bile, and the words, and lives in her sweat to which the suit cannot compensate. No machine can factor the feeling of betrayal from family, or from an illusive man.

If she could kick her own ass she would. She’d kick her ass out the door and back to that night she forgot everything, and if she could, she’d never wake up from it, she’d never have taken Mom’s call, and she could decompose in peace, or rust, or whatever she’s made of now.

“I had to, Jane,” The Illusive Man says.

She doesn’t hide her quaking hand when she points at him. “No. No…” She can’t look at him, but she can stare at her father, stare him dead in the eye because she’s had years to plan what she’s wanted to say to him. But when she tries, nothing comes out. She hears his footsteps but he’s not moving. He’s not going anywhere. Why!? "We only have a few minutes,” Henry says, “I want to tell you everything, but we need to get to the ship.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” she says. “Or you.” But she still doesn’t look at him.

“The Illusive Man was looking for this file,” Henry pats the datapad on his thigh. “All you ever needed, Jane, is right here, but The Illusive Man wanted a joy ride with you, manipulate you into thinking you needed me, but really it’s all him.”

“That’s not true!” Jack yells.
“Most of it!” Henry yells back.

“We got what we need!” Jack whips his arm straight to point beyond the facility walls. “Now we need to leave.”

“I need answers!” Shepard says.

“Jane, the Alliance would have incriminating evidence on him, as well as valuable sources to Cerberus’ weaknesses. Specifically, his weaknesses.”

“We don’t have time for this right now,” Jack says.

“Course not,” Henry continues.

“What about the cargo?” Shepard says.

“It all floats in the same sea.”

Whatever that means.

An explosion sounds outside, but it’s muffled, sounding like a thunderclap covered by a giant metal shell. They’ll have a few doors to break open before they meet muzzles.

“Hanish is using his brute strength now?” Henry pulls out his pistol and pockets the datapad in his coat’s breast.

“He’s dead,” Shepard says.

“Pity. Should come back later and salvage his parts.”

Henry makes way through the corridors leading away from the blast and she’s only following because she doesn’t know where to go. Jack takes flank, which is only good because of his array of weaponry. But knowing he’s behind her makes her attonytes crawl in ways they shouldn’t.

“Where’s your ship?” Shepard says.

“Through here.” Henry descends a level using a back entrance.

The hall is dark and lights up as they move through, setting off a domino effect of light until it stops at the exit far down. Along the way are small offices, and exam rooms.

Shepard states, “Some of the files I read said these spaces were used for eye testing. Seems odd if it was also used for studying indoctrination.”

“Read that, huh?” Henry says. “I’ll explain the correlation when we’re safe. How’d you get that information?”

Henry stops at a control panel and initiates a systemwide shutdown. It rings: “Wiping System. Confirmation required.”

“If you would do the honors,” Henry says. “Boss.”

“Can it, Henry.” Jack says. Then speaks into the panel, “Confirmation: The Illusive Man.”

Shepard spins around. “Don’t talk to my father like that.”
“Voice recognized,” the computer finalizes.

“Thanks, Janey.”

Her pointer finger nearly jabs Henry’s nose. “It’s Commander until I say otherwise. Keep movin’.”

Jack says, “This isn’t the way to the loading docks.”

“You know what?” Shepard snaps. “Don’t talk to him at all! I need you two focused! Got it? Focused!”

Though perhaps she is trying to tell herself that. Playing Commander-in-the-Middle has no winners, especially with pirates with explosives outside.

The building shakes after something else detonates.

“Is this place bomb proof?” Shepard asks.


They double time it and meet the exit, which leads outside to the alpine range, and the sudden sting in her nostrils. Along the snow line is a used path along the pinnacle that disappears down the side. Parked thirty yards down the path is a Cerberus equivalent to the M-35 Mako. Shepard checks her sector, moving down the exterior to another station of horribly placed crates.

“Must’ve shifted from the explosion,” Henry says.

Jack says, “You need to hang around Shepard more.” He checks his firing chamber and re-locks the Vindicator. “Oh and duck.”

“What?”

Shepard’s neck bristles. Nerves fire a warning and she snatches Henry’s coat to pull him down before the laser from behind the Mako meets his chest. Heathens pop out, firing sporadic rounds. Some ricochet off the containers and the wall. Underneath the barrage, Henry peeks between crates. Shepard inches back, waiting for the pause of reloading, while she sets up her shot using the VI. It registers six armed people.

“Kala-fecking-hira! Stop shooting at my kid!”

One of the humans peaks out, wearing a mocked Alliance suit with patches blacked out.

He yells, “Time to reap what you owe—urk!”

Shepard snipes him in the neck and he falls away from the Mako. She reloads.

Henry says, “That—that’s not how it goes. Can’t hire good help these days.”

“I agree,” Jack says, hiding on Henry’s right side, behind the tallest crate.

Shepard yells, “What did I say!??” Jack doesn’t respond. She nods and asks Henry, “Now what?”

“Get the Mako!” Henry says. “And I’ll get you to Calamity!”

Between Jack shooting suppressive fire and Henry occasionally firing his pistol, Shepard can cross the zone without suspect. She cloaks. Her VI masks her exhales and she moves undetected behind
Mako—five people stand in front of her without a clue. Before they knew what happened, she killed them. She had shot one from the hip and the bullet went through the man next to him, but before the first fell, she snatched his rifle, and fired on the others before unleashing her Incineration tech to watch them burn alive. She kicks the one pinned on the tire and goes to pull the latch for the door. She might as well have been a monkey opening a soup can.

“How the hell does it open!?”

Henry and Jack check the area before moving around.

“Daughter, did you ever learn to drive?”

“Got a crash course a few times.” She tries the latch again. “Where is the friggin door!?”

“It’s right there!”

But Henry’s busy with a new set of pirates who must’ve followed the gunshots. He stands in front of Shepard and creates a tech bubble around himself. Bullets catch in the field, and disintegrate. Jack fires off a couple then helps Shepard.

“That’s to the engine console,” Jack says. He slaps the side next to the latch. “This is the—” Nothing opens. “—oh. How do you…?”

“Henry! Didn’t you drive this thing at one point!?”

“Not exactly drive.”

“Oh for f—ugh! I hate my family! I hate this damned—” she kicks it. A bent panel flies up on the opposite side like a broken wing. “I’m sorry, baby, I didn’t mean it!”

Jack wheels around for added cover as Henry’s bubble fades. They back up and use Mako for cover (it’d be pointless to cloak now). Shepard checks the panel—it’s opened to four seats and the pilot’s chair. The friggin’ door.

“Get in!” she says.

Then she jumps in last, Jack secures himself in the back, and Henry’s at the helm, scrambling to find the button to close the hatch. Shepard takes the seat across and diagonal, away from both of them, then straps in, shoulder harness and all because she swears to the cosmos this is karma laughing maniacally.

She asks, “What does that even mean, ‘not exactly drive?’” Pings from bulletfire hit the exterior and maybe she’s hoping for the distraction by satiating curiosity.

Henry’s fingers leap over the haptic interface and Mako goes live. “When I needed to be alone, I’d cozy up in here. Sometimes not so alone. Heh heh heh…”

“Oh gawd!” She could be sitting in one of the places he had—ew! Her face blanches. “That is gross!”

“Sorry, that was undadly of me. Very inappropriate. Very. Sorry, ‘k’, here we go!”

Mako roars and Henry charges her forward. The tires rumble the floor and the bulkheads hum. Then she sees Henry turn off the road, and in their small window, she sees the bottom of the mountain, and the long, steep slope of white.
She spits out, “Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! Where are you going!?”

“Away from the bullets!”

“Oh my gawd.” Shepard grips her shoulder straps so hard her hands ache. She glances at Jack--his calm composure, and relaxed posture aggravates her so much she forgets for a second Henry just leapt off the side of a mountain. She looks—they’re soaring, nose down, toward the sheet of snow. Her organs feel the weightlessness just before Mako’s tires slam down; the straps stab into her neck, and she pulls them tighter to stop her from jumping around. She hits the thin foam padding with the back of her visor and grits her teeth.

Henry exclaims, “Woo! Hoo hoo hoo!”

“Fecking hell!” she shouts.

With snow kicking up the sides, and Henry skiing the tank toward what appears to be a mine a kilometer out—or down—Shepard forces her eyes shut, never having this many trust issues tested at once, but she hears a humming, not from the walls, but a voice. She opens an eye. Jack sways his head to and fro, with a curl in his lip, and brow pinched.

“Yougottabekiddingme…” she exhales as a raspy mutter and stares at the ceiling.

Jack sings between bumps in the slope. “Call me…irresponsible…yes I’m…unreliable…but it’s…undeniably true…”

Shepard rolls her eyes to the back of her head. He’s rubbing it in.

Henry says, “Made it!” He makes a final jump, shooting off the boosters, toward a small parking area with a ramp up to the catwalks that either lead into or around the mountain. “Shit!” Heathens emerge from the only visible door on the nearest catwalk.

She beats out several exhale before she mutters “to hell with this” and unbuckles. She jumps from her seat, overcoming the dreaded feeling of all her blood going to her head as they gravitate to the landing pad.

“Squash ‘em!” she yells. She snatches onto the pilot chair before Henry charges the boosters again.

She reaches for the turret controls and fires off a few to scare them, if the incoming Mako doesn’t scare them enough.

“There’s no space!”

“There’s plenty of space!”

“It’s a walk way!”

“We’ll make it.”

Mako drops and his argument does too—it teeters on three tires at the mercy of physics and Shepard feels the suspension as if on a sailboat that’s falling off a huge wave, then it regains level, lists to port, landing the other three tires against the mountain. Shepard loses grip and slams into the starboard bulkhead, which opens a hatch—the hatch—that she had tried with the latch.

“Hey, look at that,” Henry says.

Shepard moans and readies Snippy. Jack leaves first and tells them it’s clear before Henry goes,
then Shepard. She checks for damage; underneath the Mako lies crushed bodies and weapons splayed across the ground. One such weapon is beeping.

“Get in! Get in!” she yells and shoves them through the door.

“Hey!” Henry protests—

The beeping increases speed, the door closes, it pops, then booms. A fire’s roar becomes a hissing grumble. Metal weakens, wanes, and creaks until it breaks, and Shepard’s heart falls with the sound of the Mako’s demise.

—and the data pad drops from his coat. Henry reaches for it but it’s Jack who picks it up and holds it, looking at it, not reading but thinking. His eyes don’t move, much less anything until the ground shakes, which puts him back in the moment, and he hands the pad to Henry.

Shepard points Snippy down the passageway, noting the spaceport aesthetics than an actual mine. It’s only a main hallway cutting into the mountain, with smaller, paths crossing lengthwise. They advance down the main; the lights flicker after another explosion. Dust rattles, pieces of rock fall from seams.

Henry pants. “Keep going!”

Glitching holo-decals along the bulkhead read Docking. Henry bolts. The exit closes in and Jack takes left, Shepard right, and Henry pushes the green. The door twists from its center circle, locks dislodge themselves, and the door splits open.

Shepard breaches and feels the balcony walkway beneath her threaten to give. The crag is a couple thousand feet, cupping the docks, a giant’s hand guarding ships, possibly from icy gusts. A ship smaller than the Normandy stands by, magne-tethered to the second sky pier to her right. No hull code. Two turian cannons, Batarien guts, and Alliance shell. The Calamity matches the dimensions a scout shipTo her bottom, however, is that long plummet the Heathens seem to be hoping by blowing up the place.

“Watch your footing!” she says.

They stick to the crag, wildly aware of the upcoming bridge connected to a stable terrace with pillars and buttresses supporting a high ceiling, and they make it, but they meet guns when a door further down opens. Metal creaks again and the bridge behind them collapses. Before Shepard thinks, Jack yells “Go!” and unleashes his rifle on the pirates. She cloaks and grabs Henry.

One one-thousand, two one-thousand.

The tiny triangles scale over him and she runs him toward the pier before they’re completely blocked off. Shepard doesn’t think on the hard evidence Mom needs that’s in his coat, she doesn’t think about handing him the only immediate escape plan they have, and she certainly doesn’t think about Henry flying away to avoid his own incarceration. She’s just going to have to use the T word because the F word is beyond saving right now.

“Get on!” she yells, slowing down to watch the invisibility peel away, and he guns for it. It’s a long pier and she hears the plates beneath her, and the gunfire behind her, and she stops. She turns. Henry has to make it. He will as long as she stands here. But Jack…

He hides behind a bit of extruding wall, but the ricochets pepper his shields; he won’t have time to recover. Shepard, no cover, worries about her target and beyond: one head in line with the next, and she hopes she can take down two before they move in closer to Jack. There are seven now; two
more had come through the door, two lie on the deck.

After nine-one-thousand, a song springs in, and she hums as she lines up her scope with their heads.

*Say what you want, say what you want*

Ka-Boom! A pirate walks into the crosshairs—three drop (top that, Garrus), blood splurting everywhere, and a survivor yells “Shepard!” as her cloak fades. He’s Krogan with a bigger mouth than Wrex, and an even bigger shotgun than the Claymore.

When he turns to shoot, Jack kills the human pistol-wielder, and stabs his hand out that causes violent convulsions in the other two as their weapons overheat, and cook their gloves. Jack leaps onto the krogan’s back. He grips his crest plate and pulls forward. The krogan panics and reaches back. He snatches Jack and throws him overhead.

“No!” Shepard dashes to Jack as he flies back-first into a pillar.

It cracks. Something snaps underneath and the floor drops an inch, but her insides lurch further. Jack groans, Shepard grabs under his shoulders and drags him away before the krogan charges, and gets him down the pier. He manages to stand but the floor drops again, and everyone falls to their hands.

A voice calls out behind them. “Oh, captain! My captain!”

The krogan smugly nods up. Jack and Jane look back. A man has Henry at gunpoint, the Calamity untethered and purring. He doesn’t wear a helmet, has a fresh, Alliance-reg haircut, a sharp jaw, and thin compared to her father.

Jack urps—the krogan takes him by the neck and keeps him on his knees, the Claymore v.2 aimed at his back. She doesn’t know when her heart began churning stomach acid.

“Commander,” the man says, “I need you to stay.”

“Who the hell are you?” she says.

“An arbiter. Your father will not be joining your mother.”

Henry spits out, “Dammit, Illusive Man! You see what you’ve done!?”

“He didn’t do anything, well, except…” He waves his pistol at Jane. “Guess you are Cerberus’ lap dog.”

The floor moans.

“Who bought me out, Chris?” Henry says. “Who hired you and took my crew?”

“Nobody.” He takes the data pad from Henry. “Only top brass of Cerberus have access to this place. Now I will have piece of mind, knowing I brought you all down, and solved the galaxy’s biggest concern: survival.”

“That evidence belongs to Captain Shepard! Not you!”

“Don’t worry. It will be turned into the judge, once we change some things. I don’t wish to punish the innocent.”

“But why us? Why me? Why kill the captain’s kid? Why not just go all the way?”
He smiles. “You’re just walking, talking parts, commander.”

“You can’t let ‘em have it, Janey! You’re not parts! I know cuz—”

“No!?” Henry protests. “Damn, that’s twice I’ve been on the receiving end.”

“No, commander.”

The floor drops another inch. Chris steps onto the open airlock, escorting Henry onto the ledge with him.

“Because as long as you have The Illusive Man alive, I can’t make that deal. And you’ve given me the best chance at ending Cerberus forever.” He looks at Jack. “You should’ve stayed in your chair.”

Henry’s eyes yell at her. She checks the krogan and she wants to slice him open and use his guts as a bungee off this hell plank. But she can’t chance Jack. She has every reason to, every motive, but when he looks at her, Liara’s words resonate. And her instincts don’t lie.

Jack is on his knees but he is in close-range of a mid-range weapon. Jack eyeballs his captor, then meets eyes with Shepard and blinks once. In that blink, Henry yells out her name.

Then Henry cries, “Don’t!”

Chris pulls him into the ship but Henry resists, then rips the data pad from him, and throws it.

“NO!” the man jumps for it as it lands on the pier and Henry vanishes into the ship. The data pad sticks against the metal, just barely, with its rubberized, shock resistant frame. The pier bows and thins that resistance, a plank on a listing ship, and the last of the crew are at its mercy. The krogan flees with Jack’s helmet. He drops it to free his grasp. It vanishes in the haze below. The bend steepens, he slips, and he grabs the terrace ledge. Metal creaks louder; not as loud as the whimper from a 500-year turtle tank.

Chris uses the railings and hauls toward the pad as it scoots along the path, making every centimeter to stretch and take it a mile in ratio if Shepard attempted.

Jack eases his descent but she grabs his arm.

“It’s not worth it!” Shepard yells.

He shoots a look that pierces something she didn’t know was there. Before she pleads him to stop, he’s already going down, and Chris climbs in a tizzy to get it before him. Jack reaches, leaning, trying not to stumble; Chris extends his fingers, and the pad falls with Jack’s weight reaching the end of the walkway. Chris presses it to his chest but when he turns, Henry has flown the Calamity too far for him to jump. Jack heel kicks him in the face. The pier lurches. Chris grabs Jack’s ankle
and Shepard is already sliding on her back before she realizes she had let go. The pier threatens its final hold. Shepard straightens her body, aiming for Chris, and the world blurs. All except Chris; all except Jack. Chris sees her and makes a choice, to jump and hope he makes the ship, or take her on.

Chris jumps.

He hangs in the air a second before half of him slams into the open airlock, knocking the air out of him. His thin arms can’t hoist him up after all that climbing. Shepard tries slow, grasping at the railing, widening her legs to boost friction, but she sees the end of the pier, and there’s not enough time to stop.

She knows his struggle. She was just like him before N7. Weak, naïve, desperate to cling on to what matters, and knows the outcome.

Chris’ arms buckle and like the last bit of water on the edge of a cup, he drops, along with the data pad. He plummets into the clouds screaming.

Gone.

Just as she’ll be...if she was still the boomer she was years ago. Jack snatches her wrist. She twists over to her stomach and grapples the last leg of railing; it breaks and he’s all that’s left, straining to put his back into over two-hundred pounds of armor and female muscle. His forehead protrudes a vein the pinker his face gets. Sweat dampens his skin where his neck is taut, and he bears his teeth.

“I can’t hold on!” he says.

Lurching terror fills inside. In one, slow motion, she watches his grip fail, his hand lets go, and a light-headed aura blooms just before she falls, and her boots meet metal.

“What the—”

“Taxi for Janet Sherbert?” Henry’s says over the IMC in a bad, Quarian accent.

He’s extended the airlock’s deck to catch her. Jack lands next to her and hurries her inside. They meet Henry at the helm. He fluidly uses the haptic interface as an artist making sweeps across their canvas, closing the airlock, turning the port rudder to get them out of the docks, and back in the air where a ship belongs, leaving the krogan hanging off the terrace in the corner of the window. The terrace breaks off to fulfill its two-thousand-foot destiny, and ending the alien without her knowing his name.

“Activating stealth,” he says.

The six-man vessel has little room on the bridge, but plenty of oh-shit bars lining the bulkheads, to which they oblige. The ship seems to work adjacent to the Normandy, however a simpler cloak, perhaps not for recon. It skitters over her shell like a shallow stream.

“We lost the data,” Shepard says.

“That poor data,” Henry says. “Lost to the frozen chasm. Glad I turned the heater on here here, but whew! It is hot!” He fans himself with a makeshift fan of rubberized frame.

“The data pad!” Shepard snatches it from him, monkey hanging from a limb. “Holy—but I saw it fall.”
“I actually…never kept the real one on me. I had transferred the data to my ship under the wire, virtually. This is the real one.”

Shepard swells with energized butterflies that she wants to cheer. Her happiness leaks out in a grin; she bites her lip to suppress it. Mom’s saved.

“Congratulations,” Jack says.

Shepard glares. “What were you thinking? That was reckless.”

“It was worth it to you,” he says.

“Well, don’t—” she responds immediately before she hears him. Something inside melts. “Don’t do it again.”

“I’m going to check out the ship,” he says. “Where’s your main storage?”

“Back that way,” Henry points. “Passed the berthing lounge. Don’t break anything! And don’t touch my sandwich! It’s been a couple days, okay maybe don’t touch any food in the reefer.”

Jack leaves quietly.

“You should follow him,” Henry says, turning Calamity’s nose to the sky in a gradual ascension.

“Don’t want him getting food poison?” she asks, though she understands why he can’t be trusted.

“You should meet who you’ve been fighting for this whole time.”

See her mom’s unfertilized collection? Talk about them over expired leftovers?

“They’re just eggs, Henry.”

Chapter End Notes

Call me irresponsible - call me unreliable
Throw in undependable too
Do my foolish alibis bore you
Well I'm not too clever - I just adore you

Call me unpredictable - tell me I'm impractical
Rainbows I'm inclined to pursue
Call me irresponsible - yes I'm unreliable
But it's undeniably true - I'm irresponsibly mad for you

Call me irresponsible - yes I'm unreliable
But it's undeniably true - I'm irresponsibly mad for you

- Frank Sinatra
Chapter Summary

Shepard discovers the past between her father and The Illusive Man that leads to a fateful decision.

Chapter Notes

Songs: "A Warm Place" by NIN, "New Devon" Uncharted 4 OST

Already the stars shine brighter having the data in her own hands. Henry plots a course with Joker, though introductions were rusty when Joker got excited at initial connection, but Shepard already left to avoid responsibility. It’s strange being aboard anything not the Normandy, and she won’t admit she’s intrigued, after all she’s almost collected every model ship she can find, but the schematics she read in the scan don’t do this bird justice. The armory makes up the bulkheads of the p-way, from the bridge and aft, holding armor lockers, EEBDs, and open racks of weapons.

A hole empties her sorrow from the pit of her stomach and she brushes her fingers along the side of a Viper, remembering—realizing—she had sacrificed Snippy.

The quick-action door opens and the observation dome above entrances her. Space moves across a dining loft, with chairs outboard to better see above and below. On her level is the galley (as small as the Normandy’s), a port ladderwell to medical and engineering, a wider ladderwell to the loft on starboard side, and four racks stacked in twos with six stand-up lockers. In smaller vessels, they’d call it hotracking, as always someone would be on watch—two in this case), but if Henry used to have the Heathens, how come there are so many shooting at her?

The why entices her to read the datapad. Underneath the passing stars, she scrolls, but she doesn’t trust what she sees, and shakes the disbelief from her thoughts.

She plays an audio file with Henry’s voice. “Dr. Sharpé. Gellix cycle 40 February, 2183. Haven’t been planetside in a long while and this system they’re using pisses me off, so I made my own. I’ve doubled the months up so it’s like Earth, but longer. My dates are not a typo. The following reports are for The Illusive Man’s eyes only. See what I did there? Right, right. Sorry. It’s just…” For a while it’s nothing but dead noise and when he comes back he chokes. “I can’t believe she’s gone.”

Heat surfaces behind her eyes and she sniffs.

“41 February 2183. Began Illusive Man’s eval. Vitals are healthy, in the above-average percentile of his age bracket, only twelve years to catch up with me, and despite the smoking and drinking, he remains active, physically, sexually, and goes to annual check-ups. His concern for his mental health is understandable, but there are no clear signs of deterioration. He’ll remain in my care in the coming month. Tomorrow, he’s scheduled for optometry as requested. Notes attached.”

Shepard swipes to the attachment—his evaluation. In the patient’s concerns field, it reads
“cognitive alterations.”

“42 February 2183. The Illusive Man’s optics are unmatched. His clarity to read people’s microexpressions, heart rate, and gauge their character without knowing them is beyond human. I had him take a personality test, one that does not change over a lifespan, and he is a natural leader, already an excellent judge of character, and in power of limitless information. I’d hate to have him as an enemy. But there is something. Something that doesn’t connect. I’m gonna meditate over a bottle of scotch.”

“43 February 2183. Wait. 44 February 2183. Sorry. Turns out the boss man likes scotch too. And I wasn’t sharing my bottle so he had another one on hand. Yaaay—ugh. So I and he…he and I were swapping stories and I got to talking about…well anyway, she fought Sovereign, so I started thinking, and it was mostly Illusive Man doing the thinking for me at that point…why don’t I fight in her honor? Be her hero again, because he gave me renewed hope. He’s the only one that can save her. I will happily pay my share and save him too.”

“45 February 2183. Tests synthesized.” Henry sighs. “Correlation is positive.”

Correlation?

The audio stops and she swipes to the end, unable to open the encrypted files. Henry had said the cargo hold was straight back. She opens the door, passing the starboard head, another ladderwell, and meets the aft of the ship, a large bay, similar to the Normandy’s, but not empty, and not alone. Jack strolls between the containers, helmet off. When he hears her step down, he turns just enough for her to hear him back.

“Jane.”

For such a large room it’s unnervingly quiet. Stacked outboard are fifty cots at least. This isn’t a ship, it’s an escape pod. She glances at one container with a small case on top (most likely for ammo or weapons), and a Heathen symbol on it. She could fit herself in there.

“It’s over, isn’t it?” Jack says.

He raps his fingers along a rim of a sealed container with a glass dome that’s sandwiched by larger crates. It’s the only sound in the hold.

She takes her helmet off and rests it under her arm. “We’re on our way to the Citadel. Probably best if you were just a disco ball.”

“Right.” He glances at the data pad. “I…thought I had more time.”

“It’s—what—two-three days left? Plenty of time.” But the aura around him—the tension, the shadows lingering between the cargo, coating the catwalks, and half his body—whisper she’s off point. “The tests were positive.” She looks for a response but he’s stone. “What were the tests for?”

Except for the small twinge in his jowl.

The ship lists.

“I knew this would become complicated,” he says, “when I had to put myself back in the field. But it’s worth it.”

“This was never about my mom to you.”
“It’s bigger than that."

“You have to stop talking around me."

“I’m indoctrinated, Jane.” He looks at her. “And Henry is my doctor.” He takes his helmet he had placed on the crate, and stares at his reflection.

Like Benezia, like Saren, and like him. She had made a quiet assumption back on Gellix, but didn't think hard on it. They were being shot at. But to have it even closer to home, her benefactor especially, the one calling out the orders to defeat the Reapers, to find out everything about them. His work will be destroyed by them taking his mind. If he's aware of it, then he's mostly intact, and somehow Henry's helping in that. But how much of this indoctrination affects him? How much of their time together was real?

Jack continues, “If he gets into Alliance hands, he stops being my doctor, and you will never see him again.”

“Yes I will, just behind glass.”

“That was Captain Robertson’s son you killed. Chris Robertson. I didn’t place it until it was too late. Henry took him on as one of his patients when he was active duty. When the captain finds out, your mother won’t have a chance.”

“We have to tell her!” Shepard waves on her omni-tool.

“I let slip in encrypted communications that he has a son who disappeared. She’ll make the connection; I trust her, as I trust you.”

Omni-tool shuts off. “And you want me to delay the return so it benefits you.”

“With you I know my word isn’t convincing enough. It never has been.”

She ughs. “I have to go to the Citadel. This is my mission, Jack.”

“But is it what you really want?”

She looks sideways. “Yes!”

Jack exhales, a disappointment quick to express, predicting her answer before she said it, and just as quick, he slams his fist into the crate. The loud klang reverberates. His arm trembles and ripples the effect over him. His inhales deepen, exhales even deeper, and when he looks her dead across the path, they are eyes of pleading.

“It’s my mom! I owe this to her!” she says.

“You don’t owe anything because I paid it by bringing you back to her!”

“What? So, in the big scheme of the Collectors and Reapers, you drag my family into it for—? You brought me back so you could use my parents for you and use me for the Collectors!?”

“Yes. And no! At first, in part.”

Air becomes lava and it singes her skin, standing her hair on end. It’s too thick to breathe, too thin to hold her breath. Using her to finish her job against Sovereign, fine. Using her family…no. Just no. She can’t imagine how desperate they must have been, then Illusive Man just happened to be available and offer ‘help.’
“So when did it change?” she says. “When was it less about Mom, and all about you?”

Jack shakes his head. “That’s not it.”

“Then what?”

He bites his cheek.

“What is it!?”

The bulkheads rattle from disturbance outside. Shepard looks about, listening for the next thing, and it’s a faint boom overhead. Henry calls over the 1MC, “General Quarters! Mann battlestations! Route for General Quarters are back to my damned pilothouse!”

“Dammit!” Shepard yells. “On my way!”

The ship hoists railings along the p-ways, popping up sections of grab bars from the ground, and locking in place. All crates have already been secured with net hooked into the deck pad-eyes. When the ship lists again, Shepard grabs the railing with Jack and lean opposite. Cargo shifts under the net then stop dead against the tension.

“Jane,” Jack says, and she turns her back, he blurts out, “Please!”

They’re under attack, probably the retaliation of Heathens, and Jack doesn’t want her to bring all this to Citadel space? It will drop the case in an instant, the captain will have to answer for his son being a part of a conspiracy against the Shepards, as well as going A-wall, and Jack can hide somewhere until Henry, lord of smugglers, can let him out. Her and Jack can go back to saving the galaxy and Mom will be free. Henry, who cares? He must pay for his actions. But if she doesn’t act now, this ship’ll go down.

She’s about to latch her helmet and leave when the calm of Jack’s voice roars over danger’s emergence, and time slows between them, but the crates remain at the mercy of the rudders. Nets clang, bulkheads thump, but she hears him as clear as the glass on Floor 165.

“When you became real,” he says. “In that instant your fist met my chest, you knocked me out of the dark, and broke me, and I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t blink, and I couldn’t take my eyes off you.”

Henry jerks the ship port. Shepard and Jack hurl into the other railing. Her helmet flies out of her hands and rolls across the deck. Jack catches it and guides himself up to her, holding it out for her to take.

“Please, Jane. My mind will be gone without you. So what if that makes me selfish?” he says.

Shepard shakes her head, disbelieving, not his words, but her yearning of them to be true. She puts on her helmet. It locks. She can hide the shine in her eyes now.

“I’m sorry,” she says, “I have to.”

Lost is the only word she can describe what she sees, right before a new, burning purpose callouses the fear, and Jack stands upright, unwavering, gripping his helmet so tight he shakes. He lowers his head. His lips tighten. He glares.

“Forgive me,” he mutters.
She watches it in slow motion, at first not understanding what or why. Jack swings across, his helmet the hammer. Then, she realizes, and he smashes the helmet into the nearest container, and both pieces crack.

“No!” she gasps and bull runs into Jack, he falls back, she grabs the crate, and checks the damage.

An alert projects across the glass, reporting vital signs, and levels, similar to Grunt’s tank, but they’re mostly covered by a sheet. Underneath, she only sees liquid, and the faint glow from the computer and machinery maintaining the product. Oh and the splinter in the glass from the impact. She strokes the crack; it’s damp. A trickle of the liquid seeps through.

“Brace for shock!” Henry yells.

Shepard grips the rail tighter. Calamity takes a hit and Shepard’s knees buckle. The cargo bay quakes but no damage to hull; shields maintain. Before she regroups, Jack leaves his helmet and springs. He goes for a second hit, fists now. She catches one and would kick her enemy in the groin, but she yells to herself not to. It takes everything not to hurt him as he gains strength; his upper hand over her comes at her head. She flinches. He hits the crack by her and a tiny stream spouts.

*Shit!* She hurls her foot into his armored groin and he curls in like a snail.

Shepard spins about and puts her hand on the leak. Shepard growls, needing a patch, and as she pulls the sheet down to fix the hole, she freezes, staring.

At herself.

In the liquid, a person floats unknowing, sleeping; it’s a younger woman looking like her, but with shorter hair, a lighter red, and pale, freckleless skin. The alert pinging her snaps her out of it and she presses the sheet against the hole. Shepard turns to Jack. He’s recovered, one hand on the opposite rail, watching her.

What have you done?

She means to say it but the words don’t come out. Henry yells over the comm again. Shepard finds a net on the floor; it had been unlatched. She secures it over the sheet; a pathetic patch, but when the ship is hit again, and the hold vibrates, she doesn’t care. She grabs Jack who’s compliant—now—and shoves him forward.

“Move!” she barks.

Jack is first into the pilothouse and takes Henry’s left, Shepard takes right, and Henry rightly exclaims his impatience but gets to business.

“It’s Chris!” Henry says. “He hijacked a fighter.”

“One of the crates sprung a leak!” Shepard says. “We have to get to the Citadel now!”

“What? How!? Which crate?”

Jack’s face pales whiter than the female in the tank.

“Alpha one tak one—”

Henry almost ejects from his seat. “We have to—we can’t go to the Citadel!”
Hot flurries in her chest. “Why not?”

“That’s Hanar tech! We need to get to Kahje! Only they can save her.”

“How many more crates like that are there?”

Henry pauses, diving through a spray of bulletfire. “All of ‘em.”

That’s a cargo full of tankbreds. Citadel is closer and would save everyone but the new version of her. Her mom could explain herself about these “eggs” and be free. Chris is alive; C-Sec could arrest him and that threat would end, along with the captain having no say over the case, and be dismissed for a fairer hearing. Or the hearing would be dropped entirely. She’d be free. Shepard could continue fighting the Collectors, finding a way to end the Reaper threat, and Jack would be back behind glass. Just like Henry. A glass wall where she’d be safe from being hurt, disappointed, betrayed. Left. But alone. Surrounded by people but feeling empty, sleeping in the unknown like the one she’d leave to die if she chooses the Citadel. Jack’s indoctrination would ruin him, and she’s already seen what it does to family. T’Soni wouldn’t forgive her if she had a way to cure indoctrination and didn’t try. She wouldn’t want people to go through the pain she did with Benezia.

Her younger self is scarless, blameless, floating in motherless goo; Grunt calls it the tank; she calls it confined space—as she died floating, suffocating, freezing—she lives again, floating, absorbing, warm. If this self dies, she’ll never know pain, but never know life.

Forgive me, Jack said. Not sorry. He isn’t sorry. He believes in the larger scheme, and sees the connections sometimes she can’t. He makes the decisions simpler people are scared to take. None of this is simple, and she can’t keep on being simple either. This isn’t black and white, but it is life or death. And life is gray and full of things she hates and loves, ‘but the greatest of these…’

Jack owes her an explanation, but she owes him faith. If her parents trusted him enough, she needs to. Everyone is desperate right now. Desperate enough to say please. A kind of desperate that is linked to survival at any cost.

Isn’t it her duty to protect all, unborn, or already knowing? But it’s a shell. A clone. Isn’t it? And if it was a clone would she tell herself to let her sleep? Forever?

Shepard wishes Jack kept her dead. And the moment she awoke, she was already in pain. It would be the same again. She’d be doing herself a favor.

She opens her mouth to make the call, order Henry to the Citadel, but she croaks. All she wants is to prove Mom’s innocence! But how can she show up to what was probably her mom’s plan in the first place, and she hands over her treason verdict? And Mom would never forgive her for letting one of her children die—her sister, if not a clone, but a twin.

It’s not her life. It’s not her choice. It’s another chance.

“Dammit, fine! Get to Kahje!” Shepard switches channels. “Normandy!”

Joker reports in. “Yes, commander?”

“We’re making an emergency stop. Sending you coordinates. Dock the Normandy at the Citadel. I’ll tell Admiral Hackett we’ve been delayed and verify he gets my message.”

“Sure thing, Shepard, but you only have a couple days left.”
“I know. Shepard out. This thing have a mass effect core still?”

“Retrospectively, yes,” Henry says. He resets the target coords. “Just hope it won’t fry this time.”

“What?” she spits.

“Engaging core!” Henry slaps the engine panel, pulls the throttle on the interface, and Shepard and Jack grab the oh-shit bars.

Stars streak across the window as the engine hum gains volume, then all is white. Unlike the Normandy that’s able to normalize the G-force, she feels the sickly push of all her organs, her blood, her skin, sink into the back, as if being pressed against a wall. Calamity jumps into the next galaxy, but all Shepard sees is more space, and a faint rosy aura, probably from a nebula.

“Chris is still out there,” Henry says, “but he won’t find us for a while. No one will.”

Henry veers toward his desire then hits the auto. She reads the interface and it says they’re headed toward the Relic Cluster. He unstraps himself and takes off his helmet, securing from General Quarters more like. He stands and faces her as she also unlatches.

“How’d the crate get damaged?” Henry asks her.

She glances at Jack. Jack looks away, toward the void.

“During a roll, it—it collided with another crate. I tried but—”

Jack’s attention slowly returns to her, as if he didn’t quite hear her, or did, and doesn’t believe it. She can’t either.

“It’s fine,” Henry says. “It’s…it’s fine. We’re almost to Kahje, my home.” He pats her on the back. “Hey.” He checks behind her. “Did you lose your gun?”

“No,” she says solemnly.

“But you loved that gun.”

Maybe she found she loved something more.
Thrown Out

Chapter Summary

Hannah has a disco ball up her sleeve. Joker doesn't save the day and reaps the spoils of Hackett's place anyway.

Chapter Notes

Song: “Main Menu - And Ever We Fight On” - Killzone 3 OST

It’s Hannah’s idea to knock on Judge Vaughnus’ door at 0600. When she confessed to Hackett and Anderson, they gathered all their resources, and put their connections to use. They were not about to wait for Commander Shepard to rescue her, but cut the claws off the accusations, and end this. They stand properly, and don’t flinch when Vaughnus grumbles as he unlocks the door, and splits it open. He’s wearing a bathrobe and workout gear underneath.

“I apologize, Judge,” Hannah begins, “were you about to go for a run?”

“Why would you get that idea?” Vaughnus says.

His neon blue and white training shoes squeak on the tile. Every morning after toast, a banana, and a glass of water, he would run eights around the Presidium, sometimes by Hackett’s home. If he had put her in a cell, she would have never been up as early, drinking tea by the window overlooking the housing area. It’s a small world.

“Why are you here?” he says next. “And out of your confinement.”

“She’s with me, Vaughnus,” Hackett says, arms crossed.

His dress blues were freshly ironed and delivered this morning by his flag cook. As a councilor, she assumes Anderson also has assistants, but he would probably feel awkward having them do his own laundry. Nevertheless, he’s shiny too, but instead of crossing arms, he hands the judge a datapad.

Hannah explains, “This is a list of all the volunteers for the secret project led and funded by Cerberus.”

He glances over it. “This information needs to be addressed by the investigative officer, captain, and he’s not here.”
She unveils a ball with disco party qualities. Castleberry pops up.

“I’m here, your honor,” he says. “I apologize for not meeting in person; I had a delay. All names have been blacked out for privacy reasons, but the ones who didn’t mind us helping out Hannah’s case came forward. It’s a long list, your honor, and I’m betting you don’t want to arrest and try everyone, specifically Captain Robertson, the man who accused Captain Shepard in the first place, and opened up this giant jar of hypocrisy.

“You see, Captain Robertson has a son, Chris, who went AWOL with Captain Shepard’s ex-husband, the former Alliance psych-doc, along with one-fourth of the crew from his final command, the SSV Patton. That black stain could be washed in blood if her ex happened to return to answer for his crimes, along with providing the missing cargo, which is rightfully Cerberus’ property, by the way, and in no way counts as Alliance property, as determined by the falsehood that we as individuals are slaves to the military, but contracted, and only bound legally by regulations and uniformity. We are paid, free-willed citizens as with any job. Article 108 of the UCMJ, the foundation of this entire case, dictates monetary value, though it should measure the emotional trauma of a famed and honorable Alliance officer who put her trust in the military. I digress, because we sought out the former doctor by utilizing Commander Shepard’s resources—Cerberus funding, mind you—we have found not only the cargo—”

A picture of a small box on top of a larger crate in a ship’s cargo hold flickers before the rotating ball and Castleberry’s image.

“—Henry Shepard—”

A new picture replaces the old, of Henry at the helm of the Calamity, with Shepard in the corner, holding a support bar.

“—and the AWOL crewman, including associates who aided their disappearance, calling themselves the Heathens—”

New pictures cut in sequence, of Bart, Hanish, and a heap of dead bodies.

“—that’s gruesome—but we also revealed Captain Robertson’s son, who had been off the grid for so long, it took Henry and his daughter to bring him into the light.”

Picture flashes of him holding Henry. Hannah covers her mouth.

“He slipped up and hacked into a Cerberus fighter, which we pinged, and are currently following. What’s more interesting is that list. Captain Robertson is on there as a volunteer. And to cover it up, Robertson used Shepard as a scapegoat to give his son time to redeem himself by taking Cerberus down, including Roe Station.”

The next picture is a video of Shepard running toward the camera; an arm reaches for her, things explode, they’re spaced, and the destroyed station slowly shrinks behind her. The camera view sticks to Shepard’s helmet, reflecting a partial image of another helmet. Hannah hears heavy breathing, steady, but fast.

“Who’s taking that?” Vaughnus says.

“Why Henry, of course,” Castleberry says.

Hannah slowly drops her hand and hides it in her arms.

“And these photos with Henry in them?”
“One of Shepard’s trusted crewmembers. Cerberus has been more than cooperative in helping us with this case, but they’d like to see justice done to the right man, and that’s not Captain Shepard.”

“Admiral Hackett, bring Captain Robertson to me. I need to validate this.”

“How soon do you want him?” Hackett says.

“Thirty seconds ago. Before I learned all this bullshit.”

“You heard ‘em, lieutenant.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” Castleberry turns to someone they can’t see. “Captain, if you’ll step onto this platform.” Captain Robertson appears. “Thank you.”

Robertson stands parade rest, glowering. “Your honor.”

Vaughnus scans the present party, then stares down the hologram. “Is this true!?”

He turns up his nose. “I invoke my right to—”

“Can it, Robertson.” He shoves a finger in the holo. “You’re done but you’re not done with me. Lieutenant Castleberry, consider this case thrown out. Captain Shepard, you are free to go. I will inform the rest of AJAG as well as the Citadel Council. Inform C-Sec of any news on the captain’s son. We’ll be in touch.”

“Working on it now, your honor,” Castleberry says, and the ball turns off the holo and floats into Hannah’s jacket.

“What a fucking morning,” Vaughnus turns into his house. He stops. “Sorry for the mess, Hannah.”

“It’s okay, George. It was nothing personal.”

“You can tell Commander Shepard she doesn’t need her father anymore.”

Hannah grows a smile with tears brimming. “I’ll never tell her that.”

“Enjoy your run,” Anderson grins.

The door shuts, the lock shifts.

Hannah had been standing in silence for a minute, maybe it was seconds, but time had stood still as the air changed into a fresh, cool relief. She breathes deeply just before Hackett congratulates her; he was nice enough to give her that pause.

“You did it, Shepard! I guess I have to kick you to the curb now.”

Anderson says, “Maybe not just yet, admiral. How about after celebratory drinks?”

Hannah’s face burns from smiling so much. “It’s not even breakfast! My kinda sailors.”
It won’t be long before they begin asking her questions about a new investigation, the supposed intel between her and Cerberus, and the ties with Henry, though that had been reported long ago when they divorced. She’s not responsible for him and often wonders how he managed to convince fifty-plus men off one ship to go on his delusional adventure. People have done crazier things. And although she’s clear of judgment, Hackett and Anderson will now have to deal with Robertson. Their neverending dockets make her thoughts spin so fast they’re scraping against her skull. At least the house will be quiet.

Being fleet admiral has perks. Hannah steps out of their taxi to Hackett’s home, a three-story complex in the Alliance officers housing, as close to the Presidium without becoming a politician. She notices the flyboy on the wall, waiting for their return apparently.

“Jeffrey!” she exclaims and jogs as fast as her heels allow to hug him.

“Hey, Mom!”

Jeff Moreau, Joker to her daughter, had been in the family after the Battle of the Citadel. The first time they met, he rushed to the fridge and asked where the old man hid the beer. She had said “he drinks hard ciders and after I gave him the boot, they went down the sink.” His reply? “Oh shit. Sorry, Mom. Hey, are those cheese scones?” And after she fed him a dozen, she’s kept him as a son ever since.

“Oh my goodness!” Hannah starts. “I thought I’d never get to see you again.” She peppers him with kisses, so overwhelmed with joy she forgets she could break a cheekbone.

“Ow ow ow ow ow. Okay okay. It’s getting weird with the big wigs staring.”

“Sorry. Well, they know. So.”

“So yeah.”

It’s true. They do know. With nothing better to do on house arrest, she told Hackett of her stories when Jane would bring him to see her at her apartment. They’d be too far away to visit family sometimes and on too short of notice, so she’d cook them dinner if she was on shore. Thanksgiving was a special time, though not important enough to put in the Citadel’s archives. Important to her. She liked seeing her daughter have friends, even if he was two pay grades under her. Jeff probably saved the ship in more ways than the reports say, especially during that last push to Saren. He’s earned that Thanksgiving dinner every year for every crew member on the SR-1, and now the SR-2. He would’ve been the perfect son-in-law. But she knew her daughter would never go for him. He’s sweet, and too much like a kid to be an equal, and scratch loyal-till-death off the list, but it was never meant to be. Hannah can keep him around just like all the rapscallions, and roguish types Jane drags through the door wanting to know what’s in the fridge. Hannah loves every one of them because they take care of her baby. And she’ll love them as her own even after giving her own away to Cerberus.

“What are you doing here?” she asks.

“Commander’s orders were to stall the case,” Jeff says, “but it looks like I don’t have to do that now.”

“Maybe you could pass along the good news. Where is she?”

“Last transmission she was headed to Kahje. Bit of an untimely vacation if you ask me. ‘Just taking a road trip to Water World, Joker. Mind the Collectors while I’m gone. Don’t let the galaxy blow
“I’m sure the galaxy will still be mostly intact.”

“Yeah sure. But there goes my retirement salary. Speaking of handsome devils with big wallets…”

“I’m sorry, Jeffrey, but I can’t talk about that.”

But she’s misinformed of the context when another shows out of the blue. She’d been in the cab the whole time, probably listening, waiting for the moment to strut in, and she did.

“Ms. Lawson,” Hannah says.

“Captain Shepard.”

After months working together, Miranda still wears a second skin revealing everything but her heart; she keeps her distance, even in voice.

“Is it wise for you to be out in the open like this?”

“Not at all. May we meet in your quarters, admiral?” Miranda turns to Hackett.

Hackett and Anderson have left them alone in the kitchen, probably more for liability reasons. Miranda gives the overview while Joker finds snacks. Basically, she did not know Illusive Man would get this involved with Shepard, or this case, and wishes she had more say in the matter, but she’s grateful to be informed when Hannah explains Castleberry’s manipulation of the evidence. When Hannah gets to the video of the explosion, then the photos, Miranda recrosses her legs and shifts herself on the stool in the kitchen. Hannah’s leaning back on the counter with a cup of breakfast tea.

“The Illusive Man did that?” Miranda says.

Hannah sips, nodding.

“Wow. I knew about the spacewalk, but Gellix? It almost seems…romantic.”

“Jane never went for clean noses. She needed to know someone would have her back even if it meant breaking the rules.”

“It seems Illusive Man is right for the job.”

“Castleberry said he’s tracking the hijacked fighter. With a unique ship like Henry’s, I doubt it’ll remain hidden. He’ll know where Henry landed.”

Jeff adds in, “I sent a message already but I haven’t heard back. It’s funny.”

“What is?”

“Well, it’s been radio silence since I told her we hit port. Usually she’s on top of these things but I think paradise is getting to her head. She probably through her omni-tool in the water or something.”

“Paradise?” Miranda says.

“You know, Kahje, the Encompassing, a tropical retreat for exotic aquatics. Just her and The Illusive Man on a holo-beach, under an umbrella, sipping a lima coladas through a curly straw…”
Miranda growls. “We need to make sure Chris Robertson won’t be a problem. Sorry to cut this short, Ms. Shepard.”

Hannah says, “Thanks for taking care of my daughter.” She puts down the mug. “You’re a good friend to her.” And hugs Miranda.

At first, Miranda doesn’t know what to do with her arms. Maybe she needed a reboot because she seems too perfect to be real. Eventually, Hannah feels the squeeze around her ribs, and Miranda’s head resting on her shoulder. Hannah recalls Jane holding her back like this during her graduation. Miranda hiccups, like she’s trying to hide a cry, and swallows it. Hannah squeezes back.

Jeff mocks. “Awwww! You’re one of the family now!” He pops in a grape and munches on it. “Quite the happy ending, Mom.”

Miranda pulls herself away and slips out of the house without showing her face to Jeff.

Hannah looks toward the door. “Oh, I don’t know about that. If all goes accordingly, this will be a happy beginning.”

“Can’t feel like a new person until you’re threatened with court martial and come out on top.” He pours a drink, though she doesn’t know—or want to know—how he found the alcohol so fast. “I’m one to know.” He cheers himself with the second poured glass and downs a shot.

Reapers fight unconventionally, with no remorse. They take away life and use it for their own. They know nothing of sacrifice. But what if one person made life and gave it away freely? What if one person became two; two became four and four became millions? She believed in the cause and she believed in her husband, Though not in the beginning; in tragedy. When death knocks, eyes open to new perspectives and conventional ways become obsolete. People think of their future and face the promise of their own death however near or distant, and prepare, or hide. She likes to think she planned well ahead to have a chance again, even if they must sacrifice themselves like her child did, like so many sons and daughters do all the time. The rare one percent of the population who swear their lives to service with so little pay but the moral reward of knowing you’re doing something important. Even though sometimes they wonder if it was the right call. Sometimes falling prey to questioning the white light when they meet it. But this time, it’s not blind faith that will lead them into the next life. It’s wide open fact that from the ashes they will rise again.

And she could not have done it without Henry.
Throne In

Chapter Summary

Jane learns about her father's whereabouts all this time and the true meaning of their mission. Her head hurts.

Chapter Notes

My head hurts writing this. Needed to get this done, so there's a bit of a giant info dump in here. I'm aware they're bad; I've been holding off doing it, and believe me, it's not everything I need to explain. I cut myself off where I did so you guys could have a chapter to read. Thanks for being patient!

Songs: "Goner" by Ki: Theory; "I See Those Faces In My Dreams" from Run All Night OST by Junkie XL.

She remembers how he tastes.

Kaidan once described his Canadian whiskey as something to be experienced. It’s not about drinking it, but seeing its rich color, observing the consistency when it’s disturbed, and breathing it in just before the sip, holding it to your lips until you don’t swallow just yet, letting it linger on your tongue.

It might have been the one time she never heard him concerned to the point he whined like a mother hen. Judging by his reaction on Horizon, if he was here now, he would have probably burned his Alliance uniforms, then his eyes, then ears, so he wouldn’t have to see or hear another word about how she slept with the enemy. An enemy robust and bold; luxuriously intoxicating. That rich flavor, ivory color, and warm, chilling musk is all but memory, as Jack refuses to leave her side, she gets drunker, and inhibitions damned.

Shepard swallows.

She almost wishes it was the alcohol toxicity and nothing worse. Worse leads to Mom’s mistakes. Worse leads to Henry. What is worse? Worse is the kind of worse that makes you change course and head to Kahje.

Henry had found a better clamp for the patch job she did. It fits snugly around the entire container, a metal bind in a way. When he told her it’d be okay, she was foolish enough to breathe out relief. None of this is okay. A father she thought that ran away is dragging her across space. Her mother,
well-protected, is still in custody. Her…sponsor…in need of a new helmet.

She could have easily said no. Go to the Citadel, let her “self” die, turn her father in, free Mom. She stares at the backside of Henry, who’s stabilizing the container on his omni-tool as he rushes alongside the Drell emergency response team. They guide the container through the docking bay.

“Vitals dropping,” one says. “Get the pediatrician on-call.”


“Moving her to 7B, Doctor Shepard,” the last one says.

“I can’t lose her, Ana,” Henry says.

He vanishes behind the double doors, his brown coat tail billowing amongst white uniforms before the doors seal, and the scrambling fades out.

Easily.

Kahje is a blue planet with ten percent land mass. It was culture shock when they had landed. Water curtains split open and Henry flew between the pouring crystal on each side. Ahead was the hospital, and emergency landing pad. He had rung for “code blue” which means cardiac arrest to her, but something else to them.

Kahje’s island structuring reminds her of sealed office buildings. As if a resort with spaceports on the roof were inverted specifically for hanar and drell symbiosis. Hanar had waterlocks; airlocks but for the ocean. And floor tile was discouraged due to slippage. Where Shepard walks, her feet grip the ground strangely, like the floor is rubber or non-skid, but still shiny and smooth; it explains the drell suits looking like neoprene. With all the water, someone was bound to slip on their ass.

She stares at the doors but they don’t open back up. Henry left her in the entry bay with panel views just above sea level. Behind her is the Calamity parked beside a medical transport ship, and taxi shuttles lining the enclosed piers on the upper levels. Like a ship, anything above the sea line is considered a level, as it states on the wall beside the panel she stares out. 01 Emergency Medical Hub. Anything below the line is a deck. A map of the building confirms her assessments. Unlike the Citadel, there’s no VI. Maybe because this is a hospital or the hanar believe the drell should have every job possible so they are of use, as it seems nobody is idle here. But she’s only set foot in the most chaotic facility.

Eeriely not this room.

Shepard rubs her wrists to scratch the itch crawling up from the quiet.

Water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink except the view. When she turns to find something to do other than stand around, Jack’s there at the window on the far side with the vast Encompassing hugging the facility’s hull.

She watches him watch the ocean and wonders what he sees beneath the waves. For most, the surface is calm, but in that calm there can be terror, unknowing and knowing, at the mercy of currents, and beasts large and small. The hanar homeworld retains its strength by being exclusively marine. The mysteries in the deep lie open to discovery, but so few are brave to quench their curiosity. Apart from dealing with the humidity, there’s strenuous dive training to become a scientist here; to become anything, really. As basic as CPR or First Aid. Assimilating to Kahje culture is not for the weak and has been continuously difficult for the Drell, a dry land species.
They feel they owe it to the Hanar, though, and it’s up to them to continue that debt, or move on.

It almost feels familiar. A life saved is a life for service. Jack was direct when he knew of her usefulness. A symbol that shakes the Reapers and makes them throw the Collectors at her. It’s his calm; his surface. What he hides is a storm and luckily she remains in the eye of it.

Indoctrination is mental cancer. To be a puppet master for so long only to have someone else control the strings would make him desperate. Desperate enough to reveal vulnerability. His words clink together and she tries to figure out the agenda behind the possible truth, and that he doesn’t just want her around, he needs her. Did he say it to get what he wants or did he speak the truth because time is short, and it needed to be said? With him, both are acceptable.

*When you became real…*

…*my mind will be gone without you.*

She stares at the back of his gray hair for so long a white, hazy aura outlines him, but she hasn’t the energy to blink. She’s back in the Calamity, imagining the placement before the hit, the net she found on the deck. It was the only crate without one, and the most fragile. It must’ve been the first thing Jack did.

If he had told her from the start, would she have still gone with the plan? He must have known she needed to keep it about her mom. Or he’s been such a man of shadow that one spotlight would cripple him. He lies, he manipulates, he treats everyone like game pieces, but put him over the edge, and pain comes out.

What would she have said if she had to tell someone she was dying?

It’s stupid, right? Everyone dies. It isn’t something she’s been afraid of. It’s the process, really, that she’d have to face. All the regrets. All the things she didn’t have a chance to do.

Jack leapt out of the shadows and became part of his puppet show. A squadmate. He bought her something pretty and new, and took her dancing in it. He caved to his desires and brought her down with him, and sometimes up, and sideways. He wanted simple pleasures like food, even got her cake. The more she looks back, though, the longer it takes for her to remember the last time he smoked.

At the club, she thinks, when she grabbed his arm.

She steps beside him, naturally set in parade rest because any way else is uncomfortable.

“Does my mom know about your…problem?” Shepard says.

She could have splashed him with cold water for a more lively response. He seems just as lost in thought. At first, he doesn’t say anything, and they stand beside each other with the water’s reflection, and their own.

“Yeah,” he says when he looks down.

She’s the last to know everything but the first everyone chooses to throw in the frontlines.

“Since when?”

Footsteps close in and he looks passed her.
“She’s stable,” Henry says, walking up. “They’re running tests on the others, making sure they’re okay.”

The others. A dizzying concept she tries not to think about but it’s been what everyone has fought for. She has to know now and it looks like present company is ready for that. But just in case…

“He’s Henry!” she snaps.

“He—” Jack says with her on accident.

“I know, I know. We should change first, before anything,” Henry motions to his armor. “With Chris alive, we can’t chance lookin’ like we do.”

Fresh clothes arrive in the cargo bay of Calamity only moments after returning to watch the white uniforms scan the cargo. A young Drell hands over a stack to Henry, and it looks like she’s blushing. If her eyes are blinking too much, Shepard guesses that’s blushing. Or the giggle and running away like a girl. That too.

“Who’s she?” Shepard says.

“I dunno,” Henry says.

They change in the berthing and she’s thankful for clothes that breathe, but what she really wants is a shower. She’s been sticky for too long and her hair is matted down. But no one ever wants a shower onboard. It is true luxury to be able to lie down in a hot bath and soak her aching feet. People who can do that every day are rich.

She turns her armor into skivvies and slips on a wrap she’s seen a few Drell own before. Though she is grateful the robot fabric cleans itself.

“Geez, Jack,” Henry buttons up an ocean-colored shirt. “Are you Cerberus or a planetary ambassador?”

“My stripes don’t change, Henry, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

He mutters. “Not your stripes I’m getting at. How’s the…”

“Fine. Where are we securing the cargo?”

“They’re handling it, Jack.”

“I don’t trust that enough to feel comfortable.”

“It’s what you got. They’re my people and they know my need for secrecy.”

“And the ship?” Shepard says.

“Valet, Janey! They got me covered.” Henry looks like an extended tourist, with his panama papi style and swarthy skin, just before he throws his coat back on.

She scrunches her face. “Valet?”

Henry walks aftward. “We’ll take the shuttle to my lab. Come on.”

Too intrigued to ask, too skeptical to quarrel, she rides in back, leaving Jack with her father to talk, only they don’t, so Henry is humming to himself some obnoxious tune. These two should start a
pop band.

A tropical island with one resort and several shuttles flying in and out of port come into view, and Henry docks in front of a lobby.

“Ooh is it market day?” he says.

Tables are set all around the resort, covering the area with a river of people, all green, some blue, gray, and few red. She opens the doors and people swarm her.

“Whoa, whoa, hello,” she says as a little girl overtakes the crowd and takes her hand.

“Janey!” she says.

“Uh hi.”

Jack meets her through the people, but when Henry appears, the welcoming party cheers, and no space is left between anyone. He kindly waves at them and accepts a few gifts like a loaf of intricately designed bread and fish on a stick. People try to get his attention, shouting his name, and their affection for him.

“Thank you all,” Henry says, pushing through. “Thank you.”

Someone pulls a necklace over her. A female with rosy features smiles.

“You don’t know how much this day means to me,” the rosy Drell says.

Shepard examines the metal on her neck and the rare metal pendant within the chain changes color, from a deep blue to shimmering crimson and gold. She looks up to say thank you, but she’s lost to the sea of greetings.

“Jane?” She hears Jack. He’s close but the colors, the eyes, the hands trying to take hers—she can’t see yet sees everything. Inattentive blindness like on Bekenstein, but brighter, and all eyes on her.

“I’m here!” she says.

“Where?”

Shepard turns on her omni-tool and raises it high. She sees silver hair peek through Drell crests, then a human hand shoots between two people and she takes it. It pulls her through with a force that closes them into each other. She doesn’t shove him away.

“Start counting,” he says with a grin.

She slaps the cloak on.

It’s easier when emotions are out of the way and it’s just her and the job. Feelings bog down movement, even happy ones, appreciative ones; they force her to pause and think hard about what she needs to focus on, rather than what’s in front of her. About 67 yards ahead walks her answer to a lot of questions about the job nearly complete. It’s been a short while since Joker updated her. With the Normandy out of range, it might just be a weak signal; she doesn’t know the Calamity, or Kahje. In fact, it looks like they’re the only humans here. That’s not the reason for all the gifts, she assumes. What that female said…what did she mean?
She meets Henry, now with a basket of goods, and a fish skeleton on a stick. The resort halls stretch along open pillars to catch the breeze off the Encompassing, then open to a tiered courtyard, and a wide pavilion on the third level of stairs. Beyond that is a mountain of buildings in the crags and walking bridges amongst the towers. People follow him up to the bottom of the stairs and stop when he turns to thank them again.

“But I must work,” he says, “I’ll see you at dinner tonight!” He notices the diamondy edge of Shepard. “Farewell!”

Ten one-thousand.

The cloak peels away and Shepard and Jack stand on the first step. She tries to ask about dinner. She can’t wait that long; Joker can’t.

“Wave, Janey,” Henry says through his toothy smile.

The crowd mirrors them or applauds, or puts their children on their shoulders to see them off. Shepard gives a little wave; Jack, a palm in the air, then Henry escorts them up the stairs.

“Fans of yours?” Shepard says.

Henry shrugs and bites into his loaf, then points toward the pavilion.

Its glass construct complements the metal Tuscan pillars they snuck between to avoid the Drell gridlock. The white roofing lightens the rich mountain side far behind it, and allows the vegetation growing up the shelving and flat trusses to be its decor. She notices a few Earthen plants, mostly herbs. Others that appreciate direct sunlight live in large, gray pots outside the perimeter.

As Shepard moves closer to the mountain, the shade chills the warm breeze with the Drell star hiding behind the peak. Greens become more blue, and the white buildings turn gray. There aren’t many windows except the ones paneling the bottom. Or many windows open; could be storm shields, or people just like their privacy.

Henry brings them into a dome lobby at the largest and foremost tower, the one with a veranda and several elevated docks that bask in the last of the sunlight. The closest dock holds a car she’s never seen. An Aspire GW as it reads on the body, with dome windows, a center driver’s chair, and curved back seating with harnesses. The exterior blends with the ocean colors and she bets it would be seen as a glint off the surface with that chrome finish.

“Ground to Water shuttle,” Henry says between mouthfuls. “A prototype amphib.”

She nods. It would fit on the Normandy.

Inside the tower, it’s cool and dry. The lobby holds a sitting room with a long table, a high ceiling with tall sculptures in the corners, and a bar, but no desks. A female Drell in a two-piece dress takes his coat and basket. Henry turns and Shepard asks, “What?” when she sees him smiling at her but she can’t recall hearing him.

“I said,” and Henry repeats, “welcome to my home.”

“I have to wonder if this is where some of my money went,” Jack says, inspecting the ceiling. He plants his hands in his pockets.

“None of it,” Henry answers sharply. “This is Umi, my head keeper. She’ll take care of you.”
“I am Umino Rin. It is an honor to meet family even in short notice. How long will you be staying?”

“I don’t have a say, apparently,” Shepard grins.

Henry notes, “Less than a day. We have some work in the lab, Umi. Can you prepare the kitchen for tonight?”

“Always, Master Shepard. I’ll be in the light if you need me.”

“Henry,” Shepard insists.

So, naturally, like any responsible leader of a ship would do, he ignores her.

It takes a couple decks to reach the laboratory after winding their way through hallways for a brief tour of the lower house, not resort like she assumed. Henry explains he took over the tower for the hanar, and the many rooms were once offices and closets, but he opened them up for his work. It started as simple medical check-ups. They heard he was a doctor so they assumed the general kind. Then, when he became more comfortable around the Drell, understanding their psyche, he became their ventilation for their memory overtakes. Drell go into their minds, sometimes involuntary, and hallucinate their past. It’s so vivid, Drell can’t tell what’s reality. Henry, of course, was fascinated, and wanted to help as well as learn.

The lab is the Presidium underwater. White and clean, but windows to the dark blue void, a place with no beach, or reef; just blue. Schools of fish swim along the building to stay close to their food, and safety of the many hiding places. A crab with lionfish fins walks up the wall where Shepard stops, and a pair of Drell in uniforms standby in a row, behind a container matching the one on the Calamity. This one’s cloaked by technology, a disruptor, to constantly change the image underneath in a series of gradients, and mirrors, like her cloaking ability, but watery, not angular. It’s so disruptive she feels she doesn’t want to look at it.

Shepard folds her arms and checks on the lion-crab behind her—it’s still walking.

“This must be the place I ask ‘what the hell is going on?’” she says.

Henry motions toward the Drell who’s gold and blue. “This is Loti Quis, my spiritual guide, and this,” he motions to the brightest colored one she’s seen, “is Neon.”

He could be his own nebula, a burst of life in each part of his skin. His crown is dark blue with spots of light green, his frill is orange, his throat is yellow with fading, pink tiger stripes descending. His fingers look dipped ombre, pink into his blue hand. Bits of green peek underneath his sleeve. Neon’s eyes, a concrete gray, find hers, and they lock. An indescribable intensity.

“Neon was a sniper like you,” Henry says. “He’s moved on to other things.” He turns to the container and begins. “Two years ago, the Illusive Man hired your mother for your resurrection and begun the Lazarus Project with Cerberus. In return, she asked for a back-up plan for you, and did what any scared mother would do: anything and everything. The Illusive Man, with problems of his own, hired me to study indoctrination and find the cure. A month after your death, he found me in a temple on Kahje. I was a smuggler for the hanar, transporting Drell assassins and keeping them alive between assignments. It was my compact for sanctuary until Illusive Man bought me and sent me to Gellix for research. Illusive Man was the only one who saw the benefit. He mentioned your mom. I didn’t believe she started working with him at first but he convinced me. He promised he would bring you back. I helped call in your mom’s favor. Symbiotically, I developed the cure through my theoretical findings and piggybacking off the Lazarus project.
“The data you recovered lists all donors and funders. Eggs, sperm, tissue samples. Our secondary goal was to expand families and send them off to a place without Reapers. The subjects grow exceptionally fast. In one day, a baby will be ten years old. The next day she’s twenty. In a week—sixty. All my tanks are auto-programmed to stop at 18 with the exception of two: the one in medical and this one. Out of the randomized summations, she is the only one your mom and I carefully planned.

“She isn’t a clone, as you might assume. She’s an avatar. The only one of the fifty-two tanks on board the Calamity without a soul. The Drell believe when the soul leaves the body, they return across the sea. Some would say a soulless body is dead; some would say they are unwhole; we say they simply cannot wake up until a soul is found.”

Shepard says, “You’ve been working with Mom this whole time? Why is the avatar special? What’s makes her preferential to the others with souls?”

“She was made for you. In case you died or you were indoctrinated, we could free you, save you from death again.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t get it. How would I use that if I died?”

“I’d hypnotize you into it.” When she doesn’t say anything else, he adds, “I’d talk to your energy—your soul. It is how I discovered the cure.”

“So you cure indoctrination by letting them die? Is that it? You know what’s more crazy than you convincing Cerberus this works? You helping Mom years after you left.”

“It does work, Jane, and just because we’re divorced doesn’t mean we stop caring about you.”

“But you did stop. You left and never came back.”

“I never stopped, Janey. And I did come back. You just don’t remember because…” His lips tighten and he looks askance briefly before he decides. “After the divorce, I came back but you hated me for it. You told me you didn’t want to see me again. I was hurt and I wasn’t proud of what I did so I asked you a question. Just one.”

Realization falls on her in a wave of heat pulling out the cold.

“What—what was the question?”

“Is that your deepest desire?”

A heaviness wafts and she holds her head to stop the dizziness, the narrowing vision, and the billowing sick. She takes a breath, several after the first gulp, and with enough strength back, she yells at him.

“You…you…didn’t even have permission! I mean you asked but not the real question! You used me!”

“I was just as upset as you were. I wasn’t thinking! But I couldn’t believe it worked. And for once in your military life, I saw you at peace. You think this hurts? This-this-this thing of using you? I hypnotized you into forgetting me and you…were…happy. That hurts worse than anything in the world. Your own daughter at peace because you’re not there. But…but! You were at peace. Since you were a kid it’s been nothing but stress. And I just knew. I knew doing this—confirming my theory—being called crazy was worth it. And I had proof this time but I couldn’t go back to my command. And your mom…I couldn’t. I requested to change duty stations. They processed me
faster than a chief’s morning coffee. And when you died…”

“Kahje was your refuge,” she says.

“And The Illusive Man was my hope.”

Shepard glances at Jack. “He doesn’t just go into these things blind. He had to know what you know.”

Jack says, “I needed personal verification first before adopting his methods. Curing me of indoctrination through energy hypnosis seemed too good, and easy, to be true.”

“That meant going back to you,” Henry says to Shepard.

“When?” she says. “I don’t remember seeing you except on Roe.”

“I know.”

“So you put me under your scope again?” Her heels click when she starts to pace.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

“Don’t you dare!” She shoves her finger in his face. “My mind! My memories! I can’t remember things because of you!”

“You’d still forget unless I told you!”

“Your hypnotism is bullshit. I watched you walk away.”

“What happened Saturday, Jane?” Henry says.

“I went out with friends. I partied, I got too drunk, and I came back to the ship.”

Henry says in a sick calm. “Except you don’t get drunk off water, Jane.”

“I had a hangover. Of course I drank.”

“You think you had one because I made you think you did.” He lets it fester. “You weren’t with friends. You were shopping alone when we approached you. We tried telling you about Mom. You were not happy with me so I helped you forget. It was Plan B, but Plan B was proof Illusive Man needed.”

“I don’t…I was with you?”

“Us. I learned from hypnotizing you that I could segment the duration with short commands. All I needed was a strong emotional response and your consent.”

“You’re horrible!” She turns away. The crab is gone. It’s just the deep blue now.

“Janey, it worked. You got your wish! Your desire.”

“My desire was to be a family! Not this!”

Henry insists, “That’s what you thought you wanted. That’s why it worked.”

She about-faces. “You’re putting this shit on me? All this is my fault?” She flings her arms up. “Sure. Go ahead. The rest of the universe does it! Why not my father too?”
Jack says, “It’s my fault, Jane.”

“Shut—just don’t.”

“Miranda sent me a copy of your leave request and I felt that was an opportune time.”

“After the Collector ship? After you lied to me, used me just like he did? That was a good time?”

Jack snaps, “We’re at war. It was the only time I had and I took it! With Hannah under arrest and you in the dark about it, I needed a way. We’ve been partners for two years. I wasn’t about to fail what we worked so hard on.”

“All three of you are real pieces of work.” Shepard folds her arms to hide her crippling heart.

Jack continues, “Hannah fabricated a story to get you in on it, though Hannah was telling the truth not knowing where Henry had gone. Only I knew that. Jane, we tried to tell you straight-forward and your hatred for your father wouldn’t let up, so we worked around it in hopes you’d want to be a part of this.”

“Part of what exactly? More experiments? What is all this for?”

“For you!” Jack snaps, then flings other nonsense. “For us! For humanity! You weren’t the only one Henry tested on!”

A flash of Illium stops her pacing. The dancing, the flirting, the changing of suits. Shepard pales. “Are you saying, Henry controlled you?”

“Not controlling, no.”

She clenches her jaw. “Then what?” she hisses.

Henry informs, “I maintain his indoctrinated state through gentle communication of his nervous system. It’s a temporary fix and like any other control, I have to remain in his vicinity for it to work. I do not control his choices, but I keep his head clear. So clear he notices more than Reapers or his job, it seems, which is the other reason we’re here.”

“To see if transferring a soul to your avatar works,” she says.

“We’ll only know for sure when one of you dies. It’s up to fate and your permission.”

“I have a proposal,” Jack says.

The sickness flutters. Acidic wings beat against her stomach and she holds herself. Jack walks up to the tank.

“The indoctrination will consume me. I’ve spent countless nights wondering if I’ll die alone or wake up renewed thanks to my faith in your family. Which is why I—” he glances at Henry, then switches words. “I want you to be there for me when I go. And I want us to be together after. It’s just…the consequences of going through it will be high.”

“What? H—” she searches the room for a clue. “—How?”

“The reason for the memory loss is to ensure that we don’t see our deaths coming.”

Henry shakes his head. “Jack, we’re here for the whole truth. We are certain the transfer will work, but…this is the hard part.” Henry breathes deep. “You will have to forget everything. For your
“Forever?” Shepard asks.

She tightens her grip around the cloth on her waist.

“No,” Henry says. “How ever long you live through this war, or beyond, is how long it’ll take. Memory loss is the only way I’ll be able to call your souls back to the bodies in full strength, meaning I can be far enough away, and still have a hold. At the same time, I can input a series of command words, which will bring you and your memories back. If I had to maintain Illusive Man’s condition, I wouldn’t be able to. This way is guaranteed. Mostly.”

“Mostly,” she scoffs. “More theoretical bull.”

“A lot of science is faith-based. This is no different.”

“Like I said. Bull.” She examines Jack. He fidgets with something in his pocket. “Why just us?”

Henry flashes a small grin. “Someone has to clean up the war. Doesn’t have to be the people who lead the charge.”

“I’d rather stay.”

Jack looks at the floor. “Wouldn’t you like to live somewhere nice? Take a long vacation?”

“I can’t just leave. I’m not you.”

He looks at her. “I know you. You’ll fight until the very last breath to win this war. I’m asking you, when all is done, and I’m dead, and you’ve got nothing left, be with me. We have a chance to live a new life. Let’s take it. It’s worth forgetting what will be a blink of an eye to us, even though right now it feels like we’d lose everything. Don’t you think that’s worth it?”

“I’d lose more than memories, Jack. I’d lose my crew. And what about Mom? Is she invited? Neither of you said she’s comin’. A life without Mom…” Lights shine brighter in her eye when the sting hits and she squints. “I can’t leave my family or friends like you can.”

“Jane…” He steps closer and stops, as if a wall dropped by his foot.

“I’m sorry,” she mutters.

Henry tries. “Janey, we—”

“No,” she straightens. “I’m sorry but I can’t. Mom needs me.”

Jack’s omni-tool pings. He hesitates. It pings again.

Henry nudges him. Jack rushes through several swipes across his arm, and can’t close it fast enough to return to his melancholic stare.

Her omni-tool pings.

“Excuse me,” she says.

Shepard walks out of the lab and stops when they can’t see her anymore. She slides over an e-mail, her heart racing, anticipating good news.
Three words jump out at her:

*Holding the fort.*

- *Joker*

She exhales.

Things are looking up for Mom, at least.
How much of that did they expect her to believe? Shepard thinks back to her first morning after the Collector ship, and how the glass of water, and pills were situated just so. She covers her eyes. She strains to remember but nothing comes back. She growls through her teeth.

“How much of that did they expect her to believe? Shepard thinks back to her first morning after the Collector ship, and how the glass of water, and pills were situated just so. She covers her eyes. She strains to remember but nothing comes back. She growls through her teeth.

“Come on!” She smacks herself. *Think!*

The door opens and Henry walks out, looking for her. He turns.

“Think, Jane,” he says.

A light behind his head beams in her eyes and she squints.

A rush floods in. She gapes.

She did drink that night!

It was Garrus, Zaeed, Miranda, and Tali.

Vakarian had sat at the bar with Messani, pro-conning their favorite weapons when she cut between them and ordered shots.

“You call that a drink?” Zaeed had said. “No, no. You, girl, are getting the real stuff tonight. We earned it.”

“But it’s vodka,” Shepard said.

“And if you keep that up you’ll be able to drive the ship yourself and save the galaxy without me. No fucking way,” He shoved a finger in her face. “You’re getting a goddamn drink and I’m makin’ sure we all don’t walk straight for the rest of this beautiful evening.”

“Beautiful, Messani?” Garrus said.
“I know what I said, Vakarian. Now drink.”

They boys had stayed at the bar and the females went shopping. On the Citadel, days are longer, and noon might be sixteen-hundred on Earth. To them, it was fifteen-percent military discount in that posh district, or so Miranda said. Miranda and Tali were with her, arm-in-arm, not really her style but it kept them from falling over, and she had the biceps in the group. Tali—her thighs. Miranda—her everything. They had walked down rows of tempting stores. Tali had bought turian hot chocolate with dextro-boba she thought would be fun to try.

“Invented by a turian who once commanded the bombardier squad who took down a terrorist organization,” Tali summarized her read from the purchase. “He wants to share his warm feelings he has with every explosion, bite size. Aw. That’s so cute.”

“Let’s go in here,” Miranda had said. “It’d be nice to get out of work clothes for a change.”


Miranda laughed. “Spendy? After the creds we put into you I’m numb from ‘spendy.’ Come on. My treat.”

Shepard looked up to the sign. Her eyes squinted it was so bright.

Mandy’s Fineries.

Shepard glares at Henry. “I do drink.”

“We are not lying to you, Janey,” he says.

“I remember the bar. I drank with the crew.”

“What bar?”

“The…” Her brain sticks to Zaeed passing out four-ounce glasses of a mixture, but no name comes up. Not even a flicker of a sign. She lies, “Dark Star! It was Dark Star.”

He sighs. Disappointment lowers his brow, then he begins to count on one hand. One. “Think,” he says. Two. “Jane.”

She stares at the wall behind him, a feeling comes over her, the one where you think you’ve spent a minute doing something important, and then it disappears. Henry watches her. Eventually, she blinks.

“Two small commands,” he says, “and I can embed memories where there are none, or make you forget altogether. Like now. That feeling? Kinda euphoric. I just pulled out the false memory. It was made up, Janey, to show you this can be done.”

“I know it can!” she says. “I don’t care! I’m not leaving Mom!”

“She wants you to!” he says. “This isn’t just Jack and me, this is her too! We want you to do this.”

“You violated my privacy, Henry! You stole time, you stole thoughts—those belong to me!”

“You don’t want em back. Believe me.”

“That is my decision to make. Not yours!”
“You’re right.” He puts his hands away in his coat. “You’re right. I mean all we’re doing is trying to save your life a second time.”

“Don’t you Mom me,” Shepard sneers. “I got an earful the morning this shitstorm started from her already. Unless that wasn’t real.”

“No, that was real. She called you while walking circles in Hackett’s kitchen, barefoot, waiting for the teapot to whistle.”

“Unbelievable.” She shakes her head.

“If you don’t wanna do this for me or your mom, fine. But think about it for him. Jack’s losing control of himself and it is killing him. You could be a little more sympathetic considering all he’s done for you.”

“I wanna lie down.”

Henry calls, “Umi!” Then he breathes away the hostility in his tone. “I wish I had his courage.”

Shepard glowers. “I am leaving with you and your ship the second I hear that tank is okay. You will not keep anything more from me. I will be going back to the fight after I know this case is closed. And I will not be taking anymore of your crap. You two are playing God and it’s catching up.”

Umi arrives.

“So I’ll see you at dinner,” he says, voice elevated.

Umi escorts Shepard who about bursts into flames before leaving the lab decks.

It seems longer to get to her room than it did to tour the house. Umi provides a relaxing stroll Shepard only notices after the fire extinguishes, though she’s ready for the reflash. They keep to the perimeter, walking inland until they stop at a room with the view of both mountainside and ocean. They’re at least ten levels up; enough to make out the faces of Drell enjoying the shielded boardwalk and its many lounge sections. It’s night and ambient torches border the walkways. But Umi redirects her attention to the bedroom. The entire balcony belongs to the guest wing and is more intimate than Liara’s accommodations. Gorgeous, nonetheless. The room is long, with the ocean view on each end, and the mountainside in numerous port holes on the long wall. Umi secures a door to her left before she brings a stack of necessities to the foot locker at the bed’s end.

“Where does that lead?” Shepard says.

Umi informs, “It leads to another guest room.”

“Let me guess.”

“I think you already have, miss.” Umino flashes a grin. She occupies herself with straightening the bed, unfolding a bath robe and draping it across the sheets. “He tried.”

Shepard almost ignored her. “What?”

“I saw him try. He came to Kahje to escape, and found peace in our religion. He learned only a handful of us escaped ourselves. 375,000 Drell, rescued by the Hanar, left Rakhana during its destruction. A handful that slowly, over the eight centuries since the incident, became what the Drell is now. We have families, jobs, and aspirations thanks to the hanar. Henry didn’t even ask to
be a part of it. He assumed the role you see as smuggler, but to us, he is our hanar, who saved us from Rakhana. He is our wings.”

“He drove assassins to kill their targets.”

“Yes. But he won’t tell you all of it. Allow me, if you please.” She sits on the foot locker and rests her hands in her lap. As if it was as natural as blinking, she zones out to someplace Shepard can’t see, and describes what she does. “He’s the only ship we’ve seen in moons. I stand in the wasteland, face covered from the dust, my hand shading my eyes. My tribe stands behind me, my leader before me. The wind hurt our faces. The sun hurts more. Alandyra, a hanar pilot who frequents the homeworld, and the doctor, Henry, disembark, carrying pallets of water and medicine. Pain strikes his brow when Alandyra recites the fall of Rakhana and prays with him as we fan out supplies. They do not know other tribes watch. We do. Our spears aim, our feet ready, our eyes sharp, and mouths quiet. From the sands burst many. Scurrying to kill. Out of fallen towers, buildings, and the ground itself. Alandyra retreats, not fast enough on land. He takes the ship’s guns. He sprays the outfield. One hundred charge, a quarter remain. The guns cease but we are ready. Henry stops us. He extends his hand toward the enemy. Coat catches in the wind. They still run. He still stands. The sun burns. I run to pull him away. My heart throbs, throat dry and my words scratch. The wall of Drell closes in and I tremble. He does not. A cold ferocity holds him, a statue, with a bleeding nose, and eyes full of tears. He tries. Air pulsates around him. An invisible field reaches out, the eye of a growing storm. Its currents penetrate one, two, then three; they stop moving. The rest pass them. He roars to the wind. The wind carries something back. He hears the orders of one. He changes focus; he moves his influence to him—he takes hold. It’s their leader. He resists. Henry tries harder. There’s a cry. “Halt!” The wave slows. It stops. The many eyes of the manic Drell now more confused than ever, and us just the same, stare at each other as walls in a hallway. Henry catches breath. He leans into me, holding his knees. He wipes his nose. ‘Would it be rude to take one of these? Thanks.’ Henry walks between the lines, and grabs a container of water. He gulps it down. The wind dies down, the dust settles, and the tribes stare. Henry’s chest rises and falls. He takes one more sip, and says, ‘So who wants to ride on the shiny spaceship?’”

Umino blinks, and looks up at Shepard.

“Alandyra was so impressed with Henry that he bestowed this island to him,” she concludes. “Out of the many pilgrimages people take to Rakhana, only he brokered peace. With his power, he managed to change the hearts of the violent, and release them from his hypnosis. Today, we live here. And we live each day honoring what Henry gave us: a second life.”

“He saved you?” Shepard thumbs behind her. “And all those people we saw outside?”

“All of them.”

It seems to be a trend.

Shepard grabs a chair from the circular table and pulls it over. “So you can recall memories just like that?”

“Yes. Not all are as pleasant or impressive as that one.”

Shepard sits. “Must be nice, though.” And crosses her legs.

“Henry has an amazing gift that I have never seen. It is a pity the Alliance never took him seriously. He has saved a lot of lives in many ways the Alliance could never.”

“Did he tell you why he went AWOL?”
“Ay-Wall is not a word I know.”

“I mean why he left.”

“Yes.” She blinks. “He counts the Drell again. I stop him when he thinks he can fit more. ‘She would find more room. She could. She could if—’ Before the tears return, I take him away to talk. The seat is cold and surprises me. I jump—pain strikes my skull when I hit my head on a low pipe. He laughs until his cheeks turn red.” She blinks again. “‘I miss her. I miss my wife. But I miss purpose more. Is that wrong?’ I tell him ‘it’s worse because family should be your purpose.’ He’s quiet. He folds his hands the way we can’t, and stares at the floor until I hear the rhythm of the engine hum below my feet.

‘What’s your name again?’ he asks.

‘Umino Rin,’ I say.

‘Do you have family?’ he says.

‘I have a tribe and to me that’s the same thing.’

‘Do you wanna job?’ he asks me and I accept, hoping I don’t look too eager in the somber moment. He says, ‘Keep me in line.’”

Shepard says nothing when Umino comes back to reality. Those two eyelids flutter back and down. That’s when she sees the subtle iris in her reptilian eyes.

“I told him to go back to you.”

“But—wait—I was dead.”

“This was the first time he left,” she answers. “He was trying to prove himself in honor of you and your mother, and also to himself, because the more you’re told you’re crazy, the more you wonder if they’re right. Your mother legally cut him away for many reasons, but overall it was love. She lost her faith in him, her respect for him dwindled, but she still loved him, and knew that letting him go would help him, as well as you. You didn’t need to see your father fall. A daughter needs to see their father strong; a role model to gauge all past and future relationships, personal and business. If he hadn’t left, I wouldn’t be here to tell you how heroic he was.” She clears her throat. “This is just my observation, though. Please don’t tell Henry.”

Shepard readjusts her seat. “Are you and Henry…close?”

She folds her palms together. “I believe we are drawn together spiritually; our ways integrate effortlessly and makes living here pleasurable. He is not…’a dick’ as he used to ask me.”

Shepard snorts.

“But you said you’d like to rest and I’m keeping you.” Umino stands.

“Are you going to answer my question?” Shepard smirks, standing with her.

Umino ponders, and her hands fall to her side. “We are close but he will always love your mother and I choose to not interfere. My cliched adoration for him would go unreciprocated if I pursued.”

“I understand.”

Umino checks the room from her spot in the doorway. “But,” she points in no specific direction, “if
“Dad wasn’t one to quit when it mattered to him.”

She looks passed Shepard. “I’m not talking about Henry.”

Heat drains from her feet, rushing upward, swelling her ribs, and flushing her cheeks. Then, the door closes, and Umi’s words hang in the air. Shepard opens the door and almost jumps into the hallway to catch her.

“Hey,” calls Shepard. “You said only a handful were saved. How many did the hanar have to leave behind?”

Umi, already a long way down the hall, the rising moonlight painting across her lower half, turns, and says, “Eleven billion.”

Shepard falls back on the bed and stares at the ceiling. Images in the textured finish become figures, figures with eyes, all twenty-two billion of them staring back, wondering about the fifty-two tanks. Her stomach whines at the smell of dinner, but she’s not hungry for food. Questions squirm and doubts strike, a storm in her head so loud she can’t close her eyes. With answers come sustenance, but the answers she found arise a continuing need. There are holes in the paint; the longer she stares, the bigger they become, and she can’t fill them lying down. She raps her fingers on her forearms until the noises in her body jerk her upright and she stomps to the wall—to the door. The red light faces her.

She unlocks it, the interface turns green, and she hopes it’s enough.
Errors of Impunity

Chapter Summary

Jack snaps then goes to dinner. Shepard wears color over her insecurities. Miranda and the Hanar take on the last of the Heathens.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He’s been arguing in circles with Henry, leading nowhere near the end purpose of his design. They stand over the container, the Drell stand guard, and by no means will they interfere if he happens to punch Henry in the jaw. But on the outside he remains composed, one hand in his pocket, the other at his side. Callouses are forming on his palm and they feel strange to be of use again, but nothing is stranger than trying not to boil over. His suit adds an irritating heat that draws out the symptoms of his frustration to a simmering 160. Henry draws out the cause.

“It’s over,” Jack says.

Henry looks appalled but the expression withers under his haggard eyes. The crows feet peek out of greying blankets under the folds.

“After all these years?” Henry says. “All our work?”

165 degrees.

“It doesn’t—”

“We just haven’t come up with the right plan, okay?”

170.

“Henry—”

“We’ll just let her think about it and she’ll be fine after dinner, really.”

180.

“Henry, it—”

“I’m making her favorite.”

190.

“It doesn’t matter because she’s not on board!” He marches out.

“Illusive Man.” And when he doesn’t answer, Henry calls out, “Jack!”

And he wishes doors could still slam.

He never trusted the Drell, or the Hanar, but he trusted Henry, enough to handle his most private
matters, enough to have his own suite if he ever decided to visit. There was only one time he did, and he did it right here in this room.

He asked Henry to save him.

Jack stands in the same spot when it happened, at the window overlooking the water. It’s a room of nostalgia, with a classic bar, an ashtray, and whisky glasses. Another symptom of his sickness; alcohol has lost its flavor since she left her coffee on the table. He still feels her eyes on him when he makes her that fresh pot, going over the recipe in his head.

Vegetable frittata.

Red light catches his eye. The door to his right locks, a door he didn’t know existed, but he remembers these guest rooms connect, and there’d only be one person on the other side of that wall. He carefully unpockets his hand, staring at the floor, but watching the red interface rotate, sink in, and go rigid.

212.

What’s on the coffee table goes first. Then the table. He throws it somewhere and it hits glass. Shattering sounds ring as he finds another thing to throw, and another, until it seemed there was nothing left. A post stops his heel. He turns—it’s the leg of the foot locker. His skin flushes and the tinges set in. He grips the bottom of the locker and lifts it. Its absence is his desire. He prepares the long distance and aims for the ocean outside. He throws. The window crashes and the locker carries splinters in its short flight arc before dropping over the balcony. He glares down. Pathetic shards everywhere. The window failed him but the planter won’t. He picks up a pot and smashes the other panels until it looks like diamonds snowed here.

He feels a release; something that had pinched inside untwisted and the flow renewed. Set amid the smallest particles of glass is a long, sharp fragment reflecting the lights from the room. He drops the plant’s remains to pick it up. It’s thick enough not to break, sharp enough to work. His hands shake, and his skin warms to the sweat building underneath.

He fights the response, gritting his teeth, pacing the balcony until he stomps back into the room. He grips it, the glass digs into his palm. He steadies it with the other hand. He can’t see anything but the blade now. He sinks his knees to the floor. The blurry point stares him down. He huffs through his teeth. Cheeks inflamed, head hot, shirt sticking to the damp. He growls. He inhales. He growls louder. Louder. The edge cuts into his hand. The blur meets a breath away, then less than a breath, until he stops breathing. And in the second he feels his heart beat, he swears he’s going to do it.

Jack throws it down—it breaks into the diamond snow—and watches blood dribble out of the thin pink mark along his grip. It’s been almost thirty years since he lost friends, his comrades, his self. His humanity raped by Turians, and impregnated by Protheans. Jack focuses on the pulsing in his palms, a throbbing reassurance of the pain he wished was only of the body.

“Too late,” he mutters. “It’s too late.”

He sinks into his void, a black hole of broken glass and disarrayed furniture. Adrenaline subsides and the rush flows into the tips of his fingers until the last vestige of fury wastes in his handle of the cigarette case. He opens it and stares at the one empty slot. He thinks on the last night he smoked, a simple espionage trick: appear lost to find a place to light, and remain non-threatening. Although the DJ had recognized him, she didn’t spoil it, and gave a good show. His favorite, in fact. And company that brought him joy. He had forgotten what that felt like if he had known joy
Jack pulls the second cigarette and pins it with his lips to replace the case with his lighter, a retractable fire hoop for lighting and cutting simultaneously. He opens the ring and it ignites the same time a glow catches his eye—the red lock on the communicating door turns green.

He snaps the lighter shut.

Shepard’s stare at the door phases into the silence on the other side and disappointment kicks herself to check that she secured the datapad in the foot locker. She presses the lock and feels an itch without it, but it’s either that or her sidearm, and no way is she giving that up. She feels itches everywhere now and scratches her oily hair, ravenous to stop the doubts crawling over her. Jane examines the towel in the bathroom. A dress hangs on a nearby coat rack. She takes both.

“Was it sent?” Miranda Lawson sits in the pilot chair of her shuttle, watching the heads-up display and making sure the VI doesn’t glitch and change the degree of the nose at any point during the flight. She doesn’t need to waste fuel with extra resistance to the propulsion systems.

Castleberry has the navigator seat with ARPA, the map and guiding arrows, though Miranda and the VI seem to have all the control. He sits there with his datapad, reading files on Kahje, and more likely the case he just closed. He needs Chris Robertson and she needs…

“Was it sent?” Miranda snaps.

“Yes!” Castleberry says. “Gawd. EDI confirmed reception minutes ago.”

“Then tell me ‘minutes ago!’ I think you’ve been away from Cerberus too long you’ve forgotten who’s in charge.”

They’ve been flying for a while now with nothing but stars and black.

“Never forgot.”

“We don’t have to like each other but I am Illusive Man’s most trusted officer.”

“Are you?”

“I am!” She’s louder in a smaller space, much smaller than her office. “I am.” She resists punching the interface. “This is all my fault.” Miranda shakes her head. “Weather readings?”

“Kahje’s pressure dropping, hot and cold air mixing east of our destination, heading west, and a couple billion cubic kilometers of water—smooth sailing all the way.”

“Joke all you want, the Heathens are still at large as long as Robertson is alive.”

“The storm isn’t what I’m worried about.”

“Your face isn’t going to be the one she hits.”

“Leadership is a shitter’s pyramid and it’s gonna splatter on me. What are you going to tell her?”

Miranda signals Kahje, forewarning them of their shuttle less than an hour out. It doesn’t need to be
said, but with her Cerberus uniform, she’d better follow protocol and then some. Hannah’s embrace lingers and a guilt pings her manufactured heart.

Manufactured by another Henry.

Henry. What a wonderful name for a monster. Did she mention her father’s name to Shepard before? She can’t remember.

“Ms. Lawson,” Castleberry reminds.

She wants to ignore the question but when she lands she’ll be unable to ignore her answer.

“Families keep secrets, right?” Miranda fakes a smile.

The interface flares red and beeps at her. A screen flashes to the radar. Pings, a dozen targets at least, straight for the planet.

“Dammit,” she snaps. “EDI!”

EDI hails through the comm. “Yes, Ms. Lawson.”

“Notify Hanar Command there are potential hostile targets heading their way. Forwarding readings.”

“Yes, Ms. Lawson.”

Castleberry drops his datapad when the emergency seatbelts shoot over his shoulders and lock at his crotch; he winces. “Why don’t you tell ‘em?”

“The S-Band could be compromised. I’m not chancing it without EDI.”

“You love hiding behind a computer, don’t you?”

“I don’t—!” Miranda smacks her chair arm. “I’m here to fix this, all right? On my terms.”

“Sure thing.”

“Mine.”

Their shuttle commits to the adjusted speed and when they’re in range a few nautical miles later—

“Oh my gawd,” Miranda says, starring into a fleet of pirate ships.

—they’re on course for battle.

= = = = =

It’s teal. She’s never worn teal before. She checks the mirror one last third time before leaving, then glances again. Is her hair really that red? Her elevated heels press the ball of her foot harder than she’s used to. She could just stand here and look pretty for herself. In the shower she decided she could not let anyone see it affect her. It, the underlined word for something she cannot say out loud, but should—or should not.

She turns to the door. Henry earned her attention, and her respect by being present at dinner. Shepard sees a plate of crow waiting for her and she notices a hair out of place. She brushes it behind her ear but it’s short, and falls at her cheek.
Fine.

Shepard walks out at last and dark clouds approach the mountain to her left. Moonlight no longer illuminates the ocean, and the waves turn harsh, crashing grayed peaks against itself, and the manufactured island. It’s cooler now but with the humidity still in the air she wonders if she should bring a coat.

It’s just dinner; in and out. She bags the coat idea and moves forward with mission “Grab n Eat,” her way of apologizing by accepting his hospitality, and eating a decent meal since breakfast.

Breakfast.

She passes the other guest room’s door—red lock and silent. No windows on this side but she knows there’s a balcony like hers. She imagines that’s how some people meet each other at lavish hotels.

“Such a—” but she catches her self-guilt trip and shakes her mind of it.

She follows the smell of something familiar, wine and meat married in the oven, but stops at the descent to the laboratory. Faint laughter carries in the distance.

Drell take the stairs, grateful for food, but wondering why the kitchen’s run late. If only they looked left to see their answer staring back.

Her fresh retreat lingers where Umino Rin escorted her. The container, invisible yet not, warding off her eyes. Inside likely another body. No one would be around to tell her no or yes if she peeked. No one to explain, just hard fact of what’s in front of her, if she put it in front of her. If she had accepted, they would have shown her what’s inside. It tugs her and she takes a step when something else stops her.

“…think of something else.” Henry’s voice escapes a nearing room, possibly a hallway, or one of the many seating areas. “Come have a drink with me.”

And then something else starts her again.

“No.” Jack’s voice. "You were right, Henry.” Somber, exhausted.

Shepard’s heart pokes her rib and she follows the sidebar, sneaking slower when the volume rises, avoiding her heels clicking against the tile.

“I still can't convince you?” Henry asks.

Shepard finds them in a circular lounge on a lower floor by a pond. She sneaks by an elevator, onto its loft overlooking the room protected by a parapet, her own nest without all the gear. Henry and Jack stand close but not brotherly; far but not strangers. How her father has less gray hair than The Illusive Man isn’t the million-credit question.

“I’ll go with you,” Henry says next.

“Scrap it all? Jack, you’re the prime candidate; I can’t do this without you.”

“You are already ahead of me here on Kahje. Based on what I’ve seen here, you can.”

“Without you, Janey ‘n’ I…”
“I’m sorry. Your work is not without my gratitude, but it stops here, like I said before.”

“Jack…”

Illusive Man’s hands shoot up. “What did I say?” He thrusts them out and walks.

“Jack!” Henry watches him go.

“Don’t.”

Henry shoves his hands in his pockets. “Some people need more time to forgive.” When that doesn’t work, he says, “I’m sorry she lost a few memories, Jack, but you’re losing yourself. I thought that mattered to you.”

Jack turns back, standing one foot in the exit furthest from her nest, pointing at her father, and resisting word vomitus. He drops the finger, letting the arm hang, before he turns again, and leaves.

It’s the quietest room when the door shuts and Henry stands over the pond, observing his reflection. When she thinks he’s going to look up—maybe he can see her in the water—he folds his hands in prayer, recites something to a Drell goddess, and sighs. He then strolls in Jack’s direction. The doors shift open and closed and she exhales, not realizing she was holding her breath.

Shepard had taken the elevator and tailed the men’s route to the dinner arrangement, only to find a party, much less a quiet family table she dreaded since she broke free from the mirror. All tension she expected among the three of them slacked with dancing Drell, laughing, drinking, and snacking on hors d’oeuvres.

What had mattered to her most fights to stay at the front of the line. It grips, unresolved, and panicking, sensing the whirl of ideas coming to her faster than the looming clouds ahead.

The dinner hall is a great room next to the galley; a restaurant reformed to banquet and theatre with a glass roof and window panels. There’s a small stage above the snack tables. And somewhere there’s a full service bar, as she catches different cocktails and wine in squamose hands. Even the children have something with fruit on a stick in fizzing water. People play games in every corner of the room, but it’s the song that captures an audience. Someone begins to sing and children cheer and gather around the space between the center tables. A rosy Drell in a light blue dress holds a narrow plank with holographic strings taut at an angle. She lies it across her lap and begins to play. Each pluck is a liquid note, a subtle echo distorted as if she was playing underwater. As she plays, pictures telling a story scroll over the listeners. A little boy reaches for one—it’s light passes over his hand. His mother motions to keep his hand down and Shepard grins faintly.

“A drink, ma’am?”

When Shepard’s startled, she doesn’t jump; she punches. Her fist clenches and almost doesn’t resist her auto-reaction. She fakes a stretch to let out the tension in her joints and sees that it’s not a server, but Loti, Henry’s “guide.”

“Oh, no thank—” A glass finds its way into her once-fist. “—you.”

A server passes with an empty drink tray, not looking back for her to object.

“This is a special night for us all,” Loti Quis says. “Henry has returned and brought back his reason
for living.” He motions to her self. “How long will you be staying?”

“The night only.”

“For shame and for what? This is paradise. Why would you ever want to leave so sudden?”

Loti appears older than the rest; his colors still vibrant but his movements are slow. If she’s as short with him and she is with her friends, it might be rude.

“Some say that paradise is relative,” she says carefully. “I’m inclined to be one of those people.”

“Oh?” He folds his hands behind him. “Then what is considered your paradise, commander?”

“I—hadn’t thought about it.” And she hasn’t.

She looks at him inquisitively then stirs her memories for what would be something she’d like. Maybe on a ship, with her bed above the engine room, and the hum of the core lulling her to sleep. No, that’s nap time. A quiet restaurant with all her favorite food? A home in the city, just in reach of society, but turn the shutters, and peace restores. It could be a nice night with her mom at her favorite tea shop or a simple game of Pirate Farkle when Henry and Mom were still married. Pirate Farkle. Heh. Every morning before work, when she was five, Henry brewed a mug, and blew on it while rolling his dice, as she ate cereal, dangling her feet from the chair. He was trying to roll a good hand and always chanced that last die. Many times she watched, hoping he’d fail so she could yell with her mouth full of grain and milk, but most, not all, he’d win with a five. It wasn’t much, but it was winning. Barely. Luck was always on his side.

Shepard sniffs the air. “Do you smell coffee?”

“No, ma’am. We only serve that in the day.”

“That’s the issue.” She tsks. “If this was paradise, coffee would be available 24/7.”

Loti smirks. “Well that’s a load of shit.”

She snorts a laugh.

“Relax, commander, certainly around me, and you’ll discover our paradise is also yours if you allow yourself.” He rests his hand on her elbow briefly, then strolls away in the direction of a sight she thought she imagined.

The Illusive Man in an apron.

He unties it, sits, and sets it on the adjacent chair. It doesn’t matter what he wears. He makes anything look good; armor, a dirty apron, dark suit, light suit, birthday suit…but what she doesn’t get is how the fight with Henry led him to work in the kitchen. She finds a place to set her full glass down and ask, but once the glass leaves her hands, a Drell woman approaches him, her hand on his shoulder, and Shepard can’t move, and can’t look away. Whatever the Drell says to him, he nods at it, then her fingers trail down his arm, and he doesn’t move either. He stares at his drink as she leaves, then slams the last of it.

An ache of reality turns her away and her fingers bump the orphaned drink where it splashes down on the table cover.

“Shit!” she hisses.
“Jane?”

Jack. Shit! She wanted to think over what to say before he noticed, but now that the 

He hustles over, whipping his apron about, and dropping it on the spill before it drips onto the floor. She means to say thank you, but it comes out unexpectedly.

“How was that?” she asks.

Jack looks back. “I don’t know.”

He rolls up the apron and tosses it to a passing server, then observes the children laughing when an octopus dances over their heads. Worst thank you ever, so how about an apology?

“She ask you on a date or something?”

Failure.

“I wasn’t paying attention,” he says.

He looks at her the way he did all the times before. She finds it easier to talk when he’s not looking at her because she can’t talk at all. Her throat’s a bionic tube and the wires have swollen shut. He finally looks away and she can try again. It’s a chance to figure him out, to say she’s sorry, that she’s been a pain, and she’s willing to listen. Really listen. She might have gone for that drink to soothe the dryness if she’d known it was this hard.

She opens her mouth and Henry’s voice shouts, “You made it!”

Her lungs fill with ice and her words freeze. Suddenly, the muffled, surrounding conversations are obnoxious; the music, clinking glasses, clattering plates, and laughing children become a harpy’s den of screeches. Henry approaches and she tries to keep her claws retracted.

“You’re at the big kids table!” He beams. “Guest of Honor——” He takes her arm around his. “—and all that. Hey!” He motions to Jack. “You too. Come on. Come on!”

Rosy cheeks, sunken eyes, big smile—the last time she saw him like this was at a reception on the Einstein with a karaoke machine. It ended as well as she expected. The enlisted were back on their feet next day but the officers, save the biotics (and Mom), were gerbils on their treadmills trying to run off the hangover after a carb-loaded breakfast. She was seventeen. The gym was full and the enlisted were working. She likes to believe that was a defining moment for her, that she wouldn’t do that to her crew. She wouldn’t take a break when others are still at it. She didn’t want to be that kind of leader.

This isn’t paradise. This is a gym and all the places to run are taken.

Henry rings for everyone to take their seats.

“Shalla, take the kids to the chef’s table, and see what surprise the kitchen has waiting for them.”

The musician nods and the little Drell form a line without her saying anything. Her instrument in one hand, she takes the first kid’s hand in the other, and they leave. The adults either wave at their family, or take their drinks to their chairs. Henry motions at the stage and it rises up, locks into a storage unit, and the ceiling closes. Servers come out with long carts, one for each table, and set up the dinnerware, and plating.
Henry sits Shepard and Jack at a new table, horseshoed where the stage once was, and the people, with the view of all other tables, The dark clouds loom above now, an overcast of the darkest gray. Orange lightning bursts and illuminates the billows. A server sets a plate down in front of her, blocking the view, and Shepard’s heart warms to the sight of a ramekin and a torched roof of mashed potatoes. Shepard spoons the center and finds a layer of minced meat and diced vegetables. Faint cinnamon and bold broth kiss her nose and her mouth waters.

Lightning flashes. Thunder shakes the building and rattles the dinner set. A collective surprise wafts from the Drell and everyone looks out the panels.

Henry cheers it on. “Is it hurricane season already?”

Drell chuckle; if they shake it off, maybe she should too, but a pebble in her stomach churns her nerves.

“Let us take a moment to pray,” Loti Quis stands beside Henry. “Our souls open, hearts warm, and mind at peace.”

Henry bows his head with Loti, the room follows.

Everyone except Jack and Shepard close their eyes. She folds her hands like all the times she’s attended similar customs. Servers line beside them, holding hands, connecting a chain of all the tables also holding hands, and Shepard turns to Jack. Jack does and says nothing. He holds the hand of a Drell next to him, who holds hands with Neon. Shepard looks down; they're the last open link. His hand rests at his side, neither insisting nor hiding, as if he left it up to her.

She slides her fingers under his and grips the palm. He’s warm.

Henry begins, “Dear mothers of the sea and air…”

Their deaths are silent. Miranda weaves the shuttle through fresh debris married in Kahje’s exosphere. Ships burn and spark, charred bodies float past, now frosted by space. Symphonic orange rays shoot out from turrets just outside Kahje’s atmosphere, bringing down every Heathen target, all except one. Miranda chases. Up, down, and left rudder to right rudder. Any way she can avoid collision. There are no weapons systems. She’ll have to take him down on land, most likely water, if the planet defense can’t get him. Orange streaks across her window.

“Shit!” Castleberry snaps. “Are you a pilot or not?”

“I can fly!”

“That’s not—” Castleberry glues wide eyes to the upcoming veil of oxygen and pressure. “Gee I’m glad this has dampeners or this would be a painful reentry.” Robertson’s hijacked ship jerks hard starboard and a chunk of nose and a pilot seat zooms in. “LOOK OUT!”

Miranda dives. Metal knocks against the hull. She resets her line on Robertson.

“He’s broken through,” she shouts.

Robertson breaches the haze, bolting toward the sheet of dark clouds.

“Dammit! Find out where he’s landing.”
Castleberry navigates the planet map. “I think we know.”

Miranda scoffs. “At least it’s down to one.”

“It sure is.” Castleberry gazes at the debris burning up around them.

Chapter End Notes

Fixed continuity error with repeated scene. Whoopsie.
Girls Just Wanna Have Guns

Chapter Summary

An argument in the bakeshop leads to a deadly situation in the grand ballroom. Jack and Jane must improvise.

The servers pick up the last of the empty dinnerware and replace them with small plates, and tiered trays of desserts.

“Are you done, sir?” the male Drell says, whose coat extends as an apron. He hovers near Jack and the untouched cottage pie. When he doesn’t answer, the server repeats himself. “Sir? Are you done?”

Jack moves little, across the room, seemingly watching the storm, and the orange flashes.

“I don’t know,” Jack says at last, “but I’m not hungry.” He offers the bowl and the server takes it away.

Shepard samples a lemon-looking mini-tart—it turns out to be cumquat, but she’s not disappointed. Rather than sour, it’s sweet, and the unique flavor reminds her of mangos, or lichee. All of which might look like shades of lemon, but looks mislead unless you try them.

“Mm,” she hums, “so good.” She glances over but Jack the statue doesn’t blink. She swallows. “Did Henry hypnotize you into doing the dishes, I mean that apron isn’t like you.”

Statue remains silent.

She adds, “Sorry.” Still nothing. “About my outburst earlier. About me…being me, really.”

“I’m not a goal post,” the statue says.

“What?” Tingles unravel behind her cheeks as blood pools to her limbs.

The statue cracks and turns to her. Jack says, “Look, I understand I asked too much from you. I expected a lot but it’s hard to process rejection when you keep bringing it up.”

“Jack, I’m trying here.”

“No.” He scoots his chair back. “Henry’s trying. You’re just reactive.” He stands. “And I’m not disrespecting his efforts by putting on a display for you in front of his family.”

Heat surges in and she resists balling her fists. “What is your deal?”

“Talk to me in the kitchen if you want. Otherwise, enjoy your tart.”

Jack straightens his jacket and walks out, leaving her in the grace of people pretending not to look, and Henry void of knowing. He’s laughing at a joke he probably made, because he’s now explaining it to the Drell sitting around him. After a bit, they finally laugh, repeating the punchline. Henry snorts and the Drell laugh harder. Henry laughs harder. And Shepard, void of not feeling his
charm, does not smile, but that’s not worse than being told the truth, that she’s not trying.

She stands and the chair moves back with her calves. She finds the galley, the door, and her next mission: try. Try to understand him better. Try to fix this. Try to be less like the little girl Henry left. Try to be the woman Henry’s making up to, the woman Jack sees, the daughter her mom’s proud of. But how does a woman like her try? How does a soldier? A sailor? A spectre?

“Reactive,” she mutters.

Shepard breaches the bi-toned doors, half-transparent—to see in and out—and half-opaque. It’s big, with two long prep tables in the center; ovens and a kettle pit on the far side, reefers and chillboxes on the near side, and a scullery in the next room, through a wide archway. Cooks scramble to clean up their stations.

One yells, “Get the water boiling already!”

Another calls out, “who has the Broomba?”

A Drell answers and something bleeps with a VI response. A rectangular robot scours the deck underneath work tables and counters.

“I haven’t activated SkyVy yet!”

“Hurry up, then. I wanna be home before midnight this time!”

Shepard tries to find Jack, but even in a room full of Drell, and one Hanar pitmaster (or whatever Hannah called them on the Einstein), it’s hard to see in the organized chaos. She checks the scullery, avoiding Broomba, who’s moved across the walkway, and under the griddle now, but a hanar is feeding dishes into the machine.

“Jack?” she asks.

The hanar does not pause the operation, but acknowledges her. “This one believes you are looking in the wrong location. This one wishes you to consider the bakeshop.”

He motions a free tendril to the other doorway out of the scullery. She takes it and is on the other end of the kitchen, where a cove had hidden from her line of sight before. Jack’s wiping down the giant mixer and stops when he sees her in the doorframe. He throws his towel in the soapy water and turns his back on her toward his own deep sink. He picks up the dirty mixing bowl—it could fit three Drell kids in there.

Drellkin?

Drellings?

That’s a big bowl.

Jack hoists it with one hand and brings it into the sink precisely and softly on its side to begin spraying it down. An aroma of beef and spices waft over and guilt withers the joy food once brought. She sees his mouth move but the water striking the metal muffles the words.

“What?”

He drops the hose. It bounces up to its original position.

“I said—” he wipes his hands on a dry towel. “—I can’t keep doing circles with you.”
“With me?” All the half-truths rush back to her and her cheeks enflame. She snaps, “You started it and you kept at it.”

He folds his arms. “That is a different case, where I wasn’t trying to toy with your emotions but merely conceal you from information you weren’t ready for.”

Flames erect from her nostrils. “You threw me a curveball every time I was nice to you. Every time! How am I supposed to react when I keep learning the darkest parts of this whole scheme.”

He leans back, crosses one foot over the other. “You led me believe you cared enough to hear the truth!”

“I should have heard it all from the start.” She backslaps the air. “Not in pieces. Not like this.”

He shakes his head. “How else, then? If I called you on the vidcomm, and said, ‘I like you. Do you like me too? Check yes or no.” He mimics the hypothetical with hand flourishes. “PS: I’m dying and your estranged father is in on it. Help me. S-W-A-K.”’

Oh, you little…

“I don’t need your sass,” she growls. “You know what I meant.”

“You wouldn’t have given me a second look because I had done what was necessary. I kept my feelings out of it and threw you into missions I knew were dangerous, that I knew I’d have to keep some truth from you.” He unfolds his limbs and pushes himself off the counter. “I did the same here and I knew I’d be betraying your trust again, but I needed you to see.” He squares up close with her. “It’s not a shot of vodka to take down, it is a vat. I couldn’t do that to you all at once. No human, not even you, Commander Shepard, could have handled that.”

“I could have if you just trusted me!” She flings her arms back, breaking the tin soldier instilled in her. “You expect me to trust you. What about you? You trust my dad more than me.”

Every red hair strand sizzles.

“Nonsense. I trust you to save humanity. Isn’t that proof enough?”

“Proof would have been telling me everything. I could have handled it.”

He scoffs. “You couldn’t even handle your dad taking one memory from you to save your emotional stability. Do you know how many memories he’s holding intact for me? Do you know what would happen if he just let go?”

“So you only see him as a tool to keep you sane?”

“What’s it matter to you how I see him? You never cared at all.”

“He’s still my dad!”

“Then how come you haven’t forgiven him? You dangle him on a tether but you don’t let go. Why? Why—”

“That’s not—”

“—Not my business? You keep running from me, dragging me along on the same tether. What’s it to—”
“Because if you and I work then so can Dad!” she blurts.

Words hang in the air and she hears them grow louder with every echo of sudden truth. It’s not hunger for food, sex, or the send button of Miranda’s mission report. She’s like everyone else. Every damned cliched child who grew up into damaged cargo on a wobbly pallet. She’s Jack, Miranda, and Jacob. She’s Tali, Liara, and even Ashley to a point. She doesn’t say it out loud but she knows.

Oh gawd she knows.

She has daddy issues.

“What are we doing?” Shepard groans. “We haven’t even been on a date and we’re fighting like…”

Jack’s omni-tool beeps.

“Not now,” he moans, but checks it anyway.

“Must be important,” she says.

“It’s EDI.”

Shepard checks hers—nothing. It would be dawn if it wasn’t dark. A sheet unveils, slipping off her mind and unveiling a chain of clues. They’re connected from the old Citadel convention center to Joker’s message at Kahje Medical. Every message he gets, she gets later. Every call that failed, his never did.

“You disrupted my comms,” she says after her head empties of all things except. “You blocked me from my ship, just like now.”

“I may be your boss, Jane, but I respect your authority, and would never undermine you.”

“Show me.”

Jack reads his arm and stiffens. “Jane…”

“Show me!” She resists lunging.

He dials it off. “We gotta move.” He grabs her arm and starts to push.

“No!” Shepard twists out of it and shoves her finger in his chest. “You are not—”

She’s hears the singing of an engine before the thunder’s boom. The building quakes, lights flicker, and a collective gasp before the panic emits from the galley. It knocks her balance. Jack steadies her then they dash for the doorway, holding the frame against their backs.

“The storms can’t be that bad here, can they?” Shepard looks about.

“It’s not a storm,” Jack says when the building shakes again. He grits his teeth and inhales deeply. “It’s Robertson.”

“Good.” She barks. “We can end this and then I’ll be back for you.”

“It wasn’t me!”
“You’re so lucky I’m not packing right now.”

“We’d all be if you were.”

Shepard grunts.

One of the cooks exclaims, “Oh, gods.”

Screams eject from outside.

“Move!” Shepard orders and Jack follows.

No windows except the door’s upper half, where a green Drell ducks down, shaking.

“One of the kids,” he mutters.

Shepard approaches firmly but kindly. “I need you to back away from the door.”

He doesn’t hear at first. Then, after a swallow, he nods, and crawls away. Shepard takes the spot, Jack across from her.

“What about a kid?” she asks.

The Drell leans against a counter leg. “That human has him, Kirsh. I snuck an extra cookie on his plate. Oh, gods. Oh, gods. He’s…”

“Oh, Commander Shepard!” Robertson’s voice calls far. “I really want your boy toy boss back and no it’s not a song.” Jack waves her to stay down and he peeks from the right corner, then drops back.

“He’s across the room, Drell are in their seats, and servers on their knees.”

“Henry?”

“Appears to be talking him down. He’s the only one standing. Jane, everyone in there is fodder to get to me.”

There’s still time for a warning bark before she bites. “I know and I hate you for it.”

“It wasn’t me!”

She ignores him. “What did EDI say?”

“Hanar took out the Heathens. Robertson’s alone.”

“That’s all she said? Why you and not me?”

“Maybe it didn’t have time or chose 50/50 and knew we’d tell each other regardless.”

“Most advanced AI didn’t have time?”

He spits. “I’m speculating, Jane!” He wipes his mouth.

Henry’s hands slowly lower.

“Keep them up,” Robertson says, his voice distant but clear. “Or the dad is next.”

Henry complies, but he turns his wrist to flip him two birds.

“Not in front of the kid, Henry. I know how you are about teaching upstanding morals.”

“Henry’s pissed,” she whispers. If she tries opening the door, it’ll be the one motion in the room. “I can’t get over there without alerting Robertson.”

“Why is he not hypnotizing him?” Jack says.

“I don’t care.” She gets the cook’s attention. “Hey. Is there another way out?”

The Drell almost shakes his head. “There’s a truck garage for cargo that would lead you outside. Through the back door in the walk-in.”

Jack says what she’s thinking, “He’s killing bystanders as we stall. We don’t have time but your crew does. Escape through the back. Second responders will be on their way soon. Let them know there’s one armed hostile, unknown armed friendlylies, and one Spectre on scene.”

The Drell cooks crawl out of the kitchen, the hanar follows as an evading octopus on land would, and it’s just her and The Illusive Man. He pats his ankle down and sighs. He’s just as naked as she is and she’s showing more skin.

“Jack,” she says.

“I got this,” he says, readying himself to open the doors. He kneels on one leg, foot positioned to stand, and arms relaxed, but his breath is heavy, and deep. He examines her lines, taking her in from crimson crown to uncomfortable heels, then says, without tone, without a shade of emotion, “You are effortlessly beautiful.”

He rises, hands first, the door opens, and she forgot she was mad. She protests but can’t move and can’t speak. She needs him as a distraction and she knows she couldn’t use anyone else. She hates it. So many things could go wrong yet he’s still standing there, and the room’s quiet with the gunshot hanging fresh in the air. Jack advances the stairs to the stage—Robertson locks on him across the crowd.


Kirsh, the kid, cries with tears streaming his bluish skin.

“You took too long, Illusive Man,” Robertson snaps. “This is what happens when you take too long.” He squeezes the kid with his grip.

Inspiration drives her forward, she locks the door open, and moves left along the wall before she crawls to the first table. She signals the Drell hiding to keep quiet and motions them low, and back to the kitchen.

“Of course, you’re right. I should not have kept you waiting. May I lower my hands? My arms are tired.”

“I don’t see the harm,” Robertson says. “You got nothing on you.”

Translation: he has a scanner. Cunning move, Jack, but bad news. She won’t be able to save
everyone, but if she can get close enough, he’s done.

“And there’s nothing back at the Citadel, Chris. Turning me in, or Henry, won’t get you what you want.”

“It’ll get me exactly what I want.”

“You might have had a bargaining chip before, but you invaded Kahje with a fleet of pirate ships. The Citadel will see that as a terrorist act. You won’t be able to set a nose near Citadel space.”

“Then I should just do the universe a favor now.”

“But you know I have the means to help you disappear and live comfortably—luxuriously—like you’ve always wanted. Killing me won’t get you what I can get you.”

Jack’s steady voice and calm demeanor works; Robertson moves the weapon from the kid’s temple to Jack. Shepard slinks to the next table, and the next, almost to the glass wall.

Henry’s birds still linger above his shoulders. He notices movement and glances at Shepard, then the kid, then at the dad, mourning his partner from a distance.

“Yeah,” Robertson says, “you’re probably right.”

He fires the gun at Shepard’s table—

“NO!” Jack cries.

—and she freezes, staring into the woven fabric of tablecloth, and the burning hole that missed her by inches.

“Out!” Robertson barks and she takes her time standing. “Hi again. The datapad.”

All this could have been solved if she just caved to her defenseless feeling. What a stupid thing to think that she could respect her dad’s dinner with peace without a peacekeeper. Robertson fumes when she doesn’t immediately respond. Kirsh looks drained, ready to die by his will alone, slumped over Robertson’s arm; tired of the sobs, tired of injustice, tired of loss. Shepard can’t move without bloodshed, but no one else is stepping up. Jack’s done his part and she failed. It’s her…but she spots movement, and a member of her crew, and her hope renews in a flurry of warmth in her chest.

Shepard forces herself not to look at Miranda inching her way into the room. She approaches the scene, dirtied, but hair flawlessly in place.

“I have it,” Shepard says, slowly reaching for her collar. “Right here.”

“Right where?” Robertson says. “You have nothing.”

Time to look as much as she feels. Shepard unsheathes the halter off her shoulders and drops the dress. Her breasts greet Robertson’s stunned face right before the back of his head meets Miranda’s bullet. It rattles through his brain, Kirsh breaks away to his mother, and Robertson falls forward, dead. Shepard picks up the dress straps and slips them back over her head.

Miranda grins. “I wouldn’t say nothing.” She kicks Robertson’s gun to Shepard and promptly snatches it up.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Shepard says, stepping over the body now bleeding out deep
“I have a lot to explain, Shepard.”

Shepard eases her words toward the Drell medics behind her inspecting the bodies. “Can you let the cooks know Kirsh is all right?” When they ask why, she just responds, “Please. Thank you.”

Henry approaches, and Jack descends the stage to tend to the fallen, and Kirsh. Jack kneels and rests his hand on Kirsh’s shoulder, who’s holding his mom’s head in his lap.

“In private,” Miranda insists, refocusing Shepard on her.

“You saved my people, Ms. Lawson,” Henry says, “a guest room is yours, as are all amenities on the island.”

“Thank you, Dr. Shepard.” They shake hands.

“Please, call me Henry.”

She folds her arms. “I’d rather not.”

Shepard summarizes, “Her father shares your name.”

“Small galaxy,” he says, “I should find Loti and Neon. And try to get that image out of my head.” He mumbles, “My own daughter.” And leaves, shuddering.

Shepard inquires, “You came alone?” She turns to the glass wall. Bits of orange flicker across the dark clouds, which she knows, now, are the remains of Robertson’s crew.

A fool believes the weak cannot defend, but the weak are fools to believe they cannot be strong.

Miranda mirrors Shepard’s posture and says, “Castleberry’s with me, talking to the authorities outside.”

Whatever was hot turns cold inside. “What? But Mom’s case!”

“Did you not get our message?” Miranda half-smirks. “It’s over, Shepard. Your mom is free and clear.”

It’s a summer wind in a snowstorm. She hears the words but can’t believe it. Excitement swells but confusion gulps it down and she can’t cry, so she laughs.

“Seriously?” Shepard runs her fingers through her hair. “Seriously?”

“Joker sent you this, right?”

Miranda shares her omni-tool data and Shepard reads it on her own.

*Your eyes ASAP or whatever!*

*Case dropped but Heathens on your tail so stay sharp!*

*We’ll be holding the fort until further orders.*

-Joker
"I never got this." Or Joker’s taste in fragrances. “Illusive Man’s been tampering with my comms.”

“Ilusive Man.” She either bows her head or looks at her feet. “I apologize, sir.” Probably both.


He slips his hands into his pockets and acknowledges, “Miranda.”

“Illusive Man.” She either bows her head or looks at her feet. “I apologize, sir.” Probably both.

“No apology necessary. It was you, wasn’t it?”

Interest peaks and Shepard exchanges glances between them. “Excuse me?”

Miranda says, “I—” She sighs. “Not all of it—yes.”

Shepard uncrosses her arms as noodles wilt in steam.

“You and I will talk later, Ms. Lawson.” Jack reveals a hand. He picks at his nail. “Shepard, you can proudly say that you fought to the last breast. Now I need another shower.”

Miranda disapproves of the joke, but it tickles Shepard’s ribs, and her belly giggles.

It’s over. Everything is over. The Heathens are gone and Hannah is free. Robertson lies in his own spoiled life source and Jack is not the saboteur she thought he was. Nothing else could top this elated feeling of fulfillment, though she has one thing to cover, but he’s probably scarred for life. She could give Henry a minute or two.

“Shepard,” Miranda brings her back to ground. “I have a lot to explain so please can we take this somewhere private?”

Yeah. One minute.
Miranda confesses and Shepard understands.

Miranda settles for the corner suite with a view fit for a retired admiral in Thailand. She invites Shepard in and it’s the size of the room on Illium, but the kitchen is by the living room in the far corner with the glass panels, and the bed is in a cove to her left by an enclosed bathroom. At the center is a jacuzzi, carefully framed and sunken into the floor with an automatic cover. Drinks wait to her immediate right and Shepard finds Miranda with one already in hand, and a datapad in the other.

The storm hasn’t let up, but the orange comets subside to longer intervals. Lightning strikes behind the mountain, giving it a light blue edge that vanishes in a blink.

Miranda observes the waters rolling, then sips her iceless drink before she says…

She slams the glass and grips it against her chest. Her glove squeaks along the surface. She swallows the exaggerated dram, then looks in its emptiness, and debates another pour.

Shepard strolls over. “Miranda?”

“This is harder to do out loud,” she says, twisting emptiness between her fingers. “It—it was me.”

She responds softly, “I got that.”

“No, I mean…” she aggravates the glass and sets it down. “I’m responsible for getting Illusive Man involved.” She breathes deep. “With you.”

A piece of her resurrected form shrivels back to the dead space they found her in. “Like a…a scam?”

“No! No. It wasn’t a set-up. I consider you one of my closest comrades—now—”

“No?” Shepard crosses her arms.

“Shepard, listen. Please.” Miranda squares shoulders with her. “I’ve known him and your mother a long time. I’ve gotten to know you. But, I—all my work—I told him he—” She fights herself and blurs out, “When Hannah sent word she was in trouble, I convened with Illusive Man. A year ago I noticed changes, subtle at first, but then his hobbies turned, and he became less himself. The Lazarus Project stirred something. I said he was becoming obsessed with you and he should get it out of his system.” She lets it rest in the air before she continues, figuring Shepard’s pallid contour indicated the churning of sickly discovery. “All my work and not once did he look at me the way he looked at you.”

The sickness wanes.

“I thought he was going to use you like the rest. Part of me wanted him to but the other part wanted to protect you. I was just bloody frustrated with it all. I’m so sorry, Shepard.”
“There were others?”

Miranda hands over the datapad. “Perhaps actions should speak.”

“Not interested in homemade porn.”

“Just watch it. Please.”

Shepard taps the back in her palm. “Maybe later.”

“Sooner, please. And don’t tell Illusive Man I have this. Some of it isn’t…signed off on.”

Blue bursts light up the clouds, and the blackened mountain looks green again for a moment. Shepard walks Miranda’s glass back to the bar, but each step is a process.

“So Jack—eh—Illusive Man took your advice. How’d that turn out for you?”

“It’s made more of a mess on all accounts.” Miranda rubs her sleeve. “I didn’t think it would go this far. But...it makes sense. It makes such bloody sense and I should’ve saw it coming. Heh. I guess I’m a little obsessed too. I’ve spent the last two years of my life dedicated to you and only you. I didn’t want anything to go wrong and forgot you’re not a robot. You lacking a control chip proves that.”

Shepard looks on, toward the sea, toward the waves, toward rhythmic churns of gray in dark blue. “I didn’t see it either.” Spray climbs after a crash against the island. A drellmade beach settles above the ocean, a construct much like the mountain, to give the island some realism. “I wanted to hate him so much. I guess I capsized.” Shepard inspects her feet; she needs a pedicure after wearing boots sixteen hours a day, and standing for the thirteen. “I get it, Miranda.” “Honestly, I thought you two were already...or had.”

Miranda scoffs. “Please.”

“You’re beautiful, Miranda. It shouldn’t have to be said but...there’s someone out there for you. I feel it.”

“Maybe.” She glances at the data pad still in Shepard’s hand. “I should leave you to that. It’s not something to watch in company.” She hints at the door.

Shepard affirms. “So it is porn.”

“Come off it, Shepard.” She holds the exit open, as ready as anyone with the authority to kick out their CO, with a grin. “If it was I’d have kept it for myself.”

“You, Ms. Perfect?” Shepard smirks.

And Miranda rolls her eyes and lets the door almost close on her dress trail. Shepard whips it out of the way before the pinch, and the door locks.

Shepard switches on the main light once she locks herself in her own suite, but it’s too bright, so she tries the desk lamp, and it’s too dark, but when she tries the reading light, it’s just right, and the reading chair is right enough, but cold when she sits, so she shivers into it until her bare skin warms the seat. She debates getting back up but everyone except her knows she doesn’t drink. She can drink Kahje’s ocean before she thinks of alcohol.

She sets the datapad on the side table. She picks it back up.
It’s not that she’s against alcohol but there seems to be no point in numbing her awareness when people seem to always try and kill her. The last time she drank was a shot of death on Omega. Mordin had a few particulars to say and Zaeed assured revenge was best served with an extra bullet in the brain. She took both into consideration, and, in the end, despite her usual girl scout choices, she decided to choke the Batarian with the cookies instead of selling him out.

She puts the datapad down.

She had killed him because he tried to kill her. That’s justice. Letting him go would have killed more humans, even if he was arrested. Omega doesn’t care. Authorities are the criminals. For once, she thought like them, and knew she had to end it. If not her, no one, because they’d be dead already.

She picks the datapad up.

Choices. Choices make a person.

Shepard swipes it on. A list of video files pop up. Her finger hovers over the first one.

Miranda’s office.

She taps.

The window enlarges and the video plays from a corner camera of the room. Miranda stands near Illusive Man, who’s comfortable by the window full of stars.

“Sir, it is dangerous,” Miranda says, “I think you’re letting your emotions get the better of you.”

Before Roe Station? Miranda doesn’t know she already hear this conversation, but what she didn’t know is the long pause between words had more than silence. After Miranda says “but if I lose either of you…” she reaches for Jack’s arm and stops. She rescinds and sits in her lounge chair.

Jack says, “Is my suit ready?”

Miranda turns her chair, facing the stars. “You’ll find everything you need in the Armory locker, right next to Shepard’s.”

The second video continues after the first cuts out. It’s a time lapse of a bedroom at an odd angle, maybe from a table, or shelf, dated three years ago, working up to the current year. Jack walks in with women of all sorts, mostly human. She recognizes some but they all end up walking to the bar with their clothes off, or to the bathroom, and there’s little about the sex, but mainly the door, and the aftermath. Shepard gets the hints; he’s promiscuous. With all that power, who wouldn’t be? Shepard shifts in her seat, feeling the dress stick to her legs and wrinkle in annoying places. It’s none of her business who he’s slept with until the date marks her death, and the tempo slows. Miranda is there every day in the fastest frames, but mainly it’s Jack at the window, or Jack in a chair, or just standing, and reading. Then one day, a girl shows up. Time paces normally and Jack’s arguing with her, but she insists she’s there to play by unbuttoning her shirt. Jack stops her and kicks her out. He goes to the table with the secret camera and picks up a cigarette case. He starts to light the one he popped in his mouth, but he throws the lighter across the room, then the cigarette, then a chair, a vase—it shatters. He scrambles to pick up the pieces, and something white. He holds it in his hand. Shepard taps the screen and zooms in. The pixels enhance—it’s a note someone left in the dirt: “To new beginnings.”

Mom’s handwriting.
She taps.

Jack sits on his feet but she doesn’t see him cry. Video cuts and a new scene dates before Shepard helped Miranda save Oriana. New pants, no shirt now. He reads over a file. Shepard zooms—it’s Henry’s report—then zooms out.

“I’m out of time,” he mutters.

Jack backs into an empty bed and barely takes a seat before he hears something, and switches off the pad. Miranda enters and he’s at the window. They talk about Henry and then Miranda’s admission comes circle, and Shepard’s cheeks flare so hot the chair is too warm now to sit.

“Fuck her,” Miranda says.

Bet she regrets that, Shepard thinks, cheeks hotter.

Then she hears the profound.

“This is how you deal with it and two things can happen: (1) You don’t love her and just wanted to play with the shiny new toy, or (2) you do.”

Jack says, “And if I do?”

Shepard’s mouth dries. She hadn’t realized she left it open.

“Then you have your answer and a horrible, lifelong condition.”

“People like you and I can’t afford that. That’s not us—that’s not who I am.”

“Then you have my sympathy.”

“I don’t require it, Miranda.”

“You will because love cannot be controlled.”

When Miranda leaves, Jack stares where she left, then goes to the camera’s table, and pulls out a white piece of paper. The paper. He reads it over and over, eyes move left and right and left.

He snatches the datapad and flips it on.

“I’ll make time.”

The video cuts and the window blackens but Shepard stares on, unable to move in the moment of processing her evidence. A new warmth pushes aside the flames and despite thunder and lightning, elation drowns any doubt in herself, and in him. For his last cognitive moments, he wanted to be with her, and he was trying to enjoy the chance to be a tamer without a whip; a puppetmaster without strings; a man imprisoned by work escaping his cage. Henry saw that or else he wouldn’t have helped as much as he did. On the Calamity, he wanted her to hear Jack, really hear him, and she didn’t. Not all the way. She sympathized, but she was angry, and she looked over the one reason he was doing anything outside the vidcomm: her.

A brewing regret in the joy pulls her face into a cocktail of expressions, leading to a burst of sad laughter.

“I am so stupid!” she cackles, wiping tears off her wrinkled cheeks from her smile.
She growls with her exhale.

It’s not a ruse. It’s real. And as real as them stranded on a faux tropical island, separated by walls, and distrust, she stands to correct it. The communicating door glows fervently green. She widens her stride and calls out his name. There’s no answer and she doesn’t care. She opens it—

Broken lamps, tossed chairs, and shattered glass sinks her heart to the bottom of the sea.

“Jack!?” she cries out. She treads debris when Umino stands up from the bedside with a broom and dustpan. “Where is he?”

Umino sighs. “I don’t know, commander. He came to apologize for the mess, then ran off.”

“He did this?” She reexamines the holes where glass walls were.

The doorbell rings back at her place. She shuffles back to her suite toward the front entry.

“Jack,” she answers, slapping the door panel.

The door shifts open.

A gun barrel meets her.

Not Jack.
Chapter Summary

Henry cracks a joke, cracks a window, cracks a smile, then doesn't. Shepard's taken hostage by the unexpected villain, gets hit a few times, and sees double. Jack shoots himself twice.

Chapter Notes

HAPPEE NEU YEER, ALL!

Songs:

Beginning - "Damaged, Together" by Petri Alanko - Quantum Break
Middle - “The Prowler” by Daniel Pemberton - Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse
End - “Tessa” by Steve Jablonsky - Transformers: Age of Extinction

It’s the lawyer. Lieutenant James Castleberry eyes her over the sight. A single barrel pistol, Cerberus body, similar to the M-5 Phalanx, and well used. She speculates what happened to the authorities.

“Back,” he orders.

Shepard moves one foot behind at a time until she’s against a dresser.

Castleberry says, “Move and you die.”

Simple enough. She gauges weaknesses she recalls from their false alarm on the Citadel, but he moved as smooth as Anderson, with more snark than bite, but still a veteran. Whether he knew combat while a double agent for Cerberus, or as a traitor is unknown. But as a legalman, there is no combat. Wit is in. Alliance tactics are out, so it’ll be a free-for-all when she gets her hands on him. Too bad her nails are short; she’ll have to dig harder to pop his eyeballs out.

He switches on his blue omni-tool, then swipes toward her. Pain scorches her chest and groin. The armor turns to fire. Shepard wails. Her legs give out. The room blurs. Her eyes water. She tries to yell to make it stop. Make him stop. Stars burst in the blinding light. She writhes until she her body shocks itself into numbness, and everything’s white. Then, it stops, and euphoric relief rushes over, leaving the hidden wounds aching, and burning.

“Up,” he says.

She can’t feel her hands. Her mind has taken her out of her body as if trying to be somewhere else. She thinks hard to remember where she’s lying on the ground. She blinks until she sees anything but a blank wall. Her arms are crossed; she uncrosses them and presses her hand to the floor, feeling pressure, and eventually a throbbing. Castleberry waits, watching, until she’s on her feet.
again, and he commands her again.

“Forward. Do anything but what I say and I fry you again.”

“Where are we going?”

“The lab.”

“What’s down there?”

“Move.”

He flanks her with enough distance to save himself if she tried to lunge at him. Any closer and she could. Shepard walks by Jack’s room, hoping the door remains closed, and just like her hopes before, they break. Umino walks out with a pistol aimed.

“Drop the gun!” Umino barks.

Maybe he waved his hand, or only gave her a look, but Castleberry did something, and Umino pulls the trigger only to have it misfire, and Castleberry returns in kind. The bullet impacts her chest, and she falls with the grace of her now silent voice, and her dress fanning out from her body. Her eyes replicate the void, a common spiritual term of the Asari, now a cold reminder of everyone Shepard must avenge before she falls too.

That was her pistol, Shepard realizes, so who has the datapad?

“Move!” Castleberry shouts.

Shepard nears the lab’s entrance after several minutes of going over how Castleberry’s going to die with her bare hands. Even when she would have that chance, she’d have to act quickly to her armor, now a simple switch from normal to raging lava. Somehow the pain affects her nerves, all of them, and that’s reason to stay calm, and not piss him off. She’s first through the doors, but not first inside. Jack, Henry, Neon, and Miranda are lined up, where Shepard first heard the energy hyp-no-sense, along with the container. The hospital must still have the other one. A few lab crew lie dead where they were shot. The ocean churns darkness outside; sea life hiding or carried away by the storm.

“Janey!” Henry forgets the gun and jumps to meet her.

The fire burns hotter on fresh wounds. Shepard yells as unbelievable pain coats her in continuous flame. Each nerve crying to shrivel and die but can’t.

“Get back!” Jack says.

Shepard can only see blistering torment.

It subsides when Castleberry’s satisfied. Her blurred vision alters back and Jack’s gripping Henry’s arm.

“The hell did I say!” Castleberry yells.

Miranda crosses her arms and looks at Shepard. Henry too, with intense, bright eyes. It’s Jack who doesn’t look at all. He focuses ahead, beyond what anyone in the room sees. A jaw muscle moves tense under restraint, neck taut as he swallows.

Castleberry rolls his eyes and takes out ball bearing cuffs. Easily transportable handcuffs that
trigger when struck together. He makes Shepard put them on everyone. She hits a pair over Miranda and they extend rings around her wrists. Unbreakable and near-impossible to slip out of. Only a few security companies carry them.

“He hacked security,” Miranda says. “No one’s coming for us.”

“You’re right,” Castleberry says, moving by the container. “Now shut up.”

Shepard slaps cuffs on Jack next. His knuckles are bruised. She moves to Henry last.

“Not without a joke, then, lieutenant,” Henry insists.

“No,” Castleberry insists back and Shepard backs up from them, stopping between the gun and the captives.

Henry scoffs. “Whatever. You’ll love it. You types always do. Okay, okay. What’s the difference between a lawyer and a liar?” He waits for it, then leads with a smile. “Pronunciation.”

“Did the same person who came up with that also rig this with a curio deterrent?” Castleberry pets the container. “Pathetic. Really.”

“You can’t have it,” Henry says.

“Why not? You destroyed my way out so now I’m taking this one.”

Shepard turns to Henry. “What the hell is this about?”

Miranda answers, “He’s a whiny little bitch, that’s what.”

Shepard’s skin winces.

Castleberry forces a smirk and laughs off his frustration.

It doesn’t happen. Instead, he inspects the shell, passing the opportunity.

“My life is on the line, people,” Shepard reminds. “You could use less salt!”

“Or more,” Castleberry says. “That pie was so-so.”

“Says the man who peels plastic off to heat his food,” Miranda snarls.

“That’s right.” He knocks the container’s side. “On an O-3 salary for ten years. Ten!” He slaps it hard. “I thought it was due to limited openings. Far from it. It wasn’t the Alliance’s fault.” He points to Jack. “The Illusive Man didn’t want to overstep his control in the legal system. Wanted me under the radar but still of use and never paid compensation for the years I lost as I grew in experience but not rank.”

“So two paychecks for your double cross wasn’t enough?” Miranda changes posture. “What did you want? A sky lambo?”

“I am a lieutenant who eats microwave dinners!”

Exhausted from the bitching, Shepard rolls her eyes, then yells, “Everyone eats them! You’re not special!”

“Like you!? I wanted a life where I could be somebody! And then came the reports. As Illusive
Man’s only trusted lawyer, I got to see it all, and I saw my way out when we met Henry for the first time. Here. On Kahje.”

“You brought your lawyer and not me?” Miranda squints at Jack.

“You already had problems with your father, Miranda,” Jack assures. “I wasn’t going to squeeze lemons on a fresh wound.” He tilts his chin to Castleberry. “Stealing someone’s life isn’t what Henry is about, James. This is about continuing the life you have as the person you were meant to be, not what circumstances have turned you into.”

Castleberry glares. “Circumstances made by choices you committed. I was going to take the admiral’s son, a body no one wanted, but you shot it.”

“Why not just take the admiral? You had the chance.”

“Differing personality.”

Miranda scoffs. “You mean he was better than you.”

“Salty!” Shepard grits her teeth, feeling the heat come through the armor, but he doesn’t even flash the omnitool on.

“Sorry. I mean he could handle more responsibility than you.”

Oh my gawd, Lawson, you can’t just say things like that!

“You’re not fully wrong. My lack of understanding the fleet would have been noticed if I had kept the admiral and let Hannah rot for her crime. I needed his son. Chris Robertson was on his way to clearing his name and taking you down in the process.”

“And you were supposed to swoop in and take his place.”

Neon plays with his wrists; the cuffs look like they bother his scales.

Henry protests. “Whoa, man. Swooping is so bad for you.”

Neon nods. “Yes. Swooping is bad.”

Henry continues. “I’m not going to kill you and—and—and take just anyone’s body you want. Well, I’ll kill you, but I’m not bringing you back.”

Castleberry grins. “Yes.” He chuckles. “You will.”

Tingles shoot her hairs on end and blue light, her horror. The omnitool readies to attack. His hand hovers over the code.

“Or she dies,” he says. “I unlocked a deadman’s handle to the code in her armor. If I’m not reawakened to stop the code, she will burn alive in a smokeless pit.”

“You’d trust my father with this?” Shepards says.

“Unlike you, my trust is not misplaced. You let Illusive Man ride you and he breaks your heart numerous, and you keep wearing that armor.”

“He didn’t hack it.”
“But he didn’t tell you who I really was either. I was his best hacker. That’s why he brought me along to Kahje, in case shit hit the fan, and we needed an escape.”

“I needed you for your diplomacy skills and your intergalactic legal mastery.”

“No use kissing my ass now, Illusive Man. I have your girl, and soon…”

Castleberry moves the omnitool over the container and the digital panel glitches out. The container unlocks with the sound of water moving through pipes. It retracts the lid into itself and Shepard loses all connected thought as she can’t grasp a single belief in what she sees.

It’s Jack but twenty years ago, with brown hair, firmer skin, and the tendons, and veins in his hands are less pronounced. Every part she remembers is him. Everything. Everything except his blue eyes without the implants.

They’re really blue.

“I’ll be good looking at least.” He shrugs. “You know he didn’t even consider me for space duty with you. He needed friendly faces to get you on board, so he overlooked me, and gave you Kasumi Goto. A criminal over a lawyer.”

Shepard recalls when he gave her the camera footage of the courtroom but she can’t stop staring at the body to make a comeback.

“I don’t see the difference where I’m standing,” Henry zings.

Castleberry ignores him. “I am the best hacker. I took over Normandy transmissions so I could have this chance, to be who I was meant to.”

“No,” Shepard stares, not quite out of the trance, “that was Miranda.”

“She did her own thing. It helped me stay behind her veil.”

“You’re not—”

“No, commander.” He moves the omnitool toward her. “You’re not.”

“I guess I’ll die then cuz this is not gonna happen.” She jerks her head at young Jack.

“Then you’ll both die.” Castleberry pulls out a pistol from his uniform and Shepard’s standing between him and the real Jack before she knows she’s already made the leap. He cocks the slide for a crisp load and smirks behind the sight, right eye down the barrel, arm fully extended.

“All right,” Henry eases over with hands up. “All right. I’ll do it.”

“No, Henry!” Jack insists and jumps up beside him.

“Shut up for once!” He snaps back, elbowing Jack in the rib.

“You’ll enjoy this more than me,” Castleberry grins and rolls the pistol over to Henry.

It dangles on his finger from the trigger guard. When he takes the finger out of the guard and holds it by the barrel, Henry takes it. He checks it and doesn’t have to load.

“Kill me. If I’m not transferred, you choose to watch her suffer and hear—”
Jack snatches the gun with Henry’s hand still on the handle. He unloads ten rounds into Castleberry’s chest, raping the grin off his face, and replacing it with shock as he falls backward. His final heartbeat prompts the omnitool’s code. The blue interface flashes to red. Fire ignites and Shepard flails helplessly as she’s cooked alive.

“HENRY!” Jack roars.

Words muffle. Everything pounds and everything’s white and everything’s small and far and insignificant. She swims in lava with no water to turn it rock. Tears fail her and wet skin grieves. She screams for help. No words come. Endless vowels with pointless exclamations. If any part of her was still human, it’s burnt out, shut down, and dead. Only Cerberus parts remain and they endure, unable to initiate shock, a victim’s last peace. In no way can she thank her father and lover for letting her die to save his new body, to kill one lawyer, and to let the Collectors win. An inferno bursts over her and white becomes red. Red becomes blue. And blue drenches the fire and puts her out. She lies on the floor gulping for water like a fish on land. Jack takes Castleberry’s omni-tool and transfers it to his arm, leaving the body behind, then kneels down, bearing zero embarrassment to his naked form, and puts his hand on her chest. Her armor shifts. She moans, her skin fragile to touch. The armor pulls itself up Jack’s arm, crawling over him, shaping into a catsuit.

“Nice,” he says. “Pistol.” He holds his arm out to Jack, threatening blue with red.

Wait.

Two.

Shepard blinks the idiocy out. It feels like her brain gave up simple equations when it was about to die. One plus one equals three.

Two Jacks. One Henry, now tending to Miranda and Neon.

Silver Jack passes the gun over and Young Jack examines it, then turns off the blue.

“Good,” he says. “Thank you for my promotion.”

One pistol.

Two bullets.

One minus two equals Jack looking just as shocked as she when the other Jack fires. He staggers back. His knees weaken and muscles quit. He looks at the entry point and drops.

“NO!” Shepard yells, hoarse. She jumps, but it’s an aching, slow rise to leap, and the barrel faces her once more.

“NOOO!” Miranda’s biotics blaze alive and explode in a single push, flipping Young Jack off his feet and pinning him against the wall.

A wall of force-shoves Shepard back down and passes on like wind through a ghost. Henry steals the opportunity and grabs her. Pain shoots up her arm. He activates a nearby pillar. An emergency control panel that hangs on the side opens up and he whacks it. The window panels drop and the ocean collapses around them. The raging water tosses Young Jack forward, then pushes him back. He hits the framework, pinned against motion and metal until it pulls him forward again, and repeats the steps. Alarms sound. She can’t see Miranda, Neon, or the real Jack anymore. Henry grips Jack’s container and tries to pull Shepard over the rapids but the ocean overpowers, and quickly fills the lab.
Before his last full breath, he says, “Just ride the wave, sweetheart!” And he gulps air before foam smacks him in the face and he’s submerged.

Now her. The same pouring gush beating up Young Jack pushes against her. She lets the water take her back and thrusts off the container when the current pushes forward against Jack. Jack slams against the frame again but Shepard catches him and punches her entire body into him, then the ocean spits them out of the lab, and into the murk, with her hands around his neck.

If she had time to look around, there would be nothing to see, a vast arena with a sunken building shrinking in the liquid night. She squeezes hard until something crackles, and veins throb against her thumbs. She wants Castleberry to die but Jack stares back at her and in the quick second it throws her off, a pain strikes her head, and he pushes off to swim up. Which ever way is up.

Shepard swells with the need for air, and she rushes to the surface, but Jack snatches her foot, then her knee, then her waist, pulling her down, keeping her down, and she kicks him but it’s almost pointless, so she tries bigger muscles, and stomps him, then raises her knee higher, and stomps harder, harder, but he doesn’t let go, and the dire need for air displaces her need to kill. Her lungs stab, her ribs burn, her anger breathes for her as she reaches for his eyes, but he fights back. She yelps and giant bubbles rush up. Jack strangles her and his hands crush her tubes and cut off her blood. She wants to cough. She wants to kill him back. But the stabbing loss of air cripples her.

Lights blink in the distance; jellies caught in the storm, but then she remembers who this world belongs to.

Tentacles cut the dark and knock Jack one way, another way, then another. Back and forth, over and over, until they disappear, then come back with more lights in the distance. Henry, coatless, comes out from the blinking lights, and the hanar grapple Jack’s limbs. He kicks and knees to no avail; Henry pushes him down, down, deeper in the murk. She watches the violation leave Jack’s body, and can’t picture Castleberry’s end, but Jack’s, and the new life stolen from him.

She rushes toward the surface, kicking, propelling, desperate for breath, but there is no end. There is no surface. It’s too high. She chokes.

Hands turn her about. Neon inhales then takes off his breathing mask, and kisses her, pushing air into her mouth, down her throat, and into her lungs. His mouth is warm, the air is hot, and she’s glad it wasn’t Henry. He swims her to a chain bringing up the container and motions her to follow it up. He dives for survivors, leaving her with the rising chain, and the ocean void.

Shepard breaches the surface and gasps until the ache dulls, but it never leaves, and she thinks on the last image she saw of her dad, and his boots kicking away. The chain’s attached to a retrieval drone resembling a waterbug. Its antenna tip blinks red.

Blackened blue swells surround her. The Encompassing confines her to herself, a guppy in an ocean world with the island, a short distance, feeling miles away. She fixes on the beacon until something making its own waves approaches.

The same boat she ogled when they first arrived meets her. Loti Quis offers his hand over port side and she takes it, and drops into the bottom.

Miranda, hair wet and clothes glistening, greets her first. “Welcome aboard, commander.”

She sits, crouched on one boot with her back to Shepard, tending to a wounded party. Shepard recognizes the suit instantly. He lies on the deck, a lost hope regaining a sparkle in his eye when he looks over Miranda’s arm.
Not dead.

Shepard lunges. Jack groans on impact and she feels it too. Every aware muscle protests but she still holds him. The silver him. The real him. She leans back to make sure and blue implants look back. She grips his coat, scrutinizing the gunshot, and the impossibility of cloth saving him, unless he wore something underneath. It’s unbuttoned where taped wrappings cover his ribs. She feels a tag and turns the fabric over. A shiny, seamless label reads “Amanda Monday” in signature script.

“Mandy,” she translates.

Someone breaches the surface, gulping air, everyone turns, and Loti heaves Henry inside.

“Dad!” She croaks.

He clobbers her in a way a bear grapples a tree and it feels like he never wants to let go or he’ll fall.

She doesn’t stop him.

A marine iguana jumps in as well, but it’s Neon with the other Jack. He seems more suited for the ocean than any other Drell. And the strongest. He drops the body at Henry’s feet.

“Let’s hope it’s salvageable,” Henry says.

“And your lab,” Neon looks out at the island.

The boat rolls and lists as Loti takes them to the hospital. The breeze never felt as free before. She had been drowning forever, not just in the ocean, and only now is she truly breathing. Miranda’s hair whips back as turbulent as the waves. Henry has posted beside her, the clear night sky breaking behind them with the moon illuminating the passing clouds. Shepard guards Jack. Her Jack. She leans into him. Seaspray from the speeding boat kisses her face, but a kiss doesn’t hold her heart, and the density of company doesn’t hold back what she wants to say.

“When I saw—you died, and I saw you die again. When you died, I knew—I couldn’t—.” He hushes her into his arms, sacrificing comfort for another. Shepard plays with his jacket sleeve, listening to the quiet contemplation of the others until they brave to speak.

Henry confesses, “I’m sorry I couldn’t get into his head. He was so ardent to make this work.”

Loti raises his voice over the engine noise. “Or he had become so disconnected he was utterly evil, and could not be convinced of anything.

Neon, seated in the navigator’s chair, announces their approach. “We’re here.”

The clouds are far and the moon is bright when they dock. They arrive via wet side, where small boys dock in rows of piers. It didn’t take the staff long to fix up Jack, but Shepard hadn’t left his side the entire time. She could be making up for the times she’s walked away, filling the regret of her deeds copying what her father had done. But she’s here now. He’s here. And she doesn’t care how or why. She just needs to be by him. She can’t leave him. And she knows what that means.

“Would you like to see her?” Doctor Anake Driak stands in the doorway.

“See who?” Shepard asks.

Jack slips his hand into hers and the tingles feel just like the first time.
“How’s the avatar?” Henry asks, standing with Neon and Loti.

Jack signs himself out of the hospital as Jack Deer. Shepard overlooks it with a smirk. She’s been in this lobby too long to be comfortable, but Henry seems as relaxed here as at home. Doctors.

“Stable,” Loti says. “Quick thinking to drown it. Any other physical damage and we’d have had to start over.”

“Wouldn’t be a bad thing.” Henry finds a chair and table to confer at. “Take some time off, get a little sun, play with the kids at the pool.” He sits near the cafe. “A week worth spent.”

The resident at check-out views the digiwork. “Thank you, Mr. Deer, you are free to go.”

Jack and Jane approach Henry from behind.

“Your daughter still has a war to win,” Loti reminds him. “You can’t stall her forever.” He takes a cup of water and drinks it.

“Why not?” Henry frowns. “I’m her father.”

“You always will be.” Loti stares straight ahead.

“I just…” Henry leans over the table, drumming a finger. “…wish she would’ve said yes.”

Loti avoids her eyes. “Normandy won’t be here for another hour. You could—.”

“I’m in,” Shepard says.

Henry spins about and it takes him a moment to re-hear it in his head. “Shut the forward hatch!”

Shepard resists grinning. “You heard me.” When Henry looks like he’s about to dance, she adds to it. “But…BUT! We’re doing it my way. Without deception and all the other holes in your plan.”

“Yes!” He jumps arms up and knocks back his chair. “Umi was right about you. I’ll have her get our think tank ready!”

Jack squeezes her hand. Shepard turns and sees Doctor Driak carefully walking up.

Shepard tries to begin, “Henry…”

“Yup?” He beams.

He’s about to comm Umino when the air changes, and he feels it, and he looks at her, then the doctor. He freezes mid-comm, and his heart hides so it can’t hear, or see, or feel.

Shepard softens. “She tried to save me. But, uh…” The swelling redness in her dad’s eyes stings her own. “She’s gone, Dad.”

The doctor meets with him but she doubts he hears what she says.

Words drowned in disbelief.

Shepard was good at her job. She could snipe anything from any distance, and tonight, she killed her father’s smile.
Ex Post Facto

Chapter Summary

Jack and Jane go on a date and I'm sorry that doesn't rhyme.

Chapter Notes

Song: “Goodbye…Again” by Petri Alanko - Quantum Break

She has to make it count.

The Normandy docked at Henry’s island hours ago and no one has slept. Joker had railed on lawyers for fifteen minutes before Loti saved the crew and offered a tour, complete with drinks and paper umbrellas.

“Wait,” Joker sips his High Tide cocktail. “We can open carry legally here? Sweet!”

Shepard owes Loti his own drink.

Shepard owes Kahje.

Admiral Hackett already read her report. It took him two minutes to read, but an hour and a half for her to type. He called her while she had been stirring coffee, staring at the water drop logo on the bag. She inhaled deeply before answering, and passed the gauntlet of questions.

“Yes, sir,” she says. “Dr. Shepard’s body is unrecoverable.”

“My condolences on your loss,” he says. “But you know you don’t work for me anymore, right?”

“I just…thought the Alliance should know.”

“I appreciate it. Are you sure you don’t want to relay this to Hannah personally?”

She feigns grief. “I don’t think I can, sir.”

She hopes that counts enough.

Now that it’s four in the morning, she contemplates what to do because sleep is out. She used to wrestle two hours here and there, but at her rank and specialization, she was required eight, or it’s a disciplinary review. But who was she going to confess to? Alliance…in a way she’s happy ally with Cerberus now, though she doesn’t know what’ll happen when Henry stops the treatments for the head boss.

She finds two mugs in her hand but only remembers stirring the one, and could have sworn she was watching the moon set as the sky brightened to a steel blue. She hears the door open and it’s Jack in a white and gray ombre suit with a clothing bag draped over one arm. He lets himself in and lies
the bag flat on the bed.

Then, it dawns. “You took my dress to the cleaners and I asked you up here.”

“Did you forget?” Jack’s brow furrows. “Maybe you need Henry.”

Shepard declines. “Just really, really tired. Really.” She holds out the mug.

He takes it. “I think Henry needs you.”

“No.”

He sips. “Sounds absolute.” He finds the microwave and pops the mug in for a few, then tries sipping again. “I offered him a full service funeral at my expense. I think he’d take it if you talked to him.”

“I feel I’ve done enough right now. He needs time without me.”

Jack approaches the windows. “What do we do now?”

Shepard thinks on the sunrise; they have a few minutes. “How about that breakfast?”

He turns. It could be the subtle illumination from outside, or the desk lamp that makes him glow, but she keeps the brewing warmth in her chest to herself, although the grin on her face might have given it away.

“It’s a date,” he says.

They watch the sunrise on the balcony, sitting on the couch with the table dirtied with stacked plates, partially-drunk fruit juice, and crumbs. Shepard leans back with her bare feet propped on the table edge, her stomach heavy; Jack’s legs cross and he rests his heel in a free space next to his empty mug. It feels like seconds but their silence lasted until the pink rose sky became it’s true blue. Teal waves crash below every few heartbeats. Calm and rhythmic; a pleasant contrast to last night.

“He was going to be the new face of Cerberus,” she says as she folds her hands over her belly.

Jack stretches his arms across the couch and mumbles a grunt as he overcomes soreness. “I doubt he’d have survived my day-to-day.”

“If his original plan worked, what do you think would have happened?”

“At the cost of losing Cerberus, your family, and the SR-2, Castleberry would have taken on the life of entitlement, dropped of all charges in exchange for the defeat of terrorism. His father would have a changed son but the success would be short-lived with the Reaper threat hanging and unchecked.”

“And his back-up plan?”

“You’d have killed him.”

“I couldn’t before.”

“If you were in your element, you would have done what was necessary.”
She thinks back to the Citadel where she first met Castleberry, and how she wishes she punched him, but that would have just added to his case. The unsolved mystery of people in AJAG’s lobby could be answered by assuming Castleberry had a hand in it.

She processes aloud. “He must have done something when I forgot the dress in the elevator. That was the only chance he got.”

“You suppose that commotion was to get you to drop the bag in the first place?”

“That’s plausible for sure.”

Jack reaches for the juice glass, leaning over her lap to get it, and she finds him an inch closer, and her side much warmer.

“Well it’s done now,” he says and takes a swig. “We have his omni-tool and our prototype back. You want it?”

Her skin crawls and she wants an ice bath.

“I think I’m done,” she says.

It served its purpose but if it can be hacked, she’ll stick with conventional armor, how ever conventional her armor is loaded with tech. Jack will have to get a crew of people to develop a firewall or something to defend against digital warfare. Gone is the age of fists and clubs.

Jack rolls the drink around and stands. “This needs something.” He heads to the bar and glass clinks behind her as he works. “Want one?”

“No thanks.” She doesn’t have the taste for it.

Shepard rests her head on the back and looks up at the clear morning, taking in the sounds below, of people walking and talking. She might have heard Garrus laugh. Mordin might be helping fix the lab so he can tinker in it faster. Joker might be cruising in a hoverchair rental, or digging the built-in beaches. If Liara could have made it, she would have never kept still, and might have had to drag her all the way down the mountain after a two-day search. While many are enjoying the island, some feel the island is a cage, and their hearts loack away and tortured by the unfair end of violence.

If Cerberus saw what she sees, they wouldn’t put human interests first. She understands why but everyone loses someone. And she’ll never be able to bring back that boy’s mother, or Henry’s friend. Not consensually. Not naturally. Not like Jack. Not like…

Dr. Driak gives them space in the recovery room, alone with the container. The curtain flows around the cylinder, rippling from any current in the air. Light, liquid, and weightless to pull away, but fear turns it to immovable steel. Shepard doesn’t know how long she’s been holding her hand up. She should be fine. She’s seen her before yet everything pulses, and blood races. She had taken off her heels but the tile does nothing for her hot feet.

It’s no longer a sister or a stranger.

It’s her future and it’s taboo to look.

Another hand slides along hers. Jack. Slow, intent, easy. His fingers trace her tendons, and slide
between her fingers, bringing her hand to the fabric. They pull it down together.

Jack peers down. His face is darkened against the day. A glass of chilled water and faint body wash hangs over her shoulder. She accepts and Jack retreats his hand over her skin and sits back down with an iced Screwdriver.

Shepard sips very little and sets hers on the table. It was hard enough taking a shower; she used a hand towel mostly, and patted her skin gingerly. She can get over experiences like that quickly, but the blackness of the ocean, and the invisible burns all over—that’s not gonna heal soon.

Jack swallows and his neck waves behind the cartilage. The humidity builds with the sun and there’s already a sheen under his jaw, where the collar meets. Before she pulls her eyes back to the horizon, or at least the railing, he downs half and sets it down.

Shepard rests a forearm on her knee.

"I stopped drinking after my squadmate’s wake," she says. "It sort of just happened. Nobody really knows and I didn't go through some process, like alcoholism, or anything like that. I just...felt like it."

"Does it bother you that I drink?"

"No. Ash not being here. That bothers me. It was my call and I let her whole family suffer for it."

"The world suffers, Jane," he says without a beat. "They'll either become stronger for it or demand someone pay for their circumstance. Neither one is fun."

"Yeah."

He picks something from his jacket and offers her a metal case.

"What's this?"

"Open it."

"I think you're supposed to get on one knee first."

"Just open it, smartass." But he chuckles. She hasn't seen his teeth in a long while. They're straight and perfect but not so perfect he looks like he's selling something. Not too white to be unbelievable. Just perfect to her. He takes the drink again and hides the pearls behind the ice.

She opens it and remembers Bekenstein. It's a stocked cigarette case.

"You want me to take up smoking?"

"I kept that with me, thinking I was going to need it. Call me old-fashioned but I like the original tobacco. When we retrieved your father, I stopped. I thought it was because of the hypnotherapy."

He pauses. "Then Illium happened. I should’ve had six cigarettes that day." He points to the full case. "I just...didn't feel like it."

She closes it.

She tilts it and the diagonal shine shifts across the face.
“Are we doing the right thing?” she asks.

“There is no doubt in my mind,” he says. “But if you need some time with them, I’ll be here waiting.”

That’s right. He has been waiting. Waiting since before she was alive again.

“My crew will always be around and I don’t think it’s a good idea to leave you alone with Jack on the loose.” She hears it and resteps her phrase. “The other-other Jack. The one with—” She swooshes her hands over her body. “Not you. You know what I mean.”

He finishes his drink. “I do.”

He puts it down and wipes his mouth.

“Good,” she says. “So I think—”

He cradles her head and presses his lips ardently to hers until she aches for every part of him to meld with her soul, then he pulls back, mouth parted, and hungry.

“You should stay,” he breathes.

She kisses him back.
Sanctity

Chapter Summary

Jane discovers the unthinkable. A special crewmate appears.

Chapter Notes

Songs: "Sunshiny Milk" by Nostalghia; "I Get to Love You" by Ruelle

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She doesn’t know how but this time is different. It’s a desire to know every ounce of thought and inch of him. The balcony sets them high and far from everyone as a treasured privacy for leaders in their domain, but she wouldn’t have noticed even if Kahje drowned itself, and they were the lone survivors. Not with the breeze catching the mountain flora’s scent as it weaves with his musk, or the solidity of his lap against the back of her thighs when she rolls up her dress. In their brief respite before the dive, he runs his fingers along her outline, and her hair stands at attention. Shepard relishes in the tingle as her appetite for him grows, the sunlight casting over all the parts of him she needs to kiss. He draws his fingertips over her hand, writing lengths on her palm with kisses of invisible needles. They glide their hands through each other, a dance, slow and particular, but playful. How touch could be such a sensation, electric, but painless, aching, but a release. Their palms press together to trigger the charge, and bang! they create their own dimension from the heat in their mouths, and orange juice and vodka on their breath.

Before she knows it, he’s standing, walking backwards holding her hand, and taking her inside the open glass door. Her dress ripples in the air, then it’s forced another way when the door shuts, and the fabric settles about her feet, and more when Jack slips off the straps, guided by the curves of her neck, then shoulders, then breasts. She’s at the bed when Jack peels away his clothes and she drinks in the muscles working underneath his pale skin. Jack washes over her and her vibrant red locks hit the white cotton sea. His fingers drag along the bottom, churning the fire inside her to move her hips against him in a wave of heat that rocks against the shore. He pins her arms back, slides his fingers between hers, and melds. She’ll miss the feeling of his hands through her hair, if only briefly, but far too long. She aches below and he’s the only cure. Forever if she survives the tide of passion rushing over when he shifts himself into her, and he’s too flawless to abandon.

Memories flood in when she closes her eyes, and sees Jack on Gellix, and she shoots her eyes to the present, and grips harder.

Jack studies her when he pulls his lips away from hers, the vertical crease at his center brow deep and concerned.

“Are you with me?” he says between a whisper and a throaty mutter.

He’s been with her since her first breath in her second life and now in his. She’s seen him young but fell for his old. The silver hair, the ridges in his brow, and the subtle folds in his jowls. She memorized the crow’s feet on the rare occasion he smiles, and the dimples in his chin shaped like a
hook. And when he does smile with honest joy, his jaw traverses to his eyes with the ridges in his cheeks, if anyone’s so lucky to behold.

Instead of a word, she answers with a longing stare, a silent promise to never forget the way he looks at her with the day bathing them in light. She can’t read his mind but she doesn’t need to when he surrenders to the parallel need to fill her until they’re one. And when she finally says “yes” with a kiss, it’s the fervency behind the hard lock that drops him to his elbows, and his weight dissolves her into him. White sheets fall away as the day ages, but they grow younger with the indulgence of realizing they are allowed this idolization, and earned every moment hereafter.

It’s his savoring breath and the long exhale that wakes her. She squints through the dull pain of light chasing sleep away. Jack is propped against his elbow, rapt in the view. A part of her wishes to close her heavy eyes again and pass another dreamless nap, but most of her begs to be alive. Aware she’s whole, and her tiredness is not exhaustion. It’s bliss.

Jane presses the bridge of her nose. “What time is it?” Raspy, delirious. She needs water but her throat tightens when she thinks of it.

“Your liberty expired about two hours ago,” he says and her blood racing launches her forward like she heard the GQ alarm. “So you better report naked to your commanding officer right now, and apologize.”

“Oh geez.” She falls back.

Jack’s smile grows. “And make it up to him in the most scandalous way.”

“Get out of here,” she playfully smacks his chest with her backhand, then hides her eyes from the brightness, though not her smirk.

He unearths a throaty chuckle. “It’s about 1500.”

“I’ve been out that long?”

“You looked like you needed it.”

“You don’t?” She peeks over her forearm.

He musters to say something and backs from it, then he must’ve decided to go for it. “I didn’t sleep that night either.”

That answers many unthought questions; at the time she wasn’t curious enough to ask. She was scared. Easier to admit now that she’s overcome herself. Her worries aren’t with him anymore, or with her relationship with family. Hell, not even the war. Just the satisfaction that she’s with him tells her they’ll get through anything. Even the bittersweet to come.

Jane clings to him, a sudden flush of dread takes over, and she buries herself in him before he sees tears looming, though she’s too dehydrated they won’t fall.

“Jane,” he says, not expecting an answer. It’s not a start of a question, or a declaration. He says it like he’s become God, and the first thing he does is hang her name in the air like a star, the only star in his world.

Jack cradles her until his heartbeat coaxes her back to sleep. A quiet bleep wakes her an hour later,
and she moves Jack off her to the pillow, though slipping out of his arms proved a circus act. She frees herself and almost cheers at the accomplishment, but rushes to find clothes before answering the door.

She activates a partial opening, and the door swipes only one side.

Dr. Mordin Solus stands in the hall with labeled jars of fresh specimens, dated and timed, but she can’t let go that he’s wearing one of Henry’s floral shirts beneath his unfastened lab coat. She would’ve given him kudos if he attempted his sandals.

“Mordin!” She almost hugs him then thinks better of it.

“Shepard!” He observes and responds, “Tropical climate severely limits organics to minimal garments, I see.”

She looks down at Jack’s buttoned shirt that barely covers her legs.

She blocks and retaliates, “You’re wearing tourist linen.”

“I digress! Came by on behalf of Dr. Shepard. Fascinating man, although I doubt his doctrine is legitimate. Psychology too subjective to be real science.”

“Believe me, Mordin, I’ve been down that road with him.”

“Yes. Road filled with threats of indenting cranial structure. Nevertheless, here to help. Think Tank, as he called it, available whenever you’re ready.”

“Thanks, Mordin. How are you enjoying your stay?”


Just so he knows she’s still there. “Mordin.”

He shoots his attention back to her, smiles froggishly. “Will be southside if you need me.”

“And the rest of the crew?”

“Elsewhere. Haven’t noticed.”

“Henry?”

“Courtyard. Had noticed. Adjacent to beach path.” He grins and departs, the jar liquids swishing as he walks.

“I missed you, Mordin,” she says underbreath.

But he answers, calling back, “Happy to be here, Shepard!”

And with the clinks of experiments rounding the corner, he’s gone, but left behind is a covered platter she stubs her toe on.

Someone sleeps in her bed and he’s just right. Jane smiles to herself and brings the platter to the
kitchen. She could eat the fridge and still be starving, so the first thing she chooses is conquer the lingering problem. She confronts the cupboard and takes a tall glass. Turning on the faucet is easy; the sound is different. The pour is controlled, a pipe, unlike the infinity below her feet. She fills the glass and raises it. She sees her hand pressed against the other side. When she thinks of holding her breath she shakes her head and sets the glass down. Then she shakes her head for other reasons.

It’s stupid. She’s been conditioned. She’s been through it all. She’s survived worse. She’s died. She’s been resurrected. She’s shot at daily. So why is this so fucking hard!?

She hits the glass and knocks it empty into the sink. She turns over the platter lid and grilled fish, vegetables, and piped starch flirts with her hunger. They soon regret tempting the foodcubus and die, digesting at the bottom of an endless pit. She stares at the glass. Fuck it. And turns on the faucet. She cups her hands. Hands begin to shake. She yells in her head to move them to her mouth. Arms lift through honey in snow. Lips meet the water and she sips as fast as she drops it (she did it!), and wipes her hands dry.

It’s not the first time. It’s the second time. The first time she died and the second time threatened her to die. Not the faucet water, though she glowers at it. Space. Just like space; just like the ocean. Vast and far. A void too large when she’s alone. It’s why she keeps a crew. It’s not her job; it’s a need. At the twenty-year mark, she could retire. But with the war, she’ll likely not see fifteen. Or next year. That’s why this plan has to work.

Silver hair lies on his ivory pillow next to her empty mess. His leg stirs the sheets into the fray as he turns for comfort, and sighs.

It has to.

Because he’s so damned perfect with all his flaws. So maybe his side of the bed is made sometimes. That’s just the bed.

Jane sneaks back into it. Under his arm that she rests at her waist. She doesn’t know how long she admires the way he looks when he sleeps, but she knows how Jack lost track of time watching her. That he missed his chance to rest, but not the chance to watch, and know, and say without anyone to be witness:

“Holy shit I love you.”

Chapter End Notes

"Sunshiny Milk"

I woke up undressed
By the side of your bed
The ghost of my love by your miswired head
Sunshiny milk swallowed
Down to my throat
I’m sorry to say
But you know I must go

No nothing can stop me, no nothing is real
I bent all your kisses
Until they could feel
The sweat of my heart
Boiling down to my lungs
A danger to you with
My new shiny gun

Pow! Pow! I love you
Pow! Pow! It’s true
I’m fucked in the head
But you know I love you
I’d starve up my body
I’d break down my food
I’d carry a baby of music
And booze
She likes the sweat glittering across his chest, a medal awarded from above after an upstanding performance below. He’s warm and salty-sweet. The medal just as so. His neck more. Jack stirs under her pilgrimage of kisses. His satisfied grin unrolls to a candied smile and she looks away before she blushes, and she wipes her mouth.

“Good morning,” he says, throaty, rubbing his eye.

“I couldn’t wait,” she says.

Jane rests her head in the crook of his shoulder, a way-gate of protection, and protecting. And she draws her hand over his heart, guarding, and reading the evaluation of her work. It races but steadies as he becomes more fully awake.

“It isn’t morning, though,” he searches for a clock. “Right?”

“No, but we should go see Henry…”

“I decline responsibility. We unlock that door and my lie is over.”

“It’s a bit late. I picked up lunch.”

His pitch lifts when he teases. “Don’t kill my lie, Jane.”

“I ate it.”

He turns with a smirk. “Don’t do it.”

“Mordin stopped by.”

He drops his arms and slaps his legs. “You killed it.”

“He says they’re ready when we are.”

“You killed my lie.” He sighs. “Now I have to get dressed.”

“Oh no, don’t do that.”
“I have to, Jane.” He swings his feet over, ready to stand. “The lie.” He points to the floor. “Down there. Blood’s still hot.”

“At least shower. If Henry smells sex neither one of us will come back alive.”

“Your art in delaying the assured intrigues me, commander. I accept.” Jack kisses her forehead and she ushers him to the bathroom, though she wishes Miranda’s jacuzzi was available.

“You should see my voicemails.”

“I do see your voicemails. I didn’t want to mention it in our private meetings.”

“That’s it. You know too much. Gonna strangle you in the shower.”

A pang disturbs her mind’s recess.

Jack turns over the lever and adjusts the panel. Hot water pours vertical and he steps in.

He asks, “You coming?”

She wants to take it back but the joke stabs her wild with terrors. She must look stupid, frozen and naked, staring at the shower head, knowing every roach of a thought has no fact or reason. Then, Jack reaches for her hand, and they die away, the same fate suiting the lie she admits is hers too—

Jane takes it and she’s pulled in. Warm streams rush down and wet their skin until they shine. They kiss and she can still take a breath. He’s wet, and slippery.

—the lie that this is it.

This is their happy ending.

Like a proper commander of the SR-2 on leave, she avoids the truth as long as possible.

Kahje days last long, longer than night it seems, twice as long as Earth, more than the Citadel, though she hasn’t asked for official stats. And she won’t if it means she’ll learn her bed time. The muscle of her crew have cleaned up the main hall. Garrus shakes hands with some of the staff and notices Shepard scouting the aftermath with Jack. The room looks untouched but lives have been shaken. The heavy air weighs against her and she sees the cook’s stricken face, and the boy.

“Hey, Vakarian,” she smiles, meeting his hand as well.

“Shepard, thank the spirits,” he says. “You’ve been gone far too long.”

“It’s only been a few days.”

“Way too long. Have you seen what the Salarian is trying to do to those seashells?” He tsks, then turns to Jack. “The Illusive Man in the flesh.” He folds his arms. “‘The things they say.’”

“All nasty I hope,” Jack says, resting his hands at the small of his back—parade rest.

“Henry’s—” Garrus motions toward the courtyard.

Jane acknowledges without saying more and leaves him behind without knowing he’s taken Jack by the arm until she’s at the door. Jack smugly retorts something and Garrus unhands him, and
Jack walks unscathed.

“What’d he say to you?” she says.

“The usual brotherly love.” He straightens his sleeves.

“Threatened to beat you up?” She stands in the door sensor for him and a waft of humidity blows in.

“More than less.”

They step out and she’s sticky and in need of another shower. The flowing dress helps but as she walks her thighs rub and she doesn’t confess

“I’m sure he spoke for the entire crew.”

“Little do they know,” he says.

“Yeah,” she says.

Her hands fall to her sides and the path becomes longer, the courtyard far to walk. Henry sits on a bench with a Drell girl. Their feet dangle freely. His brown boots, her white sandals. She’s leaning against him, holding a cut flower and petting the petals, when she looks up.

“You’re wearing it!” she exclaims and runs to Shepard.

Jane looks down and realizes the necklace is still hung about her neck, weightless, and clearly unnoticeable, much like her when she cloaks. Somehow it remained on during her altercation. Maybe it’s not quite the basic jewelry.

“Of course I am.”

She beams up at her. “I knew you’d like it. I knew it!”

Henry stands as if he has a crick in his back, as if he’d been there a while.


“Am I happy or sad?” Jane asks.

“You’re alive,” he says, he faintly smiles.

“Hi, Dad,” she says before it’s lost to her to say it again, and before a second thought moves her straight to business, Henry hugs her, more tender than last, as if trying to hold onto a treasure someone will steal away, and he’ll never see again. She thinks of Umino and Kirsh and her hold grips him tighter. She thinks of Mom. Tighter still, then the release. And the hold lingers against her but she can breathe again, as if Dad could’ve drowned her again and she wouldn’t mind this time, as long as he stayed. Stayed until the end.

“This is Lilas.” Henry introduces the girl.

“Oh.” Jane smiles.

“Umino’s granddaughter.”

“Oh.” Jane’s mouth turns down.
Lilas looks up and without a beat grins. “My necklace looks so good on you. I should make one for your boyfriend!”

“You made this?” Jane holds it between her fingers.

“Yeah!”

Henry adds, “She dives for the materials even though sometimes she goes where she isn’t supposed to.”

Jane grins. “You remind me of a guardian angel I know. She saved my life once. I think you might have saved mine too.” She never believed in charms but any luck or prayer on the field was welcomed and appreciated.

Henry clears his throat. “Ready? To—uh—” He leads them back toward the building.

Jane bids Lilas well, and when she’s out of ear shot, she says, “You didn’t tell her.”

“I did, actually. Children here are brought up knowing they’ll meet their families again, but the way she took it. Kirsh…he’s not going to be okay.”

“Lilas’ response is not normal, then?”

“I don’t know. It could be denial or overconfidence. My old vocation really doesn’t leave me, does it?”

“No. No it doesn’t.” Jane backpeddles. “Are you holding up?”

Henry tries to answer, but instead forms a half-done nod and a grimaced smirk. Pain crinkles his eyes and before it seeps out, Jane changes the subject, which works all the way to the lab.

She smells the ocean first, then sees its marination on the equipment, and the floor. With most of the mess cleaned up already it’s hard to tell it was ever damaged, but the electronics should have been screwed, yet they work. As she passes, the sensors blink on screens as if all’s normal. Jane looks at Henry for answers and all he says is, “Hanar tech.” All she hears is “waterproof.” Things weren’t a loss at all, then. And the container’s intact. There’s just one missing.

Jack taps her arm. A rumble emits behind them. Medics roll in the second container and suddenly she hears the cadence of the sailor funerals she’s attended, the silent cries of mothers as the honor guard say the words, and place the flag in their trembling hands. She’s not dying again but if this doesn’t go the way she wants it, she might hand the folded flag early, but for which world would her flag be?

Alliance takes Earth children, colony kids, and Citadel rats, and all of them would fly Alliance before anything. All except her, who never felt like she belonged anywhere but the Alliance until they didn’t bother trying. Trying to get her. Trying to honor the fallen. Two years. She belonged to Alliance and the people who cared most don’t fly the colors. Illium, Kahje, Cerberus. Ex-Alliance or alien. She’ll be glad to go once this war is over, but she knows who needs to stay with her secrets. She knows who to trust.

Henry stands at the heads of the avatars. He doesn’t beckon. He watches. Waits for her to accept the moment.

With Jack, she approaches. She stops at the foot of his and he of hers. Present and future in the now and making. She feels the war already over yet it’s barely begun.
“Well,” she says, “at least I’m still ginger.”

Henry says, “So, your plan. My plan with the holes filled.”

“Yes…” Jane’s thoughts trail the air and cast over the soulless body. “You’ll have to convince everyone that’s ever known us that we are who we were. You can’t hypnotize everyone that knows us.” Henry nods and she moves on. “We’ll work around it.”

“You’ll still have to forget,” he notes. “Less emotional and mental strain on the nervous system. Don’t need that underlying the paramount stress of the Reapers.”

“People notice amnesia, especially what we’ve been through. We need a cover.”

“What kind were you ruminating?”

“Well, no one questions human simplicity. There are plenty of things Jack and I disagree on. Maybe use that to spark something.”

“A break-up!” Henry beams, then tries to downplay his glee, pursing his lips, furrowing his brow, and bobbling his head.

She’s a good commander. She continues. “Let them see, hear, whatever. No one will mention an ‘us’ again, not while we’re in the same room. Another thing, before we go under, I’m not abandoning my crew, or Mom. I don’t care how, but I will not be a colonist hermit, not without them.”

Henry scratches his hair. “Commands come and go, Janey. At some point—”

“Take it or I walk.”

He doesn’t meditate long, or whatever it is he does.

“Okay,” he says. “But I’ll need your pilot.”

“What can Joker do?”

“Just make sure I get a meeting with him soon. You trust your crew right? Then trust us.”

Their lives in the hands of Joker? Skeptical but not outlandish. Joker and Henry? Jane agrees and the rest is without saying, as they go over the process, like a medical pre-op assessment. It’s Henry’s most complex procedure and the treatment plan just as tedious as going over it a dozen times to make sure this is what they want. All of them. It has to be theirs. No afterthoughts or fleeting fancies. In the core, where the unexpected happens. Loving someone hard enough to save them from themselves. Swearing they’ll do anything and almost throwing up thinking about it because it’s scarier than dropping in a hot zone.

Henry’s words quiet when she excuses herself to recoup from nausea.

“Of course,” he says.

The cold pillar in the corner soothes her forehead, the throbs in her fingers rescind. The sickness that had washed over her rolls back to the pits it emerged and relief brings a sigh interrupted when a hand touches her back. Not at the small curve where Jack’s sent chills, but between the blades, where humans would sprout wings if they could, and also the most difficult part to stab. The cage of guarded organs, tough, resistant. It’s a stranger with a peace offering, and a gentle touch without
disturbing or arousing.

“I’m fine,” Jane says.

“Sure,” a gravelly voice says back.

Bright colors in her peripherals call her to look. Neon. He reassures her, a grin with the mouth that brought her out of the ocean grave.

“Snuck up on me,” Jane wipes her mouth.

She seeks the words but how does one recognize valor in fifty syllables or fewer?

“I wanted to say…” she swallows the faint taste of breakfasty lunch. “Thank you.”

Two words sufficiently received. He dips his brow toward her and leans against her pillar, watching Henry and Jack work out the last detail. He smells of the sea.

Neon talks so only she can hear. “We must carry the weight of our decisions, but that doesn’t mean we can’t share the burden. Henry is here for you. We are all here for you. You were never making this decision alone.”

“I could use someone like you on my team.”

“I am done with war though I see you are done too, but it will chase you if you do not finish it. You alone seem to be the beacon that calls ships to harbor. Who was it in your history? Henry called you someone I didn’t understand.”

“A nickname?”

“A general.” His eyes flicker. “One of the important ones. I digress, you shouldn’t worry so much about the process, or the destination, but the journey, the now. You have but a few moments left with him before you lose yourselves again.”

She rolls over and pins the pillar along her spine. “You owe my dad too?”

“I was one of his fares. A passenger.”

“Of course you were.”

“Many young warriors are in your father’s debt but I am not one. I simply enjoyed hearing his jokes and stayed around long enough to like him. Sometimes relationships build on simplicity without conditions.”

“I wish my life was simple.”

“Wishing grants the illusion of action.” He nudges her. “Stop wishing.”

Jane reflects and doesn’t know Neon had already left when she tries thanking him again. She shakes it off and returns to the men.

“Better?” Henry asks.

It only took the instant Jack had turned around to know what she is.

Not better.
She is Jack’s guiding light, his slackman for the cure. Once the indoctrination takes over, she'll be there for him every step, every fight, every agreement, and disagreement. She will not know it, but she is his, guarding him until the end. And she won't stop until it is done. The indoctrination will die and Jack will be free.

Not better.

There are fifty-one future colonists donated to the cause of human survival, from people with shaken hope, but strong faith. People that count on her to act.

Fifty-one lives able to begin fresh.

Fifty-one journeys into a new world.

Fifty-one purposes to live for and defend.

Maybe this is the simplicity she gets.

Not better.

“The best,” Jane says.

“Good,” he says, “because we’re ready to begin.”
She thought she could make it to the nearest bathroom. There are hundreds of rooms, a lobby, a courtyard, a flippin’ dozen lounges, and why of all times, is the only bathroom that’s unlocked at the end of the hall? She thought the bathrooms would still function with a little (a lot of) water damage, but no. Something about the pipes. Hold on. She can’t think and hurl at the same time. Chunks of fish, carrots, and stomach-churned vodka hit the toilet just in time.

“At least you always hit the target,” Jack says.

Quiet, you, she means to say. She moans instead. Vomit leftovers linger on her tongue. She spits tangy sour. The smell of partially-digested food sticks in her nose. She feels for the sensor and flushes her offering to the aluminum god.

Henry mutters, “She did this the night before bootcamp.”

He’s here too?

“Dad,” she groans.

“Who knows how long it’s going to be before I see you again, sweetheart. I’m just taking every minute in, even if it’s in the little girl’s room.”

Jane appreciates the cool tile through her thin fabric. They managed to get her to an lab space not affected by the flood. She hadn’t known this entire floor was the laboratory. There were stairs to the one room, but there’s a door and another hallway she hadn’t seen. And at the end of that long hall—the female head with two stalls, a decon station, emergency eyewash station, and the usuals. She had left the stall door open. No time to lock or care.

The cold wanes the sick away and if Henry wasn’t there, she’d be better already, but she stays, not wanting to face him, or what’s to follow. It’s so soon. She’s supposed to be trained for this but this is different. This is not life changing. It’s lives changing.

She did it. She killed the lie. Leave is over.

“Can you give us…?” Jack says no more as Henry steps out, and Jack steps in. It’s a compact stall. He kneels behind her and offers a hand napkin.
She glances back and reluctantly accepts. “Thanks.” She turns and they adjust themselves to lean against the divider. She straightens her legs out and Mr. Perfect doesn’t mind sitting in the squeaky muck. “Your new suit.”

“Tile’s clean enough,” he says.

She stares at their shoes. His feet are only slightly bigger than hers. She never noticed the stitching along the soft-squared toes before.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

Jack taps his shoe to hers, then she meets his eyes, and he slips his fingers between hers.

“I’m scared too,” he says.

Words never hurt more than these that broke the dam of swollen tears. They sting her eyes and she hides in the used napkin before she cracks, and falls into his shoulder.

It seems no one truly wants this day to end, as Henry tells them they can have another night, equivalent to one day on Earth, to be spent as one would on their last day alive. Aware. Maybe if she doesn’t blink, she can make it last.

They relax at the cafe by the beach. Waves creep across the sand, glittering light the Jack’s hand sweats in hers and he doesn’t let go when he sips at a glass of ice water. Sunlight glints along the condensation. Ice shifts in the glass and kisses his upper lip. He offers the drink but she kisses him instead and his mouth cools the warmth in hers.

“IT’S TRUE!”

They peel away and find the other Jack charging down the boardwalk.

Oh shit doesn’t cover it.

Jane shouts, “Jack!” And jumps to her feet. “Don’t do anything stupid!”

“No promises,” Jack mutters.


“I got this!” Jack stops her.

This is what helpless feels like, standing on the sidelines, watching the ultimate fight, and she can’t kick sand to give him an edge. He leaves himself open for Biotic Jack to chance another hit when she recovers her footing. Crack! Jack stumbles around, holding his jaw. A biotic burn reddens across the impact.

Biotic Jack jumps on him. They roll, duck hits, take hits, and end up in the water, slapping heads, kneeing guts, and then Biotic Jack wins with knee to groin, and pulls herself off him. After she smacks him.

Jack curls up with the hands between his legs.
“Did you need those, asshole?” Biotic Jack snaps. “You fucking fuck!” She smacks the water and splashes him.

Jane storms over. “Are you done!”

“How could you do this, Shepard!? After I warned you! I warned you!”

“He didn’t know about Pragia, Jack! He shut it down!”

“No shit! He’d be dead now if you hadn’t honored our deal!” She enflames her fist again and her eyes reflect the glow.

“Can the threats,” Jane says, standing in ankle deep tide.

Jack groans to stand but doesn’t recover quite fully.

“Don’t you see what he’s doing?”

“I do, Jack.”

“Fine. Don’t listen to me. Make your fucking mistakes. And when you realize he’s been controlling you the whole time, I’ll be there.”

Biotic Jack shoulder checks her on the way off the beach. Shepard inspects Jack’s face and the jaw is marked and his eyebrow is already swelling.

“She didn’t hit that hard,” she says.

“For a girl?” Jack huffs.

“Who leveled a prison.” She eases him to his glass of water. “She could have killed you. I mean why didn’t you wait until after the procedure?”

He rests the glass against his cheek. “She needed to let out her issues.” His eyes flicker back and forth.

“Is that really why?”

“I owe her for Teltin.”

Jack moseys her down the boardwalk underneath the awnings that relieve her pale skin.

“You really didn’t know.”

“I knew by the time it was too far gone. They lied about the kids and the treatments. I had to dig for the truth but then I received a transfer notice to Ascension.”

“Your people sent me a message about that.” She dusts off some sand stuck to his jacket.

“We treated survivors accordingly. That was the only thing I could do. And the kids…I owe them more than a simple, cathartic brawl.”

“If you just told Jack she wouldn’t have beaten you up!”

“She wouldn’t have listened. Trust me when I say I took care of it.”

“When they said the surviving doctors were force retired…”
“They’re dead.”

All those years ago, a lifetime for the young girl crying under a desk, and he still feels he needs to pay for what happened.

“Why?” Jane doesn’t mean to ask aloud.

“Why they’re dead?”

“No,” Jane figures she shouldn’t correct herself. “Why can’t you move on? You ended it. Jack ended it again.”

“Because…”

He stops at the corner of the resort building, just short of a small cafe serving afternoon cakes, salads. The coffee smells robust and fresh.

Like an undying habit, he fusses with his little finger. “That was the first day I questioned what was wrong with me.”

Another why pops up but she doesn’t say it. She doesn’t have to. After he collects more thoughts, he continues, quieter, as if everyone in the outdoor seating is trying to listen, but they don’t even look.

“I didn’t care about the subjects. Results mattered and damn the course to get them. I found out everything and only after I got the information from the survivors, I questioned myself. Something inside sickened me awake. Yes, I had the doctors killed. Yes, I gave the subjects treatment and new lives, but it wasn’t enough for me.” He hides his hands and looks out toward the ocean. “I shattered the mirror in my quarters the same night.”

“Jack, you don’t have to make up for the past, you just have to be better.”

“I’m trying to do both.”

They wander beyond the cafe, onto the forward courtyard, and around to the other side of the island. A flowery aroma catches in the breeze from the gardens, and she thinks of their new world together.

Jane says, “So, this future colony, you care what happens to them.”

“Enough to carry them with me into our next life,” he answers. “People put their faith in me to continue humanity’s legacy. They gave me their children. Henry and Hannah gave me you. I will not squander that.”

The afternoon notes a light golden tone over the island, signaling the coming dusk in a few hours.

Jack looks deep in introspection. Later, he says, “Nothing is simple, is it?” He might have smiled if his face didn’t hurt.

She thinks back on how far they’ve come and how wide they’ve spun solutions for near-infinite problems, and this one seems to be the most delicate, and complex. Some things aren’t simple but they can find it in others. It took a stranger for her to figure that out.

“This is our simple.”

She fishes for his hand and weaves their fingers until there’s no space between their palms.
Jane uses the rest of the daylight hours to spend with the crew. Jack gives her space, says he has some things to do, which makes it look like he’s avoiding another fight, but also distancing himself from her friends. A strategy that works in their favor but her heart aches more the longer he’s gone. She does her best to put on a smile, but she feels everyone notice regardless, and they’re too polite to mention it.

The females had settled by the pool and are already three drinks in. Jane, however, is happy she’s kept sober to not lose time to relativity. She saves face, lounging near the pool, not in it, and braving the sun using spf 30 though she wished her skin absorbed above 100. Mordin discouraged anything stronger as it would steal her credits to false advertising. Whatever that meant. She bought the bathing suit with Kasumi and had to buy hers too since she almost left invisible with it. Miranda flashes a smile at the drell bartender for another drink, and he snatches another glass, and almost spills the top shelf bottles just to get to Miranda’s choice vodka. Jane bets he’s never seen this much human chest lined across his counter before. And Jane’s view? Nothing but fit asses on tiny seats dipped in crystal liquid.

The biotic Jack says what’s on her mind, and probably every person who was lucky to witness their squad.

“Damn, ladies, we do look mighty fine.”

Jack walks into the pool with a black rashguard crop and matching bottom, then wades over to the drell. “Most of us.”

“Was that supposed to be directed at me?” Miranda scoffs.

She gives Miranda the finger. “Six shots of whatever hard Asari shit you got.”

“Hard and Asari are barely synonymous.”

“Shut your cheerleader hole. Or did you miss the part where I kicked your sugardaddy’s ass?”

“You what?”

“Knock it off, you two!” Jane wishes she was biotic herself. She could pull them out of the pool for time-out.

Tali, who had been quiet since the first round of drinks, and sits beside Kasumi, chimes in, “I saw it.”

Miranda snaps, “Saw what?”

“The fight. She pulled her punches.”

“You must be blind with that helmet on all the time. I didn’t pull anything. He had it comin’.”

“You know his girlfriend is right over there.”

The bickering is endless, as they argue over biotic prowess, then dramatically change to bouyancy based on chest size, then how many drinks it takes to make a quarian hiccup—it’s none, by the way; they hiccup as humans do—and despite the constant arms flailing and brows furrowing, Jane
looks upon her crew, and sees the smiles in between, the laughs the second before the snark, and the sun catch in their hair, their hood, their wet skin. Every moment counts and as long as they’re together, they can be oblivious. There’s joy in it. Peace.

“Oh, ladies!” Garrus calls out.

He’s across the pool, standing in white and dark blue civvies with his own squad: Zaeed and Grunt.

“You goin’ to the vigil in those bootlaces?”

Jack shouts back. “We got another hour, Garr-ass!”

“Well, in that case…” Garrus steps aside.

Grunt charges forward. “CANNONBALL!”

“No!” Miranda cries out.

Everyone but Jack tries to get away and the bartender can’t close his counter shutters fast enough. The Krogan ball touches down and water erupts with such force, a wave curls over Jane and crashes down on her and the chairs surrounding. She drips, the umbrellas drip, the bartender drips, and Garrus and Zaeed roar with laughter. Soaking wet and she hasn’t begun to shake, her heart remains steady, her breath calm. Jane wipes her face, though her soaked towel has lost its purpose, she smiles anyway.

At long last, peace.

Blink.

It’s bittersweet how she holds a lantern among hundreds of others with identical light. Their bioluminescence reminiscent of the hanar colors she saw in the water. The greenish-blue glow beneath a dark blue sky adorns the faces that have lost a friend, a wife, a mother. Kirsh and Lilas lead the crowd surrounding Henry as he speaks but she doesn’t listen. Neither do the children. It’s hard getting over the feeling that you’ll never see someone again when they were just here. Violence is fast, it’s rage, it’s ruthless, and it ends the same, with someone hurt, someone picking up the pieces, and someone spending a lifetime wondering why it happened to them.

Henry invites everyone to prayer and the island’s edge. Row upon row, the people rest their light and the current takes them away. When it’s Jane’s turn to place her lantern to the water, she stops, and looks out at all the lights spreading far across the Encompassing.

Stars on the surface, stars in the sky. A prayer for the souls separated without goodbye.

Maybe she had paid attention a little.

The drell say they’ll meet again across the sea. As the lanterns journey to the horizon, it seems true enough to believe.

Loti and Neon accompany Henry to the edge. Kirsh and Lilas stand estranged yet united as their eyes follow the steps, but Jane follows the change. Her father, in all her years knowing him, has never seen him cry. Tonight, a grown man sobs until he loses all strength in his legs, and his friends are there to steady him. More brothers than friends. Lilas catches her attention and waves at Jane. Someday that little girl will know what went on and she’ll wish she knew better.
When the sky is darkest and the island is brightest, the vigil empties, and the field along the courtyard awaits her long walk back to her room, though she denies it, and observes the stars a little longer before turning to go.

Jack stands before her in a white suit, shoes, and blanket.

Blink.

She’s never read the stars from Kahje. Even the constellations are alien and the moon’s craters make a bird, not a man, but the company grounds her to familiarity, and the world feels right anyway.

“What was your favorite time?” Jane says.

“I think it was when you hit me,” he says.

Pfft.

“Not that again.”

“But it’s true,” he says. “And I survived it. What about you?”

“I dunno. I have to think long and hard about this one—when I hit you! Duh.”

“Come on.” He laughs with a smile exemplifying a shared feeling.


Jack stares long enough for her heart to trip on its own beat.

“But every time I close my eyes, it just goes by faster.”

“Then don’t,” he says, then he gives up the space between, and kisses her again.

Blink.

She dreams until the serenity melts into horror and she jolts out of it, shouting “NO!” Her chest throbs with fear as Jack soothes her down.

“I’m here,” he says.

Then he plants his lips on her forehead and says it again. He holds her as they lie on her bed, still dressed, sheets tucked, and morning in the windows.

“I dreamt I already forgot you.” An ache in the pit of herself grows until it hurts everywhere. His solid form feels too good against her cheek that she tightens her hold to reassure her he’s real. “I don’t want you to go.”

“I know.”

Her head throbs and she’s overcome with nausea, the sick empty feeling one gets from hunger, or not enough sleep. Her body protests. It demands to stay. Jack rubs his eyes but they have a halo of
shadow, like he hadn’t slept at all.

“I wish…”

The words stick in her throat and Jack brings his forehead to hers.

“I wish…”

“I know,” he says. “Let’s get some breakfast.”

“Gawd…” She hides her face in his chest. Heat swells behind her eyes and she sobs until the despair expends her into a husk, void, and numb.

Jane and Jack stand in the lab with a small team of the best professionals she’s seen. And Henry’s most trusted. Mordin, Dr. Chakwas, Loti Quis, and Neon divide two exam tables squared with the avatar containers resting beside Henry. They hold datapads in one hand and confidence in their demeanor. Jane’s Cerberus BDUs weigh her down after wearing very little, and Jack has returned to his dark attire. Henry seems to have gotten as much sleep as Jack.

Mordin says, “Asked Dr. Chakwas here, commander. Helps to have a partner in these matters.”

Shepard walks to the nearest table.

She can see Jack on the Normandy, sitting on the edge, his shoes dangling, and Chakwas examining his bare chest.

“She’s safe, commander,” Dr. Chakwas says.

Jane brushes her fingers across the cushion. It’s cold. She grabs the edge and leans into it. It screeches over and when it hits the other table, she stops.

Henry hands over his datapad. “These are your affirmations. Read them over, let them become yours.”


She doesn’t remember what she read. She just wants it over so she can wake up next to him again. They lie down on each table, head-to-head with the future Jack and Janes, and the doctors take a side while the spiritual guides take the other. Henry’s between both. They dim the white of the room with their bodies. Silhouettes hovering, daunting. Her heart races. The pulse in her hand holding Jack’s pounds.

It pounds to the beat in the base speakers. They fly across the dance floor. Plumes of color burst from fists.

Loti prays. Peace for their souls during their journey to their new bodies. It becomes white noise when Henry begins to work, calmly speaking commands, reassuring her, casually re-inventing her state, and she’s suddenly relaxed, lying in a warm bath without being wet. He moves to Jack and does the same, then the words come.

“Is that your deepest desire?”

“Yes,” Jack says, then he shuts his eyes and breathes out, “Forgive me,” before Henry puts him
under, and moves back to her, asking the same.

“Is that your deepest desire?”

Relativity has a way of screwing with her. And little by little she forgets that relativity’s name is Henry. The first thing she forgets is why she said yes. The last thing she forgets is the pressure of Jack’s hand against hers, and the worry, and love, in his face before... before...

Chapter End Notes

"Losing Your Memory"

Call all your friends
Tell them I'm never coming back
'Cause this is the end
Pretend that you want it, don't react

The damage is done
The police are coming too slow now
I would have died
I would have loved you all my life

Where have you gone?
The beach is so cold in winter here
And where have I gone?
I wake in Montauk with you near

Remember the day
'Cause this is what dreams should always be
I just want to stay
I just want to keep this dream in me

Wake up, it's time, little girl, wake up
All the best of what we've done is yet to come
Wake up, it's time, little girl, wake up
Just remember who I am in the morning
Chapter Summary

Henry offs himself and Shepard wakes up as if everything's normal.

Chapter Notes

I needed an extra week to make sure I went with the right conclusions, since I'm winding down the story now. My puppy doesn't like it when my laptop replaces her on my lap, so I use the weekends to write when the family can help keep her occupied.

Sometimes you will never know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory. That Seuss author wrote that. Not at all a doctor, but Janey never thought of Henry as one either. He wishes he could exchange his degree for all those books that made her happy every night at 2030, until the ship’s clock dinged, and she awoke to “Taps, Taps. Lights out…” Then she’d plead for another story after someone found her roaming the p-ways. Military brats didn’t stay on warships, though all ships to him could be assessed as, but she sure loved them early on. A clear indicator, especially after her tour of the Einstein. Eyes like midnight on New Years. Nothing like the bedtime books.

Now someone else makes her happy and he’s not sure he should give her away. The secrets he keeps in his patient files will stay secret unless Illusive Man volunteers the information, if he hasn’t already. Does she want to know about the mole? Bah. He knew he should’ve tattooed the avatar’s butt.

After all the speaking, carrying key tones in the words, and triggering nerves to stimulate the subconscious, the airy hum unnerves him, a prod in his spine he can’t shake off. No shadow rests in the corners of anything with all the new lights in; brighter than Hannah’s uniform the last he saw, and colder than her glare.

He’ll have to tell her it’s done.

Henry stands over his daughter, observing the closed eyes darting through thoughts, flashes of memories as if dreaming. Except it’s a reset. Back to factory settings with the basic hardware and software intact. He hasn’t lost count how many times he’s done this because he’s only done it once. And this once stiffens his blood so cold only fear could reactivate him.

Subject Jack Harper has already stopped dreaming and lies still. Henry eyes him over his EEG omni-tool scans. His serene mug vacant of lecherous reveries of Jane. She’ll never stop being Henry’s little girl, even a little girl commanding a flying village of highly-qualified killers. Fruit
grown on a vine do not leave and not all are sweet.

A pulse beeps at Henry. His omni-tool vibes an alert. He pinches it out and it changes to the exam table’s reader. Inducing REM cycle for longer than twenty minutes is normal. But it’s only been ten and Jane’s busy.

“What are you fighting?” Henry mutters.

Jane’s fist clenches and releases. The forefinger twitches seconds later. Henry stops noticing when he changes the filter to check hormones. Someone beats a drum so hard he feels the shockwave.

“Oh shit,”

“What’s wrong?”

It jump drives his soul out and back. “Oh, shit!” He grabs at his coat, whatever good that does.

Henry waves off Miranda but she storms into the lab. “I told you about the Lazarus Project and you keep this from me!? No wonder Shepard—”

“Something’s wrong!” Henry interrupts, “so just shut it while I fix this, all right?”

Miranda unfolds her accusatory stance. “What’s going on?”

Henry swipes the scans and sends a copy to her wrist.

“Brain chemicals are overriding my alterations,” he says. “PEA is compensating and releasing more norepinephrine and dopamine.”

Miranda nods at the charts but she looks just like he did seconds before he knew.

“Meaning?”

He answers, “Her body is trying to lock onto Illusive Man as her mate!”

Miranda says, “She doesn’t want to forget.” She walks around Illusive Man and leans over him. “These EEG scans are showing she’s lucid? Is she controlling the dreams now?”

“Trying. And I am trying an alternative.”

“No! Shepard is a part of my creation as she is yours! I know her in and out. If you force her memory to erase she will not be herself anymore!”

“What do you suggest?”

“Something else. Something she’ll believe!”

Henry slams his hands down. The table shakes. “She needs to forget him!” Jack’s wrinkled face. The creases around his eyes. The scar on his chin. The gray in his hair. The years of war scarred inside. Years of being alone.

Henry steps back. “Not him.”

Miranda examines all the faces, then back to him. “Explain.”

“Me. It’s believable. She’s accepted it before. She’ll accept again.” He continues, more convinced
with himself the more he explains it aloud. “All Jane needs to forget is my standing with hypnosis and her volunteerism for soul transfer. That’s it. However it will change the relationship between her and Jack.”

She raps her fingers on her arm. “It’s only temporary, right?”

“Temporary. I can do this but you’ll have to trust me Ms. Lawson. I understand that’s a tall order.”

She stands straight.

“Do it.”

Henry stands over Jane again and talks her back into deep cycle until EEG shows slow waves across the reader, and her heart rate lowering. Then begins the real work: losing her again.

“Life without a father is picking up the pieces of a lost childhood.”

Miranda says, “Don’t I know it.”

Shepard strains to catch her memories being pulled away in the waves, grabbing to any to stay afloat until she finds herself tossed onto a flat expanse of nothing. Nothing. Nothing but clicking heels then nothing at all until the laughter.

Her laughter.

“Some help?” A hand extends, young and pale, freckles reaching up the arm, and across her face.

Her face.

She takes it and she jolts awake in her room on the Normandy with no one around but her alarm, waking her with the sounds of waves churning on a beach. Too early to be alive and no messages. She should feel relieved, but something’s off. Something she’s supposed to know. She gets up and checks her omni-tool. Two dossiers remain and her mission to retrieve the IFF taunts her. Maybe that’s the scratch she itches today.

“Jok—” she tries to say but voice meets a dry and sore cavern. She reaches for a glass of water she thought she saw by the clock—she grabs air. She attempts to clear her throat, but it stings. “Joker,” she wheezes.

“Heyyyyy,” he comms. “How you doin’?”

Joker being his usual unusual self.

“Fine?” She covers up her cough when she gets to the sink. She switches on the water and cups a hand underneath the stream. “I need you to get us to Illium.”

“Roger that, commander. One exotic port visit.”

Does Dr. Chakwas have cold syrup?
Shepard gulps a mouthful of cool water and leaves the bathroom, facing the aquarium. She stops in the glow, staring.

It stares back.

The empty blue void, devoid of darkness, as if it all ran in to her. Lurking, watching, standing by until she moves, then crashes through the glass, and swarms her, fills her room until there’s no air left to gasp for. The hum throbs above the ship’s innards, suffocating her holo-clock’s music--beating against its beat, offsetting the rhythm, and turning her nerves until the tips twitch, itch, and snap.

“Joker!” Shepard yells.

She forgets to activate the comms and slaps her ear. Her hand trembles. She clenches it to hold it still. The itch that can’t be scratched.

“JOKER!”

“Ow!” Joker whines.

“There’s something wrong with my aquarium!”

“EDI checked the systems. There’s nothing wrong with it.”

“No I’m looking at it. Something is definitely wrong.”

“What could be—there’s nothing in it!”

The refractions of light beams curve into a long grin.

It stares back…

Medical is chillier with her sleeves rolled up. Shepard’s uniform barely holds off the air conditioning and the cold bed she sits on. She unbuttons the roll strap by her elbow and unfolds the sleeve down when Chakwas tells her to hold still, then shoves a stick in her mouth, and inspects her innards so close she could bite the doc’s nose.

“You’re fine, commander,” Dr. Chakwas says as she removes the tongue depressor. “No inflammation just mildly irritated. If it is a cold, you could rest a few days, but I think you slept with your mouth open again.”

“I don’t snore,” she says, scratching at her wrists. “Not that I…EDI, do I snore?” She stops before she breaks skin and unbuttons the other sleeve.

EDI’s voice fills the room, “Not that I recall. I have over 200 hours recorded of the captain’s cabin during your sleep periods. Would you like me to analyze them?”

“No, EDI, it’s fine.” She buttons the left cuff, skin prickling. “See, doc? I don’t snore.” Then the right, skin tickling.

“Or maybe you were just screaming for too long.”

“Hey, no cold, no snore. Thanks, doc.” Shepard jumps off the bed.

Chakwas stops her, palm in Shepard’s chest. “One thing, commander, if I may.”
“It is common to undergo so much stress that the mental becomes the physical. You’ve recently experienced something quite substantial and if it’s affecting your physical health, I may have to give you SIQ.”

“There’s not a lot there, doctor.”

“I hardly call what happened with you and the Illusive Man insubstantial.”

“Oh look at that.” She checks her freckled hand watch. “Captain is needed on the bridge.”

She offers Shepard her second chair. “How are you feeling?”

Chakwas’ desk is dust free and neat, though if it wasn’t for her omni-tool, it’d be covered in stacks of how everyone feels. And if Shepard guessed, she had a tower just for her. The Tower of Fine, compiled of bullet wounds, claw marks, betrayals, illnesses, and bad dreams. What does she not feel is shorter.

“Happy,” she says.

“Really.”

She defends the bluff. “Happy I knew the truth and I’m now done with it.”

“And what is the truth?”

It’s fuzzy. Shepard can see his eyes but the rest is a mist. She squints at the glint across the desk surface.

“Take your time.” Chakwas finds a place to lean and folds her arms.

Fuzzy mist clears the longer she thinks about it. Miranda had warned her and Shepard heard, but didn’t listen. The Illusive Man, Jack, saw Shepard as he sees everyone else.

“Convenient,” she says.

Chakwas recrosses her legs, without a nod, or a look.

“Yesterday, I had to hear from my own mother that the Alliance found Dr. Henry Shepard’s body on Kahje, of all places.”

“You mean your father.”

“Yeah. Why Kahje, though?”

“I hear it’s a nice retreat.”

“Maybe we’ll visit after the war.”

“Maybe.” She shifts her seat. “Tell me about The Illusive Man.”

“We broke up. What more is there?”

“A sore throat. Tell me about him. You two must have been serious.”

“We were.”

“What happened?”
“I—” She knows she’s supposed to feel angry, upset, but when she puts him at the front of all thoughts, she’s just confused. “I don’t know.”

A message pings on her omni-tool and her cheeks flush hot.

“Who’s that?” Chakwas asks.

“Yeoman Chambers,” Shepard says. “I’m sorry. I gotta take this up top.”

“Certainly, commander.” She twirls around to her computer. “Take care of yourself.”

Shepard exits the elevator at CIC and marches toward the tech labs.

“No messages for you, commander.”

Thanks, yeoman.

She passes up Mordin and his trilling of the periodic table turned iambic pentameter and locks herself in the debriefing room. She pops the message up again and enters the privacy code to the conference comm. It unlocks and the floor gives way to her platform. Watching it split thrums her heart until all she hears is her breathing, and the hum of the machine. The more she does this the more she needs it. A want. A rush. The rev on the comms coming online and the whirs of the software loading, knowing every inch of her is being scanned, square inch by curvaceous square inch. And she knows he’s looking.

Then the ecstasy. The room goes black. The anticipation. Eager nibbles her tenderest regions. The screen flashes on and he’s standing there, lighting another cigarette, his glass refilled—no ice—staring her down, his shoulders even with hers, pelvis leaning slight, and suit cascading down that fit silhouette. So hot she forgets to take a breath. She forgets again when he speaks.

“Is there something you need?”

“Don’t play coy.”

“I thought I made it clear after Captain Shepard’s case closed that we were closed. This cannot continue while the Reapers are still a threat.”

“They’re always a threat.”

“We need to stay focused on the tasks that affect our future.”

“Hey, I got Henry’s confession before he ran off again and died. Is that not focused enough, given what we did in between?”

“Our roles in the war are too paramount to cater to emotions. We’re not doing this.”

A thermal clip plummets into her stomach and sets the acid on fire. Her ears burn and she’s only standing still because he’s not really there. A waste to punch air.

She raises her hand to kill the channel.


He doesn’t conceal his lascivious inspection of her body and she doesn’t leave without turning her hips and strutting off the platform before he cuts the channel himself.
Their heads drop on the pillows scattered along the floor and she doesn’t care half her bare ass is off the rug and the other chilling against the tile. The Illusive Man lies next to her, waning his pants back to a normal rhythm, steady, and filled with uncountable shared breaths when she was on top, and clamping her mouth to his.

He reaches up and over the bed side table for his cigarette case but Shepard’s already standing and drops it to him. He sits on the bed and lights up, watching her dress.

“Already?” he says between draws.

“Gotta focus on the tasks.” She snaps her bra together.

Smoke plumes about him. “This is the last time, Shepard.”

“You said that on floor 165.” On go the undies.

“No, that was your turn. This is mine.”

“We’ll see after I get this drell.”

“So the assassin first?”

“Yeah.” She takes in her spoils of war: one naked Cerberus boss. “Never met a drell before.”
Chapter Summary

Shepard processes the rest of her mission in short strides, and deals with her self-destructive nature.

Chapter Notes

Figured you’re smart for me not to post "blink" in the chapters every time a scene changes. Less action, more monologue, and the Paragon core slowly being tainted by a Renegade streak.

Shepard had dodged the usual inquiries of her location when she returned to the Normandy with containers of fish, which Yeoman Chambers happily managed so she could grab her squad and go. Cinderella liberty was never fun but they had to squeeze in any freedom they could before she embraced her universal duty.

Heh. Doo-dy.

Small things to giggle at seemed to cover the unsettling feeling that she was just going through motions. A list of tasks that barely feel real but when she touches her skin, she exists. A haze of sequences like in a day dream, when you can’t focus on a single part because you just want to skip to the end. A happy one. Chakwas never prescribed her meds but if she had it’d feel like this. Maybe she should back off the medi-gel or stop getting shot at. Even if there weren’t Reapers there was always something trying to start a war. So yeah. She’ll always be in someone’s targeting VI.

Miranda and Mordin sign out at the armory and once they’re on Illium with her, they meet a fun little Asari named Seryna who drives them toward the end of someone’s life at Dantius Towers. Shepard asks questions for a quick briefing but Miranda remains quiet, and, frighteningly, Mordin as well. It seems only in his personal habitat does he talk to himself. Or it’s Miranda’s bitchy aura again.

“Anything else?” Seryna says. “This might be your last chance.”

“You’re still meeting with him!” Miranda shouts.

Point goes to bitchy aura. Mordin folds his hands in his lap and looks out the window.

“Or tell me I’m wrong.” She crosses a leg.

Shepard grins. “You’re wrong.”

“Unbelievable.” Miranda shoves her back into the seat. Stripes of light from headlights cast over her.

“I don’t know what it is,” Shepard says. “I can’t explain it.”
“I can.”

Shepard waves her off. “Get off your high heels. It’s nothing serious.”

Miranda pokes her finger at her. “Sex with my boss—OUR boss is serious.”

“You don’t know what follows that word ‘serious’. Seriously…”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“Fun.”

“I just want to know you’ll end it!”

“Seriously hot.”

“What do you know!” Seryna says. “We’re here!”

Her skycar opens its doors and the squad falls out ready and armed.

“Good luck!”

Seryna probably cranked on the tunes after she sped out.

“Shepard, I can’t count how many casual liaisons he’s had.” Miranda checks her pistol. “But I can count how many times he’s cared for them: ze-ro.”

Mordin eyeballs something in the distance which Shepard barely notices in her peripherals.

“Problem incoming,” he says.

A mech’s voice calls out, “Excuse me.”

“I’m still wondering how you found out.”

“Whatever. Your personal affairs are only my concern if they affect the mission. Clearly you got it covered.”

Shepard whips about her pistol and aims along her midline. Miranda copies and fires Overload tech then drops the closing dog mech, and Shepard takes down the others. Mordin doesn’t wait long by the door frame. Shattered glass crunches beneath their feet and a long trek upward ends when Nessana blinks, and she lies dead, meeting her sister in the afterlife.

Her reaper stands in front of her, praying in golden light, unmoving when the sun stopped for him, and warmed his back.

“Commander Shepard,” he says. “I know your name. Your father was a kind man.”

Metallic taste surfaces on her tongue. She swallows.

“You knew him?” she says.

“Enough. He would shepherd me to and from contracts when I was young, ensure other assassins would survive the transit, occasionally the contract itself. He lived up to his name.”

“He played bodyguard to assassins?”
“An uncommon act from a human, though not uncommon with Hanar. We were treated well. Your father took on his own contract with the Hanar. I like to think he saved many lives in doing so, mine included.”

She scoffs. “Well, it didn’t turn out well for him.”

“That I am also aware. The measure of an individual can be difficult to discern by actions alone. Take you for instance.”

She almost stopped listening; the sun never stopped for her.

“Well,” he says, “here I am.”

On the Normandy, he elaborates his motives, eases her concerns over his blood disease, and takes her on a trippy ride through his eyes on Kahje. There’s something entrancing the way he describes the people, the water. They feel vibrant to her. A club scene in the night on the Citadel.

“They fly over the black of the sea bed, like birds plumed with the light of heaven.”

Flourescent. Thane blinks at her, down and across.

Shepard stands. She bumps the table and holds back the hiss from the sharp pain of the corner.

She says, “I should check on my fish.”

Even the poor excuse renders a polite response. She leaves pinker than her last sunburn and thankful he doesn’t watch, or he does. The reflections in the windows. That’s what she would’ve done.

Samara accepted after a long journey with bullets and nasty crap in the air. Shepard had wished she’d gotten her sooner. When she found Samara meditating in the observation lounge, she asked if she could try it too.

“The goal is to clear your mind,” Samara begins.

Shepard sits in her favorite plush pajamas, knee almost touching Samara’s, facing the stars.

“Of all unpleasantness.”

She tells Shepard to count and use her breathing to focus on the void.


In. Out. In.

Shots fire. She flinches.

“Five…”


A hand touches hers and Shepard opens her eyes to see Samara break her glow.

“Are you with me, commander?”
Are you with me?

Shepard inspects the room but no one else is there.

“You vanished momentarily,”

Shepard notices the remnants of triangular pieces fade from her skin. She rubs her arms as if the unease could be massaged away but it sticks, and her racing heartbeat refuses to settle.

“Try again tomorrow?” Shepard says finally.

Samara bows and Shepard keeps her word. She tried the next night after saving Thane’s son, and the next after killing Samara’s daughter. Parents trying to do the right thing in strange ways. It felt good to see Bailey again. She has a novice pattern going with him involved in family matters. First hers, then Thane. Bailey could ask for a favor in return, maybe see to his own affairs with his kid. But he’s such a big man about it. At least he wants to fix things. And Bailey was sorry to lose Henry after Hannah’s trial. Slipped through his fingers, he said. She said nothing, on account of wanting to say every slimy insult about Henry, and spared Bailey’s fatherly side. Afterward, though. Right before they sailed to the Hawking Eta cluster, after Tali’s trial. They still had a couple hours to spare, mainly because she told Joker to take it slow and sure. And she wanted Jacob to reclean the weapons after she did on her personal time—sleep has been non-existent. Her new sniper rifle isn’t the Widow, but it works. And she doesn’t have to do an extra arm and shoulder day in the hangar bay. Or in cargo with Grunt.

“You quit this rep and your arms will shrivel to Salarian meat,” Shepard growls her best Grunt impersonation.

Tali swivels her seat, sipping a stirred cocktail at the bar. Kasumi’s fluttering her foot as she reads a book on the couch, lying comfortably in her hooded catsuit. Shepard leans over the counter, seated next to Tali, no intention of using her stool as a toy. Just sit. Sit and fester, holding a full glass of blue drink.

“What was that?” Tali says.

“It’s nothing,” she answers. “Talking to myself.”

“Oh.” Her fingers walk across the counter, sentient with alcohol, then point to her vodka and blue raspberry mix. “Are you gonna have that?”

She’s been sitting here for a while, sober. Shepard stares at it. The blue leaves her mouth dry and the longer she looks, the less appealing it is.


One with a lot less vodka.

Shepard sits back down with a happy (happier) Tali and her blue Shepard’s Dextrolight, while in Shepard’s five-clawed hand awaits a darker concoction, a subtle violet resting at the bottom of a cylinder, and 4/5ths bright red.

“What’s that one called?” Tali says after a long sip.

After a moment of twisting the glass, catching her faint sheen of her reflection, she says, “Her Demise.”
She slams a quarter of it down. It’s sweet with tang and a heavy kick that catches up but doesn’t rattle her head. Smooth. Too smooth. And dangerous.

Tali asks, “Do you like it?”

Shepard exhales a long relief after staring at her new oblivious fish in their tank. In a sense, she’s one of them, circling without end, people pausing to admire; to judge. She could stop but she’d turn belly up because she’s not the typical pretty fish. She has scars but armor, gentle but a sharp bite. When people fear her they try to kill her or control her, and they fail every time.

He can’t leash a shark. Maybe that’s why he’s trying so hard to break away. He puts his women in separate bowls but gave Shepard his pool. Deliberate favoritism possibly to get her to work more loyally. And she can smell his wounds. A damaged man sworn to a cause she almost admires wholly. She remembers Cerberus is not kind. When she helped Liara get the Shadow Broker, the spectre mentioned their political assassinations, though Shepard hadn’t forgot those cases, she dismissed the claims because the present mattered more. The spectre could also smell the sex on her, and knew of her romps with Illusive Man.

“You fuck him to feel power,” she had said. “You want control for once because you’re just the gun people shoot. Don’t you judge me…”

Shadow Broker had tipped her off, they later discovered before killing him, to psychologically wound her. No one but her dead father had done that. A void she fills with an insatiable appetite for older men. She knows it and it hasn’t affected her work before.

Before he looked at her that way. He must’ve done it on purpose because it drove her mad. Throughout the first mission on the Roe Station all the way to dumping off Dr. Henry-friggin-Shepard with the Alliance to sign his confession and his life away. He teased her and flirted until it was all she thought about. The mission had been straightforward. They got Henry, he had the evidence on him, and boobs on your uncle, as Joker purposefully butchered the saying. Turns out Hannah just froze some eggs as insurance and was waiting out the war to use them or not, outcome-dependent. Harmless, but her captain that dimed her out had a crush on her, and didn’t want her to go that route, especially when Henry was involved. Got him jealous. She can see that. Her mom is the most beautiful woman in the world.

The most beautiful woman chose a dipshit and almost had to pay for his crimes twice. Mom said it was his idea to go to Cerberus. Henry found it easier to steal her eggs from Cerberus than if she used proper Alliance channels. He confessed he was going to sell them off to the hanar to pay off some debts. New assassins with Shepard blood. And human recruits? Perhaps the Hanar wouldn’t be able to resist. Henry seemed to know more about them than her own daughter. His own ex-wife.

She has Illusive Man to thank for distracting her. What better way to get deeply involved into her work than sleeping with the man who holds her strings. She likes a little pull now and then. But lately, pulls are turning to pushes. Pushing her away and getting her to focus more on the Collectors than personal feelings. Spartans fought harder beside their lovers, she had reminded him, but he said the Spartans are dead, and he won’t be joining her on the battlefield anymore. Not after Roe Station. It was a one-time thing; a mistake, he said, when his desires got the better of him.

Desire won on Illium, chasing Henry across galaxies after he broke free, and again on Kahje, where they found him dead at his estate, a tropical resort. Alliance picked him up and the resort
was free for the day. Desire didn’t get them out of bed ’til the afternoon.

She aches when she’s not with him. Sores from battle throb prominently than when she strives to reach orgasm, and after is falling into a cloud under the sun, and she’s numb.

So why is her hand scratching over her keyboard now, typing “It’s over” to the Illusive Man? She needs to cut away. She knows about the other women. She knows this isn’t love. She knows this kind of thing never ends well unless it ends on both sides. He had already tried ending it but she insisted. She wasn’t ready to let go of the fire because she likes the burn.

They’d fight about Malthusian economics versus human ingenuity and make out after she scolded him for tasting like an ashtray.

Her hand hovers over the send button and pushes the delete, following a long sigh.

No one gives her that rush like he does. A changing puzzle matching the twists of a mission within the fixed parameters. A calm shell bracing a storm beneath. He’s a battle and she will keep her spoils.

The RIFF is one of many.

Shepard stands over the body of a geth. Husks keep coming and she fires back, bursting them into flames two at a time, Mordin three sometimes, and Grunt holding the other side of higher ground between ramps. After the core’s destroyed, and the IFF in her grasp, the geth is a bonus. And everyone agrees though it’s a lot lighter than expected. Feels like 200 pounds of hardware and weird muscular stuff. Tali has names for all the parts. Shepard’s terms let them fall in one general box and she’s not ashamed.

Grunt throws the geth toward the airlock and him and Mordin jump after, Shepard follows. Grunt’s in and pulls the geth in with him. Mordin reaches a hand out and Shepard takes it.

“We’re in!” Shepard shouts.

Joker jerks the Normandy away and that small room that once took Henry, Illusive Man, Miranda, Chakwas, and her, now seems incredibly smaller when the krogan almost falls on top of her. Shepard loses balance and slams against the bulkhead, Mordin pinned between her.

“Brace for accel!” Joker yells.

“Now he tells us,” Grunt says.

Most of the inertia is heavily dampened but when she tells Joker to get the hell out of there, he will, and the crew will feel it. They’ve adjusted as accustomed to space life, but his barrel rolls test the mass effect core sometimes too often, and leaves Shepard in awkward situations with squadmates.

“Uh, Shepard,” Mordin says.

“Ssh.” She pats his chest piece.

Her ear rests over his midsection, along the concavity. Just a second longer. She’s never heard a heartbeat race so fast.
Legion’s fun in a take-every-joke-literally sort of way. Joker makes fun of him often and she thinks it’s to release some tension when teased by EDI. Between a bot and a hot interface. It wasn’t difficult to maneuver through the geth ship when he asked her to take care of the heretics. In a way she saw the heretics like Cerberus, wanting to do right for their people but having a differing opinion on what is right, and what to do. What Jack experienced on Pragia is part of the Cerberus Shepard can see but doesn’t want to see. They had different ways of doing things and thought stealing children was the right way to go about it. Why? The bigger picture. Something Illusive Man always talks about. He didn’t condone it but then again he doesn’t condone some things she does either. Like activating a geth on a shipful of crew he’s paying for. As long as he still has the collar on the shark, he doesn’t care what she does.

If he doesn’t care, then he doesn’t care at all. Which is fine, really, she said it to Miranda that’s it’s just all in fun. And he’s never been exclusive with her. The details are in the logs on Liara’s new ship.

So why has she?

Maybe Illusive Man had it right. That was the last time. His last message was distant and professional. A true businessman dealing with underlings, no emotions attached. So why does she bother giving him a fun time? Other people enjoy her company. Maybe more than some. And she’s not dumb to the eyes on her when they think she isn’t looking.

It’s the flood of feelings she needs to stay out of the blackhole her father left her with. Her why is in the smell, the suit, the confidence. That silver hair and cheshire mouth. And since she’s been alive he’s always been around.

Shit.

Why can’t she just drink like everyone else?

EDI informs her the IFF is nearly installed. When she and Miranda suggest taking the squad on one shuttle for next mission, only one thing runs through her mind:

To which planet and what bar?

It was Citadel, by the way, and she regretted waking up in the bathroom, puking her guts out from one drink, and having to read her omni-tool five times before she knew what the fuck happened.

Collectors took the crew. Where are you?

- Joker
You know when you say you’re never going to do something ever again and it usually involves lots of alcohol? Shepard waits for Joker to finish his debrief. Jacob’s in the corner of the room and Shepard slams another tonic to get the last of the hangover killed.

Joker sits on the conference table when Miranda stomps her high-mightiness.

“Everyone!?” she snaps. “You lost everyone and nearly lost the damned ship too!”

Whose idea was it to take all the combat-trained personnel (save Burt and Ernie) who could have dealt with it? But Shepard doesn’t dare make things worse, though something inside her really wishes she would. Or maybe Joker would like to see her punch Miranda, or throw something. Anything to make Joker laugh again.

“And don’t even get me started on unshackling a damned AI.”

“What was I supposed to do?” Joker defends. “Break my arm at them? EDI cleared the ship. She’s all right.”

EDI knows every secret of every crew member. Every log she keeps quiet unless upon request. She doesn’t throw anyone under the bus even for a joke. She’s more than all right. She’s a loyal shipmate. Another piece of Cerberus she admires.

“We did everything we could, Jeff.” EDI comforts.

“Thanks, Mom,” he says.

Bet he’d like Hannah to be here now. She doesn’t listen to what Jacob has to say. If she didn’t have to involve them, Miranda and him would’ve been gone, and the family meeting would proceed.

“I’m done waiting around,” Shepard says. “I want those assholes to feel our mounted guns packing their shit.”

“Colorful, commander,” Miranda scoffs. “I’ll let the team know you’re ready.”

She leaves and Jacob soon after. The debriefing room shrinks to the two of them and they’re staring at the floor, avoiding what should be said.

“I’m so sorry, Shepard.” Joker fidgets. Then wrestles with a thought. “You know what I’m not
Sorry! What the hell were you doing? You took the big guns and left me. For what?"

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“I could smell it on your breath when you came back. You never…”

“I know.”

“Of all days!”

“We’re going to get them back.”

“Good! And when we do, I’m leaving! I’m done with all this Cerberus and Alliance bullshit.”

EDI intervenes, “You don’t mean that, Jeff.”

“All right I don’t but it felt good. Not every day I have a chance to get a bad letter on my next report card.”

“I’m glad it wasn’t you,” Shepard says. “Mom would’ve…”

“Snapped? Yeah…I know. If she’s ever on leave after all this, maybe we can take her to Tiptree.”

“One blue moon at a time.”

They will pay for what they’ve done. Shepard falls back on her bed, staring at the passing stars. The aquarium hums nearby, her clock ticks when time hits the hour, and the frame around the window begins to blur. A group of stars form into eyes and when the window melts into the ceiling, the stars attach to Illusive Man who hovers over her.

She jumps. It’s half-past the hour now. She checks her messages. It’s the same one from before except she holds on to the last two words that might have meant something if she just knew how to read beyond the emotionless dribble.

Be careful, it says.

She’s a walking trillion-dollar project. She’s valuable. Don’t break. Don’t die. That’s what it’s supposed to mean. That’s not what she wants it to mean, but what is she going to do if he can’t be here to fix this hollow feeling? She needs a hit. A few more hours to drive somewhere, breathe him in, and let the screws loose. Miranda’s already pissed at her; she probably knows she didn’t send that break-up message. Anything in the computer is recorded, sent or not.

She could take a shower, maybe lie on the floor, and finish herself. Oh gawd that’s pathetic. She’s Commander fucking Shepard. She—

Her omni-tool beeps. Nothing activates except EDI near the main door.

“Incoming communication from the Illusive Man,” EDI says. “Standfast.”

Her glass display becomes a monitor. Illusive Man appears in landscape view, an enlarged vid with minimal lag, and clear audio. Even in pixels, his eyes are sharp.
“Shepard,” he says, “I…forgot why it was appropriate to call you privately.”

“But you called.”

“I did.” He searches for something in his mind.

“Just tell me what you’re thinking. You can set your business ventures aside for once.”

“Do you ever get a feeling that something’s not whole?”

Shepard admires the Shadow Broker ship model Liara gave her. Little trophies to fill in the empty spaces on her shelves. And the fishes in the aquarium with the eel.

“I was reading over your final order and went for a cigarette. For a second, I had no desire for it, then something else happened, like I was dreaming awake. I heard music.”

“Could be one of your janitors in the hallway again.”

“This wasn’t about someone’s headset on too loud. This was a concert in my room with no one around except my unlit cigarette.”

“Maybe you should talk to your doctor.”

“I don’t have anyone I trust with this new information. I thought, since we keep one secret between us, maybe we could keep two.”

She doesn’t tell him it’s not much of a secret. “What else happened?”

Illusive Man paces the screen, straining to recall.

“Lights. I heard people and then…that’s why I called. You were there.”

“Me?”

“You wore one of my covert armor concepts. I should have it made into a prototype.”

“Why was I there?”

“I don’t know, Shepard, but I can’t shake off the feeling. Be it an hallucination or sleep deprivation overriding my state, I knew if I didn’t call you, I’d regret it, maybe for closure before storming the beaches.”

“I suppose you couldn’t fly over here for a quickie,” Shepard jokes.

“It wouldn’t fulfill me much to rob you of such short time. Besides, I doubt I’d be this lucid by the time I got there.”

“What do you mean?”

“But if I could freeze this moment and spend the rest of my life knowing you were fine, I would stop all the times we had before, and relive them until I died watching each other young forever.”

“What do you mean lucid? Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine. I think the hallucination rattled my brain a bit. Just know…no matter how this ends, I’m proud to know you. Despite your opinions of Cerberus, of me, you’re an amazing woman, and
an impressive leader.” He picks up his glass. “Be careful, Shepard.”

It’s hard to decide what she really wants when she faces the raging glow of the Omega-4 Relay, knowing behind her somewhere is a man just as lost and damaged as her, adamant in keeping control without giving away what happens behind the scenes. The doubts and frustrations of being the only people who have lead and organized such a war. Illusive Man has been a boss, high on a throne, dictating without lifting a finger to help on the ground. That’s what she thought for a while until Roe Station. So much distaste for him flipped when she witnessed his smooth tactics in field and ability to adjust to the changing situation. It was all it took. A new player in the team. A taste of one. Then he went back to his ivory tower when she wanted more. He’s capable of much more than Cerberus. He doesn’t have to be just a boss. He could lead and be with Shepard down here before the dive into the angry orange, on the brink of throwing up from holding in the terror too long. He’d sweat less than her. He was just as calm arresting Henry as he was in that chair. That stupid chair.

She won’t bail from the mission, but she won’t lie and say she didn’t feel like running the other way. Hiding under her desk is hardly inspiring to the people she just convinced to go kill themselves for a universal cause. These are the secrets leaders keep to themselves. They’re not perfect, ever, but they’ll never show the pebble in their boot.

“Approaching Omega-4 Relay,” Joker marks.

Shepard swallows back the bile. “Let’s make it happen.”

They’re not fodder, they’re lives. Lives she learned to adore and she’s prepared in every possible way to keep them alive. The ship is optimal. Her squad is clear-headed. They will get their crew back. They will decimate the Collectors and when she gets the chance, she’ll wipe the Reapers with Harbinger’s shell, and flush em in a black hole.

Hannah would be proud to see Joker maneuver how he did. Proud and horrified. It’s why she doesn’t talk about work that much, and Hannah doesn’t talk about hers either, but that doesn’t stop their superiors from finding out, and relaying a summary.

It took forever to down the floating eyeball. But once that problem blew away, their nemesis came back for more, but the nerdy school kids trained with the masters, and upgraded the weapons systems.

“Fire the main gun,” she commands, smug.

Like lasercutting a sandwich.

The Collector ship falls with consequence. Joker tries to keep it steady and EDI collaborates, but the crash is inevitable.

EDI declares, “All hands, brace for impact!”

Miranda plays XO well in front of the main crew, but after they recover from being tossed about the pilothouse, vulnerability leaks out.

“We all knew this was likely a one-way trip,” she says.
Don’t be such a Debbie Downer, Miri. But she’s not wrong.

“Our primary objective is to destroy the station and stop the Collectors,” Shepard adds. “At any cost.”

“Well then, we’re off to a good start,” Joker notes. “What’s next?”

A good briefing and a well-placed inspiring speech, strangely adopted brother.

The road is long, the trek is slow, but no one dies except Harbinger over, and over, and over. What an incessant putz. Hearing his voice grinds sandpaper against her squidgy parts, and leaves marks in her skull from her brain trying to kill the irritant.

“All right, Shepard?” Mordin asks.

Tali leaves with the rescued crew, including a very silent Donnelly and shaken Kelly Chambers. If anyone can keep them alive, it’s her and Chiktikka vas Paus, her drone.

“No,” she knocks her helmet a couple times. An itch isn’t leaving. “But appreciate you asking.”

“Here if you need me.” He reloads his Phalanx. “Until the end if you allow me.”

“You’re stuck with me, Solus.” Shepard pats him on the elbow, a respectable gesture bred from years of Alliance training.

“Ready whenever, Commander,” Miranda walks between them.

Samara follows but without the grudge nudge.

They descend in their bubble, a shield that repels swarms but not bullets. Life is never easy. Shepard can vouch for every empty clip she drops, every sync to her cloak, every near-hit behind cover. In Miranda’s dramatic display to take down the last scion, its attack breaks her shield, but not her spirit. She unleashes that last clip on it until Shepard jumps out of cover to pull her down, but hands grab her from behind. Husks grapple her armor. She swings her omni-blade about and gets one but the other. It pins her to the ground. A shockwave sounds in the short distance. The husk roars in her ear then drops heavy and silent. Someone snatches her arm and yanks her out of the wake. Light and the booming sound pass by, then fire, then an explosion. Mordin huffs. He lies next to her leaning against the short wall.

Shepard steadies her breath. She sighs and pats whatever part of him is closest to her sore arm then jumps up before the rest of her thinks it’s nap time.

“Don’t do that again,” Shepard says, walking passed Miranda to take point at the front of the bubble.

“Shepard,” Samara wheezes. “We need to go.” She barely stands upright, tired from burning continuous energy.


Husks and flaming alphas attack sporadically and down easily. It would have been fun with Snippy, shooting from the hip the way she runs down the passage to keep up with desperate
Samara. The next door is now in sight and they book it. Shepard pushes Mordin ahead as she fires husks giving chase. Miranda levitates the remainder and Samara slows to the flank. She expels the last of her will—the blast sweeps through the swarm, incinerating the weak, and throwing others to the vast below.

The next door isn’t far. Garrus bellows over the comm and Shepard expedites. Mordin unlocks the panel and the second team rushes in. Fire exchanges through the narrowing field, then the door shuts, and seals. She hears the bullet and sees Garrus stumble, but he shakes it off.

Whole again apart from Tali. Apart from…the Normandy.

“Tali’s group just arrived, Shepard,” EDI reports. “No casualties.”

Shepard’s armor lightens a bit and she can breathe. Any peace in the squall is manna.

EDI shares notes with Miranda. “There should be some nearby platforms that will take you to the main control console. From there you can overload the system and destroy the base.”

That’s when Joker relays the news and Shepard offers a rearguard to hold off the mass front closing in. They look to her for guidance, and look up with reverence. A medal didn’t do that; freeing their consciences did. She had planned to take everyone with her but if Joker says it’s bad, it’s worse.

“Pick a team to go with you,” Miranda says.

She would have liked to have seen the king among the people. Her royal drug to keep her high in battle and a regal pain to fire her up. Miranda makes up for half that while Mordin keeps her level. She could take her other fire hitters, but they all don’t have what Mordin has: a great singing voice. If that isn’t truth, it isn’t, but it’d be nice to hear a victory ballad.

But what of Thane? She thinks of Kahje, his time there, and her father. She can’t take that baggage with her.

“Doc,” she says, “you’re up with me and Miranda. The rest of you stay back and defend this position.”

Shepard already stands on the platform, the shuttle to the end. Mordin hoists himself up and something inside pulls her tongue to form words that galvanize.

“Make me proud,” she concludes. “Make yourselves proud.”

The three turn to face the tunnel, a wide tube leading exactly where EDI said.

“Commanding speech,” Mordin says.

She thinks it hailed from a post-war play, patriotic bravado. Felt like she should have dipped Miranda and kissed her after. Or Mordin, but he might say that Salarians don’t have the mouths for it.

She hears the whirrs of the platforms, and she’s back in the derelict ship for a second. It was a trap and he knew it. She remembers how furious she was after they escaped. She had more than words for him. She wanted a bullet in his head. Little did she know…

Weapons go up. Her squad crouches down. Collectors approach. Little moving targets she doesn’t need to cloak for because she’s been practicing her speed. Each aim of her weapon triggers her
adrenaline to focus harder, breathe slower, and ultimately wipe the platforms clean one by one.

This is it.

They’re almost home.

“EDI,” Shepard says. “What can you tell us?”

Their platform moves through the tunnel, the components vibrate below her boots, a sickly song of her past, now the pinnacle of what’s to come.

“The tubes are feeding into a superstructure,” EDI reports. “It is emitting both organic and non-organic energy signatures. Given these readings, it must be massive.”

“Shepard,” Mordin points to the end of the tubes. A dim orange glow within the steely blue.

Not the light at the end she was hoping, but answers for the dead they’re about to avenge. How many lives had the Collectors taken to create it this far?

“If my calculations are correct, the superstructure is a reaper.”

Shepard holds her gun a little tighter, her stance a little wider. The tunnel opens up to a metallic skeleton a fraction of the size of Sovereign. It hangs from the tubes, suspended in air and life. An abomination from skull to spine.

A human reaper.

Cerberus becomes a better idea the deeper the Collector hole goes. Same concerns; different methods. She knows one way: this thing has to die.

She watches it fall to blue darkness. A biomechanical fetus to EDI but it was tens of thousands of people to Shepard, and it felt good lay them to rest. At the mercy of reapers is no way to live, like Saren, or tools for their production line, like the Collectors. The final atrocity is becoming their DNA. She lets her ground team and Normandy know what’s going down.

This bomb.

“Roger that, commander,” Joker says. “Hey I—uh—got a signal coming from the Illusive Man. EDI’s patching it through.”

Miranda opens her omni-tool and saves face as well as Shepard does. Shepard fixates on priming the bomb but when she sees him flash online, it’s hard to look away from the job.

“Shepard,” he says, “You’ve done the impossible.”

“Almost,” she says as she programs the timer.

It’s sad she’s done a dozen of these in the field and can still hold a conversation.

“You acquired the collector base,” he says. “I’m going over the schematics EDI sent. A timed radiation pulse would kill the remaining collectors, but leave the machinery and technology intact.”

Shepard stares at her bomb. She’d have to switch the components entirely; reforge the charge, reset the timer, and reconnect the detonator. What a load of…

“They were building a reaper. That knowledge…that framework could save us.”
Shepard jumps to attention and faces the vid. “They liquified people and if Reapers get their hands on this again, they’ll prolly use another species next to complete it!”

“We could use their own weapons against them.”

Who is he?

“Were you planning on finishing their job to make this weapon functional? Did you not hear a damned word I said? They almost turned my crew into gray shit for this thing! We have to destroy the base.”

“Don’t be short-sighted,” he says. “I didn’t discard you because I knew your value. Don’t be so quick to discard this facility. Think of the potential.”

Her value?

A thing; a shiny bauble in his pool. She regrets deleting that e-mail.

“I’m not so sure,” Miranda says, “Seeing it firsthand; keeping it would feel like a betrayal.” Illusive Man dismisses. “If we ignore this opportunity, that would be a betrayal.”

She could laugh. Something inside her needs to purge. It pings off her sternum and turns to lump in her throat.

“You know what’s a betrayal?” Shepard snaps.

“Shepard, you died fighting for what you believed, I brought you back so you could keep fighting.”

Just let the platform give way so she can die with the feelings that just dropped in the chasm with the reaper.

“I don’t believe this,” she says.

“Some might say I went too far but look at what you’ve accomplished.”

“I’ll accomplish nothing if I don’t fuck this place up!” Her armor tightens in unfavorable places, swelling from the sudden rage. “You know me more than most! How the hell would you think I’d agree to this?”

“We need to put our emotional investments aside and think of what’s at stake.”

“What was that back on the Normandy?” She gestures to the hypothetical ship behind her. “Just a show to keep me invested?”

“Shepard—“

When it starts she can’t stop. It’s a waterfall of shit she’s been wanting to say and held back too long by missions and more missions. “You’ve never put any emotional anything into…anything! I’m the one putting everything on the line and you’re here in pixels!”

“Have you forgotten what I did for your mother?”

“You did that for yourself! Henry convinced Mom to work with you and that implicated Cerberus.
That’s why you helped my family. Not for me, not for her, nor for anyone else but you.”

“This isn’t the time for a couples quarrel.”

“A couple, are we? Oh, then I think it’s the perfect time for it! Cuz after this, I’m done with you.”

“Shep, be rational.”

“This is me rational.” She takes off her helmet. “This? This is my rational helmet.” She sticks it back on. “It’s time I cut the strings.”

Illusive Man about-faces and barks at Miranda. “Don’t let Shepard destroy the base!”

“Or what?” Miranda says.

Shepard hooks up the battery to the charge within the platform core. “Wishing you were here with me now?”

“Dammit, Shepard!” He roars.

A warmth emerges in her chest when he thrashes in literal transparency. There’s the fire she’s going to miss.

“Miranda!” he snaps. “I gave you an order!”

“Sisters before misters.”

Before Illusive Man can say anything else, she cuts him off, and his image shrinks into a line, then nothing. Shepard finishes installing the software that’ll amplify the bomb by detonating any similar nearby materials. Miranda walks over and hands her the blasting cap.

“Thanks,” Shepard says, but she wasn’t talking about the detonator.

“Do you copy?”

Joker’s voice fills her radio static as she pulls up Miranda from the debris. She’s bruised but nothing a good escape won’t fix. Mordin’s fine too. Thanks, afterthought.

“Don’t leave me hangin’, Shepard. Do you copy!?”

She answers, “Joker! Did the ground team make it?”

“Yeah we’re all waiting on you.”


Everyone’s instincts sync. They run for the Normandy. After finishing off the human reaper they have maybe a minute or two before detonation. The rush climbs through her, Blood shoots to her legs, breath gains strength, and her heart races so fast it might beat her to the ship. She doesn’t slap her cloak on. The bullets are for her. She throws an Incinerate behind her, more as a flare than cover. It might have hit. Mordin wins the dash, Miranda hops in soon after, and Joker helps them inside with the arm not holding a loaded rifle.

Chest hurts. Throat sore. Shepard can’t do this forever. Collectors in the flank fire and miss. Every
bullet she hears is the one that didn’t get her. And that would be enough to help her fly.

Joker comes out with cover fire but it’s when Mordin springs out that her push reenergizes, and she compacts all will into the final leap.

She jumps high.

It’s not like the derelict reaper without gravity. This is all her armor, weapons, and all her might balled into a desperate prayer for wings. Her stomach bashes into the edge. She holds onto the airlock floor, feet dangling, arms straining, screaming at her to stop the abuse. Mordin grabs her arm, his fingers hold tight about her wrist. He’s stronger than he looks and it’s all she needs to roll up onto her feet and turn around in time to flip the Collectors the bird as EDI seals the airlock doors.

Joker limps for the helm and Shepard follows close.

EDI alerts, “Detonation in 10…9…”

Joker drops into his seat and swipes through the interface. “Yeah I get the gist of it, EDI! Hold on!”

This is one burn Shepard doesn’t want to feel. But it’s freeing to soar off on a ship flying colors you no longer represent. Is that how he father felt? It’s different, right? A sense of renewed vigor washes over her. If she had been weak, she’d fill with dread. Illusive Man had been keen on seeing everything from a god’s point of view that he forgot a god also sees their souls. It’s a piece of mankind no one can control. And Illusive Man is no god as much as he thinks he is; as much as he wanted her to treat him as. Now that the strings are gone, she sees him with intuitive clarity. Webs of what Cerberus has done, what she thought was rumor is probably true, like the political assassinations, the experiments on varied species, the silencing of her father.

Joker slams the interface and Normandy rockets forward, all ahead full, dodging the remains of ancient ships who tried what they’ve accomplished. The bomb should have went off already but the vacuum of space leaves much to the imagination. A faint orange glow flickers in the window, then casts over the ship, and floods the sky. Joker brings out the reserve thrust he saves for special events, and the orange blur stretches long and far until there’s nothing but white, and then stars in encompassing space.

Shepard’s omni-tool has glitched several times, swearing she’s being hailed by Illusive Man. She is, but denial is a smaller pill. She can’t just shut it off, however. Sometimes she likes using the omni-blade for cutting through thick steak. That and she wants to give him a chance to come clean. It’s been urking her for the last five minutes.

Some of the framework hangs askew off the bulkhead, and across the doorway. She lifts it aside and drops it, then enters what’s left of the debriefing room. The table’s mechanics still work but the internal software’s damaged. EDI tries her best and eventually gets it online. Shepard steps into the circle. The tingles she used to get already fizzled. The broken shackles from her drug leave her calm, and she doesn’t give three shits and a pack of gum if she pisses him off more with what she wants to say.

He sits in his chair, glowering at her from behind his lighter’s flame, and it ignites more than the
end of his stick. She folds her arms to hold the ache in her chest, another bomb about to go off.

Illusive Man sucks on his cigarette.

“You’re costing me more than time and money,” he says, sneering.

“I avenged countless lives at that base,” she says. “I’m not sorry it’s gone.”

“The first of millions more lives. Billions! And you let your emotions get the better of you.”

“I never let what we had get in the way of the mission. This isn’t different.”

“What we had is irrelevant now.”

“Because you can’t use it to manipulate me anymore?”

“I enjoyed your company, Shepard, more than your delusions are inclined to believe.”

“You can’t love someone and control them at the same time.”

“I expected you to have my back when it mattered, just like I did for you.”

“This isn’t quid pro quo. This is preserving humanity! Harbinger is coming and he’s bringing the whole family. We will lose ourselves to the Reapers before they even start if we don’t keep our values.”

“Values don’t prepare us for the Reapers, Shepard. Weapons and intel do. The technology in that base could have secured dominance for the human race in the entire galaxy.”

“Human dominance?” She lets it sink and leans in. “Or just Cerberus?”

He stands from his throne with the fiery blue star behind him casting its light against everything black, yet his eyes remain the most intense.

“Strength for Cerberus is strength for every human,” he says. “Cerberus is humanity. I should have known you’d choke at making the hard decisions. Too idealistic from the start.”

He waves her off and she wants to snatch that hand from the air and break it.

“What part of arresting my father was easy?”

“His choices didn’t involve the trillions of people counting on us to stop the Reapers!”

“Yeah but I bet his death kept him quiet if he had anything to say about you.”

“His death was tragic.”

Illusive Man extinguishes his spent cigarette and reaches for a fresh one.

“Did you kill him?”

The coroner said it was suicide. Henry was a runner but running from life made little sense since running preserved his life until his demise. The question hangs in the stillness between them, the feed hums, as if trying to soothe the discontent.

He drops the unlit cigarette into the tray. “I could never kill your father.”
She doesn’t believe him, even if his voice is steady, and his expression never wavers. She uses it anyway.

“The hardest decisions are sticking with the morally right ones when everyone else doesn’t. I’m the only one here who seems to be keeping her humanity. If there is a scrap left in you that cared about my family, it’s not too late for you. Humanity needs a leader. You can stick with me and learn what that means on my terms, but I’m not going to be your drone.”

“My place is with Cerberus as should yours.”

“You sure that’s what you want?” she asks.

“Your place is by my side, Shepard. I made you. I brought you back from the dead.”

“And I’m going to do exactly what you brought me back for. I will win this war and I’ll do it without abandoning the soul of our species.”

“Don’t you turn your back on me, Shepard!”

When she hears her boots walk off the platform, guilt emerges from the ooze in her blood that once belonged to Cerberus, and it’s not her walking away. Would her father say this was the morally right decision? Is this why he left the Alliance—her?

“Did you mean it?” Miranda stands in crippled doorway with fallen hardware tubes behind her.

“About being morally right?”

“I learned that from you.” Shepard hunches under the damages and avoids getting shocked. “You had my best interests at heart.”

“I didn’t want you hurt, commander. I didn’t expect we’d hurt Illusive Man.”

They reach the armory and Shepard relinquishes her guns.

“I don’t think we did.”

She lifts her helmet and everything’s white and gray again. She drops it on the metal counter by the lockers.

“Don’t be certain of that.” Miranda removes her visor. “I’ve worked at his side for years.”

It wasn’t Illusive Man that was always there. Miranda brought her out of death, back into the world as Hannah did the first time, only she’s more of a sister than a mother, and she has Cerberus to thank, but it’s time to leave the nest again.

An hour after routine debriefing, she organizes the crew to clean up the ship, and begin repairs. Shepard descends to the bay and meets the faces that followed her into that morbid abyss. They’d follow her anywhere but she knows people grow, and time’s eternal ripple will carry them out to sea. And if the tide pushes them back to her, she’ll be there for a pick-up. This is her ship now. Her crew. Her Normandy. The Reapers will have to pry it from her twice-dead fingers.

Can she bear another anvil crushing her chest until she can’t breathe? Miranda leans back in her chair and wipes the tear before it falls. A package sits on her desk with an encryption in the holo
she holds in her hand.

To Miranda Lawson

When it’s time.

Dr. Shepard

She brushes her fingers across the crate, to the hinges and lock. Click. It cracks open along the line and she lifts. The gift rests in packing foam cut out for it’s compacted mode. Its design is unmistakable, repainted with a red streak down the receiver, and the name Snippy engraved on the stock.

Choices made must be choices kept. And the keepers reap the consequences and carry them for the dreamers until the lie is dead, and the truth rises from the ashes of people left behind. She can’t tell Dr. Shepard that he’s failed because it’s working far better than he would’ve hoped. And she’s still the only one that knows. If the Shadow Broker gets a hold of it, that’ll be it for Cerberus, and the Shepards. The right buyer will have the theory and it’ll be up to her to kill the man who has the mind to put it to practice. The man who solved death.

But that’s not the hardest secret to keep. In all her work with Cerberus, divulging Shepard reasons to steer away from the Illusive Man, she not once asked how she might know this. That oversight will save her from bringing the end of them too soon; a timeline she cannot disturb or else Dr. Shepard’s plan will work, but the Reapers will win, and all that’ll be left of humanity is what was made on Kahje. It’s a delicate balance the doctor entrusted her ruthless calculations with, and she accepted, unknowing that emotions would get the better of her. To want peace for a sister, a commander, and happiness for a man with good intentions and dark methods. Who knew that little piece of intel could reverberate from the tenderest pluck and deafen the future of their universe with a boom?

Such a little thing that she knows where The Illusive Man sleeps.

Miranda locks the crate and shoves it into her gear locker.

Okay, maybe two things.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, man, you guys. ....oh, man. Do you want me to go through Mass Effect 3 like I did with the last couple chapters? Or do you want a Part 2, where I go kinda mission by mission but focus on just Illusive Man and her? I already wrote the final chapter. It's just about how I get there that's the problem. I guess it depends on how much you love the Jack x Jane romance.
Chapter Summary

The Reapers invade and Shepard faces down a pain worse than dying: her past.

Chapter Notes

Song: "Take Over" by Hidden Citizens (featuring Ruelle)

You never know what you’re going to think about when you get blown up until it actually happens. People that have survived death tell stories about what went through their minds that day. Doomsday, First Contact, and, yes, even the survivors of the Batarian colonies. All of them say they thought of their loved ones first. An instant moment of clarity of who is the most important figure in their lives. Their daughters, sons, fathers, mothers, husbands, or wives.

When Shepard flew across the room from the blast of the Reaper, she’d like to claim she thought of her mom. Or her dad. Hell even anyone on the Normandy, or the Normandy. It certainly wasn’t Anderson.

The second thing people think about is how much they did in their lives. Did they do enough? Did they do enough of the right thing? They’ll wish they mended relationships, or undid bad choices. Or wish they never wasted all those years surfing the Extranet, or sitting on their ass playing games with strangers across worlds. Nobody thinks about social media, the extranet, or their game trophies. They do but it’s nothing good. It’s all about family and how they impacted the world with their existence.

Shepard doesn’t have to think about it. She does it every day and knows it was her best. But that first thing? Yeah…she wishes she thought of Mom.

Anderson yells, “Shepard!”

The blast throbs in her ears. Smoke and burnt wires wake her up with the admiral’s insistence. He shakes her and tells her they gotta move, while she tries to shake off the blast, and that image.

Not family.
Not a friend.
Not even her gun.

A year ago she yelled at a screen and served a hot-blooded meal of gumption, which ended her relationship with the Illusive Man in every way. Then, she thought she was free. Now, he stares at her as if they were still on Illium, a lavender sky behind him before dawn breaks through the city’s skyline.

She’s supposed to hate him. She blew up the Collector base and then turned herself in to the
Alliance after Hackett’s “favor” nearly did her in. They’ve held her caged on Earth because they can’t court-martial a Star of Terra recipient and look pretty for the media. But maybe if the Normandy was still in space, it would have been Collectors v. SR-1 all over again.

Survival is their only means now and the one thing she does not want to think about drills her skull. That clean, shower smell with a tap of cologne, whisky on his lips, on his breath, smooth hair between her fingers, and his hands…

Her dog tags will be the only salvageable thing left if she doesn’t get out of here. To hell with final regrets. The Reapers are her focus and like this nightmare, she will be the last thing they see before they die. And if the subtle hints Anderson gave her are true, Cerberus won’t be helping them.

Steel blue eyes look up at her through the ducts. The kid in the hoodie she saw playing on the roof. Duct sheet metal bends and pops under his weight. When she reaches for him he draws back like her hand’ll bite.

“You can’t help me,” he says.

No blade stabs worse.

“Shepard!” Anderson shouts. “In here.”

She can carry the kid like an old rucksack. She’ll tell him to close his eyes. There’ll be milk and cookies in the galley waiting, even if she has to learn how to make them herself. If one human survives today, let it be their future generation. Let it be the innocent. She turns back to the kid and the tiny space rests ominous and empty.

It’s like taking a drink of poison, knowing you’re going to die, but you have to swallow. One life for trillions. She had to let Anderson go. She stands in the Normandy, her home, and her brothers beside her. And she watches the man who’s more a father than her father run off on another Alliance vessel. When the Reaper comes around and charges an attack, she locks onto the kid on the platform. A Reaper’s horn is unmistakable. It bwomps louder now that she’s in a flying box, but the sight of that beam…

Fire cuts through the shuttles trying to take off. They explode, taking military and civilian lives, the blue-eyed kid included. She can’t save them all.

She’ll remember them when she faces the Council.

But first, Mars.

And next, Kaidan questioning her motives.

Shepard stands over the murdered bodies at Mars station.

“Cerberus,” Kaidan says. “What are they doing on Mars?”

“Good question.”

“You don’t know?”
If she vents exasperation into words, she hopes he notices. “I’m not with them anymore, Kaidan, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“It wasn’t but you have to admit it’s a bit…convenient.”

She knows what it looks like. And after they reach the remnants of a convoy, it looks worse.

“Looks like they had help from the inside,” Kaidan says.

Shepard’s still grasping at logic sticks, trying to figure out what Cerberus would be doing here. What she knows about the Illusive Man, how he thinks, or how he used to think, gnaws her rib cage, trying to loose something she wants to keep locked away.

Cerberus doesn’t need a battalion. They use sabotage and subterfuge just like she does. So what’s so important in here that Illusive Man and Liara are fighting over it?

Once she confirms the entrance is clear, she moves in, and seals the door from the lone panel.

Kaidan insists, “I need a straight answer.”

Here we go.

“Do you have any idea why Cerberus is here?”

“What makes you think I have any idea?”

“You did more than work for them. You bedded Cerberus! You slept with the Illusive Man, for god’s sake! How am I not supposed to think you know something?”

Yeah it looks pretty bad. But Kaidan’s been with her when they shot up Cerberus too. And he damned well knows she’s always looked at the bigger picture when it came to peace. He didn’t do anything else to help her fight the Collectors which is total shifty cow shit.

“I worked with them to fight the Collectors and I made a mistake with Illusive Man. Who hasn’t?”

“There’s more to it than that. He rebuilt you. He gave you a ship, resources. You can’t tell me it wasn’t serious.”

“Whatever it was, I broke it off when he went power-hungry.” Geezus, Major. “Let me be absolutely clear. I’ve had zero contact with Cerberus since I destroyed the base.”

“And the Illusive Man?”

This is the most she’s heard his name in almost the entire year she spent chained to the Alliance. Her last hearing barely said his name. It was Cerberus this and that. Outside the talks, there were no messages. Nothing from friends. Certainly nothing from the Illusive Man. She was locked down tight. Still, she expected he would have wanted the last word, a letter stating “neener neener neener” as he roams the galaxy rich and free. Free to screw any girl he wants.

“None. I’m in the dark with you.”

And it’s eating at her.

James says, “Commander Shepard’s been under constant surveillance. No way they’ve been communicating since.”
Kaidan says, “Sorry, commander. It’s just—”

The oxygen generator vents breathable air into the room at last and she can talk without the helmet hiding her frustration.

“I shouldn’t have to explain a damned thing to you, Kaidan.”

Not after Virmire. Not after any of it. She made strangers more loyal to her in a month than he’s been in years. Her lost gun was more loyal. Snippy didn’t deserve its fate.

The elevator takes them up a level and the ceiling splits open to a cargo bay. She keeps her gun ready, hoping for nothing, expecting everything. It’s another person in another duct and when bullets ricochet against the metal, Shepard ducks behind the largest crates and waits it out, peeping around the edge until someone kicks the grill out.

Liara jumps free. Two Cerberus troops follow close but she fires her dark energy sphere and they’re caught helpless in the field. Now shot to death. Liara puts away her sidearm and turns. She halts.

“Shepard!” she exclaims.

If it wasn’t for her intel as Shadow Broker, Shepard would have never known just how many women Illusive Man met while she was deployed. And though she was supportive of her decision to be with him on Illium, she remembers she said something about being careful, then later after she became the Shadow Broker, she said “merciless wet squad just a signal away.”

“Thank the goddess you’re here.”

“Maybe you know what’s going on,” Shepard says.

“I do.” She walks them to the window and points to a building, the archives. “They want what I’m here for, blueprints for a Prothean device that could help us defeat the Reapers.”

Oh. Is that all?

Cerberus breaches again, a race to the Archives ending in lots of fallen troops. None of hers, of course. Alliance never stood a chance, not with Dr. Eva Core infiltrating the station. But at least they got Cerberus scared now. They’ll be trapped in the storm soon, The Alliance is still putting up a fight, and then there’s Shepard coming up the back. Cerberus teams try to cover all sides but no matter what they throw at her, flashbangs included, they can’t match her cloak and pop.

When they get to another security checkpoint, Kaidan suggests they use one of the radios in the Cerberus helmets so a team brings over a tram that'll open the sealed door in their way. But the dead troop isn't what he's used to. No one is.

“Shit,” Kaidan jumps back.

Dead, white eyes stare into the beyond. The troop’s ashen skin is laced with veins. Zombified.

“Looks like a husk,” he adds.

Is this what Illusive Man wanted? Is this indoctrination or is this something more?

“Why did he do this?” Shepard mutters, kneeling down for a closer look.

He doesn’t smell like sweat. The body lies in heavy armor and there’s no reaction. Not even after
she killed him.

“You mean Illusive Man? Cerberus? They did this to their own guy? Is this what they did to you?”

She inspects her hands. “How!”

“I don’t know who you are since Cerberus rebuilt you. For all I know you could be their puppet, controlled by the Illusive Man himself.”

He tried. He wanted to, probably still does. But backed into a corner by an ally feels worse. Her jaw begins to ache and she realizes she’s been clenching her teeth every time he talks.

“Not remotely fair,” she says.

“I just want to know is the person I went to hell and back still in there somewhere?”

“Illusive Man didn’t change me. He wanted me exactly as I was and it bit him in the ass.”

But Kaidan wasn’t there to see it. All her other friends made it to the Collector party.

His trap worked—“Hey, this is…Delta Team. Anybody there?”—but someone planted a failsafe along the tram tracks leading into the next wing. They have to shoot their way to the Archives again and now Cerberus knows for certain the Alliance requested back-up, but they got so much more. At the end of the tracks, her squad takes cover. Liara drops her sphere, Kaidan takes out their shields, and her new scope filters the smoke so she can snipe through obstructions. Feels good to be back.

“Is that—holy shit!” Cerberus shouts in their radios. “It’s Shepard!”

Feels real good.

At the end of the fight lies the door to the Archives. They take the right wall, Shepard first, Liara second. She hacks the door. She cloaks and moves in, inspects all sectors, then gives them the go. Liara follows, Kaidan watches the door. The only thing in the room is the giant clump of shielded Prothean obelisks and a smaller, blue copy in a projector. Liara books for the panel built by the surrounding guard railing. Shepard pretends to be interested in the Prothean crap, but an empty room doesn’t feel right. Cerberus should be here.

“Shepard.”

Her hair stands on end. A chill casts over her back. She’s on Illium, Bekenstein, Kahje, and the Normandy in a maelstrom and the turns sicken her. She smells the body wash, the fresh shave, the cup of coffee, and tastes all three on her tongue. She spins to her six and loses blood in her head. Draining down and coming back up in a wave of heat inclining her to vomit. She grips her rifle tighter. It’s stupid to point it at a hologram, so the muzzle stays down. Maybe shoot the projector instead. She declines to fire when it splits into two Illusive Men and wavers back to one.

“Fascinating race,” he says, “the Protheans. They left all this for us to discover but we squandered it. The Alliance has known about the Archives for over thirty years and what have they done with it?”

Enough.

“What do you want?” Shepard snaps.
He’s taken back. A flash of pain streaks his face but maybe her heavy-headedness is tricking her eyes. He focuses on the Prothean obelisk.

“What I’ve always wanted,” he says. “But now that you’re gone, it’s one less equation to fix into defeating the Reapers. The data in these artifacts hold the key.”

“Defeating!? I’ve seen what you’ve done. You turned your people into monsters.”

“Hardly. They’re being improved.”

“Is this what you wanted for me? Why you hung onto me? That’s not an improvement!”

“That’s what separates us, Shepard. Where you see a means to destroy, I see a way to control—to dominate and harness the Reaper’s power. Imagine how strong humanity would be if we controlled them.”

“People on Earth are dying and you want to control what’s destroying us!?”

“You’ve always been shortsighted. Hasty. Your destruction of the Collector base proved that.”

“That base was an abomination. If I was shortsighted, I would’ve given it to you because of what we had.”

“Quid Pro Quo is no means to our relationship. I merely wished to embrace the apex of humanity, with you on top.”

“You always hated girls on top, remember?”

He takes a drag of his cigarette.

“This isn’t your fight any longer, Shepard. You can’t defeat the Reapers even with the Prothean data.”

“You should be helping me! If Cerberus is truly for humanity why try to stop what I’m doing! Join me!”

“You’d do better than most by my side again, but the odds aren’t in your favor. More importantly, I don’t want them destroyed like you did the Collectors.”

“I knew you once. Now you’ve gone too far. The Reapers will destroy us if we don’t stop fighting each other!”

“You thought you knew me. You only saw what you wanted to and it was easier for both of us that way.” He sucks his cigarette another centimeter down. “You were a tool.”

Her cheeks enflame.

“An agent with a singular purpose,” he continues. “Despite our differences you were relatively successful.”

She tries to stop her hands from shaking. Her knuckles turn white.

“But like all relics in this place, your time is over.”

Shepard turns her face away when the fire turns to acid and stings her eyes.
“Liara,” she says through her clenched teeth.

And Liara knows to grab the data.

Illusive Man jabs his finger at her. “Don’t interfere with my plans, Shepard. I won’t warn you again.”

Before he can see a tear fall, she turns her heel, rifle along hip, checks beyond the hologram, and blows a bullet into the projector. His image glitches and shuts off. Glad she shot the right component or he would’ve had more to say.

“Shepard!” Liara shouts and Shepard snaps “What!” back but it’s not about her reaction. “The data! It’s not here!”

Shepard checks the screen Liara’s scrolling through, trying to grab anything she can.

“It’s being erased.”

“Dammit!” Shepard wipes the tear away. “How’s he doing it?” The sudden change in circumstances turns into a major buzzkill and she’s relieved her sickness died with the projector.

“It’s local,” Liara says. “Someone’s uploading it.”

Kaidan finds Dr. Eva Core and shouts for Shepard into his comm. Liara doubles back with Shepard, armed and ready, but she’s too fast to fire at. Is this who Illusive Man replaced her with? A doctor with a hot bod? When she gets to her, Shepard is gonna rip her limb from ultra slim limb!

They chase her to the roof and the storm yells in their helmet receivers, blowing against their armor, and forcing Shepard to push harder with the sidewinds hindering her sprint. Core reaches an open space and despite her heels, charges for the incoming Cerberus shuttle ready to bug out. Shepard fires off a few with her pistol but Core leaps and makes it in.

“DAMMIT! JAMES! ANYBODY!”

Cerberus turns but an Alliance shuttle heads straight for them, and crashes into the side, sending them careening down. Shepard sees nothing but the shuttle’s nose, and dives out of the way. Smoke and fire billow from the impact. The shuttle rests silent and the Alliance shuttle with James aboard miraculously remains spaceworthy. He sets it down and hops out.

Shepard’s squad regains footing and shakes off the adrenaline jitters.

“Normandy’s en route,” James says, breathing hard.

She’s so furious she can’t even talk. First the Illusive Man, then her replacement, now almost getting fragged by a lieutenant. A lieutenant!

Kaidan takes a limping but reluctant T’Soni to the shuttle.

“We need that data,” she tells him, trying to get back to the Cerberus shuttle.

Something thumps against the shuttle wall. The door breaks off and flies out. In the midst of thick fire, Core emerges but something’s amiss besides her being alive. Her skin’s gone.

Shepard was replaced by an AI!?

Core fights off Kaidan, breaking away his gun, his grip, then his balance. She grabs him by the
helmet and raises him up. Shepard bolts for a clear shot and without saying a word, aims around Kaidan and fires. Bullets ricochet and Core doesn’t even look at her.

“Orders?” the AI says.

Shepard stops firing. A direct line to Illusive Man? What is he saying to her—it!? Core turns her back to Shepard. She slams Kaidan’s head into the shuttle’s frame over and over despite all the bullets she’s pumping into her backside. Then she turns and charges for Shepard. Kaidan drops.

Why won’t it die!?

She unloads the final rounds and makes them count. Each one she aims at its eye. Core reaches for her. The last bullet fires. Something in the AI pops. It falls. And Shepard recovers Kaidan.

“Grab that thing!” Shepard orders James.

Normandy hails her and Hackett’s predictions rang truer and too soon. Between the storm and the Reaper mass coming, she runs for the shuttle carrying 230lbs of man and metal on her shoulders.

Normandy flies in and opens the aft bay door. James and Liara head in first. Shepard climbs the ramp. Her quads ache and her VI tries to compensate the loss of strength.

She doesn’t care. She doesn’t feel it. She feels something else.

Words that weigh heavier than a fallen comrade. The final note in a break-up song yet the downward spiral continues. Kaidan’s hurt and it’s all because of her. She orders Joker to the Citadel but running doesn’t feel any better. Liara tells her they’re running for help not running away. Shepard ends up glaring at the body James drops on the exam table in Medical. Kaidan lies unconscious on the other one, the same one Illusive Man once sat. His sickly charm had worked on Chakwas too. She keeps Kaidan’s helmet on in case it’s the only thing holding his head and implants together. It also levels his spine as he lies in his suit. He’d complain about his neck if he woke up. When. She means when.

Shepard resists slamming her hands on the table.

EDI interrupts her brewing rage. “Commander, incoming transmission over the secondary QEC. It’s Admiral Hackett.”

Dread pulls the anger out and balls her hands into fists. She shuts her eyes and imagines her rank stripped as she explains her mistakes away. Maybe he’ll understand. Maybe he won’t care. Another big picture man wouldn’t care about this, right? As long as she can fix it and secure an edge in the war. She’ll make it right whatever it takes.

Even if she has to kill Illusive Man herself and be the last thing he sees.
She did and maybe-almost-a-little became inebriated with Bailey.

He never stops and her friends never stop telling her how wrong she is.

“Dammit, Shepard. I told you not to trust Cerberus.”

“Well, you had to have seen that coming.”

“A lot of Cerberus assassins are after me, Shepard. A lot. I have to stay hidden.”

“If you can’t beat ‘em, beat ‘em harder with a bigger stick.”

That last one she heard at Purgatory amongst a group of turians by the bar, probably trying to make a comrade feel better about the Reapers. She’s been going there a lot lately. The pulses, the volume, the lights, and the people all seem to empty out her brain and mix it into each shot she takes.

Shepard sits by the wall of moving lights, a sheet of abstract white and blue. A flight of shots rest on the circular table. Each one the same clear liquid except the one in her hand. It’s topped with a red syrup she’s told is spicy, and leaves a smooth heat on her tongue. A reward for herself once she downs the flight of seven.

Everything’s riding on her to save the galaxy. She hasn’t always been nice about teaming up with people. She snapped at the Council for all the bullshit she had enough of. Udina was right…until he wasn’t. And the Asari councilor just spoke with her about Thessia. Basically, she said “we can finally help you because my people need help now, so we need you to fix it!”

Seems Asari don’t lift a finger unless they need something. So much for Allies. Maybe these so-called alliances don’t work unless everyone’s in deep shit. But if they’re all in the deep how the hell do they get out? That might’ve been the thing Cerberus saw before they twisted.

She tries to stay positive by making lists of accomplishments. Liara suggested she try a journal, cataloguing was her word for it. Shepard already does but Liara didn’t mean the official reports, the templates that force you to write only the facts. She meant what really happens. She also wants a copy for her blackbox. Shepard hasn’t seen much improvement in her mood since she started writing.

Shepard takes out her datapad. Let’s see…ah. There it is. First accomplishment since the war:
relationship status - single (yay?). Recovered the data from Core’s body. EDI gains new platform. Get to stare at shell of what once replaced her (boo…).

Lists are so much fun that she starts the first shot with a quick jerk of her head and holds her breath before alcohol lingers long enough to taste. She could blow fire if she had a flame.

Rescued Primarch Victus. Acquired Garrus again. There’s a loyal friend who’s been through hell and back, Kaidan. Take notes. Did everything Victus needed but then Wrex showed up. And the Dalatrass.

Shot. The second one tastes worst than the first but she breathes it out.

Saved Jacqueline Nought. Cerberus mech quite cathartic.

Recovered a living Prothean artifact: a Prothean! His attitude is what she wishes she had.

Took out the Rachni queen. Let her die, really. Got Grunt back too.

Shot. Her tongue’s almost numb to it now.

Rescued female Krogan. Gained Mordin.

For Mordin! Shot.

Almost hugged Mordin. Wanted to say so many things. Maybe he was right. She did stop by a little too often for chats.

For Mordin again! Shot. Okay, now it’s water.

Saved the Krogan species! Wrex and Bakara are so happy. So…happy.

She holds the fifth. She can see through it to the wall dancing with light. To Thane. To Legion. To all the sorry bastards at the end of her scope. For uniting geth and quarian.

To unity in general but nothing remotely specific to what else she may or may not be thinking about.

Slam.

She reaches for the final. A C-Sec uniform stands before her. Bailey. He lifts the shot and sits in the opposite chair.

He says, “This menu item is for parties not a party of one.”

He slams it and sets the glass down on the slotted board.

“Bad day, too?”

“They’re all bad.” He wipes the corner of his mouth with one finger. “Can’t believe after what went down people still come here.”

“You took Psych to get that criminal justice degree. After trauma like that, there are people that reassess their lives, and people that completely avoid the truth.” Shepard waves the server down from a table of booters harrassing her.

“Right,” he says.
The server, a woman in metallic red, picks up the board after Shepard takes her spicy shot, and tips her twenty-five percent. She almost went with fifty but she might think she’s trying to get into her vinyl, or whatever that is. Her throat burns, her tongue sweats, and is she breathing fire? It feels like she could cook off a chicken with her nostrils.

Bailey asks, “So which one are you?”

“I’m on the cusp,” Shepard says, eyeballing the men oggling her server still. “You?”

“At the age where it doesn’t matter, so I try to help others fix theirs.”

“Just don’t give too much of yourself to people who don’t want to change.”

“Yeah. We would know about that.”

It’s easy to point out what she wants if she focuses. She wants justice. She wants to protect. In the blurry frame of people, her server tries to drop off her tray but one of the patrons brushes his hand on her thigh as she walks past.

“We would.” Shepard closes her datapad and compresses it to pen shape, then slides it in her pocket. “Wanna fix something?”

“How much am I going to give?”

“Your conscience will remain clean. Follow my lead.”

Shepard scrapes the chair back and leaves her drunken nest, following her target line straight through the crowd to the table of men yucking up their vile jokes. Some of them she’s said before they graduated to pull-ups. There’s five, all Alliance, all drunk. The longer she stands there, the shorter time the alcohol creeps to her head, and there’s double.

“How about you lay off that girl?”

They size up Shepard’s dress and curves, then they look past her. She feels Bailey behind her.

“What girl?” the man with darkest hair says.

The eyes on him tell her that’s their instigator.

A worried boot squeaks, “We weren’t doin’ anything. Wooley’s—he’s—”

Dark-haired d-bag named Wooley says, “We’re just enjoying ourselves, minding our own business.”

“Everything is my business, especially when I see a bunch of recruits breaking liberty protocol, and harassing all the ladies in this establishment.”

“All? No, no, no, no. I just played with—it doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t?” Shepard leans in. “Cuz I’m pretty sure you grabbed my chest during this conversation.”

“What!? I didn’t—!”

Bailey says, “And I’ll believe it. I’m gonna take her word over yours cuz you ain’t shit compared to a spectre.”
“Oh hell.” Wooley stands and Shepard grabs him back down. “You’re—I didn’t mean anything by it! We were just trying to earn some extra income!”

Bailey levels shoulders with her to see the entire table. “Say that again?”

He says, “That’s my girlfriend, Vie. We split tips cuz she heard from another dancer that people give more when they sympathize with them. We’ve only been doing it for a couple weeks. We didn’t mean anything by it! Honest! We just want more than what the military’s paying me for, that’s all. Can’t afford a condo here on a stripper’s paycheck and E-2 paygrade.”

Shepard can’t stand the way her arms feel at her sides. The irk crawls up her spine and slithers about her head. The server’s about the come back to their table but she stops in her track when Shepard stares her down. She pleads with Bailey but she should’ve been begging to her.

Bailey is only the barrier to pass when Shepard rolls around him, and she punches the woman in the eye. Her cheekbone stabs back against Shepard’s knuckles but it’s worth the angle. The emerging black eye will help their scam.

Hands grab Shepard and pull her back, but she’s done. She only needs to do it once to get artists like them the idea.

"Vie!” Wooley rushes to her side.

A great angle for her to kick him in the balls, but Bailey already has her back far enough to do no damage.

“That’s enough from you,” Bailey says.

Shepard shoots her hands up; she promises no more. She can’t even feel her arms anymore so she leaves them up; what a cool sensation, like her personal singularity field for her joints. She could sleep like this.

Bailey snatches Wooley’s collar and pulls him up. “If my men ever catch you scheming good people from their money again you’ll be getting more than just a ‘tip’ behind bars. Get hitched and grab BAH like everyone else who’s in it for the money.” He shoves him back and walks away.

“After you,” Bailey insists toward the exit.

There’s peace after a storm. Purgatory was loud, almost deafening. It’s nice to leave the chaos and find a place on the Citadel that’s remote, even if it’s the balcony outside Bailey’s office. It’s not much of a view, just more corridors and a small garden. People walk through the skywalk oblivious to her eyes locked on every one of them until Bailey steps out.

“I would have offered my place, but I heard you’re biased against microwave dinners.”

She could have been Thane. She could have grown up a weapon, be her own Snippy, trained in death but not her own, and die like him too.

He hands her a bottle from a local brewery she knows that’s by Anderson’s favorite fishing spot. She always wanted to go.

“Not water?”
She could have been like Mordin. Committed to a cause then discover she made the biggest mistake of her life that cost the lives of millions, only to fix it, and pay for it whole.

He untwists his own bottle.

“I’m not here to hold your hand,” he says. “I know you would’ve done that sober. I would have if I wasn’t so goddamn responsible now.”

“This must be my gateway to the underworld.” She sips. It’s cold, slightly bitter. “Punch a girl, life of crime.”

Bailey scoffs before slamming half his down.

But she’s herself. No one else is Jane Shepard. She just mothers the universe and cleans up their messes while everyone else cries about it. Would Mordin have thought he should have been like her? Or Thane? Thane would want her to be in her own head. He had instant connection to his memories, something that kept him aware of how much he’s lived as himself, and no one else. If she could do that, she’d probably be in a hospital. But if she could learn from them, she could live in the moment as they could live in memories. One present moment at a time and right now she’s with Bailey; she’s got a cold one in her hand and leaning on a railing, watching citizens go about embassy business, and the asari tree blossoms in the shade.

Bailey says, “Why the hell did you even try a stunt like that?”

“Because saving the galaxy from itself isn’t fucking simple!” she says. “Saving one lady from a bag of dicks at a bar is. If I could keep doing that, I’d be happy. But I couldn’t even pull that off. Nothing in this world is what I want it to be.”

“You keep getting shit on no matter what good you try to do. It’s never good enough.”

“Exactly.”

Maybe his promotion stuck him in a box where he couldn’t be a dirty cop with a good heart. Maybe after Udina he finally gets her more than most. He’s seen it firsthand, not like before her grounding.

“Fuck it.”

Bailey tilts his bottle neck and Shepard *tinks* it with hers.

“To zero fucks given,” he says. “But we try anyway cuz if we’re not tryin’, we’re dyin’.”

He drinks until there’s nothing left but a patch of bubbles.

“I always thought I’d get to tell my ex-wife a few things. I was supposed to see my kids back on Earth. First vacation in years, but I had to cancel since I got the promotion.”

One big oh-shit fills her mind and she doesn’t know what to say, so she tries to think of what she would have wanted to hear, something that would keep her going even if it’s an inevitable fail.

“Don’t give up,” she says softly, her hand softer on his shoulder. “You’ll see them again.”

A doubtful chuckle mixed with a whine leaves him, and he leans over the railing, eyeing the green span. “Thanks, Shepard.” He pats her hand and it’s dry and rough, but after the shots and beer, she feels more than his palm. Inhibitions crumbling. Emotions opening. Syncing common problems,
matching moral grounds. And then, his hand doesn’t leave. “You know, I—uh—”

A woman calls out, “Shepard!”

Bailey clears his throat and Shepard jerks her hand away but when they see the Liara walking through his office, detection hardly mattered.

“You are here,” she says.

Shepard twirls the last drop in her bottle, then dips the bottle on her tongue. Don’t want to waste a good brew, even if all she can taste is the bite. Maybe a nibble.

She stomps up to the balcony window, just before the couch. “That information the councilor gave you, we can’t sit on it while the Reapers are out there.”

She glances at Bailey.

“We have to go!”

Shepard takes in the blue eyes and aged face.

She says, “Fuck it.”

And hands him her empty drink before she’s dragged away like a teenager who broke curfew.

Chapter End Notes

Trying to summarize ME3 as best as possible. Hope it’s creative enough without all the info dumps but we NEED the end. Yes we do.
Tizzy! at the Discotheque Orb

Chapter Summary

Shepard deals with Thessia better than expected, she wins back Miranda at Sanctuary, and hosts a party after the clone fiasco. Snippy returns.

Whatever she drank at the bar stays with her on the shuttle to Thessia. No adrenaline saves her when they see Liara’s world burning as they drop behind friendly lines, but the blood pumping, and time between the bar and now eases her stupor to a low buzz. Since they reached the temple, it hasn’t affected her aim, in fact it’s improved with the lower heart rate, and less tension. Up until she hears a banshee’s scream, that is. Liara gets them through the temple doors carrying the highest price to get there on their shoulders. Shepard stands over the scientists at the edge of the pools of blood. She was talking with the Prothean VI. Was.

“Indoctrinated presence detected,” it says before it freaks out, and 'hides.'

Javik and Liara about-face to see Kai Leng approach.

Shepard watches Thane fall and she doesn’t remember firing her gun. It misses Leng’s head. How!? She rechecks Lenny the Locust, then fires again, and misses again.

“The Drell had a better time than you,” Leng says. “So stop trying. Someone would like to speak with you.”

If that someone shows up in an omni-tool, she’ll definitely get him between the eyes. Just line up the faces and boom. Done. Kai Leng takes out a compact holo device. The same one she remembers when she got stuck in the taxi on the Presidium. The very same but now it’s in his chest.

That fucking disco ball.

Illusive Man pops up full bodied and more smug than last time. He’s prismatically translucent for a tool.

“Shepard,” he says.

Nope! She fires at it but the bullet whizzes through.

He says, “It’s not a drone you can shoot out of the sky.”

She motions her squad to keep their weapons ready. Leng could backstab them any time; the talk could just be a ruse rather than a power flaunt.

“How did you find this place?” she asks.
“The Archives.” He smirks. “Or did your Shadow Broker miss that one?”

“Show yourself,” Liara says. “I promise I won’t miss.”

“Violence belongs to Shepard.” He struts toward the beacon. “Stick to your talents, Dr. T’Soni. Yours helped uncover the key to subjugating the Reapers.”

“This tune again.” Shepard rolls her eyes.

He turns about. “Dammit, Shepard!” He’s shorter than her without his armor. “What you want will gain us nothing but their destruction.”

And whinier too.

“Except peace, bat hat.”

“They want to control us. We need to control them back! If they wanted us gone there would be nothing left already.”

“Whose side are you on? Really!?”

Why is she even arguing this? She should be chewing on Leng’s throat by now. Didn’t she learn anything from Bailey? Is she really this stupid?

“I know them, Shepard. I know how they think.”

“I bet you do.” She is that stupid but not as stupid as this. “I bet you’re all sorts of connected to their line of thinking.”

“No. I’m saying they’ve got it right. Why kill when you can control?”

“Is that why you haven’t killed me? Just everyone I care about?”

“Not at all.”

“Don’t you see they’re pulling you over to their side? They’re tearing us apart because a divided race is easily conquered!”

“No I just see things differently.”

“You cared about humanity once. You might have cared about me. If any of it is true you’ll stop fighting me, you’ll stop listening to whatever they’re whispering to you! You need to join me to stop them.”

“Don’t ever question my intentions. I’ve sacrificed more for humanity than you’ll ever know. And don’t assume you know me. My methods for dealing with the Reapers are simply more refined than yours.”

He stands there believing this crap and she stand there with him! She hates him! She hates him! She hates him! So why can’t she move!? Why is she still trying!?

“There was a time I empathized with your cause. Now you’ve lost complete sight of it. Cerberus was supposed to be humanity’s sword, not a dagger in the back.”

Gawd, that was lame. Now she’s saying lame shit. She hates him more.
“Poetic but again you miss the point. The world is more gray than you care to admit.”

“Looks pretty black and white from here. I don’t agree with you therefore you’re against me. Nothing gray about it except the hair on your head.”

“You do have a point there.” He walks the disco ball back to his dog. “Leng, the commander has something I need. Please relieve her of it.”

Oh you did not…

Shepard yells, “I left my hair dye back on the Normandy, Leng! Go fetch!”

Illusive Man mutters, “pain in the—” before he disconnects.

Leng unsheathes his blade, a space katana against guns is necessary to him for some reason, and says, “Now we can--hiding already?”

Shepard had cloaked when he put the ball back in his chest. One second distracted is her win. She forgets the gun when she sneaks behind him and clocks him across the head. Her glove crackles between her skin and his visor. For sure her already damaged knuckles are now swelling with fluid. She tries to do it again but he spins and flips and—well he just looks ridiculous.

“Learn that in gymnastics class with the other girls?” Shepard says.

“No,” he says, “they went to flight school.”

At the temple entrance, a blinding light beams across the room, and danger bristles her neck hair.

“GET DOWN!” Shepard yells and leap-falls into cover.

Cerberus air support. The machine guns scream, blasting holes through any soft and hard cover, and blowing debris into the air until it makes a fog. Liara yells something across the pews but her radio can barely overcome the .50cal.

“He has some kind of forcefield!”

Shepard catches on and sees Leng in a dense hamster sphere. It’s recharging him; he’s a battery.

Leng calls out, “You’ve had your fun, Shepard. A pity the good ones never last.”

“That says a whole lot more about you, doesn’t it!?”

“Oh it does.”

Shepard hears the gunship drift away, and when she sees an image of a man in the blue and white, she unloads bullets. Leng stops them with his hand, a frontal barrier, and not one bullet clips him to feed her hunger for his blood.

“Target the supports,” he orders to his headset.

The rest blurs in her fury as the building’s pillars explode away and Liara and Javik dodge the falling the debris. Shepard’s innards sink to her gut when the floor gives underneath her and all she sees is darkness as she scrambles to grab onto anything.

Anything.
Liara yells for her and what had been her only saving grace falls to the hidden Prothean ruins as Shepard’s fingertips slip off the edge of the flooring. Liara snatches her up, but Shepard plus armor is heavy; Javik hoists her up from her belt, then rolls her leg weight over the failing stability. But all she sees is a ship flying away and Javik’s holstered weapons. She seizes his rifle and jumps to a full run, firing everything at Kai Leng. He’s far and she doesn’t care. He’s gone and she doesn’t care. She hears Illusive Man’s voice over and over and finally the last of her thermal clip.

Thessia burns hazy orange. Not the blue she remembers. Not what Liara grew up in. It’s Earth, it’s Palaven, and now…

Asari voices radiate in her ear, frequency noise, and no way to answer back. Shepard listens to Liara’s people fall in the line of her purpose, her reason to come here. She put them in harm’s way. *She* did.

Reapers black out the view as people scream, wondering if any of it was worth dying for. Shepard feels Liara’s touch and she rips her arm away and shuts off the channel to call the shuttle.

She puked on the ride back.

“Shepard,” Liara whispers, leaning over the war table, staring at Thessia and the Reaper forces moving in. “Nobody predicted Cerberus would reach Thessia before us.”

“I should have,” Shepard says, sipping at a container of water. It was not fun news to give the Asari Councilor. Like answering the comm when she ditched therapy during her parent’s divorce.

Kaidan, James, and the crew stand around the table, stricken of happiness, but not their spirit.

“I fucked Cerberus,” Shepard continues, “and now they’re fucking all of you. This is on me.”

“Let’s wring their balls for a change,” James says.

Shepard flips off the holo. “I’m with Vega.” She examines EDI and Traynor in the room, then Kaidan, then Liara who’s trying her best not to cry in the war room. “Any ideas?”

And Traynor swoops in with a brilliant find:

Sanctuary.

It’s where Oriana’s voice pleads anyone to stay away, but where she is, her sister isn’t far. After all Miranda explained to her while they spoke on the Citadel, or via mail, Sanctuary was an end for the Lawsons. And the final paycheck from the Illusive Man.

Miranda exhales, staring at her father’s corpse she pushed out the window. Sanctuary is rubble and the comm towers are back up, issuing repeated warnings. Their conversation resonates the last time they met on the Citadel as Miranda sees to Oriana.

“He wanted Commander Shepard, not a drone,” Miranda had said.

“His demise,” Shepard plays off apathy but her heart aches. He wanted her as her, not something to be controlled. At some point, it changed, but in the beginning, it was simple, and she felt free.
“I just wanted you to know I always regretted wanting that chip.”

“You’re not your father,” Shepard had said, “and neither am I.”

Now, Miranda sees to Shepard, and Oriana waits while Vega gives her a quick check-up.

“About your father,” Shepard says.

“I’m glad he’s gone, Shepard,” Miranda says. I’m sorry if that sounds cold.”

It is…but she understands. Garrus files through the computer, sifting data, finding anything he can, but Miranda fans a device in her grasp. She inspects it, quiet for the longest time, then looks up at Shepard, and confidently hands it over.

“Before Kai Leng evacuated, I planted a tracer on him. If you act fast, you’ll track him right to the Illusive Man.”

“You always think of everything,” Shepard says.

“Not quite but nobody’s perfect.”

The silver box activates in Shepard’s glove and a local map springs up on the screen. The arc of Illusive Man’s demise.

Got you, bastard.

All Shepard knows is now it’s just point and shoot. She was relieved when she got to run the other way as Hackett and Anderson voluntold the crew to take leave for retrofits. Something she hadn’t done since Mom’s case a year ago. House arrest doesn’t count. If there was one thing she would have gotten wrong, it would be that she couldn’t pull the trigger on Illusive Man. End Cerberus and permanently end her ex-lover. She only fantasized shooting exes like any other sane girl with a broken heart. But to critically think of the act…she would have to think like Illusive Man. It’s for the greater good of humanity. End Cerberus; save humanity.

She almost had time to write more in her journal after she settled in the apartment, but a clone interfered. What’s strangest about it all was staring back at herself and she felt like she had been there before.

A mirror of her exactness sleeping, waiting. Only this one was alive and hated every second she breathed.

Familiar.

Almost as if…

It was a dream, she tells herself. Or she was happily drunk and was trying to talk to the fish in the tank again. Sorry I killed your kin at the sushi place. Yeah, she could see herself talking to fish and seeing her reflection.

The morning after all hell gates closed and the crew finally partied until they crashed, Shepard
awakens to an empty bed; she’s spread across tucked sheets and a ruffled comforter. Someone took off her shoes and aligned them against the side table.

Muttering permeates the halls from the lower level. Two people in a hushed argument. Shepard stretches and regrets raising her arms. Her shoulders and back moan with lactic acid. Geezus. Did she deadlift a shifty cow? She makes it through her home, trudging crisp, clean late midnight air, but feels like Jupiter.

“—solutely ridiculous. —a terrible idea.”

“—she needs this.”

“—the repercussions.”

“Please trust me.”

Shepard freezes on top of the stairs. Miranda’s back peeks around the corner as she faces the kitchen. Shepard sneaks down the stairs to catch her talking to what sounds like Liara.

“What’s going on?” she says.

Miranda spins about, heels locked against each other, almost at exaggerated attention. Then, she fidgets with her uniform’s neck line, and after a while, heavily sighs.

Only her and Shepard stand alive. The forever night outside beams traces of gold and red across the quiet, blue living room. The clock on the fridge glows 0358hrs.

“Why are you up so…late?” Shepard whispers, meeting Miranda by the wall.

“That doesn’t matter,” Miranda says with such quietness. “Liara insists I give this to you now. Call it a mental boost for the cause.”

T’Soni reveals herself around the corner with a cup of tea. Not the only ones alive. They convene around the counter where a suspicious crate rests.

“I thought you could use it before when we face Cerberus. How does Garrus say it? Just like old times.”

Old times, huh? She pops the lock and the hinges creak when she lifts the lid. Shepard strokes the receiver, where someone intricately painted red shapes along it, blending into the grip with his name inscribed on the side: Snippy.

Her long, long lost friend, and appendage.

He’s smooth, recently wiped down, except where the muzzle darkens from last time she used him.

“Is there a cleaning kit in here somewhere?” Shepard lifts the foam and beside some stashed ammo in the corner is a pouch and chimney cleaner attachments, although in the field she called them donkey dicks. “Be back.” She re-situates the crate and takes it in one arm. “Thanks for this.”

“You’re welcome, Shepard,” Liara says.

Miranda nods before she sits down, and browses the assortment of tea Liara left by the pot, shaking her foot hastily on the resting bar of her stool.

In the walk-in closet by the jacuzzi, Shepard inspects the muzzle. The cleaning kit open and
splayed across the bench. Why would anyone clean the gun but not the most important part of any piece? She double checks the thermal clips aren’t loaded, then strips the rifle apart, tilting each piece this way and that until she gets to the long barrel, and something slips out, and drops on the bench with a tink.

“Hello, FOD.” She scrutinizes it between two fingers. “What are you?”

The cylindrical chip, smaller than her recruiting coordinator’s whistle during fit tests, looks like it goes somewhere, but nothing else comes out of the gun. Shepard rests her elbows and rotates the thing until whatever’s inside should wish to puke. Then finally, she notices a line thinner than a hair strand, and she pokes her fingernail at it. The cylinder opens, a capsule that unfolds like a scroll with very little words on it. Just five.

The closet door shuts suddenly. It’s dark, save the bench light.

“Hello?” she says.

She tries the door; it’s snug in the lock and barely budges under her strength.

“Miranda?” she calls out.

No one answers.

Shepard activates her omni-tool and the room illuminates orange. “Miranda!”

Silence in the glow quickens her heart rate but it’s an easy fix. Just bust apart the door; she can afford it. She brings her leg back—

Her omni-tool beeps and a voice emits: “Janey.”

“Holy hell!” She tries smacking her wrist but the picture remains of a voice reading.

“To you, I’m dead. To me, I’ve moved on.” The frequency flickers with pitch and volume. Waves dance along her arm and there’s no point in trying to stop it. “I’m just another world apart from you and…I know you hate me. I’d hate me too.” The waves shudder under Henry’s fluxing exhales. “Just wanted to say how proud I am. And that I know you won’t give up. Don’t give up. You’re the strongest woman I’ve ever known and I boast to our people that you’re my daughter every day, every chance. You’re so close, Jane. I feel it. Read the words I’ve given as my gift to you. Happy birthday, sweetheart. Oh and don’t attack the wall. Love you!”

The wave flattens, then shuts itself off and her omni-tool disappears.

She’s left in the sharp beam from the lamp clamped on the bench, illuminating the little words left behind by the dead.

“April showers bring Jane flowers.”

The wall flicks on, an 48-inch screen of nothing at first, then a feed activates, showing Illusive Man’s chair.

“…Mir—” almost shouts, then stops when Illusive Man enters from the left, holding an identical scroll.

Henry’s voice emanates from Illusive Man’s comm. “…Sometimes you have to fall apart to understand how much you need her. Read the words aloud if you still care for Jane. And don’t try
to track this; it’ll only lead you to a dying sun. Toodles.”

“Toooldes…” Illusive Man mutters.

He paces around his chair, then sits, and replaces the cylinder with the cigarette case. He lights up and rubs his temple, holding his breath for a while before letting it out.

“Shepard,” he says. “I don’t know how you found your way in here, but if you’re watching this, you’ll know I’ve already dispatched agents to your location, which is not a dying sun. I’ve known your whereabouts for some time; it’s only a matter of when I get to you. This love note is obviously a trap; I won’t subject myself to such foolishness if it isn’t. Consider my warning a promise that your time has come. I normally have no quarrel with the likes of you, but you broke into my station, and I have no choice. I will end you.”

“No!” she cries out and Illusive Man looks right at her.

“Commander Shepard?” He stands cautiously.

This isn’t a trap, it’s something more. She knows it! She feels it! She has to try!

She shouts, “Meteor showers give Jane powers!” The shit Henry makes people say.

Illusive Man freezes. Did the camera lag? The smoke moves, so no. What’s going on?

He presses his hand against his forehead, looking delirious, searching for a clue, then her screen must have flipped on his end—his attention shoots right for her. “Jane!”

“Oh my gawd,” she says.

“Jane!” he fumbles in his breast pocket then pulls out the cylinder and scrambles to unroll and read. “Deadly as the art of Jack.”

Millions of everything she hadn’t remembered race across time and run her through and over until she locks on to one singular memory: Jack. He wore white and a smile only around her. Such feeling overwhelms her and instead of saying all the things she wants to, she breaks down, and every tear is a word meant for him. He extinguishes his smoke beneath his shoe and nears the camera.

“Times I wish I installed a VI communicator in you but the original didn’t come with a phone.”

She breaks into laughter and almost hiccups as she wipes her cheeks.

“We’re almost there,” he changes the subject.

She sniffs. “Why can’t you stop Cerberus?” And grins. “Mainly you, you ass?”

“I can’t stop the timeline or I would. It happens this way or the Reapers might figure out what’s going on.”

She brushes her hair out of her face and knows he’s watching, so she bites her lip the way he likes. She gets a smirk as receipt.

“I think we’re going to kill each other,” he says.

She chuckles. “I think you’re right.”
He chuckles with her.

Shepard leans forward, tracing every line on his face with her eyes, every angle in his blue irises, and strand of hair out of place. She’s kissed the scar on his chin fewer times than she wanted. She’ll make up for it after.

“How much time did he give us?” she asks.

“Not enough,” he says.

“Then I’ll watch you ’til you’re gone,” she says.

“Try not to blink,” he says.

It was a dream, she tells herself…

Shepard awakens to an empty bed; she’s spread across tucked sheets and a ruffled comforter, with the impression that someone slept on top of the covers with her. That someone had taken her shoes and aligned them against the side table.

James’ voice permeates the halls with a waft of breakfast and coffee.

“—Eggs? Kaidan, eggs? Miranda? You gotta try these eggs…”

She grabs her shoes and notices a datapad lying on the ground. Could have fallen from the side table. She ignores it at first, but when she gets her left shoe strapped on, she glances over and catches a name that pings her curiosity, and cracks the dam holding back the cares she stored away.

Mordin Solus.

Is it too early to invade the liquor cabinet?

"Morning," she tells everyone in the kitchen when she makes it, trying to rub away the red in her eyes, feigning a yawn so she can wipe the last of her tears.

"An early birthday present arrived for you," Miranda says.

Kaidan heaves a crate from behind the counter and places it next to a full carafe of dark brew.

Shepard opens it and Snippy rests comfortably in foam packaging. He’s painted red with his name on the stock. He’s wiped clean and spotless. After she checks the chamber, she looks down the muzzle—so shiny it’s like she never fired it.

Her insides swell with purpose and belonging, and peace overcomes, like a severed limb reattached, and she’s whole once more.
Chapter Summary

Is it getting darker or is the mood just waning? Shepard cracks a monitor and some jokes to feel better.

Chapter Notes

Was gonna call it The Queen's Sacrifice after the aesthetically and tactically brilliant chess move, but Shepard's not down yet.

It’s an unjust suicide having a type, the kind that’s emotionally unavailable, physically beyond her means in age or race. She used to think there’d be The One. Illusive Man came and her quiet volcano became the galaxy’s nemesis. It could have been before that, watching Henry give up on his family, leaving her daughter with no closure as she was helpless on Kahje, vulnerable to Illusive Man’s charms, and that musk. Clean, soap left under a cold waterfall after a storm. On a hot day it would be a sin to resist and Kahje was humid, too heavy to wear clothes. Henry’s death set her inhibitions free, but Illusive Man steered, and a vessel of damaged goods is doomed to sink. And the captain as crazy to try and keep her. At least he stayed behind with her as she went down. So there could have been one, but not The.

Snippy counts over one hundred kills through the Cronos Station, scrolling accuracy and averages in her visor feed. Lenny got a few as well, but nothing is so satisfying as a long barrel from her hip after a cloak and flank, seeing the target’s helmet turn a centimeter before pow.

On the monitor screen, Illusive Man sits on an exam table with a female retrieving his vitals.

What Shepard’s done to his troops she could turn the gun on the computer so fast, but they talk. She wishes there isn’t audio, but in an empty corridor, a calm before the hail of bullets, she almost welcomes it filling the steel blue dark.

“Sir, you wanted my opinion on this,” she says. “It’s too dangerous.”

“No,” he says. “We’re close. Sanctuary was a success. We can control Reaper forces. Everything we’ve been fighting for, every sacrifice we’ve made, it’s about to pay off.”

She moves into his proximity. “We can’t lose you, sir. Humanity needs your mind and we need you intact.”

“I understand the danger, Jana.” He leans and rests his elbows on his knees. “That’s why I’m
trusting you with this. As long as you’re here, you’ll keep me in line.”

Jana strains, almost playful. “I’m holding you to that, sir. Okay…” She toys with her datapad, updating the approach.


EDI says, “I’m receiving data on Jana now. She is the assistant to the Illusive Man, covering secretarial work to managing the scientific and medical branches. Illusive Man may have been mentoring her for a larger role than merely—”

Shepard kicks in the table. Pixels frozen in low resolution, barely making out his face, and she punches the screen anyway. When the sting shoots through her hand it releases that buzz, an urge to do it again. And again. The monitor’s a thick web of nothing when she backs off.

“Let’s go,” she says.

And hides the grin as she struts away when she hears Garrus put a bullet through the computer for cathartic deeds.

The door at the end leads to a long ramp through a bottomless room. At the top is the next door, with zero cover on either side. He knows how she maneuvers. He knows how much she hates this, how vulnerable her team is. He could be on the other side and blast them away. She squeezes her grip on Snippy.

Garrus says, “Ever play that fantasy game where you team up and have that drawn out hallway just before the boss the size of a dreadnought?”

“My database suggests all fantasy games meet those perimeters,” EDI says.

“I knew I should’ve shot him when he was on the Normandy…”

“Here’s your second chance,” Shepard says.

The door lock’s green and the tile beyond that lures her in. It mirrors the infinite stars, as disorienting as she was in space, launched into oblivion with the Normandy so far, her father even more distant, and the station blown apart on one end. Silence all around except her breath. She had held onto Illusive Man, a cat clawed into its person before a bath.

He knew that too.

“Shep,” Garrus nudges.

It spans several dozen yards, or it looks that way. Curved panels produce a cinematic view of the blazing star, and the Cerberus falling to Alliance Navy; a fitting backdrop to his master computer; a command center much like Liara’s but transparent and simplified. He could have seen more than what she sees now, a virtual supplement to the screens. She never did find out what those eyes were about.

She steps up onto a platform and stiffens. Not a platform; the only one. A video transponder, scanning her image for him, and sending a likeness all these nebulae away. He undressed her with his imagination, and eventually her armor did come off. That ridiculous high she got teasing him, but he’d tease back, and she knew they’d have to do something about it.
She unruffles her feathers and brings the blood back into her fingers, then double times it to his chair. It’s not even comfortable; her ass would be asleep in five minutes if she leaned back. Must be how old men stay awake these days.

“Help me locate the Prothean VI,” she says to EDI.

But she’s already on it at the starboard end of the holo-screens.

“Shepard.”

That voice.

She doesn’t turn. There’s a digital accent, a hiss from the transponder. He’s not here. He might have been before they landed, but already well gone.

“You’re in my chair,” he says.


“Very amusing, Shepard.”

Shepard swirls back enough to see Illusive Man where she would be, and she dangles her legs over the arm, her back on the other and feigns luxurious comfort. “It’s all I can do when you’re bringing everybody else down. Even yourself. Cerberus is finished.”

“Quite contrary,” he says. “We’ve achieved everything I’ve ever imagined. Almost everything.”

“I saw Sanctuary. We all did. It’s not the same as controlling a Reaper.”

“A significant hurdle.”

“Yeah just one more step to it.” She gets up and it’s relief. “What is the Catalyst?”

“You’ll have to ask the VI yourself. I’m done helping you.” He jabs his nicotine-stained finger at her.

She scoffs. “Pfft. When did you start?”

“You think because I’m willing to use the enemy’s tactics that they’re no longer my enemy?”

“Never saw a Nazi killing a Nazi without an ulterior motive.”

“Everything, Shepard, everything I’ve done has uplifted humanity. Not only above other species in our galaxy, but over the Reapers!”

“You’re willing to do whatever it takes? Then hand over the Catalyst! We’ll end this with the Crucible.”

“It’s not that simple.”

He’s as stubborn as her! Her feet burn up and the armor VI runs frantic keeping her cool.

“It is that simple,” she snarls. “We’re fighting each other while Reapers occupy Earth! It’s time to stop.”

“Your idealism is admirable, Shepard.”
“You used to hate it.”

“I never hated it. I never hated any part of you. In the end, it was our goals that became too disparate. I believe destroying the Reapers is the worst mistake we could ever make. And nothing you could say will ever convince me otherwise.”

“Even with Cerberus’ ashes still hot you think you can do this your way.”

“I knew you’d say something like that. Cerberus isn’t people or a building. Cerberus is an idea that cannot be destroyed. Besides,” he takes a drag, “I’ve already acquired what you’re looking for.”

“EDI?” Shepard glances back.

“I’ve almost got it,” EDI says.

“EDI, I’m surprised at you, working so hard to bring about the Reapers’ destruction. You could’ve destroyed Eva’s body, but instead you chose to control it.”

“It was necessary,” she says.

He smugly replies, “My point exactly.”

“You won’t get anyone in bed with you with a mug like Sovereign,” Shepard says. “Or Harbinger.”

“Guy was a creep,” Garrus says and she almost forgot he was in the room. He mimics him with a girly voice, “‘I know you feel this.’”

Illusive Man takes another drag, hiding his disdain.

The Prothean VI pops up in his green elegance.

“I’ve got it,” EDI says.

“Enjoy your little chat,” Illusive Man says, “but don’t overstay your welcome.”

Shepard puckers and tucks her chin. “‘This hurts you.’”

“‘Our power is unmatched,’” Garrus adds.

Illusive Man throws a hand up in the air and shuts himself off, muttering elaborate obscenities that probably last well after, and hopefully until they meet again; she’d like to finish the comedy hour. Would Mordin have been proud?

She doesn’t linger in her victory, not yet. She asks the VI what she needs to know.

Then the VI says, “The Catalyst is the Citadel. Illusive Man has informed the Reapers and it is currently in Reaper-controlled space.”

And her Twelfth Night crumbles into Romeo & Juliet.
Closed Eyes on the Apex

Chapter Summary

Shepard meets the consequences of loving more than she could grasp.

Chapter Notes

Inspirational Songs: "All of Me" by John Legend, “When It’s All Over” by RAIGN, “Heaven Help Me” by RAIGN

Edit: I revised this chapter immediately after because I didn't like how Anderson's scene violated the relationship between Jack and Jane. Death is sacred and the moments following should never be interrupted. Hope the scene flows better as well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Then…

Illusive Man stands, a lion over his domain, inhaling the bitter need from his cigarette, and expelling it across the room, toward what’s left of the Reaper from Shepard’s failure, and outright insubordination. Jana drops a report off. He had ignored her loud entrance as she walked along the catwalks to get to him.

“Essential personnel have evacuated, sir,” Jana says. “Alliance ETA one hour.”

“Thank you,” he says.

“Are you sure you want to leave him behind?” Jana says.

“Yes. Give him the rendez-vous coordinates. Once I disembark, change them.”

“He is a good soldier to you. Why do this now?”

“Leng was always a hazard, useful, but just as Shepard’s time is up, he is at his end. See to it they both pay.”

“Sir, why not tell him yourself?”

Illusive Man cannot deny results, but he had watched the scenario on Thessia from his feed, streamed by a sentry Jana’s science team designed, similar to his projector, or “fucking disco ball.” Her pet names for him grow more colorful the longer they live in this galaxy gone awry. He hadn’t planned on finishing her on Thessia but Leng almost rewrote the objectives. He thinks of the
crumbling temple, the floor breaking, how he was stuck in his command suite, and he reached out to grab her, but his hand went through the interface.

“No!” he had said.

Illusive Man grips the railing so tight his bones ache.

“Because I’m telling you to do it.” He turns his head and stares.

“Yes, sir,” Jana pushes out like an apology and leaves faster and quieter than she came.

He knew Shepard could have saved herself so why did he react? In one slice of a nanosecond he grew an emotion he thought he was rid of: worry. He looks in the space where Jana trembled, and revisits a concept they had intended for later, but it seems he will need to move on it sooner if he is to be rid of this sickness.

Human emotion.

Now...

It’s been forever. She’s exhausted, blown off her feet by fire and shockwaves from Harbinger. Retaliating for the jokes, more likely; they never had a sense of humor. She had touched the beam, a white blue warmth that she thought would disappear after she made it, but if Anderson’s up here, the beam remains, and can spit out anyone who falls in like she did.

Shepard trudges on though every part burns, infuriated that she won’t sit down, and die. Unaccepting that the mission is still underway. Exhausted, never seeing an end, except for everyone else. All the bodies piled along the corridors—she has to believe Bailey evacuated in time, but Lady Luck liked her better when she sided with Illusive Man.

There’s nothing left of her armor, and if they hadn’t issued the fire retardant uniforms, she’d be Alliance Navy forever, with her shoulder boards seared into her flesh. It’s that cheery thought that moves her one step further until her body remembers walking. And though it’s been long, wading through the motions, each chapter closing her life up to this point, she reaches down, and breathes. Just before she arrives at the main chamber, before she feels her body max, a step away from dropping to her knees, and fall failing, a tune sparks in her head, and it’s just enough of a distraction that she listens, and she starts to hum.

*I’ve studied species turian, asari, and batarian...*

She passes through the rising plates with re-emerging vigor. The plates shift as the Shadow Broker’s ship did, and that must be where he got his information from. The aliens beyond alien; constructs of demise. She recognizes no one among the piles and counts that blessing, but if she’s going to be honest this close to death, she’s looking elsewhere. She sees the Shroud on Tuchanka. The elevator can’t be far. She can get to Mordin. It’s just up the ramp.

*I’m quite good at genetics which is a subset of biology...*
That’s what she tells herself. Reach Mordin, reach Thane, Williams, Anderson, everyone. Her feet make the movements, but each step radiates tingles, and then pressure. Going numb can be good, if she chooses to die right now, but why waste all efforts to turn around at the gates?

...of which I am an expert which I know is a tautology...

Mordin never desisted from his goal. He went right to the top and so should she, unafraid of their last years as long as they make them count. He believed in a wheel, that life circulates to ease the struggle of shorter years, yet in one life, he made more difference than any, as if it wasn’t reincarnation he depended on, but the value of limited time with uncertainty. No one is certain that’s why it’s called faith. Mordin’s leap would be testament if she saw him on the other side.

When she passes the door to the command chamber, she doesn’t know what she had expected, but it wasn’t this.

She feels the heat of Illusive Man’s will pinning her finger to the trigger and how soft it is to pull, but facing down the target in her sights leaves a sick taste in her mouth, as she bites her lip to try and make any of this heartache real. Physical pain she can understand—a cut, a bullet wound, a bruise from a night of passion, and several days of teasing, yet here he is in cold insistence that everything he knows is the right thing, and all she knows that’s right is to—

The gun goes off.

Anderson stumbles back but stiffened from Illusive Man’s puppeteering. He would have been okay if he stayed behind. He could have rallied in the back. He didn’t have to follow!

She lectures every valid point musterable but there’s no point when the blackness tears his face; he’s barely human. Reapers spun him into this monster and she watched from the captain’s seat all that could have been, now bleeding in front of her. Anderson falls as Illusive Man breaks his concentration. The room spins the grayed orange of the Catalyst and her chest throbs dry, as if she’s breathed air too hot and now her insides reject it.

“I only wanted to protect humanity,” Illusive Man says. “We can control them; it will work! I just…”

If Shepard had a dog who gotten too old and too sick, she would have held onto him until he couldn’t take the pain any longer. And if he was too stupid to know better than to die, she’d help with that too.

She looks down her arm, it’s still locked ahead. Down the barrel, the Illusive Man looks back. He still has a choice. He can still fight. She’s doing it now. Why can’t he?

“It’s not too late…” she says.

Mom talked about it. No matter how much they hurt you you still care for them because of what they gave you, and what they didn’t.

“I…I can’t, Shepard.”

“Yes you can!”

Tears rewet the blood on her face.
Illusive Man straightens and looks at her. One thousand pictures rush her head. She once knew him by name and called him a dozen times and argued a dozen more. The dance they shared, the dress he made her, the deceptions to protect her, and how Mom hugged him with a secret wisdom. What did she know, dammit!?

Then, he hides behind Anderson and the room stills, her heart stops in the brief slow motion just before the act.

“You’d undo everything I’ve accomplished.” Illusive Man takes Anderson’s sidearm and steps away, in clear sight, and primes the weapon. “I won’t let that happen.”

What she would do for the greater good he would too. They’ve been gunning each other too long.

“What’s humanity worth if you can’t even save the ones you love?” Shepard begins. “Because of the Reapers, we don’t even have each other anymore!”

“That’s not true.”

“They took you away from me! They put it in your head that I am the threat to your cause but I’m a threat to theirs! Not you!” Emotions stab her skull and the sting surfaces from her throat first.

“Not…you. I believed in you before all this. Even when we went crazy after Henry died. Then I saw you change. You weren’t the one I fell in love with. I had to leave. You didn’t belong to me anymore.”

“I’m not their slave, Shepard.”

“Then tell them to back off. Do it.”

Pressure overcomes her and presses against her skull. A migraine with tunnel vision and no way to move.

Illusive Man strains. “I know…it will work.”

“You can’t. You’re just controlling me like they want you to. Like they’ve always wanted. But you can break their hold. You can free yourself and save us all.”

“They’re too strong…”

Pain turns to vigor, the delirium of no sleep before she crashes.

“Do it!” she yells.

“I…”

“Do it for me!”

He drops to his knees and cries a whimper. “I can’t!” He pulls at his hair. “It’s not…working!”

“Try, Jack!”

“I am!”

His eyes redden and shine. He shakes and exhausts every effort to move something—anything—to prove he has the will, but there’s only so much energy in one, weakened, spent body. The writhing ceases, a calm washes over, and he’s still, until he lifts his head, and looks at her like she threw herself over the cliff to grab him, and he’s about to let go. And then…
“Jane?” He blinks.

His gravelly voice beckons and she feels a euphoric release in her head. Tunnel vision subsides but she still can’t move. He stands upright.

“I’m sorry. I am so sorry.”

He squeezes his eyes shut and she regains function. She breaks for the control panel but everything hurts. Her bones stab and the hole in her stomach bitches the most.

From what she read beforehand, Hackett’s people created a simple process to open the mechanism, and translated it in every language, even kept the Prothean. The Citadel mirrors such design and the shutter seal breaks away. Earth shines in spite of the fire.

“We did it,” she says.

She turns and every chunk inside sinks at the quaking gun barrel aimed so precise she can see his crystal eye in the sights.

He says her name between clenched teeth, his body rigid and trapped in melancholic beauty of his messed chrysalis.

“It’s okay,” she says.

And it is. She’d be all right if this is the last thing she sees. She’s done her job and she can die knowing that. She sees what’s she’s done in her life and only regrets those she didn’t save. It’s okay, Jack. One life or one hundred, she valued every minute, and put more into the universe than took out. She followed her mother’s morals and learned from her father’s shortcomings. She’s lusted and loved, indulged and behaved. She traveled worlds and is home again. She’s up in the tower with Mordin, she’s in the bar with Bailey, shopping with Miranda, at a park with Liara, and dinner’s almost ready with Joker drooling as he sets the table. Mom’s free and so’s Dad. Sooner than later, it doesn’t matter. They’ll all be together. And Jack will be there too. The fifth seat reserved just for him when it’s done and he pulls the trigger. He gets the last shot she saved for him and she couldn’t be more content. He’s the wisdom she sought in Mordin, the compassion in Bailey, and the charm in Henry. He showed her that lust reciprocates and has insatiable reason to become more. He taught her to walk like giants and how to dance. And she fell for him and this is the consequence. When giants fall, they watch the horizon slowly turn, the sky becomes the floor, the earth their heaven, thunder cracks, and the ground quakes. Because when giants fall everyone feels it. When the universe ends, this is the truth; this is why.

He says, “I loved you the entire way.”

Each cell aches every feeling she’s had since they met. Now burnt and begging for the calm. They know, else they’d rage to survive one more mission, one more battle. Just one more. They’re sore and accepting. She’s ready. It’s not the Reapers, she tells herself. It’s Jack.

It’s Jack.

And he fights every ounce within, and when she convinces herself it was him all along, a twisted peace overcomes him, and he turns the barrel—

“Don’t-don’t-don’t!” She lunges—

Bang!
Muzzle flash and the vacant expression. Blood sprays from the exit hole and she grabs him as he falls with poise given to the great men who deserve better endings. Her side roars in protest, but she’s deaf to it as she wails Jack’s name in the pouring tears, rocking him tightly against her chest. A waft of cologne catches in her nose and she’s back in the bed with cool, white sheets, in their clean, bare skin. Then she thinks of how his lungs rose and lowered, and she’ll never know his heartbeat in her ear again. She retches ugly cries until she’s blotched and clammy, and a great, seething beast emerges from her soul, and burrows deep in the hole plaguing her stomach. It churns the memories, the smells, the tastes. It prowls within and scratches her head, hunting for the pain she can’t bury.

Jack steals a kiss while she’s sleeping, but she hasn’t been asleep with the neon light beaming through the window. She kisses him back, eyes open, and his stunned look is worth the steal. She hears his laugh over a glass of whisky. The name Four Roses tumbles in her curiosity as ice crumbles when it shifts. The stench of smoke and her disdain for it as she threatens him with cancer, and tries to hide the cigarettes. The way he had looked at her every time he called a meeting. The way he looked when he said her name, when he got mad on the shuttle, when he hummed a tune, and when he yelled at her about breakfast but it was never about breakfast.

Blood drips over her fingers and coats down her wrist, and forearm to a growing pool of hot sticky red. Jack’s uninhabited shell an absolute that all she’ll have of him now are the memories.

He’s gone.

He’s really gone.

Just.

Gone.

And if this is it—

She looks around before lying him back down to rest her head against his shoulder, and her arm across his chest.

—she’s gone too.

Earth, a distant orb, and majestic in its design. A perfect world for imperfect humanity. One hell of a view but what’s the point of it when the one she wants to share it with can’t see?

She turns to see Anderson, but he doesn’t move, so he’s not getting back up. She shifts under Jack and checks her stomach where there was a constant sting. Blood coats her hand. She could close the wound in her abdomen. One small Incineration on the area and she’d cauterize it, but her omni-tool is no more, and she doesn’t see the point in trying. She embraces Jack again, looking out at nothing specific, thinking how soft his hair is on her cheek, and without a thought to it, her eyes close, and she fades into sleep.

A message sounds, bleeping at her incessantly. When she wakes, she’s not in her bed, and it’s not her alarm clock. She could go back to sleep forever, the responsible captain that ignores her duties, but she answers.

“Hi, Mom,” she says.

“Jane?” Her voice is static, fighting through the interference. “Thank God. Hackett’s been trying to contact you. What’s going on down there?”
“We made it. It’s just…”

“What, Jane?”

Shepard laces her fingers through Jack’s hand and his fingers are already cold, and stiffening. She feels the crack, a statue worn away by hundred years of weather, and suddenly breaking, pouring out the rain held in the wounds of her structure.

“Jane?”

She gulps in her sobs to stop the pain in her convulsing stomach, but she has to wear the mask. The same mask her mom wore when Henry left, and the same when he died.

“I’m fine, Mom,” she almost chokes. “Just really glad to hear it. To hear your voice. I mean.”

“I’m so proud of you. I know this is the wrong time but any chance I might stop over sometime and look over some venues?”

Earth is still on fire, ships are narrowly dodging Reaper attacks, and she…what?

“He proposed to you, right?” Hannah says. “That’s why Jack took you to that resort. Sweetie, you can’t hide news like that from me; not even your father’s grave, rest his soul.”

Some of Jack’s blood seeps into her hair and on her neck. She pats it and wipes the residue on her pants before more tears fall, then stares at her bare, ringless, stained fingers.

“That’d be great.” She tenderly rests her palm on his neck. “Hey, Mom?”

“Yeah?”

Shepard rolls over after she kisses foreheads with him, and looks up at the stars.

“I really wanna see you.”

“Oh, sweetie. I miss you. My little ginger bear all grown up.”

Earth watches through the open shutters. Wishing, wondering.

“I love you, Mom.”

“Love you too, hon. See you soon!”

Static.

Click.

“Commander Shepard?” Hackett’s voice airs over the command’s comm. “Commander Shepard, do you read?”

Her direct link must be blown off if he had to hack the Catalyst to talk to her.
“What…” she says, feeling the sense of duty take over the nonsense of living. “What do you need me to do?”

“The Crucible’s docked but it’s not firing.”

Shepard struggles, and situates Jack next to Anderson and cups his face. Husk ridges tear his skin, fresh wounds. Foreign. Alien. Scarred from desperation and abusive manipulation. They raped him of himself and only know does she see a curl at the corner of his mouth. A peace she envies; he must see something beyond the veil she can’t. And she wants him so much to tell her what.

“It has to be something on your end,” he adds.

She crawls away, lustered in stickiness that impedes her further, and she slips, and bangs her shoulder into the floor.

“I’m not seeing—” She drags herself to the controls, but there’s just a keyboard, and nothing to read on the interface. “I don’t know how to—”

Stars surface in the corners of her vision, then creep into a pixelated blur of silvery red, and the last thing she remembers is black, and numb.

Shepard reaches for the seashell in the bucket she finds along the beach. It’s peach with brown veins, and ridged like her favorite potato chip. She must have been walking forever. Her footprints in the sand go back until she can’t see them. Though she’s walked beside the ocean’s edge, there is no tide, and she looks up where there is no sun, but light is everywhere. Not a shadow cast, but value in all things. Light upon light, purples and blues instead of grays and blacks. The beach is a ribbon between lush green trees of fruit and flora, and a teal ocean that changes to crystal blue if you get close.

She drops the seashell back in. Her clean hands are prime, without hard cuticles, or nails bitten off from breaking so many times. But what is she wearing? Does it matter?

Shepard feels a presence, if that’s not weird enough, and turns to see footprints alongside her trail, but no one’s there. She turns to the bucket—

Mordin stands tall and in his prime.

“Shepard, horrible timing.”

As light makes everything around her, it grows in her. A warmth cascades from the cavity he left. Since then, her fighting spirit has been kicked to the ground so many times, she lost her way in the mud. He wears two horns again, and no scars, though she liked them. More stories to tell when she asked.

He picks up the bucket and it’s now a glass container; he tosses another seashell in. It’s all red with bright teal speckles and a black streak. Among the other shells are blue and gray, purple and lighter purple, turquoise, gold, and darker reds.

“Been running tests. Still so much more to discover. Will have to wait. Seashells still alive.”

“Alive?”

Shepard picks up a small, cone shell; it’s white with dark markings growing from a light blue fade.
“They’re just shells,” she says.

She puts it back. Another one catches her eye—a vertebrae with interesting hole shapes: hexagons, and protrusions up the edges. She picks it up and the holes fill with an iridescent film. She blows gently and the film pushes away into an orb, then refills the hole, and it floats over Mordin.

“And this is just heaven.”

Shepard returns the shell and the film vaporates.

“You’re dreaming,” he continues. “Keep dreaming and consequently you’ll end up here, and see the rest of it. Past the veil. The real thing.”

“You’re here? Then the wheel…”

“Not my invention. Not my belief. Someone else must have gotten it wrong.”

“How do I get out of here?”

“It’s simple enough,” he says. “Open your eyes.”

“And if I don’t want to go?”

Perhaps he knows why because he walks up to her the same way Hannah walked up to Jack. The warmth multiplies ten fold when he pulls her in, the gentle hold so rich and prismatic it encapsulates all she’s desired to say, and dissolves into his steady heartbeat against her ear.

“You love him,” Mordin says. “And he’s not here.”

“You are.”

“You love the idea that you can obtain anything unavailable. I am dead therefore more loved due to impossibility. Know what else?”

She sniffs. “What?”

“There are many who aren’t here either.”

“I’m not leaving you behind. I can’t.”

“Still have much to learn.” He releases her and looks ahead, enticing her to turn, and see the trails still impressed in the sand.

Clear waves edged with glistening foam move across the entire trail, filling the imprints, and instead of erasing as they retreat, there are more footprints, some human. They go on forever and stop where she stands beside Mordin’s trail. Shepard wrenches about—Mordin’s gone, so is the container, but he never left.

No one ever did.

Everyone dying, slipping into their final rest, the long blink, and all she could do was watch, yet it was her that had her eyes shut always. It’s not the end, but doesn’t mean she’s ready for it. As long as there are those who remain on either side, she must fight for the living. No time to sleep; no time to collect shells. If it’s as simple as Mordin says, it’s time to—
“Wake up,” a boy says.

Chapter End Notes

"All Of Me"

What would I do without your smart mouth?
Drawing me in, and you kicking me out
You've got my head spinning, no kidding, I can't pin you down
What's going on in that beautiful mind
I'm on your magical mystery ride
And I'm so dizzy, don't know what hit me, but I'll be alright

My head's under water
But I'm breathing fine
You're crazy and I'm out of my mind

'Cause all of me
Loves all of you
Love your curves and all your edges
All your perfect imperfections
Give your all to me
I'll give my all to you
You're my end and my beginning
Even when I lose I'm winning
'Cause I give you all of me
And you give me all of you, oh oh

How many times do I have to tell you
Even when you're crying you're beautiful too
The world is beating you down, I'm around through every mood
You're my downfall, you're my muse
My worst distraction, my rhythm and blues
I can't stop singing, it's ringing, in my head for you...
Their Strongest Desire

Chapter Summary

Where the end becomes the beginning.

Chapter Notes

Songs: "Wings of Destiny" by Phil Rey, "She Remembers" from The Leftovers soundtrack.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Voices from afar count the steps. They call, remember, regret. She could achieve ultimate consciousness and rape everyone of choice. She could decimate her body and feed it to the Reapers, or decimate theirs, and ultimately all synthetics. Whatever choice she makes now, it is the end of her. It’s a weight of pain and loneliness no one should hold onto. Not organic or synthetic. Though she’s not alone, she has to think for everyone. The cost of everything and what she came here to do. She stares down the ultimatum, colors of her awaiting grave, and she turns on the platform, feeling her footsteps take on infinity, as if all the choices she wants to make return, their own bodies, shades that shift from possibility to certainty. And the footsteps she saw in heaven, emerge adjacent, and blend into hers as she braves the final approach.

She raises her pistol.

If the constructs remain intact, the Reapers win, and Jack’s death is in vain. They controlled him; they want to control her. All this time Harbinger demanded her energy and now this boy says she can add herself to the Crucible. Synthesis isn’t for the living. It’s in the achievement of death, a rite of passage she’s seen in Mordin when he held her, knowing her more than she troubles to. There’s only one right choice. It’s the choice of never allowing the Reapers to exist ever again and allowing those who can rebuild AIs to find their own way to understanding them. The galaxy has fought wars because of difference and it won’t stop, but the battles will change. Opinions change, hearts change. Humanity has always improved upon itself without Cerberus. The Reapers twisted that ideal of enlightening humanity to which they pitted lovers against each other and gave them three choices that are more manipulations to sustain control. People can rebuild, people can grow stronger, and people can live on.

Reapers won’t.

The energy tube pulses light up the rod, a coil similar to Tesla’s but encased with tertiary security. She sets her ammo to disrupt tech and her gun buzzes in her grip. She loosely aims and fires but it only chips the metal. Eventually, one of her bullets breaks it, and sends the last pulse to the top load, where it disperses a warning to all Reapers. It explodes. Sparks fly an arced barrage. A gas connects and blows the coil out of place with a force that breaks its cage. She chokes on the burnt wire smell and wishes her last words to Jack were different, then a red flash covers the sky, and it reminds her of the streams over the gala dance floor.
She should have stayed for breakfast.

Lightning erupts from the tube before Shepard sees the Crucible’s core prime, and she’s enveloped in smoke and blaze.

**Unknown**

Darkness everywhere. Not even in a dream. Just alone, hovering, in dots not quite stars, but moving, her mind creates light to make sense of the nothing. She feels her breath. It inflates her chest. She lets it go. There’s a tingling in her arms, then she notices it in her legs. Warmth takes her and a glow hits her face.

She awakens, eyes blinking and squinting through the beams surrounding her. She wants to rub her sinuses—someone’s holding her hand. It’s strong, gentle, but trembling. Her eyes trail upward. He’s not quite young, brown hair, and haggard, but fit, slim in a light suit. He watches her, bright blue eyes fluttering back and forth. Her chest swells with an indescribable ache. They don’t speak. She can’t muster anything to say and yet, to be sitting across from him, even in silence, she feels a peace beyond the ache, wholesome, fulfilled. Yearning.

His lips move, words unsaid but trying to form, finally left agape, a hole of confusion until he closes it, and his attention diverts to another. He pulls away, her free hand is stiff; she stretches out her fingers and sits up, but she’s sore, and more careful moving.

They’re in a small bay matching the ones in colonies, but lacking windows, and privacy curtains. A doctor approaches. His medical badge is the clearest she’s seen since opening her eyes, as reflections of light blur out his face, and line his white uniform with an aura.

H. Shepard, MD.

He blocks out the glaring bulb when he stops in front of her. His silhouette lightens as her eyes adjust, and at last she sees his face. His smile releases tension in her shoulders she didn’t know was there.

A holographic clipboard appears around his wrist and he reads it over as it scrolls circularly. Then he swipes it and the chart changes to what looks like her vitals. He changes attention to her.

“Mr. Harper,” he nods to the man. “And hello, Miss Marple,” he says as he reaches beyond her—a clock on a side table. He’s checking the time.

“H-hello,” she says. She massages her throat; it’s raspy and dry.

The entire room is four beds wide, but only two beds exist, the man’s and hers. Most things are white and hurt to look at, but some things are dark and soothing.

“Is something wrong?” Dr. Shepard says.

“No. I…”

The man beside her stares at the lines in his hands, then rubs his palms. He finds a pen on his side table and snatches it without thought, waving it between fingers until it blurs into a bowtie fan. Dull pain creeps over her head and she winces.
“…Just…a lot of things are uncomfortable.”

“I’m sorry, darling, I know this must be a lot to take in. You’ve been through one heck of an ordeal.”

“What happened exactly?”

“You were in a collision. You both are fine. You just have a little bit of amnesia but with time and rest I’m sure we’ll get you back to your old self in no time.”

“Us?” She looks over—he’s sipping water from a short glass now—and checks his hand for a ring.

“Are we…?”

“You were together when I got you. I’m here to keep your worries at a minimum; I’ll take care of you. I promise.”

“Can you take care of this headache?”

“Absolutely. I’ll dim the lights for ya too. Anything else you’d like?”

She hasn’t stopped looking at the other patient. To like would mean she would have a preference based on an assessment of multiple things, a priority, a desire. She doesn’t remember anything beyond a few minutes ago, yet there is something in the way her hand felt in his, how she thought, just for a beat, his eyes should be brighter. Instead they look lost, as lost as she feels, and the only priority set is solving her amnesia. And her desire. The thing she wants most.

What she desires most is to know who that man is. And if time and rest is the only way, she’ll be glad to wait.

“Can I get a glass of water?” She says, “and maybe some painkillers.”

Images flood her mind and drown her eyes in flashes like a sped up photo gallery, spinning, zooming, animated. Some just a picture, some a second, but the ones that stir rage or love flow before her like a movie, painting light and dark, people moving in and out of focus, until he shows up. Blue eyes, graying hair, black suit. He stares past her, through her; his living image draws closer, gliding over mirrored tile and when they’re just about to touch, he mutters her name with a rugged softness. He mouths it to the wind that carries the river of memories through ghostlike trees leading up to a structure as large as a moon but shaped like a folded star. The Citadel. It sparkles with golden lights. Faces of people surge through and she knows who lived and who died. She knows their names and the names of their family. She knows if they were friendly or a hindrance. Not all of them are human. Not all of them are organic.

“Get out of my life!” Her voice. “Gawd I wish I never saw you!”

A man says, “Is that your strongest desire?”

“Yes! Leave!”

A wave of grief strikes her and she feels like falling, under endless tears, and throbbing heartache. Another wave. Anger. Unfairness. It’s red with the blood of friends and strangers. She sees her mutilated body at the apex of the Citadel. She feels her death again. Waves of aggravation, acceptance, and then a calm. She turns helplessly in a shallow ocean, no shore in sight. A swell lifts her up and breaches white clouds—wafts of joy fill her. They push out the hurt. More images. The gala…the hotel room…the morning after…they fling around her in currents. Claws of water bear over and push her downward into the crushing pressure of betrayal and lost faith. The ocean
world, the ice world, every world she’s landed on, and every place she’s destroyed, or saved. The Turians, the Drell, the Asari...every person she’s killed. Every person she’s protected. And within all these flashes lies a wish: purpose. How she saw her parents, how she sought to belong, how she striving every day to be better than who she was before. Nesting in that wish is a burning need. A purpose for love. A love for purpose. The trials of N7 crash against the dam gates holding the sea of emotions, encompassing all that she is and has yet to become. She stands on the stillness of the water, walks up to the gate. It’s colossal, towering beyond the clouds now. She reaches out. She taps it with her finger. It explodes into shards of mirrors reflecting her choices. As the ocean rushes out, it’s absorbed into shards as a gas. Each wave curls and vanishes, seeped into the power of her free will. All gaining size as the ocean wanes. She’s surrounded by a curtain of reflections, hovering in a nothing, a nothing the becomes something when she hears a familiar stride clicking behind her. She turns. The man walks on nothing, shoeprints ripple in his wake, the final vestige of the sea. He stands under her. She wills herself downward. He offers his hand as an anchor and she pulls herself in.

She looks into two Earths, grayed blue with copper rays around the pupils, and flecks of green. A dark ring sets the irises, as outer space encompasses the worlds, once a bright triad of points, now a tranquil hue. She sees the reason, the hope, and the wrong; his desire to do right but never doing it the right way in a mind that blurs the difference. His eyes gloss and she sees her reflection. She sees herself and she knows him.

She knows his name. She flies without moving, zooming backwards in light trails until they halt, jolting her to reality.

She remembers.

“Jack,” she says.

She stares from across the bed. Back in the white room, next to Dr. Shepard—her dad, and Mr. Harper—Jack.

Jack had stopped after a sip, frozen with the glass and pen in hands, looking off in the distance before he hears her speak, and he turns. His hands shake. The water in the cup reacts.

“Jane Shepard,” Jack says.

Before she can say or do anything else, the glass falls, and shatters as the pen hits the floor, and his arms are around her, compressing her against him, like it’s their last embrace, but the first of a thousand apologies.

The horrors he’s inflicted on millions, the manipulations, the lies. What weight his arms hold if she wasn’t there. She glances at her father. He makes that same face when she swore into the Alliance as a kid. He grips his chest, an underlying need that she’ll be just like her mother, and more. But she’s not. She’s Jane Shepard. And he knows either way he’ll be proud of her decision. Either way, they’re alive because they were a team despite polar differences and petty opinions. They’re alive because of each other. They’ve alive because they’re family. And what do families do?

Shepard slips her arms underneath his. They reach over his back and she feels his shoulder blades. He’s warm and clean, a fresh scent like he’s been outside in a breeze. She nestles her mouth into his neck and squeezes as she breathes him in. He shivers. He lets out a gasp of relief; she can hear him smile, and then, he trembles, his shoulders shake, and she squeezes harder to hold him together.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers below his quake. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”
Holding onto him wanes the hurt. The throbbing in her head dissipates into faint prickles. Euphoria bathes her into what feels like she’s outside herself, looking in. It’s that detachment from herself that forces her to look around the room to regain the feeling that she is existing in the moment. What is happening is real. It’s not another trick. But it is a play; a cover to ease her amnesia from something believable into what is the truth.

Shepard combs her fingers through Jack’s fine hair, and she pulls away to press her forehead against his. He holds her wrists and she cups his face, at first not looking at him at all, and then she has to check. They’re steel, not entirely blue. A tear falls from one and its trail traces along her hand.

“Me too,” she says.

Chapter End Notes

Amnesia will be explained next chapter, if you're as confused as Shepard. That's kinda the point, to get you discombobulated.
Making It Count

Chapter Summary

Jack and Jane process what happened. Henry needs company.

Chapter Notes

Songs: "Wings of Destiny" - Phil Rey; "You Are The Reason" - Calum Scott

Thank you for your patience while I don't Game-of-Thrones the conclusions.

Indoctrination presents new meaning, a debriefing, a rehabilitation. They wait on Henry’s assistant in a lounge after an hour’s worth of physical and psychological exams. Do her eyes work? Are her motor skills in check? Can she still remember Henry dying but at the same time saving her life as she drowned? Two timelines co-existing in her head but only one is real. He says staying hydrated helps, but she’d rather take the needle and bag, despite her subsiding apprehension to water. Jack wraps his hands around his cup, hands that made her feel alive, sexy, treasured. Their use in the unforgettable sex prominent in thought; she hopes to do it again when the stomachache calms. It can wait, though every part of her urges to leap. It’s stronger than any feeling churning inside. Terror of this new body, the world she’s yet to see outside, who’s alive, and who she’ll miss. Hannah’s out there, and Joker, and the team. What will they do now that she’s left them?

A hologram clicks on from the platform ahead. Jack squints over the lip of his cup. A sharp, blue transparent vid of Miranda Lawson in her white catsuit and boots.

“Commander Shepard,” she says, “I suppose it’s only been minutes for you.”

Jack sets the cup on the side table furthest from Shepard and she hopes he takes her hand then, but she withers when he folds his arms about himself.

Henry walks in and slips something to him before retreating into a corner.

“Try these,” he mumbles.

Jack thanks him and puts on a pair of silver-framed spectacles.

“Ms. Lawson,” Jack says.

“It’s good to see you as yourself again,” she says, “so to speak. I apologize for not being there in person. I’ll be brief as Henry trusts recovery is most important, and you’ll want to practice your new lives not in front of the vid comm. First off, I know of your hypnotism experiment and even assisted Dr. Shepard in ensuring its success. Like the Lazarus Project, I wanted the best for you, and nothing except perfection was admissible. We needed several doses to keep you in your hypnotized state, like stages of a prescription to sustain it, and sometimes it was healthy to take you off it for a while.”
When Miranda and Liara were up late in the apartment and she got to see Jack.

“Liara’s in on it too?” Shepard says.

“She’s the Shadow Broker,” Miranda says. “I couldn’t keep her out of it as much as I tried.”

“Who else knows?”

“That’s everyone.”

“And the amnesia?”

“A side effect to your new bodies. Your physical form has not developed memories unlike your souls. The final stage of hypnotism granted full synchronization, which activated all the information stored at once. You could compare it to the Eureka Effect but one thousand times magnified. You may feel euphoric, and, given how much information we stored, experience flashbacks. Your mental health is paramount so if you ever feel you need to talk to someone, Dr. Shepard is available, but if that’s too personal, Shepard, Liara should be available soon.”

“Is she coming here?”

“I’m not up to speed on that part, Shepard.”

Henry chimes in, “I’m still working on it.”

“Miranda,” Jack says, standing; he’s lean, decades short of what she’s used to, and pauses so long the space between him and Miranda grows. “I can’t express my gratitude in words.”

“You just did,” she says. “I wish I could be there but I don’t think it would be right of me to violate such a personal time for you both. Enjoy it. That’s an order.”

“Wait!” Shepard jumps up when she sees Miranda about to hit the disconnect. “What happened after we…”

Miranda lowers her arm from the panel. “You won. The Reapers are gone. No more indoctrination; no more mind control. But all Reaper tech, including the Relays, have been destroyed.”

Jack is free yet his stoic facade steels celebration.

“And the geth?” she asks.

Her inclination wanes. “Shepard…”

“I have to know.”

“All synthetics have been wiped, including Cerberus forces, and you,” Miranda glances at Jack. “And you.”

It’s done; she made her choice and they all pay for it.

“What do we do now?”

“Live with each other. I hear your place is really nice. I’ll stay in touch as more people awaken. We have a world to clean up here while you begin your own.”

It’s nice to have a friend looking out. Shepard felt she could have been the bigger sister; it’s more
likely been Miranda all along, and Shepard the middle child who gets away with everything. She can’t repay Miranda, but she can live her days to the fullest, what any soldier would do for those who no longer can.

The comm’s been off but the words stay, as dust in the air.

“I needed you to hear from her,” Henry says. “Drawbacks forced our collaboration. Details aside, we basically had to erase me from you. I took you under a few rides as Miranda kept you close. We used anchor points—Snippy, for example. Hella smart thinking. Without her, I don’t think this would have worked.”

He doesn’t have to say it. She knows the love of a creator to their creation when she sees it, experiences it. It’s reciprocated, a rare blessing to have a devoted friend who won’t flake out when you need them most. She’s been there for the galaxy and Miranda’s been there for her. It’s more than enough. And Miranda’s rebuilding Earth, which means she may stay in contact with Hannah and the Alliance. At least Mom’s not completely alone. Shepard recalls the pods on the Calamity. If Henry smuggled them across space, then they’re not alone either, but as much as she tries to think about everything else, she always goes back to Jack, and it feels like it’s just him and her. Jack and Jane alone in the world she’s yet to see, that she’ll see for the rest of this life, and if possible, the next.

Jack rests interest at the door, lingering before the question, “How far are we from Earth?”

Henry answers, “Not as far as you think.”

He escorts them through a rushed-together medical station, and at the end, a greenhouse with a semi-cylinder glass shaft, and a small, railed lift with matching shape. They elevate and the plants seem to go with them, sprouting vines, rows of garden vegetable signs by mounds of watered soil, and the irrigation system in place on all levels. In a month’s time, she estimates the half-tube will be fully green, but for now, it’s nice to imagine.

“We’re not on Mars, are we?” Shepard almost jokes, unable to see through the condensation on the glass.

Henry, in a jokeless tone, says, “In case the plants here try to eat us first.”

They take the second level and walk through a quaint residence with bedrooms zippered down a hallway, leading up to an open space, the living room, bar, and kitchen, all squared in by window panels and a porch, with stairs leading out to a beach.

Palm trees and lesser known tropical foliage paint outside, stroking the sandy ground with bushes of green, speckled with vibrant flowers. Shepard gapes at the sudden change from dry, cool air to heavy mugginess as she breaks through the front door’s sensors. The air’s as lush as the forest, with the scent of salt carrying the sound of ocean. Islands bearing coats of trees protect the reef that shields the main land from the strong waves in the distance, an archipelago spanning to Shepard’s right, and wrapping around to create an inlet about their habitat. Further east, on the sunny side of the house, the landscape opens up to a larger, wider stretch of white beach, and teal ocean.

This isn’t heaven, but it’s close.

Enough time has gone by where she’s comfortable walking about on her own while Henry scrutinizes Jack’s health, and keeps him close. Part of her thinks it’s to keep them at a pace. The
Shepard found a satchel for her newest mission, and more revealing clothes found in a closet to catch the sun that her skin hasn’t seen in decades. She squeezes the sand between her toes, somebody else’s virgin feet, no infections from hot boots worn sixteen hours a day. Then she ventures toward the reef onto wetted sand until she comes across a washed up seashell. It’s a spiral cone shape, cleaned out and shiny. She almost picks it up until she notices a second one, smaller, rigid, but intact.

Shepard stands there until her feet sink under as gentle waves move across, rolling, and pushing the shells further up. Up and up, the beach goes on for miles, and along the strand lies countless shells. Whole or broken, worn from incessant beatings of tide.

*So this is where we go.*

“Shepard?” Henry calls. “I made breakfast! It’s half-decent!”

Shepard sees bright sky and tree branches, but can’t see the house where she lies herself down. She can hear Henry walk across the porch. He steps on the creaky plank, and soon blocks out the light with his silhouette, trying not to kick sand in her face.

“What are you doin’?” He pockets his hands.

“I thought he could run tests on me.”

“Who?”

“Mordin wanted to take leave after the war. He went to a place like this. I thought he’d eventually find me.”

Henry acknowledges and plops beside her. He’s wearing his nice pants.

“You should be the last person to feel this burden,” he says.

“What burden?”

“That you’re hollow and there’s nothing after death.”

“There’s a beach after death.”

“You’re not dead, Janey. And you’re certainly not a shell.” He holds his knees and looks at the sea.

“I felt my body burn. It disintegrated.”

“Not your original body—a four-billion-credit recreation. What makes this one different?”

“I just…I don’t know. It doesn’t seem possible. Like being struck by lightning twice.”

“You feel you’re not yourself because you believe your body is who you are.”

“I guess.”

“Is a hermit crab a crab or his house?”
Shepard notices the tide has moved further out. Shade from the trees are short and the sun rays have opened her pores for so long she’s starting to feel the heat before the burn.

“How did my soul know where to go?”

“It knows where home is.”

“But how did my soul transfer to this body?”

“I called it to.”

“Your Energy Hypnotism theory.”

“It’s not a theory. It’s science now.”

“A science that could make you live like a king.”

“That food’s prolly cold,” he says. “Dammit.” He gets up and sands himself downwind. “Let me go throw it back on the fire. Come inside soon?”

“Yeah.” The sky’s hue reminds her of bright eyes, then she says, “Dad?” and sits up. “How is he?”

“You don’t know?” he asks.

Jack’s been quieter than usual. More polite and left without reason to charm. She wonders if it’s his body’s mannerisms, or how he deals with the situation, by distancing himself as he has for the past day. They’ve all got issues. She just needs to know how he’s dealing, and what someone says to one person, they may say something else to another.

“I want your take,” she says.

“There’s a little guilt there, and the last time he was this young, he was fighting turians in the First Contact War. But he’s adjusting better than I hoped. He asked me the same question of you. Maybe you two should do something about that.”

Henry’s footsteps go up to the house, the door shifts open and closed, waves crash against the far reef in rhythmic duty to her breath.

She discovers her bedroom faces the west, toward the wide beach disappearing into the horizon. Shepard stops herself outside of it from her stroll through the yard to give her full belly some room. Wild fern and bushes gather closer to shade-bearing trees, and flowers border the porch while long grass fills the spaces. She wonders how long the days are, since the first one she spent avoiding clocks and mirrors. She saw who she was when she peed in a cup. Freckles in different spots, ginger wine and brighter green. Her scars missing. What if Henry’s wrong? What if there was a soul inside and she snuffed it out? She heads for the glass door and a piece of paper caught in the railing flaps in the breeze. She pulls it out and reads pen scribbles.

Are we us?

“What if you’re wrong, Henry?”
Jack’s voice emits from the north side of the house and she jumps through her bedroom door—and hits the glass—locked. Her nose throbs into her brain. She unlocks the door with the hand holding a now crumpled paper, and leaves before she eavesdrops again. Maybe the dishes need cleaning.

Jack looks over the balcony of Henry’s bedroom, sharing a new bottle resting on the coffee table by a bucket of ice. It’s the simple things he misses and Henry has done his best to comfort. A benefit to the new body is no addictions, including the given that correlates with drinking. The downside are the glasses, a temporary issue Henry believes happened during the scuffle on Kahje. The body was under the last stages of development before the interruption. Fortunately, like human infants, the eyes will repair themselves. Until then he’ll have to govern his myopia using archaic tools. Henry’s careful not to use unnecessary procedures and for that Jack’s thankful.

This morning he set them on the bathroom sink and one look in the mirror he thought if he was thirty again, and his friends were still alive. A foolish thought, even more foolish to slip back a couple decades to be with a woman who liked him as he was. He could ask Henry to put him back in the tank, let him marinate to get the grays back, but how she looked at him again and remembered, she didn’t flinch. He was not Illusive Man or that stranger on the other bed. When he awoke from his daze, nothing about her changed. The vibrant red hair, the dazzling eyes, and the lush mouth he’s kissed a hundred times, but never enough. Her soul shines more truth and he could see it, not in the way Henry does, but he always knew her best. She may see differences but he doesn’t. No matter the body it’s Jane Shepard. A far moral issue from when he wanted her exactly how she was in every way for the Lazarus Project. He didn’t want another mistake. He knows better now.

He’d been part-listening to the doctor’s rigmarole about recession elimination due to the cancer—Reapers—eradicated from all life. No chance of indoctrination when the strain doesn’t exist. Plus, it’s a new body, wiped of everything, including his sports finesse—there are some things modern tech can’t recover.

“What if you’re wrong, Henry?” Jack says.

“Then she’s going to kick your ass,” Henry pours his drink. “You’ll lose, by the way.”

“If it comes to that,” Jack sips and turns to admire the view of a master suite with an office and personal armory. He toasts the Vindicator mantled above the dresser. A favorite.

“It’s confirmed the Reapers are no more.”

“Promise me.”

He sips small, turning back to the mountainside. A mane of waterfalls cascade down the cliffs, pooling into each other at the bottom, where the river travels westward, splitting into hands reaching for the ocean. He had looked over maps Henry’s reconnaissance drone printed and compared this place to Kauai, maybe a bit of Zhangjiajie. He’d bet Jane would think of Virmire, but old wounds aren’t vacations, and neither is pioneering.

Henry reads him and answers with a small nod, then looks down at his boots, walks up to the railing, and leans on it. “What the hell is Four Roses anyway?”

Jack breaks his somber demeanor with a smile and hides it behind another sip.
“It’s not even real whisky,” Henry teases.

“You treat all of your patients this way, doctor?”

“The ones that need it.” Henry makes a face after he slams ounces down. “You know—man that’s **hmph**—I’m not just some doc checkin’ up on you.” He holds his breath. “You wanna talk, I’m here. About anything.”

Jack swirls his glass. The amber color tranquilly turns at the bottom of crystal.

“I appreciate that,” Jack mutters.

Henry slaps him on the back and his shirt sticks to his skin. It’ll be weeks before they’re used to the humidity. After admiring the clouds rolling around the peak, kissing the waterfall heads, they change weight to the other foot and cross ankles. Jack thinks of installing a rail inside along the window panels. Same view, cooler lounge.

“Deal’s over if you serve this swill at the wedding, though,” Henry says.

He’s supposed to be surprised, panicked, maybe. Hearing it out loud awakens a piece of him he’s not experienced in ages: joy.

“Wedding?” It tickles the back of his throat when his mouth goes dry.

“Oh yeah. You’re not banging my daughter without some investment.”

Jack snorts. “**Some** investment?”

“The real commitment is putting a ring on it. And, Harper,” he waggles his finger, “I’ll be damned if I don’t get my Daddy-Daughter dance.”

“Shouldn’t we go over it with Jane?”

“Oh she’s for it.”

“Does she know that?”

“You know that. And if you don’t I might check in that ‘promise’ early.”

“And they lived happily ever after with a gun in his back.” He raises his glass.

“Damn right.” Henry too.

Shepard glides her hand along the container’s surface, skin scented by dish soap. The sensor flicks the medical report on. An ID number, a race, a gender, an age, and the name of the donor. Every nameless container held in this cargo bay keeps the same report but the donor’s change. Donors with hope, sacrificing emotion for logic. Children they’ll never see, but people who will live on, without knowledge of Reapers, without the terror of an artificial tyrant controlling life and death. When Cain and Abel were two of only four existing people in the world, is this how it happened? Is this how they populated Earth? They’re left to fill in the plot holes of the Bible with fiction of their own, never knowing how any of it happened, but to have faith that it just did, and they should accept it. When they awaken, it should be made clear Henry is not a god, and far from it. They
must explain to the first generation why they came to be and what must never happen again else they’ll repeat history. If Liara is capable of making it out to them, Shepard will have the perfect person to uphold their knowledge. They could begin a treaty, maybe a constitution, to set a foundation for the colony. Countries have rules. Jack would be good at organizing this, but they’d have to bring in more minds than keeping this temporary oligarchy. Shepard can’t lead forever, it’s not her place, and she hopes Jack feels the same. A pact, then, when the people are ready to govern themselves, they’ll step aside. Earth has enough poor examples of what happens when one stays in power too long. They don’t need to start that here on…

They’ll have to come up with a name for the planet as well.

She leaves the bay and the light through the door casts the same off-white color from her Citadel apartment. A tea aroma fills her nose and the Armax advertisement flashes across the walls.

“You will remember everything,” echoes Henry’s voice, “everything that makes you you in this universe when you hear the words darling, miss, marple, and painkillers within two minutes of each other.”

She stares at two vessels sitting on the bar and she’s back in the beach house living room. Footsteps come behind, Jack and Henry. They must have said her name but she doesn’t answer, not until she connects the contents of the vessel to the number of house guests. When it comes, a disconcerting tide pushes over her, a cold steam takes away the heat from her face, and suddenly she’s light-headed.

A hand gently grips her shoulder and she doesn’t know who it belongs to.

“You were there,” she says.

She guessed right when Henry answers, “Always, sweetheart,” and Jack keeps walking.

He stops before the vessels, staring at them for the longest it took her a full breath, then walks into the kitchen, and hides behind the refrigerator door, looking for snacks.

“Miranda let you into my apartment?”

“Not precisely.”

“Then how’d you complete the last session? I can hear it like I hear you now.”

“Your omni-tool. Just needed my words to help you along. And emotional triggers to seal things in place.”

“Miranda mentioned my rifle.”

“It helped keep you moving forward without knowing exactly why.”

“That Psych degree paid off.”

“It kept you alive. I’d say it rewarded me.”

“It must have been difficult keeping me out of the loop while I jumped through it.”

“You were a challenge to fully hypnotize into believing certain things because you’re headstrong, even if you try not to be. At one time, I made you think I was a selfish douchebag, I died, or I was non-existent. It helped when I needed to return your timelines back to one.”
“Yeah.” Like a zipper on a giant bag, and it’s closing up. “I’m beginning to remember everything.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“I thought you were running from the law.”

“Oh that too.” He makes a wave-off gesture. “You just experienced death, something that people need to process.”

“Can’t imagine what it was like for you.”

She could have smacked him on the cheek and she’d have gotten the same reaction. Then, he thinks back to something, his eyes always soften when he does, and reluctantly agrees with a faint nod.

“I think I left something in the—my—I’ll be back.”

He turns back up to his room, which leaves her with Jack, who’s now sitting at the island on a stool, eating something rolled up, forbidding her from kissing him when she approaches. He catches her in his sights and confirms after he looks her up and down. The sun kissed her more than he has, another thing he probably noticed besides her bandeau top, and bikini bottom wrapped with a sheer, slit skirt. She struts around the island until she comes to a cold brew of coffee, sips, and nearly chokes when she finds more alcohol than coffee.

“Henry’s been trying to remain numb and awake simultaneously,” He says between swallows.

“Is he okay?” She sets down the mug in the sink after spitting out whatever nasty concoction that was.

“Not certain, so I’ve been watching him when he thinks he’s been doing that for me.” He finishes his meal, a crumb hides where his smile grows. “He witnessed his only blood die in Reaper jaws. And now, he’s left his wife, and is the sole person who invented immortality. Whatever he’s telling you is much more for his benefit than ours. We need to make sure he’ll not do anything brash, like his beautiful daughter would.”

“That’s…” she wants to be concerned for her dad, and she’s sad to just now see it as Jack does, but, “…the most you’ve said to me since we awoke.”

The stowaway by his mouth gets it with a napkin and is gone forever, leaving her clear to descend and ravish the new, younger Jack. The silver will come back in twenty years. She can wait for that long, but she can’t wait for other things while her father’s away.

He answers, “Well, I’m intoxicated and I’m prone to rambling.”

Jane laughs, but not the kind that hurts your belly, the kind that surprises you when you’re supposed to be serious. “That explains so much now.”

What can also be explained is how fast she crosses the kitchen and locks him in a passionate wrestle, needing him inside her until she’s so deep in his mouth she tries to taste the back of his skull, and his tongue guards the way. Jack’s stool topples but he snatches the island edge in time. He reeks of bourbon, as if he sweated the bottle, and it stuck to his clothes that have been aired by the breeze.

He breaks half the kiss. “Henry isn’t back yet.”
His name alone kills it for her and she pulls away, but leaves her leg leaning against his crotch. She feels its strength.

“It’s been two minutes,” she says.

“Could you check on him?” he sighs.

He massages her arms and regret spills out of his eyes as he scans her chest, and tugs at her skirt band. What’s more important than this has to be a problem.

“Something I should know?” she asks.

He looks straight into her eyes. “You didn’t notice?”

Shepard walks into Henry’s room, her bikini damp from arousal, but she won’t mention that. It’s the humidity. Every part of you sweats. Her dad’s by the bed, standing over a picture of Mom he picked up from the side table. The other one next to its spot is her and Mom taken a couple decades ago. And for a while she thought he didn’t keep anything from back then.

He doesn’t say anything when she comes in. He doesn’t do anything, really, but she’s not convinced he turned into a statue. She looks at him with new perspective, Jack’s words flow back, and she sees Henry as a king who lost a kingdom.

“Dad…”

He hears her the second time, and it must’ve been the way she said his name.

“He told you, didn’t he?” he says.

She doesn’t want to give away anything else, so she goes up to him, and pulls down the shirt collar to check.

He cries, “Ow! What are you doing to me?”

Shepard lets him go and hides her chest with her arms.

“Your scar,” she says.

“What scar?” He adjusts his shirt while trying to look back there.

“The scar on your neck. You got it shaving your head when hair was ‘inconvenient to the Alliance.’ When I came in for morning hugs I always saw it in the mirror.”

“What about it?”

“It’s not there.”

She lets it sink in. Truth is she’s holding her arms to hide the shaking.

“Sweetheart…”

But he doesn’t know what else to say.
“You died, Dad.”

He doesn’t deny it, even scoffs, and mumbles with a sad brow, and a more pathetic attempt at a smile. “It was a bitch to get you here.”

“When?” She thinks of his fake death on Kahje. Was it real, then?

“I had to get your bodies before the Alliance did, so Miranda and I did what we could and I made the call to go into the wreckage alone.”

“Why, Dad!? We didn’t need our broken selves.”

“Because I needed you. My work does not make your body—old or new—less important. Your death means everything. Your life is everything. I shouldn’t have to…” He takes a breath, tired of the anger rising, and holds it in until he lets it go. “You’re my daughter. Everything that’s you matters.”

Selfish.

All this time she’s been seeing it through a port hole it’s hard to remember there’s more than one window. It took Jack to help her see. Jack, the very journey in which they all sacrificed in order to keep him alive, of all people. It should be easier for her to see the real Jack, but she fell in love with both. The indoctrinated, selfish puppet, and the charming, forward-thinking executive. She expects the bad side to come out and it hasn’t. He’s free. Now she needs to give her father slack so he can be too.

The word ‘closure’ comes back to her.

“So…do you wanna come with?”

He seems to understand what she means, but he declines with a small wave.

“Finding you was my goodbye, sweetheart,” he says softly. “It’s hellos only from now on.”

She wants to say it, she does, but words aren’t much when the actions aren’t met. She’ll show her love through living, and loving the man he saved, and helping their new colony grow, even if it has to be just the three of them for a while. Shepard does what she hasn’t done since her ship brat days, and embraces him until she feels his arms hug back. When she leaves she doesn’t look back because it’s no place for a daughter to see her kingly father break down in tears.

It’s unsettling to have this many hours in a day, but the slower the cycle, the longer the sunsets. The sun just started turning the land gold when Jane picks up the lonely canister off the bar. She meets her man at the base of a ledge from the cliff the beach wears as a necklace, the ledge its pendant. A few trees gift shade up and down the cliffside, but when she had walked up the half-mile from the house, she took the sand between her toes over rocks stabbing her feet.

“You’re going to get a sunburn,” he says, waiting at the top of the slope.

There’s a pleasant pathway from the beach to the top of the 50-ft cliff, smoothed out by years of foot traffic, it looks like. She wonders if it’s human.

“Just testing out the UV threshold,” she jokes, but now more importantly knows he was watching her. “What about you? Haven’t seen you outside until now.”
“This one comes with a built-in tan.”

“You’re doing it again.”

“What?”

“Picking your nail.”

His hand is in his pocket which is sewn into loose-fitted white pants that match the shirt, while the other holds the second vessel. He does it whenever he’s hiding something from her. She hasn’t seen him do it with anyone else, like his body only gives it away to her, and only she seems to notice, even veiled by cloth.

“What is it really?”

Jack grins and shakes away whatever burden he thought of telling her. “Later. Today’s too perfect and looks like Henry let me have you to myself.”

“He said he had things.” Which is the truth and all she knew. “Are you ready?”

She’s been hugging the vessel as if it’ll jump away. It gleams against the sun and bears more weight than sadness, but its cold surface feels good against her clammy skin. The tiniest pebbles scratch against the bottom of her feet and she catches the scent of sweet flora. Jack hums a short yes at last and they move across the wide ledge. From the left, the islands by the house peek around the bend, and to the right is more ocean, and more beach, but a mountain region takes over the hills a few miles out, and connect the mountains behind them back to the house. They step to the end. It’s a moderate drop to the sand below. A gentle breeze catches her skirt and tells them which way to face as they open their vessels by tapping the lid, and they self-unseal, and digitally sing as they twist open. She’s been to a few funerals, more than she cares for, and less than expected, most of them grouped in one, and the names sounded off by the commanding officer, followed by hollow words of shipmates he barely knew. The sound of prayer isn’t better than silence either. The laying of the memorial, seeing the wreckage of the ship she died on. Here she stands in another empty world and has nothing to say.

Jack comforts her and she doesn’t know why until she notices the trembling. She had been locked in the past, remembering everything in reverse, starting from the last breath she took, then the blood on her hands, the sound of the gunshots, the holy speeches, the frowns cast away, and the smiles cast, the smoke in the air, the drinks on his breath, and the wonder of the dance, her mom’s victory to the dread of justice, the discovery of accidental attraction, and the relief from rekindling familiar hatred—one touch is all it takes to bring her back. Her chest rises and falls. She stares into the vessel, the lid in her hand now, and all that’s left is to leave the pain in history, and never be afraid to blink again.

Together, they tip the ashes out and the wind carries them west.

They must have sat on the ledge for an hour, cradling the emptied vessels in their laps, in silent communication, comfortable watching the waves rise, and crash, and glow yellow from the sun’s descent. She had put the lid back on eventually. Now, she traces the ornate engraving as she would Jack’s face.

“It feels so light now,” Jane says.

Jack doesn’t turn from looking at the same spot for the past several moments, but he slowly nods. In another few minutes, Jane decides she needs to move, and in sync, Jack too, along with his
deeper sigh. He tries on a smile after so long of having no expression, but it’s weak, and fades quickly. He offers to take her resealed vessel, and sets both beside each other where they sat. She thinks they’ll blow away, but Jack does something, and the bottoms magnetize to the rock.

“To remind us,” he says after he walks back to her. He faces the ledge once more and the sun takes away every shadow from his face.

Jack joins his hand to hers. In the sunset, every part of him remains golden, even his eyes warm to a hazel. She could look forever, watch the wrinkles crawl back around his eyes, the jaw sag, ears grow, and cheeks wilt. Given enough years, she’d wear down the back of his hands caressing the veins along the tendons, and kiss him until lip lines are all that’s left of his mouth. But all this time admiring the view, Jack had been picking his nail again.

Jane asks, “How many lifetimes do you wanna do this?”

“I think we should make this one count,” he says.

He slips a shaking hand out of his pocket—

“Don’t you?”

—and holds it about his little finger, the ring she thought was her mother’s fantasy.

“I knew I loved you the moment you died,” he says.

Shepard finds it impossible to move, much less breathe, as blood pounds in her chest, and flushes her skin.

“The news unsettled me in the exact way love unhangs a man. I went all the wrong ways to show you. I took you places and made you do things, and I hid every part of how I felt about you until I saw you in person and I couldn’t hide anymore. I asked myself every morning, ‘what can I do to be with her?’ Every step, every plan, everything. There is no one I want to be with except you. And there’re no words full enough to prove that if I can’t fix what I break.”

Jack kneels—once the Illusive Man, a power that bows to no one and takes no knees to submit or prove anything, but a man who can’t keep the ring still that he has to hold it with two hands. Waves shift along the sand below, birds sing their partners home to rest, and the sun dark orange now. Clouds high enough to escape the rays hold on to their blue tint, and the rest are left gold.

Jane wipes her tears and drops when her legs can’t hold her up anymore.

“Before we get to the part where you unequivocally say no and run off the cliff, I need you to know what I regret the most,” he continues. “None of it.” A tear falls onto his cheek after hanging as long as she had been listening, waiting. “I loved every bated second that brought me to the scariest moment of my life, asking Commander Shepard, and all that comes with it, to be my wife.”

“Yes!” She sobs.

“But I—”

“You talk too much!” She squeezes him tight and burrows her face into his neck.

“—didn’t ask yet.”

“Couldn’t wait anymore.”
His shirt muffles her wet laugh.

“Fine!” He pushes her back to arm’s length and spits out, “Jane Shepard, will you marry me?”

“Unequivocally yes!” She jumps on him again.

They fall over and almost forget to put the ring on. She examines the simple band with stone inlay after he slips it on. Unconsciously, she reaches for her sternum, and finds what she should have been holding by now is no longer there.

“I commissioned Lilas to make for you.”

The little girl on Kahje remains close to heart, and Jack closer than ever. Nothing else could surprise her or make her more happy than now. The wedding, she corrects herself, but she thinks of who couldn’t make it, and the aspiring ceremony turns somber.

Jane sits up proper and fidgets with the ring.

“I can’t have a wedding if no one’s here to see it,” she quietly says.

“Henry will.” Jack props himself up on his hands. “Maybe Liara, definitely Miranda.”


Something bleeps in her ear, a digital signal similar to her comms, but in her head.

“What was that?” she asks.

Jack answers, but not to her, “Yes.”

“We got a problem back home,” Henry says as clear in the hardware as in person. “Come down.”

Jane tries, “Uh, roger…Dad. We’re half-mile out. Be there in seven.”

A confirmation bleep disconnects them, if that’s how it works, and she’s about to break into a paced run. It’s been a while since she’s trained barefoot.

“That doesn’t sound good,” Jack says.

His playful tone makes her look back and Jack’s grin stretches so far her intuition yanks her out of urgency, and she crosses her arms, saying, “What are you up to, Illusive Man?” before she hears something smaller than Henry’s ship enter the air space of whatever sector this is. A shuttle with damaged engines, but steady hull, a girl trying to keep it together after only a patch job or two, then back up in the air. She gleams in the distance, low elevation and all ahead slow moving south from the mountains, the Kodiak limps toward the expanse on the eastern side of the house, where Henry had set up a landing zone.

Shepard can’t feel her feet hit the ground when she bolts along the cliff, ignoring every rock and bump she lands on. Her eyes lock onto the scratched hull, but fervently, the people inside.

“I told you to keep your crew where they’re at!” Henry’s shout carries across the property. “Joker! Gawd damnit!”

She pushes harder, sprints until her heart screams in her throat and the humid air burns her lungs. Sweat drips in unpleasant places without the luxury of armor. This body hasn’t physically trained. It’s gassed by the time she touches the grass around the house. Jack had tried to keep up and she
only notices when he calls out for her to stay off the landing.

She’s here. The Normandy’s here. She anticipates anyone coming out of that shuttle and they’re Mom’s orange marmalade touching down. She stays clear of the thrusters. It’s already hot, she doesn’t need to fry. When they shut off she’s at the door pounding on it. It shifts open and a purple blur clamps down on her and Garrus stares her down. Beside him, Kaidan models a new wound above his brow. And with eyes shining from tears still falling, Liara steps forward, clutching her heart.
Chapter Summary

Shepard says hello and goodbye. Jack and Henry are forgiven.

Chapter Notes

Song: “Hurricane (feat. Fleurie)” - Tommee Profitt

Among the gasping, the burning muscles, the pounding blood, and dreadful need to fall back in exhaustion, she finds her smile broadening over the shoulder of her quarian.

They’re alive.

Tali’s arms twist and wriggle to tighten their hold.

For a crew who’ve memorized her face, they’re quick to accept it’s her, and might even be surprised her voice hasn’t changed despite appearances. Knowing the Canadian, he may just be acting polite. Garrus cracks a joke as she expected but he holds her hand as solid comrades, a long time together in everything and still in one piece. And the way he touches Tali’s arm lifts the heavy air. Liara glides over when Tali lets go at last. Her arms slip under and squeeze. It’s not about the power of the hold but the aura of the person, how minds connected reconnect again. In one move, Liara pulls the disbelief in Shepard’s heart and fills her with all things positive, as if by magic. Such magic that melts pain into overwhelming happiness that it leaks.

It slips her mind that other people are watching, besides Steve Cortez, who gets out of his seat to give her a salute out of habit. Kaidan’s attention falls to Jack. He’s caught up to her, lingering on the edge of the landing zone. From far away, if she wasn’t familiar with either, she could say it’s Henry, but Henry wouldn’t be caught in white ever again. Each step forward seeps apprehension, but the first one to shake his hand after the long standoff to acceptance isn’t Liara or Tali. It’s not even Garrus.

Jack talks with Kaidan privately. They look like brothers counting sins and coming to a compromise understanding while the world waits for the verdict, and it ends in a nod and a pat on the shoulder. This carries over to the team and there’s nothing more Jack needs to say; nothing more she must defend.

Henry enters the frame, Shepard’s view from the shuttle door, three men in agreement to something he said before he gets to Jane, and has words with Cortez. It ended with, “To hell with you, we’re here for our commander,” and Cortez earns his place forever on her all-star chart. She always liked a little fire in her crew’s eye.

The return to the Normandy is as surreal as seeing a shuttle in the sky of nowhere. She’s broken, pinned among trees and a crag of waterfalls, with one wing so damaged they may have to amputate. The poor girl did her job. She saved everyone inside and Shepard can’t wait to see them
all again. But Hannah would shame her in every dreaming night if she doesn’t hunt down her gimp first.

She calls out to Joker after jumping off the shuttle before it lands. Everyone follows and she only assumes Steve goes back to the LZ as she opens the airlock, and runs to the pilothouse. An empty chair turns her back through the CiC, calling out to him again. Elevator’s out from ship’s low power. She takes the hatch down one deck. It’s dark and quiet until she reaches the mess hall. A crowd surrounds medical but no one’s on the table. Chakwas stands by the door to the AI Core. It glows red.

The crew tear a path upon seeing Shepard, peeling back as much space as they need when seeing a ghost. It hangs in the air, the unease of the consequence, and all eyes lie on her, rely on her to brace the effect, and answer to the one on the other side of the seal to the AI Core.

Joker sits on the floor, eyes pink, sunken, swollen. He’s holding a module. EDI lies on the table in back. Her body turned, her face hidden from view; the lamp the only light in the room. EDI’s system is lightless, absent of the soothing hum from just a couple years of brilliance. Shepard takes it slow, her boots tread sacred ground approaching the table. She turns EDI’s head and she could have died a third time if Henry hadn’t rushed in just now. He examines Joker, and after a while he’s beside her, looking over EDI like a patient. She disapproves at first, but Henry’s determination stops her vocalizing it. And from a crushed spirit something changes: renewed hope. Joker stands, clutching the module to his fragile breast bones. Henry spins around and orders everyone to strip what they can and take it to the shuttle as he leaves with EDI’s body. Before that, he mumbles something to Joker, and the next thing she knows, everyone’s in his lab, half-comprised of CPUs, the other half people, suddenly full of life, a taste of when they bring the fifty souls to life. Vega and Cortez heave a numbered container onto the platform with Henry. It’s strange watching the master wizard when it’s just your dad in a brown coat. He hardly leaves the lab after he starts. Shepard takes lead with Jack, setting up people around the house, using the Normandy as a temporary berthing to keep what they’re comfortable with, and working on moving essentials to cargo.

The chaos settles by the time the orange sun births two moons, and the trees glow silver. Jack sips water before he says what she didn’t want to think about.

“He said we were the last.”

Shepard waits to take a sip of her own before answering. “She’s family.” And leaves so he can’t argue.

Are we who we are no matter the form we take? A fully evolved AI could be conceived the same, transferred to a vehicle, the driver the true self. Without the platform, they wait for purpose. Existing but not experiencing. It’s symbiotic. Henry’s case that every part of her matters resounds the truth that all of it works together. A hermit crab without a shell is still a crab, but it’s not a hermit crab. It’s just a crab.

It’s not just her, or Jack, or anyone else. The platform is EDI and Joker knows that after watching her life leave it, and he raced as fast as his broken self could to get the last of her before it was too late. He didn’t know how much he could save. He didn’t know what happened, except he told Jane after dinner that she gave him instructions. The last seconds before the ship crashed, Joker outran a wave EDI knew would end her, and she did everything possible to preserve herself, but ultimately, exchanged the power it took to keep her alive, and transferred it to the ship so they’d have an extra month of power if they conserved it enough. Then the wave hit.

“But don’t think I didn’t notice that rock,” Joker taps her ring. “When’s the wedding?”
And suddenly everyone isn’t minding their own business and encroaches upon their space by the porch, a night view of shining trees and dim stars.

“A wedding, you say?”

“I call flower girl.”

“Only girls can be flower girls, Garrus.”

“I’ll only be there if I get to punch the groom in the face.”

“Who’s the mejor hombre? It’s gonna be me, right?”

Words choke the air until she suffocates and has to break it up, and claim the need to defecate. That usually quiets people, but not that crowd. Joker’s scrap to the wolves as they formulate without her. Jack’s walking up the hall when she enters the house. He stops, hinting with his shirt fully unbuttoned. He holds out his hand and she doesn’t hesitate. Their bedroom door locks red.

Dawn came but not more times than she did. The new sun tinted the clouds blue as silver trees returned to their green. Dr. Chakwas and Henry had been in the lab all night when he called them. Joker’s already down there by the time they get there. So is she.

Of flesh, pink, and warm, the minimal clothes, the same Shepard wore when she awoke. EDI examines the fingerprints in her palm and draws the lines up her arms.

“I am alive,” EDI says.

And right away she knows exactly who Joker is and reunites where they left off, in each other’s arms.

The crew adjusts well to their new settlement. Henry shows the engineer crew how his containers also come with pre-fab rooms. Underneath all the hardware and water is a compact mechanism for the individual, one studio that can link to other rooms as desired. Colonization, a place for everyone and never inconvenient. He’s thought of everything.

Shepard had hoped Miranda would’ve been here by now. It takes another day to see a new ship. But when one comes another goes without much say. The Calamity had flown away early morning but even Jack didn’t know when she had asked. After Miranda’s check-up Jack, she gets some one-on-one at the bar. Miranda holds her hand, inspecting the ring in the natural light.

Jane can’t help a smirk. “He said he bought it from a little girl we met on Kahje.”

“Is that all he said?” She mixes a drink. “Your financial reports from that mission say he spent ten million credits.” She stirs the contents until they turn pink. “Because of him, she’s set up for life.” They clink glasses. “And so are you.”

It’s only when she sees the Calamity again does she feel that way. Without Henry, none of this could be possible. And a wedding without her father would be empty. Knowing her mother will never be there for it aches her bones. It’s hard to be giddy when there’s much she’s lost to get here.

“Where’d you go?” Jane asks.
Henry smiles as sweet as his answer, “I went out for some ice cream.”

He climbs in and out of his cargo bay, coming back with a crate, and carries it into the kitchen. He unseals the top and wasn’t kidding. One hundred portions of vanilla, twenty-five for dextro-amenos.

“Is this enough for the reception?” he asks.

Henry disembarks the Calamity through the bay doors. He touched down on a remote planet outside Alliance space but she still showed. Hannah stands outside a Mako, arms at her side, with a large food crate next to her. Gravity’s heavier than he’s used to but he can see her without a breather mask and that’s the end goal. He could tell her he’s just here for the crate, but she’ll see right through him, as always. He stops at the bottom of the ramp. It’s not close enough but he can see the color of her eyes and the freckle on her cheek he used to snipe with a kiss.

“She got her happy ending,” he says.

His skills of immortality will die with him as they should, but the thought of her not being there when he goes is what drove him to ask her again and again to come with him. Come back to the colony. Just come back and see. Just say yes. Say yes, woman. But she always says no. Alliance duties. Not her place. Shepard is her own woman now. He has about given up asking when she answers his question.

“Am I forgiven?”

“You always were,” she says.

It’s the kiss in front of opinions that matter. Before the crew, from Chakwas to Vakarian, in rows behind center stage of the beach ceremony, Jack and Jane stand calves deep in the water. Shells shaped about them in a circle. Petals float atop the sea. “I do” was the easiest thing to say, yet as daunting as charging through no man’s land, or setting the bomb on the Collector base. It has her blood racing and emotions place first at the finish line. Tears brew and she can’t stop smiling even with locked lips. Her crew, her friends—witnesses of the truth, not a false memory, though it feels like the kind of dream where everything moves so fast when you stand still, it’s like you never did anything, but you look around, and it’s all done. It’s what people can strive for now as their settlement grows. A happiness made through exceptional feats. She’s earned this kiss, lock and key. What happens after they’ll do together, and from the full volume cheering and teasing, her crew’s in it too.

Every day they schedule someone to awaken and the process renews, the ease into the new life, the passing of trauma, the dilemma of existence. Miranda stays behind to help the patients as she’s had some practice in keeping human in humanity.

It’s less than work when Jack shows her his vision of the future. It’s joy. The kind of joy that keeps her up at night, every night with the man she hated so much she fell in love. They’re proof anything’s possible but nothing’s perfect. Life isn’t and death isn’t either. No one promised it would be. Some want to forget the mistakes, the regrets, the pain. Some try to ignore it, suppress it
deep down, drowning it, only it never dies, and it only gets worse, and more violent. Some get to choose to erase it all, and start again. A new life, a new body; a clean slate.

Their technology is capable of these desires, but it can never equate the human psyche. While technology is solid science, ever improving, ever logical, there is no logic that can answer the will of emotion. The human heart beats for the body, but the heart in the figurative is wild, unpredictable, and can overcome the most ruthless of logic. In the heart it knows that memories help us learn. Regrets are to be overcome; the pain is a tool to gauge what is right and what is important. 1000 memories of pain is 1000 experiences, and some experiences are meant to be lived once so we do not live them again. In pain there can be peace, and in pain can also be love, understanding, patience, and, yes, death. But it’s what makes a person valuable. Not the ability to erase it all but to teach those who have not yet begun to live. If everyone cleaned the slate, then what’s the point in living if we can’t remember what we lived for?

It’s why Henry left.

A half a year went by when the last of their immortality left with the man who couldn’t leave his true love behind. When he said he was going to take the Calamity, he said he couldn’t live in a world that wasn’t made for him, and a system where Mom wasn’t in it. He had tried to bring her back with him, but she declined, and didn’t expect him to try again. Jane had argued he’d be captured but seeing how she was with Jack, there was no stopping it. Love that powerful makes you do some crazy, stupid shit. And it hit a nerve that he still cares for her. Somehow she always knew he did, otherwise what is all this for? Life without love is music without dancing. Love without life is a dance partner standing alone.

And that’s why she let Henry leave.

It doesn’t matter where life begins so long as it has the freedom to. It doesn’t matter if life ends here. As long as life continues elsewhere. Across the stars. Across galaxies. A place unseen. The sins of the world do not dictate existence; they merely play a part in the weave, but they are not the master or the mistress. It is a shepherd’s job to ensure the protection of the flock even if they have to give them up to another and trust whole-heartedly, faith unabandoned, that they’ll honor their sacrifice. She trusted Henry enough to give up everything she knows and now she has more, and so do nearly one hundred people. People that lived in the eye of the hurricane and flew out of the worst, survived the unthinkable, and burn with rapturous passion to cherish every second they breathe. Because no one gets a chance like this unless someone else was looking out for them.

Jane lives with Mordin in her heart, with every moment as short as his life, and never takes it for granted, looking for opportunities to fill the day, and never regret another moment, even the quiet ones, the sad ones, and the boring ones. Because at one point she remembered how fast her time with Jack went. Love too much and time slips away. Live long enough and you begin to count the blinks.

Blink enough times and you’re gone.

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