What Lies Beneath

by NightmareWalker

Summary

Stolen from her parents in infancy, Shepard takes part in a revolutionary experiment that will change the course of history. It's the classic question of nature versus nurture in this galactic fight for freedom, life, and love. As she rises against her captors with her closest allies - and made family - scattered to the four winds, dark forces work behind the scenes to bring them back to heel. At any cost - using any means necessary.

Notes

So, another story that I probably won't update frequently! But never fear, this is completely - nearly completely - mapped out from stem to stem, with only little blank spots in between everything. It's just a matter of finding the time to sit down and write everything now, since my job is still shit and I'm still working sixty to eighty hours a week. Upside, I am looking into a different job that will hopefully pan out and - hopefully - pay better with actual normal hours instead of this insanity.

There will be some time jumps through the first...ehm, three or four chapters? Like, they’re obvious, but they’re there. I’m just building the world and setting up for everyone’s frame of mind as the story really begins, so bear with me, guys.
SO, that Life is Strange: Before the Storm release?!?!? Amiright??? Who else is excited for the next episode??? And Rachel motherfucking Amber, bitches! She's tiny! And cute af! And flirty! And Chloe has no fucking chill, I stg!

*ahem* fangirling moment over now, promise.

Read on!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Prologue

Belfast, Ireland; Earth

“Are you sure you can’t stay for another week or two? You only just used up your maternity leave; you’ve still got months of time off to use. Why not stay planet-side with us?”

The woman, Rear Admiral Hannah Shepard, shook her head sadly and tore her eyes away from the similarly mournful stares of her husband and two month old daughter. “I can’t, Ned. I mean, I know I could, but there’s so much trouble in the Outer Reaches…I have to go.”

“I know,” Ned said quietly.

Their daughter decided to pipe up with a mighty squawk, face rapidly pinking with her tiny fury. Hannah dropped her bag and swooped in to pluck her daughter from her husband’s arms, nestling her close and murmuring as she rocked gently from side to side. Ned smiled gently, eyes gleaming with half-serious humor and unshed tears. “Why can’t I ever get her to settle like that? You make it look so easy.”

Hannah continued rocking her and patted Ned’s scruffy cheek fondly. “You just haven’t gotten to know her yet.”

“Because you won’t stop holding her,” he joked.

“Can you blame me? She’s beautiful. Perfect.” Hannah looked down at her daughter, now cooing to herself in her arms. “Our perfect Arryn Lee Shepard.”

As if already recognizing her name, Arryn opened her eyes and her mismatched blue and brown eyes stared at her for a second before they crossed.

“Silly girl,” Hannah chuckled, tickling her stomach and grinning as Arryn cooed. Her freckle dusted nose wrinkled as hair escaped Hannah’s bun and tickled her sensitive skin and she reached up to tug at the errant strands with a pudgy hand. “Ah ah, not mommy’s hair. She needs it in one piece, not gummed to death.”

Ned delicately untangled her hair from Arryn’s grasp and wrapped the strands back into their bun. He cupped Hannah’s jaw in his hand and kissed her once, twice, lingering with their daughter pressed securely between them as he felt tears prick at his eyes again. “I love you,” he whispered.

Hannah leaned her forehead against his and felt her lips tremble in a smile. “I love you, too, Ned. Keep her safe.” She cautiously transferred Arryn to his arms and she immediately began fussing, squirming in discontent in his arms. “Hold her close to your heart, let her listen to its rhythm,” she said, urging Ned to have a tighter grip. “There you go, sweet girl.”

Arryn slowly calmed herself as Ned bundled her closer, turning her head to nuzzle at his chest. “She’s hungry. I left some milk in the fridge, but you’ll have to get her some more before the end of the week.” Hannah took a slow step backwards and nearly tripped over her bag. “Make sure you burp her after you’ve fed her, and don’t let her sleep before seven, or she’ll never sleep through the night. When you get—”

“Darling, I know. I’ve been with you since her birth, remember?” Ned smiled sadly as Hannah nodded and shouldered her bag. She snapped to attention and saluted him jauntily, then relaxed
and waved her hand.

“I love you both, be safe, I’ll call you when I can.”

Ned waved at her and Arryn turned her head toward her mother’s voice, eyes opening again so she was faced with her husband’s blue-grey gaze and her daughter’s mismatched blue and brown eyes. “We love you,” Ned said, lifting Arryn’s little arm so she could wave goodbye. “Say bye to mommy, sweetling. We won’t see her for a while.” Arryn cried out and Hannah twisted on her heel, disappearing into the skycar that would take her to the space port.

A small transport was waiting to take her out to the Kilamanjaro, and they would be venturing into the Outer Reaches to go after some Batarian slavers that were wreaking havoc on the less defensible colonies on the edges of civilized space. She allowed herself a final look at her family, standing on the porch of their house on the outskirts of the city. She finally let her tears fall as the trees swallowed up their home and her husband and daughter disappeared from sight, leaning back into the seat in the back of the skycar. She watched the ruins of castles and old villages underneath them as they flew toward Greenwich and anxiously fingered the two necklaces hanging between her breasts. Her dogtags jingled gently with each twist of her fingers and, on a thinner chain, a hand hammered pendant of a baying wolf caught the sunlight intermittently. She lifted the pendant on its long chain and thumbed it fondly, twisting it subtly to it would catch the light and glimmer with each motion. She lifted the pendant to her lips and kissed it, whispering, “Keep them safe.”

She never saw the skycar barreling toward her.

Ned Shepard forced his hands to stop trembling as he leaned over his daughter, dressing her in the nicest, warmest clothes he could find amongst the pile of clothes littering the dresser in her room. He swallowed harshly as he zipped up Arryn’s jacket and lifted her into his arms. His daughter was silent, mismatched eyes locked on his face and expression somber as though she, too, recognized the need for solemnity. “Well, we can’t keep them waiting, can we, sweetling?”

Ned took a deep, shuddering breath and left Arryn’s room with her bundled in his arms, keeping his eyes steadfastly averted from the shut door directly across the hallway. He hurried down the stairs and locked the door behind himself, lingering on the porch with his eyes staring through the waiting towncar. He haltingly walked down the path and slid into the backseat silently. He cradled his daughter close until they reached the cemetery and clenched his jaw hard enough that it ached when he saw the throng of people standing nearby.

A man in Alliance blues with caramel skin and sad, dark eyes, approached him as he exited the towncar. “Ned, I can’t even…Hannah was a sister to me.” He offered his hand and stumbled back in surprise as Ned threw an arm around his shoulders, shaking silently as he kept his arm securely around Arryn.

“I know, David. Thank you for coming here, she would have…Hannah…” Ned took several deep, shuddering breaths and stepped back. His eyes shone wetly but his head was high as he turned toward the gathered people, Anderson at his side with a steadying hand on his shoulder. Ned watched his daughter numbly as the priest said some words over the casket by the open ground and only looked up when he heard the first volley of gunfire. Seven Alliance soldiers aimed over the casket and fired again, and once more, then returned to parade rest, and he felt the first tears streak down his face as Arryn cried out in shock and fear.

Anderson and another soldier folded up the flag resting over Hannah’s casket and his friend strode over with solemn dignity to present it to him. He clutched the soft fabric against his stomach,
Ned clutched his jacket around his stomach as dirt covered the casket and felt his legs give out as it disappeared from sight. His fist clenched, fingers biting into his palm, and the warm sting of metal pinching his skin drew his gaze away from the hole in the ground. A ring made of four different metals from the various Council homeworlds, colorful and strong, gleamed on his left ring finger. He took it off and turned the ring slowly so he could read the inscription inside the ring.

*Family, duty, honor. N & H For our love will endure.*

His eyes welled up again and spilled over his wind chapped cheeks, and Ned knelt by Hannah’s grave until the dirt was compacted in the hole, then dusted off his pants and staggered toward the road. He began walking slowly in the direction David’s house was located, well familiar with it as he and Hannah had been friends with the man since his wife – deceased, dead – entered the military and met him. He slipped the ring off his finger and read the inscription again – *Family… love* – and wiped at his streaming eyes with the back of his hand. He smiled mournfully and slid the ring back on his finger, pressing his hand to his chest as he walked down the street.

He never saw the hooded stranger appear in the alley as he passed by.

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David Anderson wept over the coffin being lowered to the ground, unashamed in his grief as it disappeared into the earth. He held the squalling baby tighter to his chest and gently rocked her as the mourners shook his hand and their heads sorrowfully. When he was at last alone, he stared at the twin markers that rested side by side in a secluded grove in the cemetery. The first snow had fallen the night before and gentle flakes fell on his shoulders now, innocuous amongst the sadness.
filling him. He brushed a gloved hand over the fresh, crisp inscriptions on Hannah’s and Ned’s graves and whispered, “I wish I could have done more. I wish I could do more,” then turned on his heel and walked away.

Arryn wailed in his arms as he walked away and he hushed her gently. “I know, little one, I know. I wish I was able to…but I can’t. This will be better for you than anything else.” He stopped on the curb outside the cemetery where two cars idled quietly. His towncar was parked in front of a nondescript skycar, in front of which stood two men wearing suits and identical somber expressions.

“Mister Anderson?” One asked, removing his sunglasses. David nodded silently and the man held out his hand. “We’ve been expecting you.”

“I’m sorry, I had to…my friend, he just-”

“We understand you just buried the father today, and the mother has passed on as well?”

Anderson nodded. “Her father was…accosted, nearly two weeks ago, and her mother…she was killed by a hit and run skycar driver over a month ago.”

The man nodded gravely and gestured toward Arryn. “We understand there are no other living relatives and there were no godparents named?”

“That is correct.”

“And you are unable to care for her…”

“I can’t abandon my job. I wish I could, somedays.” Anderson looked down at Arryn’s face, scrunched up in discomfort and mouth working against the buttons on his coat. “I wish I could take care of her.”

“But you can’t, so we will find a home that can.”

“And she will be well cared for?” Anderson jerked his head up sharply, holding tightly to the infant as the man’s silent companion reached for her.

The man smiled somewhat toothily and nodded. “She will be taken care of; I promise every need will be met.”

David searched his empty gaze for a long moment, then turned his sight down to the child in his arms. He stroked her chubby cheek with a gloved finger and smiled wetly as she turned her head toward the digit and began suckling on it. “Be safe, little one. I will miss you and your parents dear.”

He cautiously turned the infant over to the silent man and watched them get into the skycar, tracking its progress until it disappeared from his sight. He sighed heavily and scratched his neck, eying the tombstones at his back and the towncar before him, then slid into the seat and shut his eyes, resting his head on the back of the seat.

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“Is this really her? Are we sure?” The man held Arryn like she was a ticking bomb, face scrunched up uncomfortably as the infant squirmed and screwed up her face in preparation to scream.

“Yes, but to be safe…” His companion took out a small box shaped object and a needle snicked out of the top. He quickly pricked Arryn’s shoulder and she jumped and began wailing. Within seconds, the handheld machine beeped cheerily and the man smiled mirthlessly. “Yep, she’s it.
Ought to make the Illusive Man happy.” He eyed the crying baby irritably and snapped, “Can’t you shut her up?”

The man holding Arryn jolted as she screamed louder and placed his palm over her mouth, hoping to muffle the sound, if nothing else. Unexpectedly, she quickly quieted to hiccups and sniffled and began rooting against his hand. He crooked a finger and she latched on, suckling hungrily and shoving her head against his hand when no milk was forthcoming. “Don’t get attached,” his partner said as he noticed his gobsmacked expression, “we’re just dropping the brat off, then we gotta go track down another.”

He nodded and firmed his expression until the skycar dropped down on the edge of the ship ports, pulling his spit slick finger from her mouth when they climbed out and ignoring her cries as they handed her over to a dispassionate woman wearing a suit. They disappeared back into the skycar and left the woman staring down at the wailing infant with a frown on her face.

“You’re certainly verbose.”

She walked onto a featureless ship and set Arryn down in a small bed with high railings and then walked out, shutting the door behind her to drown out her persistent cries. She knocked on the only other door in the tiny ship and waited until a coarse looking man poked his head out and stared at her wordlessly. “Get us up in the air, we’ve got to make up time.” He nodded and disappeared and she retreated back into the small, sterile room where Arryn was sobbing and hiccuping.

“Initial readings seem good,” she said to the room at large, picking up a small earpiece and fitting it in while ignoring her cries. “Testing, three, two, testing.” She scanned a monitor that appeared above Arryn’s head and nodded to herself. Pressing a button on the side of the small bed, a transparent wall appeared and Arryn’s cries were abruptly silenced, although she still cried profusely. The woman spoke quickly into the earpiece, eyes roving across the baby’s body and the monitor floating before her. “Vitals are normal, heart rate elevated for obvious reasons…physical growth and development appears to be on track; we’ll need to speed that up…age, thirteen weeks…right in the middle of the chart, good, very good.”

She typed quickly as she spoke, eyes darting between Arryn, the readings on a separate monitor, and her own. After she finished typing, she disabled the soundproof barrier and winced as Arryn’s cries reached her ears again. “Can’t have that.” She picked up a small mask and fitted it over her mouth and nose, then dispensed a mixture of nitrous oxide and sevorflurane through it. Arryn’s cries quieted and within the minute she was completely limp on the small bed. The woman nodded to herself and checked the flow through the mask, then slipped on a pair of gloves and picked up one of several needles. “Now, then, let’s figure out what is in store for you.”

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Unspecified Area, Pragia; Terminus System

“Prepare for exposure; doors locking.”

“Doors locked.” The mechanic snick of metal sliding home echoed through the sterile room.

“Vents closing.”

“Vents closed.”

“Oxygen masks.”
As one, the handful of scientists slid their masks over their noses and mouths. The head scientist typed on the monitor floating before him and glanced into the small room through the one way mirror. “Exposure to element zero beginning in three, two, one.” He input a command on the monitor and the infant laying in the small bed on the other side of the glass wriggled anxiously. A small stone, innocuous but for the glowing veins running through it, was uncovered from beneath the protective metallic sheet and rose to sit by the bed frame. “Exposure to eezo for thirty minutes, mark.” A timer appeared floating at eye level and the group of scientists relaxed marginally. They spoke amongst themselves, glancing occasionally through the glass at the squirming infant who glowed eerily in the slowly pulsing light of the stone.

“So, this is it.” The woman who spoke was breathless with wonder, eyes locked on the infant through the glass and gleaming intently. “This is how Project Olympus begins. This one child. What’s her name?”

“It doesn’t matter, chances are she won’t survive and we’ll have to start again anyway.” Spoken tersely by a sour looking older man, he glared through his mask at the woman and sneered when she turned her nose up at him. “If it really matters that much to you, the girl is called SA DA 9 30 in her files.”

The woman shook her head and regarded the glass again. “It’s kind of sad that she’s been reduced to a serial number in a file on a computer.”

“If you dislike it that much, then get out of here; we don’t need your conscience suddenly kicking in partway through and biting us all in the ass.”

“As if. I’ve waited ten years for this to come to fruition, there’s no way I’m backing out now.”

“Then shut your mouth.”

The woman dropped into sullen silence and watched the timer count down. The man typed a code on the monitor as the clock dropped below ten minutes and the stone began breaking down. It released noxious fumes as it crumbled into dust and the infant began crying when she inhaled the first whiff. As she cried, more and more of the gas swept into her lungs and she started wailing and flailing her arms. “Dispensing gaseous eezo, monitoring infant’s vitals.” He watched the monitor carefully as more of the gas was inhaled through the infant’s nose and mouth, eyes glittering above his oxygen mask. “Five minutes left, approximately thirty percent of element zero remaining to integrate.”

Half a minute later, a siren blared and the monitor flashed red. “Shit, heart rate spiking, brain activity is too rapid!” He furiously typed and a mixture of anesthesia was dispersed into the air around the infant. Within the minute, her frantic crying and wiggling had quieted, although she still trembled and whimpered occasionally. The man stared at the monitor with his breath held and sighed in relief as her vitals dropped into acceptable ranges. “Heart rate and brain activity still high, but within acceptable ranges, barely. Three minutes remaining, approximately fifteen percent of eezo left.”

“Shit, I don’t want to be you if that hadn’t worked,” one of the other scientists said with a tense chuckle. “The Illusive Man would’ve had your head on a spike if she died.”

“But she didn’t.” He gestured grandly at the infant with a smirk on his lips. “I have this under control.” As if to prove him wrong, the alarm went off again and his eyes widened. “What the fuck? This can’t—heart rate declining, no, god dammit!” He watched helplessly as the infant started to convulse and cough in the tiny bed, unable to administer any drugs to counteract the seizure. “This wasn’t—this was never predicted as a side effect!”
“Dammit, we can’t just let her die!”

“We can’t very well run in there, either!”

The woman stared with wide eyes at the glass and then dashed for the door to the side of the viewing window. “No!” She was tackled by the others in the room and dragged back, her motions arrested by the hands that held her arms in a painful lock behind her back. “The fuck do you think you’re doing?!”

“Trying to save-”

“You can’t save her! You can’t even acknowledge that she exists! This job, this Project Olympus, does not exist! Can you get that through your empty head?” The man got in her face as he yelled and jabbed his finger into her chest for emphasis.

She dropped her head and nodded once, listening to the alarm echo through the sterile room. It abruptly cut out, replaced by the monotonous drone of a flat-lined heartbeat, and she sniffled quietly.

“Fuck.” The man slammed his fist against his leg and meandered over to the monitor. He half heartedly typed on it and stared through the window at the motionless little body laying on the bed, mouth creased into a frown. “Transfer of eezo complete, less than two percent remaining in the air. Subject is…unresponsive. Heart beat nonexistent, brain activity absent, unable to attempt resuscitation.”

Behind him, he heard the woman sob once and sighed again. “Notes; subject appeared to respond well to radiation, but while transfer through inhalation was more direct, it was also more harmful. Time of death-” His eyes wandered across the second screen to his right and his jaw hung open. “Uhm, previous statement rescinded. Heartbeat present again, brain activity slowly climbing… this is unbelievable!”

The scientists all crowded around the viewing window, watching in fascination as the infant’s chest slowly rose and fell with each labored breath, hands waving lazily in the air as her eyelids fluttered. Her head fell to the side as her eyes opened and the scientists gasped, staring at the mismatched blue and brown eyes that stared at the one way glass, the inner irises shot through with a bright, metallic blue.

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“You’ll be unconscious for the surgery, so no.” The doctor impassively washed his hands as a nurse prepped the squirming toddler, grabbing hold of a swinging leg and strapping it to the table efficiently. The toddler whined at the cold cuff that immobilized her and reached for it and was unceremoniously pushed onto her back. The nurse strapped down one arm, then the other, then her remaining foot, and stood at the side of the table motionlessly. “She secure?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Proceed.”

“Of course.” She inserted an IV into the toddler’s elbow, eying her seriously when she squirmed in her limited space and whimpered.

“Don’t like needles.”
“Stay still, girl.”

She grudgingly stilled herself and watched the nurse slip the needle under her skin, inhaling sharply but not moving. The nurse started the IV and turned to the slight man who was fiddling with a small dial attached to an oxygen mask. “Anesthesia?”

“Ready.” He handed her the mask and she pulled it over the girl’s mouth and nose and they watched her drift off almost immediately. “Heart rate slightly elevated, vitals normal otherwise.” The doctor snapped a pair of gloves over his hands and pulled his mask over his mouth and nose, then turned to the table. The nurse flicked on the powerful overhead lamps and the girl seemed to glow under the stark lights, disheveled dark brown hair wild on the sterile table and skin pale from lack of sunlight, freckles standing out starkly.

“Procedure ready to begin, nurse and anesthesiologist standing by,” he said, speaking into the small microphone attached to the earpiece. “If the nurse would begin by shaving her head?” The nurse picked a pair of scissors off the tray by the table and began lopping off the toddler’s hair as the doctor continued speaking into the earpiece. “After the subject has been shaved and cleaned, the first implant will be inserted in the motor cortex of the brain, followed by one between the C1 and C2 vertebrae. Depending on her reaction to those, the other two that will help with initial power dispersal may be inserted as well. At a later date, more will be inserted at intervals down the spinal cord and tested for reception.”

The nurse finished taking off most of the girl’s hair and reached for the straight razor, lathering her head with soap and stripping the uneven hair from her scalp. When she washed the last of the suds off her skin, her head gleamed under the bright lights, interspersed with bloody spots and raw areas of skin. “Ready to make the first marks, doctor.”

They bent over the unconscious girl and drew on her bare skin in preparation for the cuts he would make. “Local anesthetic.” When the area was numbed, he picked up the scalpel on the tray and dragged it along the line of her temple, just inside where her hair line would be. Blood welled up immediately and the nurse dabbed at the slow dribble as he cut deeper. They worked efficiently, speaking occasionally when one would need something or as the doctor made notes about the progress. Several hours later, they straightened and he groaned as the vertebrae of his spine popped. The nurse snipped the last of the suturing thread off, the incision marked by a thin line that was dotted with neat rows of stitches.

“How does she look,” the doctor asked the anesthesiologist.

He glanced at the monitor before him and nodded. “Heart rate a little slower than normal now, but otherwise everything looks good.”

“How are you good to go for another?”

The nurse stretched as she nodded and they unbuckled the girl’s restraints and turned her onto her stomach. They buckled the straps again, washed the back of her head and made more marker lines where the next implant would go, then the doctor picked up a new, sterile scalpel and made the incision.

The little girl stumbled on the grated walkway and felt a rough hand shove her when she stopped. She glared over her shoulder with as much hate as her five year old face could muster and stiffened as the man – Franks, her handler, her mind supplied helpfully – laughed at her expression. “Ye cannae intimidate me with that look, girl, so turn ‘round an’ keep walkin’.” His thick Irish accent was soothing to her ears, being nearly the only one she had heard in her short
life outside of the few scientists that poked at her. She saw many other people when she was taken out of her room each day, but none of them ever spoke to her – and how she hated the way they spoke like she didn’t hear them, couldn’t understand them, or talked with each other in low tones outside her range of hearing.

She stopped in front of the metal door that she had memorized as her own – seventh on the left, halfway between the hallway that led to the lab and the wide double doors she had never been through – and waited while Franks keyed something into his omni tool. Once the light to the side of the door blinked green, she was prodded into the room and left by herself, listening to the locks click into place on the other side. She stared around her room at the small bed, dresser, table with a chair where she took her meals, and a door that led to a tiny bathroom in the far corner. As always, a tray with nutrient rich, tasteless food was sitting on the table, a small stack of paper sitting beside it with a pencil.

She ignored the table in favor of walking into the bathroom and stood on the stool in front of the faucet, staring at her reflection in the mirror she could just see into. Her face was round still but hard edges already gleamed in her heterochromatic eyes, blue and brown glinting in the bright lights and the electric blue shot through her irises catching the synthetic light eerily. Her skin was pale from lack of natural light and dusted with freckles across her cheeks and nose, ropy scars peeking out from beneath sable hair at her temples. Her hands were covered in chalk dust from the day’s lesson in balance and stability on the tippy beam set up in the room next to the lab – she didn’t like going there, the scientists always stuck a needle in her arm and, once, she fell asleep and woke up with bandages wrapped around her head and a headache – and she stuck them under the cold water to wash them.

She ate her bland supper and stared at the papers full of her lessons in reading and writing; large, blocky letters and words that spelled simple sentences she had already memorized and traced endlessly for the past week and no longer interested her. Once she was done copying the letters in the blank space beneath the printed words in her careful writing, she set her pencil down and left the papers and empty tray on the table. She pulled her pants off and left them in a pile by the door, then slid beneath the thin sheets just as the lights went out and stared at the softly glowing wall clock that displayed the time – eight pm – until her eyes grew heavy, and her head tipped to the side as she fell asleep.

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“But I always go to-”

“Nae today, ye don’t. Ye go this way, girl.” Franks kept his hand heavy on her shoulder, guiding her down the hallway, but taking a right at the end instead of left toward the lab and training area.

She counted the doors they walked past and had just reached nine when Franks’ hand tightened its grip and she was pulled through a windowed doorway. The room, walls lined with stainless steel counters and cabinets and a similar table in the middle, unsettled her somehow, and she reached up to scratch absently at a ropy scar that spanned the back of her neck.

“Get on the table, girl.” She barely resisted before she was set unceremoniously on the cold metal and fidgeted as Franks stood by her rigidly.

A few minutes later, three people in white coats filed in through the door and stood in a loose half circle in front of them. Their eyes gleamed brightly with fascination and excitement, fingers ticking quickly on their omni tools before they turned their gazes on her as one. “So, this is SA DA 9 30,” one said breathlessly, almost sounding in awe of the skinny eight year old sitting nervously in front of them. “I wonder if she will be capable of everything they’ve theorized. So many possibilities…” Her tone dropped off thoughtfully as she caught the girl’s chin and tilted
her head one way, then another, looking at the slowly fading scars that lined her temples and regularly peeked out of her hairline from behind her ears to the nape of her neck. “When will they start working with her?”

“Not until she’s healed after this surgery,” an older man said, washing his hands by the sink. Another, smaller man sat behind a little table and started playing with the dials, watching a screen hovering in front of his face until he seemed satisfied. “Get her ready.”

The woman stepped back as Franks told the girl to lie down on her stomach and they strapped her arms and legs into the buckles on the edges of the table. She struggled automatically against the restraints and Franks grabbed her hair roughly. “Calm yerself, girl, or I’ll give ye somethin’ to struggle against.” She settled reluctantly and stiffened when she felt the cold edge of a blade against her neck. It sliced through her shirt and bared her back, and the regularly spaced scarring down her spine, to the harsh lights overhead, leaving her skin racing with goosebumps as the cool air hit it.

“Are you ready with sedation?”

“One minute…approximate weight, fifty pounds, age…okay, go for it.”

The woman pulled a mask from beside the table and fitted it over her nose and mouth, and the girl felt herself grow drowsy as the people continued to speak over her. Once she was out, the woman washed her hands and snapped on a pair of gloves and waited for the older man to fix his mask over his face before handing him a marker. “First incision goes over the T4, then T9, then L4.” They drew on her skin with markers and made casual conversation over her body as they worked.

“God, if this works…”

“It’s still experimental.”

“I know that, but we’ve done so much research, it has to work. We’ve put so much time and money-”

“You mean the Illusive Man has.”

The woman waved her hand carelessly at the man standing opposite her. “We’ve put the time and effort in, though. It will work,” she said certainly. “With the placement of these extra implants, it should give her better control over the biotics without the backlash of the energy overloading her extremities. She already has the cranial implants, these will only fine tune them more and allow for more even power dispersion.”

He hummed as he made a final mark on her skin and stood up. “Okay. Ready to start?” She nodded and handed him a scalpel. As he made the first shallow cut, the girl twitched in her restraints and he stopped to throw a look over his shoulder at the man sitting at the little table.

“I put her under with the correct dosage, I know my job,” he said defensively.

“Obviously not; she shouldn’t even be moving.”

“I can’t really give her a-”

“Do it.”

The man held up his hands in defeat and adjusted the amount of gas flowing into the mask, then nodded silently. The older man made another incision and his eyes narrowed over his mask when
the girl’s arms twitched. “It will have to do. Make sure those straps are tight,” he told the woman. As she checked the restraints, he widened the incision between her shoulder blades and dabbed at the blood welling up from the cut with a cotton swab. “Get the implant ready, I don’t think she’s going to stay under for long.”
Welcome to Hell

Chapter Notes

Have another chapter, guys! For now, posts will be every other week, but hopefully that will change soon.

Read on!

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The man held up his hands in defeat and adjusted the amount of gas flowing into the mask, then nodded silently. The older man made another incision and his eyes narrowed over his mask when the girl’s arms twitched. “It will have to do. Make sure those straps are tight,” he told the woman. As she checked the restraints, he widened the incision between her shoulder blades and dabbed at the blood welling up from the cut with a cotton swab. “Get the implant ready, I don’t think she’s going to stay under for long.”

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As she stood up and wiped the sweat from her brow, the girl spied an anomaly amongst the normal swath of scientists that were observing her training. Another girl, several years older than her, was standing near the back of the group with an inscrutable expression on her face as she watched the girl run laps around the room. The girl dragged in a couple more breaths as she walked around, cooling off and scratching the back of her neck. Her short, wavy hair was completely saturated with sweat and she unselfconsciously stripped her shirt off to dry herself off, watching from the corner of her eye as the scientists made notes on their notepads and left the viewing room.

The girl, though, stayed behind, watching the girl watch her, and clenched her hands together in front of her. The older girl scrutinized her for a long moment, then took slow, halting steps until they were face to face. She looked over her shoulder at the closed door and then returned her gaze to the girl, slowly extending her palm. She laid it flat against the glass and locked eyes with the girl. The girl stared at her palm and the smooth, unblemished skin offered to her, and rubbed her fingers together. She felt the hard calluses already forming on the pads of her fingers, rolled her shoulders to dispel the ache from doing chin ups, and took the last step toward the glass. She set her palm against the glass, opposite the older girl’s, and offered a vague smile as her fingers pressed lightly into the cool glass. The older girl returned it faintly and tucked her long, black hair behind her ear, then leaned in and blew on the glass, then wrote in the fogged area and met brown and blue eyes.
The girl, just beginning to show signs of adolescence – although she had no concrete way of determining her age, only that she was *changing* – walked ahead of her handler silently, little hands balled into tight fists by her hips. She turned left at the end of the corridor and stopped for Franks in front of the door that led into the training area, then stopped on the edge of the room when it was open. Her heterochromatic eyes blinked and her jaw gaped loosely at the scene in front of her.

A different girl, younger looking and bald, was fighting furiously with who appeared to be her handler, biting and scratching at his hands and face and crawling over his body with all the dexterity of a spider. The man yelped as she raked her nails across his cheek and grabbed her head in his hands, throwing her over his shoulder so she landed heavily on the mat at his feet.

“Get off me, you little bitch!” She screamed at him furiously and he kicked her in the side before stalking away.

Franks shoved her forward and retreated from the room before she could recover, leaving the girl tripping over her feet toward the skinny, unfamiliar face still laying on the mat. “Hey, are you – who’re you, are you alright?”

The girl didn’t answer, but she looked up and smiled around bloody teeth manically. “I gonna hurt you,” she said, and picked herself off the floor with a grunt to throw herself at the girl. Her knuckles landed hard just beneath the older girl’s nose and split her lip, then they were rolling on the ground and trading punches. Their handlers reappeared in time to pull them apart, flailing and swinging wildly, and Franks shook her roughly.

“Get yer head outta yer arse, girl!”

“She started it,” she cried defensively.

“I dannae care, I’m gon’ tae *finish* it if ye don’ shut it!” He shook her again and the girl squirmed as the other handler cuffed the bald girl upside the head.

“Let go, asshole!”

“I’ll let you go when you stop being such a contrary little bitch!” The other handler grabbed the girl by her ear and twisted it sharply, smiling darkly as she yelped and her hand curled around his wrist. “Got your attention now, don’t I?”

“Now, now, there’s no need for violence.” All four turned to see a rather small man walk into the room, white coat marking him as a scientist of some sort and a genial smile on his face. His eyes, though, were hard and calculating as they flashed over to the girls and their bloody faces. “Although it appears a little late to say so,” he continued softly.

The girls’ handlers snapped to attention and kept hard hands on them. “Theodore Tidus,” Franks said smartly, “we didnae think-”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, waving off her handler, “we have work to do, and this is a… promising start. So!” He clapped his hands together and the girls jumped. “You are both here to begin training-”

“That’s all we do, jerk,” the bald girl said venomously.
Tidus nodded at their handlers and the girls suddenly found themselves face down on the ground, heavy knees pressed painfully against their backs.

“Stay still, you little runt.” The bald girl’s handler pressed his hand between her shoulder blades and pulled something out of his pocket, then snapped it around her neck and jumped back with a smug expression on his face. The girl jerked to her feet and charged blindly at him, only to drop a few feet away and scream. She writhed on the ground, eyes bulging and hands scrabbling at her neck while the girl stared in horror as her face grew red and her body began to spasm.

“Stop, you’re hurtin’ her! What’re you doin’?!”

“Teaching her some…restraint.” Tidus pulled a small remote from his pocket and let go of the button his thumb had depressed, and the other girl abruptly stopped shrieking. In fact, she stopped moving at all, and the only reason the girl knew she wasn’t dead was because of her rough breaths, rasping and sucking in great mouthfuls of air as her hands covered her neck protectively.

“Now then, if you would, Franks?”

The girl laid perfectly still as he fastened something around her wrists and, when he got off her, slowly sat up and studied them. Innocuous enough, the thin bracelets glowed subtly under the bright metal and she shuddered as she looked at the one around the other girl’s neck. Her skin was a vicious red and, as she painfully sat up and glared at the room at large, the collar shifted and revealed a thin burn mark beneath the metal. She felt another chill run down her back as Tidus began circling them with a dark smile on his face.

“You two are part of a magnificent experiment that will cause a massive paradigm shift in humanity’s place in the galactic community. You see,” he said conversationally, crouching in front of the bald girl and taking her chin in his hand, “humans are unable to be biotics – naturally, anyway. We don’t have whatever little bit of DNA other species in the universe do that enable them to access that ability, and that gives them a great advantage over us, one that we can’t allow to be sustained. So, Cerberus took it upon themselves to develop a program that would create the first human biotics, and use them to cement our place in this new age.”

The bald girl tore her chin from his hands and scurried backward out of his reach, eyes bloodshot from the shocks to her system and still defiant. “Why do you care?”

“Me? I just want to see humans at their rightful place at the top of the ladder, so I took over this project.” She sneered at him and he lazily waved around the remote. “This little device here? Every time you disobey us, lash out, refuse to cooperate in any way, it can send out pulses of one hundred milliamperes of electricity through your body. That’s enough to stop your heart if sustained long enough, girl.”

He lackadaisically tossed it behind him and the other girl’s eyes rounded. “I don’t actually need that though. I can access your collar anytime I want with this.” He flashed his omni tool at her. “So can your handler, and any other people who will be in here with you. Got it?” She nodded mutely and he patted her head before standing up. “Okay, so. These are also for you both.” Metal clinked as he pulled out two dogtags on chains and handed them to the girls. “They have your IDs and names on them.”

The girl excitedly looked at hers and her eyebrows twisted in confusion. “Shepard? But I thought…”

“T’will be yer name ‘til the day ye die, girl, so get used tae it,” Franks said behind her, and she let the tag go so it settled against her shirt.

She kept her head down as Tidus explained how she and the other girl – Nought, she heard in a
quiet murmur from her – would train together from now on. “But your training will no longer only include the endurance training or basic schooling you’ve been given. You’re both able to begin the next level of activity, so we’ll start that immediately.” He ushered them over to the far wall and made them stand against it, both girls warily eyeing their handlers and Tidus as he paced in front of them. “You both are part of a ground breaking experiment called Project Olympus, two of over two dozen possible participants. When you were infants, you had biotic implants surgically wired to your nervous systems. Today, we activate them.”

He smiled coldly and nodded at their handlers. Both girls were grabbed by their arms and yanked away from each other. “Since you showed some natural proclivity toward protectiveness, Shepard, you will be the focus of this first activation. If you would?” Nought’s handler smiled darkly and stepped back from the girl, opening his omni tool at the same time and keying in a command. The little girl dropped to her knees and screamed as she clawed at her throat.

“That’s the point, child. Are you angry?” Tidus circled Shepard with an appraising eye as she struggled against Franks. “Are you afraid?”

“Of course I’m bloody afraid, you’re goin’ ta kill her! Stop it!”

“Make him.” Tidus stopped in front of Shepard and grabbed her jaw. “Make him stop hurting her. Throw him away from her; get him to stop using his omni tool.” Behind him, Nought made animal-like sounds and curled into a ball, shivering with each pulse of electricity. “You’d better hurry though, or she will die.”

Shepard strained with all her strength against Franks’ grip, but he just yanked her back harder against him and cuffed her head. “C’mon, girl! Do it, don’t be such a bloody baby!”

“Go ta hell, Franks!” Shepard felt him cuff her again and pulled out of habit, but her attention was riveted on the little girl screaming hoarsely on the ground in front of her, blood just beginning to run from her nose and the skin of her throat red and blistering. “Please, please, jus’ stop!”

Nought’s handler grinned toothily, Nought wailed, and Shepard saw red. She screamed over the girl’s anguished sobs and felt pressure building behind her eyes as heat spread down her spine and through her arms.

“Let her go!”

She barely registered the faint blue glow around her clenched hands as she thrust them toward Nought’s handler. The heat grew almost unbearable, but Shepard kept pushing it through her body and watched with satisfaction as the man behind Nought was propelled backwards and slammed hard against the wall. He stumbled to his feet and brought up his arm to activate his omni tool again and Shepard hit him with another blast of energy, sending him into the wall again. She heard the sick thud of his skull smacking the wall but didn’t register anything other than Nought’s hoarse, barely-there inhalations as she intently watched the faint rise and fall of her chest.

“Good…good, girl. Now for young Nought.”

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Nought caught Shepard’s elbow as she was reloading the pistol in her hands and tapped the plugs in her ears. “Don’t look now, Shepard, but the princess just showed up.”

She jerked her head back toward the door at the back of the range and Shepard flicked her eyes
over the younger girl’s shoulder. She watched the young woman – Miranda, her mind supplied with a hint of bitterness, and what did she do to deserve a first name? – grab some plugs from the bin by the door and set them around her neck. The holstered pistol strapped to her thigh glinted dully in the artificial light of the range as she walked toward them with a coy smile just tipping the edge of her lips up.

“Shepard, Nought,” she greeted, dipping her head at them.

Shepard straightened and nodded back, watching from the corner of her eye as Nought’s lip curled back in a sneer. The younger girl casually flipped Miranda off as she walked into the booth separating the targets from the rest of the room, just able to sight down the range over the bar. She fired off three rounds in quick succession and Shepard’s keen sight watched holes appear in the center mass of the cutout downrange.

Miranda pursed her lips at Nought’s back and grabbed her shoulder when she lowered the pistol, yanking her around with narrowed eyes. “What’s your problem?”

“My problem, princess, is your damned ability to come and go as you please.” Nought, for all her diminutive stature, especially when measured against Miranda’s lanky and svelte frame, still managed to look dangerous as she bowed her shoulders and snarled. She jabbed her finger against Miranda’s chest as Shepard looked on with blue and brown eyes attentively watching her body language. “You waltz in and out of here every day without a care in the world-”

“Now, that’s not true, I have to go through the same tests you do,” Miranda interrupted. “I wouldn’t care if I watched them cut you open myself; you have no idea what we’ve gone through.” Nought whispered with a dangerous glint in her eyes.

When Miranda scoffed and rolled her eyes, the younger girl grabbed her by the throat and yanked her down until they were eye level. She tugged away the collar of the compression shirt she and Shepard both wore, baring the collar around her neck. Slipping her thumb beneath the metal, she pulled it up so Miranda could see the scarring that circled her neck. The skin directly beneath the collar was burned a dark red by the electricity and dissipated in spidery patterns that faded into the pallor of her skin tone. Miranda gaped at the scars as Nought pushed her roughly away and yanked her shirt back up over the collar.

“So don’t come crying to me when you have to get a needle in your arm every week.” She advanced on Miranda and pushed her again as Shepard followed silently. “Yeah, you got the same implants we did, but you haven’t had the conditioning we have, you haven’t bled like we have, fought just to do it again another day, bled to fight to bleed to-”

Shepard took Nought’s arm and pulled her back from Miranda, twisting so the younger girl was suddenly folded into her arms. She grunted when small fists smacked her ribs but held tighter, dropping her chin atop the head covered in fuzz and humming tunelessly. Nought hit her several more times, hiccupping and eventually tangling her fingers in the hem of Shepard’s shirt as a sob ripped out of her throat and she buried her face in her chest. Sheppard rubbed her back, feeling the knobs of her spine under her shirt as her heterochromatic eyes met Miranda’s shocked gaze. Go, she mouthed, nodding at the door. Miranda chewed her lip and turned on her heel, slipping quietly out the door as Shepard bent back over Nought and whispered in her ear, kneading the back of her neck soothingly.

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Shepard stood rigidly against the wall next to Nought, staring distrustfully at an older boy with brown eyes who was staring unabashedly back at her with a glint in his eyes. He offered a cocky
grin and she scoffed, baring her teeth in dark parody of a smile. Before words could be spoken, the door opened and Tidus walked in, looking at a document on his datapad. He briefly looked at them as he walked toward the cabinets on the far wall and rummaged through them for a moment.

“You three are very lucky today…very lucky indeed,” he murmured, distracted as he pulled a bottle from within the cabinet. “You have been chosen to be part of the elite within Cerberus’ biotic forces; selected to enter Project Phoenix and be trained with specialized biotics. You should feel honored; few have made it as far as you.” He pulled a syringe out of his pocket and drew liquid into it, flicking the glass to dispel any bubbles.

Shepard tensed when she saw the liquid in the syringe but didn’t otherwise react, staring over the doctor’s shoulder stoically as he approached her. “Shepard, your arm.” She hesitated and he lifted the arm with his omni tool threateningly. She jerked her arm up immediately, offering the delicate skin of her inner elbow as she warily eyed his wrist. He took her arm and stuck the needle in, dispensing the liquid quickly and drawing up another dose in a different syringe.

Shepard felt her world tilt sickeningly and leaned against the wall, listening as though from a long distance as Nought screamed and then yelped in pain. She groggily turned her head to find the younger girl lying limply on the floor, Tidus standing impassively over her with a finger on his omni tool. She tried to take a step and fell to her knees next to Nought, reaching out with shaking fingers to drag the pads across the back of her hand.

“Now, now, no need for dramatics. Just a little prick, Nought.” Tidus cut off the surge of electricity and took Nought’s arm while she trembled on the floor, pushing the liquid into her arm and moving over to the boy who offered his arm freely with a smirk. Shepard twisted her fingers with Nought’s briefly, squeezing hard before she scrambled back to the wall and pushed herself to her feet. She took a few staggered steps and dropped to her knees again, dry heaving as the drug worked through her system quickly. She watched as shoes appeared in her swimming vision and heard Tidus’ voice above her.

“Relax, Shepard, this won’t take long…”

When she awoke, her mouth felt fuzzy and her arms ached. She looked around, finding herself lying on a hard bed in the med bay with her arms and legs strapped to the edges – something she was very familiar with. What made her feel nervous were the bandages around her wrists and forearms, beneath the cuffs on her arms. She cautiously flexed her fingers and looked around, silently relieved to find Nought in the bed next to her, snoring quietly and twitching in her sleep. Gauze was wrapped around her wrists and she was similarly shackled to the bed frame, a pink stain on the bandage near her palm. Shepard felt dread pool in her stomach when she saw the boy in the bed across the corridor, flexing his fingers and examining his bandaged wrist with interest as Tidus spoke quietly to him.

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“Please, please! Don’t do this!”

The agonized scream from within the ‘classroom’ made the Cerberus soldiers standing guard shift uncomfortably. They briefly met each other’s eyes before resuming their positions and palmed their weapons nervously. Within the room, Nought stood menacingly in front of a terrified salarian, idly twirling a small knife that was dripping green blood onto the floor. The salarian was tied to the chair in the room, eyes darting wildly around as he bled heavily from his mouth and left eyes, where a long, deep wound was etched into the side of his face. He jerked back in the chair when Nought took a step toward him and whimpered fearfully, chancing a glance when no blow came.

Nought’s arm was arrested in Shepard’s iron grip, the older girl’s heterochromatic gaze locked on
the salarian’s terrified face. “No more,” she murmured, taking the knife from Nought’s grip.

Behind them, Tidus stopped Alenko from moving with a hand on his shoulder; even though the young man scowled and shrugged off his hand, he remained in place behind the table filled with ‘tools’ to use, fingers flexing restlessly on the edge.

Shepard pulled Nought away from the salarian and replaced her, calmly meeting his gaze with her own. “Please, have mercy, young one. I have not…” Shepard stepped up to him and studied the bloody knife in her hand, handle slick with his blood and glinting dully in the light. Her eyes flicked up to meet his briefly before she shoved the blade deep into his ear canal, leaving the weapon in place as his eyes widened and rolled up immediately. She turned impassively from the limp body and walked over to Tidus, standing firmly at attention and meeting his eyes unflinchingly.

“Efficient. You could have taken your time, as young Nought was doing. More time to practice on salarians, although his begging was getting rather old.” Tidus made a mark on his omni tool and sighed. “Alright. That’s all for today, you may wash up and return to the common room.” He preceded them and walked down the hallway, leaving the trio to make their way in the other direction.

Shepard and Nought lingered behind Alenko, who stalked off irately, and she caught Nought’s hand to slow her even more. “What were you doing,” she hissed.

Nought scowled mulishly and Shepard narrowed her eyes. “Just doin’ what asshole wanted,” she muttered.

“That does not mean you had to torture that creature.”

Nought snorted and threw Shepard a coy look. “Like what you did to that asari the other day was any better?”

Shepard paused, swallowing harshly as she recalled the vivid purple blood that sprayed across the wall and her face when she slit the young maiden’s throat, the terrified, gurgling whimper that left her torn throat as she thrashed and died slowly. “…that was necessary. Tidus was getting…” Her voice was low and hoarse with suppressed emotion, fingers curling tightly into her palms.

Nought’s eyes flashed all too quickly with sympathy before it was replaced with her now-normal expression of barely-held-in-check rage. “Keep telling yourself that, Shepard.” The young girl squeezed Shepard’s hand and trotted down the hallway, leaving the young woman to stare at her hand and the green blood that was congealing on her skin.

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Shepard grunted as she severed the training dummy with her biotic whips, watching it fall to pieces in front of her. To the side, Nought shredded another and leapt at one close by, a manic laugh falling from her lips as her pale skin was lit with a blue glow from her biotics. Shepard flicked her wrist and the tip of her whip cracked across a dummy Nought was demolishing, severing its faceless head smoothly.

Nought turned to her with a glare and snarled, “That was mine, Shepard!”

“Maybe I thought it was time to stop torturing the poor, defenseless dummy.”

Nought smirked and strutted over to her with the ends of her whips dragging behind her. The overhead lights illuminated the dark hair just beginning to fill in across her scalp. “You should tell that to Robocop over there, he keeps ruining my dummies.” She jerked her toward Alenko, who
was steady working his way through a group of dummies with an intent expression on his face.

Shepard snorted as he cracked his whips across the torso of a dummy and growled when it didn’t fall to pieces. “It helps when you step in closer,” she called out. Alenko’s eyes cut over to her as he scowled and put his fist through the dummy’s head. Shepard twisted her wrist and a whip appeared, crackling with suppressed energy. “Make sure you’re close enough to do the most damage, or all that energy you’re putting into your attacks will be pointless.”

“I don’t want to get close to them, Shepard, the entire point of the damn whips is so we don’t have to.” Alenko took a step closer, towering over Shepard’s smaller frame threateningly. “If I can kill someone from five feet away, I will, because that lessens the danger to me.”

Shepard smiled toothily, eyes glinting dangerously as she stepped up so her boots toed against his. “And what if you can’t keep away?” Her arm shot out and a dummy was torn apart by the whip, hard pieces shattering and flying across the floor. “What if someone gets inside your guard, Alenko?”

She let the power fade from her wrist and suddenly thrust her hand out, grabbing Alenko’s collar. She yanked him down and headbutted him, groaning in pain at the impact and watching as he reeled and blood gushed down his face. He pressed a hand over his nose and rushed at her, tripping when she sidestepped him and stuck her foot out. As he stumbled to his knees, Shepard pressed her foot into his back and shoved him onto all fours. “What will you do when someone gets the upper hand?”

Alenko pushed against her foot, muscles bunching beneath his shirt as he got to his feet and threw a shockwave at her feet. Shepard yelped as her feet went out from under her and she landed hard on her back. Alenko threw himself on top of her, legs pinning her hips against the floor as his blood dripped onto her neck and chest and a bloody smile lit his face. “What will you do, Shepard?” Shepard’s head snapped to the side as his fist slammed against her cheek and she grabbed his wrists, grappling with him.

Alenko grunted when skinny arms wrapped around his neck and pulled taut, cutting off his air supply. He let go of Shepard to grip scarred forearms and pull, face steadily turning from red to purple. Shepard scrambled out from beneath him and watched Nought lock her arms around his neck and squeeze his torso with her legs. Alenko staggered to his feet and sunk his nails into her skin, and Shepard saw red when she yelped in pain. She spit out a wad of blood and rushed him, getting off another powerful hit to his face before all three of them were suddenly writhing on the ground. Shepard dimly heard someone screaming as she clawed at the cuffs on her wrists and only realized it was herself when she ran out of air. Across the floor, Nought pulled uselessly at the collar around her neck and wailed, and Alenko shuddered with each pulse that flowed through the bands around his arms.

She registered movement out of the corner of her eye and forced her twitching head to steady long enough to see Tidus standing at the door with a nonchalant expression and a finger on his omni tool. “I suppose that will be all for now?” He left his finger in place for a few more seconds and then stepped inside the training room, looking at the destruction of the dummies and the three still lying on the floor, gasping for air. “Alenko, I thought better of you,” he said disapprovingly. “Shepard, what happened?”

Shepard kept her mouth stubbornly shut, slowly getting to her feet to stand at attention before the doctor. “Nothing, sir. Just a misunderstanding.”

His mouth turned down in a subtle frown, eyes searching Shepard’s face for a clue, but eventually he nodded and stepped aside. “Very well. Keep your secrets.”
He gestured at the open door and two large soldiers walked in, dragging Miranda between them. They dumped her unceremoniously on the floor in the midst of the biotics and walked out, and Tidus gestured at her. “Young Miss Lawson here will be joining us permanently. Do make her feel welcomed.” He opened a tab on his omni tool, keyed in a command and Miranda gasped, eyes snapping open as she cried out. “Ah, there she is. Time to get up, Miss Lawson. You’ve some catching up to do.”

Tidus walked out the door, leaving Miranda groaning as she scratched at her shoulders and back madly. Shepard waited a few seconds then knelt beside her and grasped her shoulder, turning her onto her back. “Miranda?”

“Shepard,” she gasped, “help me. Something…it feels like my back is on fire.” She groaned and rolled onto her stomach as Shepard grabbed the hem of her shirt and lifted it up.

“What the…”

Placed closely along the length of her spine, small, round bits of circuitry glowed faintly. The skin around them was yellow with the remnants of iodine and stitches that were neatly sewn around each node. Shepard ghosted her hand over one and flinched away when it shocked her. She winced apologetically when Miranda cried out again. “It’s…some sort of…electrical nodes? They’re sewn into your skin,” she said quietly, horrified at what had been done.

Miranda laboriously sat up and reached around to touch the nodes but Shepard caught her hand and pushed it away. “Don’t. You’ll make it worse. Just lay here.” They sat together on the floor while Alenko slowly got to his feet and made his way back to the dummies after glaring at them hatefully. The sounds of his biotics tearing plastic apart made Miranda flinch.

Nought crawled over to them and laid her head on Shepard’s shoulder, staring balefully at Miranda from behind Shepard’s curtain of hair, half escaped from its ponytail. “What’d you do, princess? Miranda cocked her head in confusion. “You were free as a bird last we saw you. So, what’d you do to end up here with us?”

“I…I didn’t do anything.”

Nought barked out a cynical laugh. “Tell me something else, maybe it’ll sound sincere. You must’ve done something, princess. Maybe daddy dearest finally got sick of you?” She fluttered her lashes innocently and cackled when Miranda growled angrily.

Shepard pushed her back with a stern look. “Shove off, Nought. Go work on your whips.”

Nought affected a put upon expression that quickly morphed into playful suspicion. “Fine, fine. I’ll be a good kid, but only for you, Shepard.”

Nought moved off toward the dummies and Shepard watched her tear them apart for a couple minutes, studying her fluid motions and quick reflexes. Suddenly, Alenko’s whips got a little too close for comfort. “Alenko! Get your head out of your ass!”

“Bite me, Shepard! You’re just bent because I’m better than you.”

Shepard scoffed and rolled her eyes, muttering, “Hardly,” under her breath. Miranda watched her curiously and slowly shifted until she was sitting up. She rolled her shoulders, pleased when nothing happened and got to her feet. Shepard watched as she stretched, the material of her shirt pulling taut over her skin so the impressions of the nodes were just visible beneath it. “Are you alright?”

“Fine, Shepard. I’m sure this is just a misunderstanding.” Miranda moved away from them after
throwing a confident smile over her shoulder, leaving Shepard to watch her walk away with a furrow between her brows.
Hey, guys, here's another chapter! I promise I am working on the Warlord Ryder story, but my muse only recently got back from her Extended Vacation, the Bitch...So, in the meantime, you get this, and promises of continuation. On a sidenote, what are your feelings on smut in stories? I mean, I love writing it, and like to think I'm good at writing it, but what are your feelings?

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“Tighten up! Come on; get your heads out of your asses!” Shepard barked over the hum of gunfire. She crouched behind a barricade with her rifle in hand, eyes flicking to her right where Nought and Miranda were pinned down by another gunner.

Nought’s face twisted furiously when she tried to get up and nearly had her head taken off, sneering and throwing up her middle finger briefly. “Shepard, I’m ready to brawl if these sons of bitches don’t stop pretty damn soon,” she growled.

“Stow it, I don’t care. You wait until Alenko and Williams give us the signal.”

Nought threw herself onto the ground and glared at the ground that was littered with casings from her weapon and lit up when Miranda scoffed. The blue glow of her biotics threw her facial features into sharp relief, highlighting the new hollow of her cheeks and the dangerous dip in her brows. Miranda sneered at the younger girl and smacked her upside the head, ducking beneath her frenzied punch.

Shepard growled and rolled out of cover after holstering her weapon, grabbing them both by the scruff and holding them back from each other. She got into Nought’s face, voice calm in a way that belied the deadly glint in her heterochromatic eyes. “You stop this right now, Nought, or so help me I will make you clean the toilet in the common room for the next month.” Despite the mulish tilt of her jaw, Nought’s eyes rounded and she gradually backed down, lowering her eyes with a barely perceptible nod.

Shepard rounded on Miranda to chew her ass out when the gunfire abruptly ceased and the sound of bones breaking reached their ears. The muted whump of a shockwave made her smile grimly as she shoved Miranda away and vaulted over the barricade, hand glowing with her biotics as she
dashed for the shooting nest secreted behind tall makeshift barricades. She paused at the corner of one and drew her weapon, checking the magazine as she waited for the other two to catch up. Nought wouldn’t meet her eyes and Miranda, although attentive, shrunk in on herself when Shepard reached out.

“On my six in three, two, one…”

They followed her with weapons drawn as Shepard made her way into the nest, checking corners on the way. They found nearly a dozen Cerberus mercenaries either knocked out or moaning quietly as they made their way to the center of the maze of hallways. Shepard fired off a burst rapidly when she saw a merc suddenly appear at the end of the hallway, tagging him in the shoulder and chest, and he went down with a grunt of pain. She approached him cautiously and kicked him onto his back, staring at the welts left by the rubber bullets with a dismissive glance.

“How many?”

His lips thinned silently and she shrugged, swinging her weapon around between his eyes. He swallowed but remained silent until Nought stepped up with her hand glowing blue. “I’d start talking, unless you want your teeth decorating the wall.”

His breath came faster as Nought’s expression grew more delighted and darker at the same time, until he was cowering away from her hand as it closed the distance. “A dozen in the center! That’s it, I swear! That fucking crazy biotic and the super soldier already came through and cleaned house before you got here; I just missed them!”

“Which way?” Shepard barked and the merc pointed down the hallway. She smiled mirthlessly and smacked him with the butt of her rifle. “Thank you. Let’s go.”

They made their way silently down the hallway until they heard a burst of gunfire and the telltale hum of biotics, then followed on Shepard’s heels as she burst into a sprint. They came upon a brawl centered around Alenko as he carelessly threw singularities at the opposing mercenaries and Williams, who was dodging both rubber bullets and the debris being thrown around from Alenko’s abilities. Her face was murderous and streaked with dirt and sweat, her light armor dented and scratched in several places as she moved from cover to open ground and threw herself over a low wall to escape the barrage of bullets from the frantic mercenaries. Shepard threw a singularity at a cluster of mercenaries and used the brief moment’s respite to duck behind cover with Williams.

“Start without us?”

“That fucking – insconsiderate, asshole-ish – I’m going to kill him, that’s all there is to it. I swear I will break his fucking neck and dump his dead ass out the airlock.”

Shepard chuckled and set her hand on Williams’ shoulder. “Let me take this, soldier. You stay here, you look tired.” She patted Williams’ cheek with a smirk.

Shepard caught Nought’s eyes and made a line with her hand toward the mercenaries, waiting for the ecstatic grin to break across the girl’s face, then looked at Miranda and made the same motion. “Back her up,” she yelled over the gunfire.

Miranda nodded stiffly and shifted forward on her feet, watching Nought holster her weapon and shake out her arms with a demonic grin still on her lips. She shouted a war cry as she popped over the barricade and charged at the cluster of mercenaries with her biotics, laughing when Miranda overloaded their weapons with her biotics and they exploded in their hands. She ran through the group, scattering them and sending more than a few flying into the walls to slump bonelessly to
Shepard fired at another small group to the side, throwing a singularity into their midst and picking them off leisurely when they went up into the air. She watched Alenko break cover with his whips trailing behind him, a cocksure grin on his face as he twirled them overhead and caught a merc around the ankles. The hapless man went flying and landed on the ground a few yards away, followed closely by another. Shepard rolled her eyes as Alenko showboated, twisting his whips around in an inefficient arc and ignoring the few at his back who were eyeing him speculatively. She ducked closer and ran across the room, sliding onto her back to avoid an errant strike from Alenko’s whips. She heard Nought yell indignantly and watched the mercs she was running toward as their weapons overheated, smiling to herself as she drew out her whips and felt the biotic discharge snap and crackle up her arms. She cracked the closest across the face and kicked the next in the knee, barely slowing to watch him crumble to the ground before she had the last wrapped in a whip and was snarling in his face.

His eyes were wide with terror, face cut from shrapnel and streaked with sweat. “Don’t!” Her knuckles split his cheek, blood spurting across her face as he spit out a wad of blood and tissue, and she let him drop to the ground.

She surveyed the carnage with a dispassionate eye, nodding as each of her team stood up from behind cover – or stood arrogantly in the midst of the fight in Alenko’s case – and waited for the buzz of the arena’s stop signal to ring through the room. They congregated in the center of the room as a cluster of scientists and doctors walked through a door in the corner of the arena, led by Tidus and their handlers. Each of the young biotics stood stiffly at attention, ignoring the aches in their joints and the sweat that dripped down their skin as they were ignored and talked about as if they didn’t exist.

The people around them were gesturing excitedly at their omni tools and the results that were transmitted directly from the nodes stuck to each biotic’s chest and temple, their voices blurring into an indecipherable mass of noise that hummed and irritated Shepard. She grit her teeth, hands flat against her thighs as she stared over the group’s shoulders, and felt her pulse hammer in her head as a migraine hit her hard. The lights were suddenly too bright, the sounds too loud, the sweat soaked mesh of her compression shirt and cargo pants constricting and scratchy against her skin.

She felt a small, calloused hand slip into hers briefly and squeeze her fingers and glanced out of the corner of her eye at Nought, who was staring stoically ahead. Her throat bobbed beneath the collar around her neck as she stroked Shepard’s fingers once more and let go, returning to her former position with barely any adjustment. Shepard relaxed marginally, ignoring the excited chatter around her as she stared across the arena at the open door in the corner, imagining breaking through the group and making a run for it with her team at her heels, unaware of the barely-there smile on her lips.

Williams grunted as she blocked a hit from Shepard, taking a couple steps away to get her bearings. She bared her teeth as Shepard stalked toward her, all sinuous strength and slinking movements with her bruised knuckles and hair covering her eyes, braid half undone with the exertion of their bout.

“How you doing, Williams? You look a little shaken; sure you don’t want to sit down?”

Williams shook out her arms and smiled. “I’m fine, Shepard. You just got lucky. It won’t happen again.” She put up her fists in a defensive position, high and close to her chest, and watched Shepard closely. They closed on each other and Williams threw the first punch, striking the ground.
out suddenly and landing a hit on her jaw.

Shepard shook her head and flexed her jaw, feeling the bruise already forming, and smiled a toothy grin. “Lucky punch.”

She kicked at Williams’ leg and, while she was hopping backwards, tackled her to the ground. They grappled furiously for long moments until Williams was perched atop Shepard’s hips and had her wrists arrested in her grip. “I win,” she said with a smirk. Shepard only threw her legs around her waist and was about to roll them when Williams was suddenly thrown off her and landed in a heap nearby with Alenko atop her.

“Don’t touch her,” he yelled. He hit her in the face and her head snapped to the side, blood spattering across the floor. He grabbed the collar of her compression shirt and yanked her up, snarling in her face. She kneed him in the groin and slid out from underneath him when he doubled over, holding a hand over her nose and mouth. Blood slid down her chin, red and shining against the pallor of her skin, as she glared balefully at the man. Alenko pushed himself to his feet, still cupping himself protectively, and roared in rage at Williams.

Before he could take a step toward her, Shepard was in his face, pushing him bodily away from her. “Stay back,” she barked. “The fuck is your problem?”

“She was hurting-”

“We’re always hurting; this is only sparring.” Shepard shoved him back another step. “This is only practice; you have no reason to haul off on her-”

“You weren’t doing anything-”

“I was handling it.”

“Didn’t look that way from my end,” Alenko insisted stubbornly. Shepard flexed her fingers, feeling the first crackle of her biotics in the pads, and watched Alenko glance down and subtly adjust his stance.

“Do it,” he taunted. “Come after me if you’re so capable.” He hurled the word at her sharply and she charged him, lowering her shoulder to lift him off the ground briefly before sending him slamming hard onto his back.

She landed atop his hips and her fist hit his jaw, turning his head aside with a sharp snap. He bucked beneath her, trying uselessly to dislodge her, and she smacked his cheek with the flat of her palm. The room was silent but for the echo of skin hitting skin and their heaving breaths, and Alenko stared up at her with one dark eye in disbelief. “Did you just...”

Across the room, Nought laughed sharply and doubled over in hysterics, clutching her stomach as she leaned against the wall. “That...that was...priceless!” Tears ran down her face as she continued laughing.

Alenko turned steadily redder until he surged up with an enraged roar and bore Shepard to the ground. She was hit twice in quick succession and sprayed blood across his shirt when his knuckles split her lip and she bit her tongue. He got in a couple more punches before he was bodily pulled away from her. Shepard groggly sat up, spitting more blood onto the floor as she waited for her vision to clear. She wiped away a heavy streak of blood from her brow and blinked the blood out of her eye as she watched Nought and Williams wrestle with Alenko until he was gasping for air under their restraining weight. She jerked away from a hand on her shoulder and looked up at Miranda’s concerned gaze.
“Shepard…”

“I’m fine,” she groused, getting to her feet and swaying threateningly.

Miranda silently slipped an arm around her waist and Shepard slowly sank into her side, letting her take more of her weight. “Your definition of ‘fine’ needs some work, Shepard.”

Shepard snorted mirthlessly as Williams got off Alenko and left Nought kneeling with her knees in the middle of his back and his arms in an uncomfortable position. The soldier approached Shepard and studied her face for a moment, turning her head from side to side. “A couple will need stitches,” she murmured.

“No.”

“I can clearly see bone at your temple, and your lip-”

“I said no, Williams. If they find out…”

“How will you hide this?” She gestured sharply at the blood staining Shepard’s compression shirt and dripping onto the floor steadily.

Shepard shrugged insouciantly and Miranda struggled to keep her upright as she wavered on her feet. “I can always say I walked into a door.”

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“What’s going on?”

“Shut up, Nought.”

“Bite me, asshat!”

Nought grunted as the soldiers surrounding them shoved her hard and went to round on them when her arm was caught by Shepard. Blue and brown eyes narrowed at her in warning and she huffed, shrugging off her hand as she walked down the hallway. Shepard met Miranda’s eyes over Nought’s shoulder and then Williams’ on her other side before returning her gaze ahead to stare at the back of Alenko’s head, striding silently along until they reached a heavy metal door. One of the soldiers at the front keyed in a code and stood aside as the biotics were ushered into the room, leaving them eying each other in confusion as it was shut behind them.

“What the hell is going on?” Alenko asked, looking around the empty expanse of walls. Shepard’s gaze tracked all the corners, finding several cameras, and then landed on another door that nearly disappeared into the uniform whiteness on the other side of the room.

Tidus walked through it a few moments later with a gleeful expression on his face and she felt dread curl through her body when nearly a dozen kids who mostly looked to be around Nought’s age filed in behind him, bound in chains and surrounded by stone faced soldiers. “It’s good to see you all here! You look well; powerful and deadly.” He smiled at them each in turn and swept a hand dramatically at the kids, whose chains rattled as they shuffled back in their limited space. “I have a…test…for you today. A coming of age, you could say.”

He paced between the two groups with a bounce in his step. “You five have proven your tenacity, adaptability, and stubbornness throughout your time here, and now, I offer you a chance to prove yourselves one final time.” He planted himself squarely between them and tucked his hands into his pockets. “These, standing behind me, are failed candidates. Unable, inept, useless, they now eat our food and stay in the compound without contributing to our cause in a worthwhile
The kids huddled together when the soldiers shoved the guns in their faces, the youngest whimpering and crying quietly. Tidus yanked the closest against his side and shoved him at the biotics’ feet. “Your task is to exterminate these liabilities.”

All the soldiers but one left the room as the kids started crying and backing away fearfully while Shepard, Nought, Williams, and Miranda exchanged horrified looks with each other. Alenko, on the other hand, seemed determined as he crossed the short distance between them and grasped the child’s neck in his hand. A blue glow surrounded his hand and the boy screamed for a long moment until his windpipe was crushed in the powerful biotic’s grasp, falling limply to the ground. Nought roared and leapt at him, clawing and kicking at his skin and hurling obscenities with every other breath. Miranda was on her heels, pulling on her arm to try and separate them and pleading for her to stop. Both of them dropped to the ground in a shuddering heap as electricity surged through their veins, contorting oddly to try and escape the pain. Tidus barked at Alenko to step back when he advanced threateningly on them and waited for the man to grudgingly lean against the wall.

Shepard took a step toward him, fighting against Williams’ restraining hold as she snarled, “What the hell is your problem?! Stop it! They’re only children!”

Tidus met her gaze coldly, finger still on the command that left the two biotics writhing on the floor and whimpering in pain. “They disobeyed an order, a direct order. I can do whatever I see fit to them. And these children, as you put it, are nothing but a liability to us. They don’t support our cause in any way, so what use do we have for them?”

Shepard snarled in rage and strained toward him, mismatched eyes burning furiously until he keyed in a code that sent a powerful, short shock through her system. Her arms shook with the intensity but she backed off immediately, glaring with loathing at his smug face.

He nodded and turned to Nought, who was struggling to her feet through the spasms that rocked her slight frame. “Feisty today, aren’t we? You look a little queasy, that’s natural. Maybe you should…sit down!” He keyed in a different code and Nought stiffened as electricity visibly arced from her collar, dancing up and down her throat. She spasmed as she fell bonelessly to the ground and Shepard threw herself down by her. Her hands hovered uselessly over her body, afraid to get too close to the power arcing across her skin.

“Stop it! Just stop!”

“Tell your team to do their jobs,” Tidus growled, arching a brow.

Shepard sneered up at him and flinched when a shock jolted through her body. Nought screamed hoarsely and Miranda sobbed on the floor behind them, and she snapped. “Fine. Fucking fine, you bastard, just stop it!”

Tidus smiled benignly and keyed in another code, and the silence that fell across the room was sudden and stifling, Nought’s screams echoing for a long, unsettling moment. She laid limply before Shepard, barely breathing, not even moving when she cautiously ran her hands over her neck and shoulders, slipping her finger beneath the collar to stare in horror at the damage done to her skin. Nearly black burns were seared into the delicate skin and spidering marks radiated out from it in intricate patterns. She felt her stomach churn and swallowed down bile as she turned her loathing gaze up to Tidus, awaiting his orders.

“Get the youngest,” he barked at the remaining soldier in the room. The man robotically grabbed a tiny girl from the midst of the crowd and pushed her forward. She tripped over her gangly legs.
and landed at Tidus’ feet, shivering and dripping tears onto the floor before Shepard’s horrified gaze. Tidus smiled ruthlessly and held his hand out to the soldier, who emotionlessly handed over his sidearm and retook his position against the wall with his weapon trained on Shepard.

Tidus held out the pistol to Shepard. “Shoot her.”

Shepard stared in horror at the gun, the polished metal gleaming dully in the light, grip black and grooved and molded perfectly for her hand when she slowly reached out for it.

“Shoot her, or I will burn her from the inside out.” Tidus held his hand threateningly over his omni tool.

Shepard stumbled numbly to her feet and stared down at the girl through hollow eyes. Her golden hair was lank and tangled, shoulders narrow and trembling with her tears, eyes grey and sunken with malnourishment as they met hers. Shepard lifted the pistol until it rested against the girl’s forehead and set her finger inside the trigger guard. She memorized the girl’s face for a long moment, listened to her panicked breathing as she tightened her grip, and pulled the trigger. The sound was deafening, but all Shepard heard was the dull thud of the girl’s body hitting the floor, the sobs from the kids huddled against the wall, and Tidus’ satisfied chuckle.

“Well done, Shepard. We’ll make a proper killer of you yet.”

Shepard barely noticed when he removed the pistol from her grasp, eyes trained on the vivid blood that spilled from beneath the girl’s prone body and the small, neat circle in her forehead. Dead grey eyes stared through her as a trickle of blood slipped out of her nose, and Shepard’s legs wobbled. She was suddenly on the floor on all fours, dry heaving and gagging as the metallic scent of blood met her nose. She lifted her hand to her face and froze, staring in horrified wonder at the blood staining her hand, dripping from her fingertips and running down her wrist. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and the last thing she saw was the girl’s body, surrounded by a halo of blood, and another slight body falling behind hers.
In Death...Sacrifice

Chapter Notes

Let me know what you guys think of this chapter; I'm unusually nervous to post it, although I don't exactly know why. Well, I DO know why, but I also know my reasons for what I did....eh, let me know, regardless.

Read on!

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Williams slunk stealthily down the hallway behind Miranda, pausing when she lifted a fist and pointed at the corner up ahead. “Another camera up there. Give me a second.” She tabbed open a program on a datapad she had stolen off a scientist earlier in the day and typed a command into it, watching the small red light flicker out with a satisfied grin. “Alright, let’s go.”

Miranda led them through the labyrinth of hallways confidently while Williams, Nought, and Shepard cautiously strode behind her with their heads swiveling at each minute sound that echoed down the empty corridors. Miranda disabled another camera as they stole toward the rooms housing the computers where they would figure out which way the exit was. She nodded at a door near the end of the hallway and set to work hacking the security door, leaving the others to warily watch the hallway for activity. She made a satisfied sound when the door slid open and they all filed in, crowding around the woman as she sat in front of a large console. Miranda typed for a few moments, then sighed and glanced over her shoulder. “You know, I really appreciate knowing you guys are here, but I could do with less staring. I think I can feel someone literally breathing down my neck.”

Shepard, who had been standing at the door, glanced back as Nought jerked away and scratched her neck, muttering under her breath as she stalked toward a different console. Williams perched on the edge of the desk and crossed her arms, setting her rucksack between her feet and rolling her shoulders. “I wish I had my Phoenix Armor. I don’t like being out here without it, I feel itchy.”
shoulders. “I wish I had my Phoenix Armor. I don’t like being out here without it, I feel itchy.”

Nought snorted from the other console and lit up, the blue of her biotics playing in front of her face in delicate whirls of light. “Speak for yourself, Robo-grunt. I just want my damn shotgun,” she groused.

Williams scowled at the side of her head, about to snap back at her when Shepard hissed quietly. “Shut it, both of you. We can’t afford any liabilities right now, so save your chatter for the ride out.” She stared darkly at them, face shadowed with the light from the hallway coming in behind her, and shifted her weight uneasily.

Miranda muttered to herself and said quietly, “Shepard, you may want to see this.”

Williams took over her post as Shepard stood behind Miranda with a hand planted on the back of her chair. “What’ve you got?”

“Something…interesting. I don’t know…just read.”

Shepard took her vacated seat, slowly scrolling through a file filled with names and dates. “We’re all here…” She saw one labeled ‘Shepard’ and clicked on it, blinking as words scrolled across the page, heavily redacted but still legible in places.

Candidate – Arryn Lee Shepard

Candidate code – SA DA 9 30

Candidate process date – August 14, 2154

Candidate biometric readings

- Weight – 13.4 lbs
- Length – 23.2 inches
- Heartrate – 91 bpm

Overall health – good

History – Parents, [redacted] and [redacted] in positions of power, early thirties, healthy, familial history of longevity and high intelligence. Incidents arranged to simplify process of retrieval, no living relatives to challenge movement. Child is of average size and weight but appears healthy enough to enter [redacted]. Infant taken by agents from [redacted] to be tested for compatibility.

UPDATE

SA DA 9 30, shows increased brain activity after introduction of element eezo. Growth extends to physical development. Irises, colored brown and blue, developed steaks of biotic blue. Implant progress stated below.

[Redacted]

UPDATE

SA DA 9 30 developing at faster than anticipated rate. Implants, assimilated three years ago, have responded favorably to tests for [redacted], moving on to phase two within the month if reports
continue as noted.

Note – regenerative micro-organisms injected with last test responding favorably; tests conducted show improved rate of healing, no negative side effects noted as of yet. Progress noted at a later date.

UPDATE

SA DA 9 30 inducted into [redacted], shows increased protectiveness over other, young candidates. Will begin training immediately, including [redacted] to influence attitude and monitor changes below.

Note – experimental combined control collars and biotic dampeners complete, began live testing when candidates manifested abilities. Show great promise, effective from distance of [redacted] and able to be accessed from any omni tool with clearance for lower level. Progress tracked.

Shepard numbly sat back in the chair, staring through the console blankly. Miranda set her hand on her shoulder, unsurprised when it was shrugged off brusquely but staring sadly at the back of her head. “Shepard, I…”

“It’s fine,” she muttered, going back to the folder and clicking on Williams’. “Hey, Williams, I’ve got some info for you, if you’re interested.”

“Shepard?”

Shepard scrolled through the file quickly and glanced over her shoulder. “Your name, if you want.”

There was stunned silence, and then Williams was practically on top of her. “Ashley,” she whispered in awe. “My name is…Ashley.”

“It fits,” Shepard said. “Ashley Williams, super soldier, crackshot, general pain the ass.”

She keyed back and dug through Nought’s file, snorting a couple times. “Nought-”

“Hit me, Shepard.”

“Full name – Jennifer-”

“Okay, nope, never mind.” She walked over and blocked Shepard’s view of the console, moving in front of it as Shepard tried to forcibly move her.

“But, there’s someth-”

“Don’t care.”

“Oh, so I can’t call you-”

“If you ever call me that, I will pull your spine out through your throat and beat you to death with it,” Nought said seriously. “You can call me Jack if you have to.”

“Jack?” Shepard raised a brow. “Where the hell did you pick that up?”

“I hate to interrupt,” Miranda cut in, “but we’re kind of in the midst of escaping. Can we please
Shepard sobered immediately and tabbed back to access Miranda’s file. She stared hard at it for a long time and pushed back, vacating her seat as she gestured for Miranda to take it. “I think you should look at this.” Miranda warily sat down and scrolled past the information at the top of the file, stopping when she saw her father’s name mentioned.

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**UPDATE**

Henry Lawson signed documents giving Cerberus full control of daughter past week. Statement includes access to gene pool [redacted] highly viable, inclusion in Project [redacted] to test cloning capabilities. Subjects include [redacted] to be tested at a later date for viability.

**NOTE –** Lawson deemed sufficient subject to introduce to [redacted], training begins with biotics, serials [redacted] to test adaptability. Experimental nodes, property of [redacted] surgically inserted; tests of control begin immediately.

**UPDATE**

Lawson remains amenable to Cerberus, discipline rarely necessary. Progress is satisfactory in training, biotics less powerful in combat but have technological facets previously unexplored.

**NOTE –** Henry satisfied with results of cloning. Praise for efficient delivery and redirection of defective genes. Expected upkeep of visits to gauge durability and health confirmed. Progress updated below.

---

Miranda sat back in the chair, eyes wide and fingers slack on the keyboard with dumbstruck realization. “I can’t believe it…”

Jack, who had wandered over to peer interestingly over her shoulder, scoffed. “I told you that Cerberus couldn’t be trusted, you dumb bitch.”

Miranda rounded on her in a rage, ready to throw a punch until Shepard slunk between them and eyed them harshly. “Save it. We have things to do right now. Miranda, can you find out where they’re keeping our armor? We need to access the hangar, too. We’re getting off this rock.” She took over her position at the door, watching down the hallway as Miranda refocused and typed quickly.

Within a minute, she made a satisfied sound and rolled back. “We’re in luck, the armory is on the way to the hangar. We need to go up a level, and then follow these corridors. As long as we avoid any guards or scientists, we should be fine. I can keep temporarily disabling the cameras as we go, that should throw them off long enough for us to get aboard a ship and escape.”

Shepard nodded sharply and stood aside so Miranda could precede them down the hallway. She brought up the rear, glancing occasionally over her shoulder as they snuck onto a lift and rode up to the next level. “This way,” Miranda whispered, leading them down an identical corridor. She stopped in front of a heavy door and hissed, “This may take a bit. Keep an eye out for guards.”

As she bent to the task, Shepard directed Ashley to the other end of the hallway to watch the doors to the lift. She left Jack to watch Miranda as she slunk to the other end of the hallway, peering around the corner warily. All was silent aside from the near indecipherable muttering
coming from Miranda as she worked feverishly to open the door and bypass the security measures in place. Shepard started when she heard a muffled curse, looking back to find Miranda scowling at Jack furiously.

Jack smirked behind her, hand suspiciously close to her backside, and widened her eyes innocently. “What?” Miranda scoffed and tossed her hair, cheeks faintly blushing, and Shepard rolled her eyes.

She sucked in a surprised breath when something grabbed her shoulder and roughly yanked her around the corner. She found herself face to face with a Cerberus soldier, his dark eyes glaring down at her as he unstrapped his service weapon from its holster. Shepard reacted immediately, swiping his feet out from under him and landing heavily atop his hips. She wrapped a hand around his throat and pinned his other at his side. He struggled fruitlessly under her weight, scrabbling for purchase on the smooth metal floors, and his eyes widened when a faint blue glow appeared on the edge of his vision. The hand at his throat suddenly tightened, completely cutting off oxygen, and his eyes bulged as he ran out of air. Shepard watched impassively as he gasped for air and his struggling slowly ceased, leaving her biotically strengthened hand at his throat for a few more seconds after he stopped moving. She checked for a pulse and stood up, turning to find Ashley and Jack watching from the corner with inscrutable expressions on their faces.

“You good?” Jack asked.

“I’m fine, check on Miranda.”

She nodded and Ashley walked toward her, setting a hand on her shoulder in passing. “Let’s drag him out of sight, lean him up by the lift; we know the camera there doesn’t work at all right now.”

They carried the corpse and dumped it by the lift as Miranda stared with wide eyes until Jack nudged her shoulder brusquely. She worked on the scanner for another agonizing minute until it slid open nearly silently and they all piled into the room, digging through the sparse weaponry and armor. Ashley hummed as she pulled the pieces of her Phoenix Armor over herself and cradled the helmet under her arm, holstering a pistol at her hip. Jack drooled over a shotgun resting on a rack, grabbing ammo for it and shoving her pockets full as Shepard reverently traced the barrel of a sniper rifle.

“Jerk off with it later, we need to go now,” Jack snapped.

Shepard sighed and took a pistol laying next to the rifle, checking the clip for ammo and stuffing a couple more into the pockets of her pants. She turned to walk out when her eye caught a safe tucked high in the corner of the room. “Miranda, can you open that?”

“Now, Lawson.”

Miranda pursed her lips as she hacked the digital scanner and stood back when it beeped in confirmation. Shepard pulled the small door open, staring at the contents within. A few small baubles, an envelope which, upon inspection, contained some credit chits she pocketed, and a box filled with three items. The first, a set of dogtags with the name **Shepard, Hannah** stamped in the metal, made her hands tremble. She ran her thumb over the letters slowly as she pulled another necklace out and studied the hammered pendant with a baying wolf painstakingly etched into the metal. She swallowed as she took a ring, colors swirling through the smooth metal like oil in water, out of the bottom of the box. She silently mouthed the words etched on the inside of the ring – **Family, duty, honor. N & H For our love will endure** – and slipped the ring over the chain of the wolf pendant and put that and the dogtags around her neck, resting against her own
dogtags.

They clicked quietly against each other when she turned and made her way to the door. “Let’s bug out. We need to get to the hangar.” The others followed silently behind her as they travelled the corridors, avoiding soldiers and knocking them out when they couldn’t, hiding the bodies in open doorways and behind stacked crates.

They had just ducked into the hangar when a klaxon blared, startling everyone. Shepard groaned and Jack rolled her eyes. “Of course. Why doesn’t this surprise me?”

“We’ll deal with it; just find us a bird, Miranda.” She nodded and slunk off as a handful of Cerberus mercenaries ran through a door with weapons drawn.

“I got this, Shepard,” Jack said. She confidently stood up and her biotics flashed as she charged at the group, scattering the few that managed to get out of her way. The others went flying, slamming into the walls and the machinery nearby and not rising. Ashley took out the remaining few with her pistol, blood spraying across the floor as they fell.

Shepard searched the hangar for better cover, ducking when a singularity appeared nearby and she felt it pull at her braid and clothes. “Alenko,” she growled under her breath. She hazarded a look at the door, unsurprised to find the male biotic standing there arrogantly with his hand extended and a whip in his other.

“Shepard,” he called, “you know we can’t allow you to leave.” He snapped the whip out and a nearby crate burst into splintered shrapnel that cut into the side of her face exposed to it and shredded her clothes. She wiped away the blood trickling into the corner of her eye and let her biotics roar to life, pushing a shockwave toward Alenko as she ran for cover.

To her side, she heard Jack cackle and launch herself at a group of soldiers that had burst into the hangar at the wrong moment, and the sudden burst of gunfire from Ashley’s pistol leant wings to Shepard’s feet. She rolled behind the tracks of a massive machine and checked her pistol before throwing a singularity blindly toward the sound of gunfire. The surprised yelps told her she had hit her mark and she smiled to herself before popping over the top of the tracks and firing at the first Cerberus marked soldier she saw. His body jerked to the side as a bullet hammered into his shoulder and he went down. She saw Jack lash out with her biotics as a trio of soldiers, a ferocious snarl on her lips, and caught Miranda’s form out of her periphery.

The biotic tech was scrambling into the backside of a small ship, and Shepard crossed her fingers as she threw herself into the thick of the fight. She tossed mercenaries over her shoulder effortlessly with Ashley on her heels to take care of those who didn’t stay down, steadily wading toward Alenko. He was keeping Jack at bay with spastic bursts of his whips, grinning manically when she yelped and cursed. Shepard watched blood drip from her fingers from a gash on her forearm and burst into a run, throwing a shockwave before her to send the man skidding across the ground.

“He’s mine,” she snarled at the other two. “Take care of the soldiers.” As they squared off, the sound of fighting faded from Shepard’s ears, focused as she was on Alenko’s smug expression.

“You can’t beat me, Shepard. There are more soldiers coming and your team is getting tired. You can’t hold out forever.”

“I don’t need to.”

She threw herself at him, ducking beneath a whip to tackle him at the waist and bear him to the ground. She threw an elbow at his face before she was thrown off and scrambled away, trying
desperately to avoid the whips carving shallow furrows into the floor. She cried out when a stray bullet clipped her arm, thrusting her arm out to send the mercenary flying with her biotics. He hit the side of a ship with a wet sound and didn’t move when he landed on the ground, but Shepard was already focused on Alenko again, flicking away blood from her hand as she reached out to grab his collar. Her fist smashed against his nose and sent him reeling; she took the moment to shake out her hand and call a whip into her grasp, deftly flicking it to wrap around his ankle and yank his feet out from under him. He groaned when he hit the floor and she lifted her pistol level with his head.

As her finger tightened on the trigger, she heard a pained cry from Ashley and her head reflexively jerked over. Alenko took the opportunity to kick at her hand and she dropped the pistol. A furious scramble for control of her weapon took place and Shepard felt dread slither down her spine when she heard another, weaker cry from behind her. The moment’s distraction gave Alenko the edge he needed and he wrenched the gun from her grasp. He cracked her across the cheek and turned it on her, then, before she could do more than open her mouth, fired it. Pain blossomed, thick and heavy, in her arm and chest, and she toppled backwards with the impact. A secondary bout of pain radiated out when she hit the floor and she clenched her jaw to stay quiet. Alenko chuckled as he stood over her and grinned victoriously.

She stared down the barrel of the gun before kicking at his leg, simultaneously rolling to the side to try and avoid the moment the gun reflexively went off. She felt the bullet nick her leg and ignored the pain that flared up when she rolled onto her injured side, instead taking the moment to grab his collar and bring their foreheads together for a headbutt. She groaned in pain as he dropped limply to the floor and stumbled toward the weak sounds of pain, snarling at one of the few Cerberus soldiers still up and floating him with a singularity. She casually shot him in the head with a discarded pistol as she walked by and fell to her knees beside Ashley.

The soldier lay amongst nearly a dozen mercenary bodies. Her armor was streaked with blood and more scratches and holes than she cared to count. Scrapes and flecks of blood dotted her face, too, and her breaths came quick and shallow. “C’mon, we need to go,” Shepard rasped, attempting to pull Ashley up. She crumpled with a pained cry and Shepard immediately loosened her hold, letting the soldier fall gently back.

“Go on, get out of here.”

“Not without you.”

“I can’t go, it hurts too much.” Ashley stared up at Shepard through glassy, tear filled eyes and smiled weakly. “Guess I bit off more than I could chew, eh, Shepard?”

“No, I refuse to accept that. You’re getting off this rock, soldier.”

Jack walked up behind them and stared down at Ashley from behind a blood spattered face. Her arms were criss-crossed with scratches and nicks from shrapnel and bullets but she appeared otherwise well. “I can take one side?” she offered.

Ashley moaned as they tried again to pick her up, but they managed to limp toward the ship that was humming quietly near the front of the hangar. Miranda stood near the ramp with a pistol in her hands and raised it as they got closer, firing past them. “Shit. We need to go now! Get onboard!” Shepard and Jack took a couple more steps before the gunfire volleyed over their heads. They ducked behind a crate some yards away from safety and let Ashley gently settle between them.

“Fuck.” Shepard cracked the back of her head against the crate and gingerly pressed a hand against the bullet hole in her skin. Blood flowed, hot and sticky, over her hand, and she
grimaced. “We’re pinned down,” she muttered under Jack’s vehement and colorful cursing.

Ashley tiredly tipped her head toward her and smiled faintly. “Give me your gun.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

Shepard’s eyes widened in realization and she shook her head. “No.”

“C’mon, Shepard, we both know the chances of you two getting us all to the ship safely are next to none. I’m just dead weight at this point.” Muffled curses from the hangar doors alerted them of a soldier being hit by Miranda’s pistol, and the returned gunfire made their ears ring. “Make a choice, Shepard. We haven’t got much time.”

Shepard searched her face for a long moment and nodded tersely. She set her gun firmly in Ashley’s grasp and poked Jack. “Give her your shotgun.” Jack pouted but, at Shepard’s suddenly fierce glare, glanced at Ashley and wordlessly handed over the shotgun and ammo in her pockets.

“This should be fine; I’ll cover you two. Get ready to scramble, on my mark.” Shepard clenched her jaw and squeezed Ashley’s hand as she crouched by Jack. Ashley painfully got to her knees and aimed over the top of the crate. “Three, two, go!”

They burst from cover at the same time Ashley started firing into the group of soldiers, putting two down immediately and wounding another. Shepard didn’t look behind her, focusing on getting to Miranda and dragging Jack onboard when it looked like the young woman might turn and throw herself into the midst of the men approaching them. “Go, go,” she yelled at Miranda. She disappeared into the cockpit and the ship jerked into motion as the ramp slid up and shut.

The last thing Shepard saw was Ashley dropping the spent pistol and picking up the shotgun, aiming at the soldiers stalking toward her and standing on trembling legs. She sat back against the wall as Jack leaned heavily against her and shut her eyes, feeling the hum of the ship in her bones, and let it lull her into a half asleep trance where the pain of her wounds couldn’t reach her.

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“Flying a ship is a lot more complicated practically than it is in theory,” Shepard grumbled from the co-pilot seat of the small ship.

Miranda sat in the main chair with a smirk on her lips and said dryly, “It would help if you didn’t nearly send us into the side of a stray asteroid when you yanked the controls out of my hands.”

“I wanted to see it up close!” Shepard winced when she tried to cross her arms and sunk petulantly into her chair, watching the stars slowly slip by outside the glass. Her gaze stared into the inky darkness of space for the first time, completely taken with – and terrified of, she privately admitted – the empty expanse. “It’s all new to us. We couldn’t all come from a privileged family,” she said with a hint of bitterness coloring her voice.

Behind them, Jack goggled in unabashed fascination, hands on the back of Miranda’s chair and eyes roving across everything with curiosity. Her fingers slowly traced along the stitching of the seat Miranda was sitting in and then she abruptly sat herself half in her lap, wriggling until she was comfortably ensconced in Miranda’s arms while the woman stared in dumbstruck bafflement at the back of her head and Shepard bit her lip to avoid making any noise.

“What the bloody hell are you doing, Jack?”
“I wanted to see if the seat was as comfortable as it looked, but you’re in the way, Princess. Scoot.”

Jack wiggled herself further into the seat as Miranda grumbled and muttered under her breath, fruitlessly pushing on her shoulder to try and remove her. “I’m in the – I’m the bloody pilot, Jack, I can’t scoot.” She elbowed Jack none too gently in the ribs as she reached for the console and ended up with the young biotic wrapped around her to keep from tumbling out of the seat. She gasped as Jack squeezed her too tightly and Shepard broke into pained laughter in the other chair.

“It isn’t funny, Shepard!”

“I beg to differ, it’s very funny from my perspective.” Shepard hid a smile as she returned her gaze to the window, eyes cataloguing the quiet serenity of the stars and the vast expanse of dark space flowing around them as Jack and Miranda bickered beside her with unusual camaraderie in their voices. She sobered when she thought of Ashley, left behind and bleeding profusely as she secured their escape, and laid her head against the back of the seat with a silent sigh as a sudden bout of exhaustion stole her flagging energy.
Alright, so we've officially entered the beginning of the second arc, guys!

Read on!

Miranda and Jack helped Shepard off the ship, leaning her carefully against a crate in the backwater port they had landed illegally at. Shepard gasped as her wounds burned and the crease between her brows deepened when her head pulsed angrily. She forced herself to her feet and staggered as she tried to take a step, caught between the two women hovering worriedly on either side of her. She clamped a hand over the sluggishly bleeding wound on her thigh and let them set her down against the crate again. “We can’t stay here.”

“You can’t move, either. You need some medi-gel at the very least.”

“And what will you say when someone asks what you need it for? They don’t just hand it out without a reason,” Shepard retorted.

“Out here…things are different. Not regimented like they are at the Teltin Facility. I could make up an excuse,” Miranda said quietly.

Shepard shook her head. “We can’t risk it. I’ll be fine; we need to get away from the ship though. Actually…” Her face took on a thoughtful, pensive expression. “We should split up.”

“What.”

“Are you out of your fucking mind? I think the blood loss has made you stupid, Shepard.”

Shepard fixed them both with a stern look. “When Cerberus comes after us – because they will – we’ll have a better chance if we’re separated; they’ll have to send people after us in smaller groups, and we have a better chance of hiding if we’re on our own.” She winced as she sat up straighter and felt fresh blood roll down her skin beneath her compression shirt.

“How do you expect us to keep track of each other if we split up?”

Jack whipped her head around to face Miranda with a horrified expression. “You can’t seriously think this is a good idea?”

Miranda fidgeted and pushed back a strand of hair. “It seems to be our only option at the moment, Jack.”

The biotic scoffed and kicked at the crate Shepard was leaning against. “You’re both nuts! If we split up they’ll be able to pick us off one by one with none of us the wiser!”

“If we don’t, how do you expect us to blend together,” Shepard shot back. “We don’t exactly look innocuous right now.” She gestured at her blood covered clothes and lifted her wrists to bare the cuffs. “These will give us away immediately.”

Jack fingered her collar with a scowl and Miranda said,” I may be able to fix that, at least. Hold
on a moment, I think I saw some tools in the back compartment of the ship.” She disappeared and Shepard and Jack watched the dock for a couple tense minutes until she reappeared with a toolbox in her arms. She knelt by Shepard’s side and pushed some cloth between the cuffs and her skin as she pulled a tool out. “This may take a while. Just try not to move too much.”

She slipped the delicate tool into the locking mechanism and dug around until there was a small snick of the locks disengaging and sat back as it fell off Shepard’s wrist. She offered her other arm to Miranda and, when her wrists were free, rolled them slowly and reveled in the feeling of air running, unobstructed, over her skin. She stared at the scarring as Miranda stood and worked on Jack’s collar, tracing the blackened burns left behind and intricate electrical burns that webbed around the scars.

She looked up as Miranda tossed Jack’s collar away and she reached up to frame her neck, making a noise at the back of her throat before throwing herself into Miranda’s arms. The woman staggered under the force of Jack’s lunge, steadying herself against the crate and wrapping her arms around Jack’s slight frame until she suddenly pulled back and distanced herself with a stammered excuse. Miranda watched Jack walk away, hands at her throat and half covering the similar burns and scarring on her skin, and returned her attention to Shepard after she nudged her foot with her leg.

“So…” Miranda sighed. “I think…we have too few options right now and no time to think of anything else. There has to be a way for us to keep in contact though-”

“We’ve got a problem!” Jack bolted toward them with wide eyes and grabbed Miranda’s arm. “Someone saw us land I guess; there’s a bunch on guards with guns coming this way.”

They got on either side of Shepard and helped her to her feet and quickly left the port, slipping into a narrow alley. Jack kept looking over their shoulders as Shepard staggered between them and Miranda’s gaze swiveled back and forth at the end of the alley. She walked back with a frown on her lips. “There are guards everywhere. We have to get out of here.”

“How would you suggest that trick, Princess? I’m all ears.” Jack held her arms out wide. “Shepard and I are injured and covered in blood, in case you didn’t notice.”

“I know, which is why I’ve found a ship for you to stowaway on.” She faced Shepard with a tight grimace. “I overheard a passing worker saying that this end of the port has ships that are all heading to the Citadel; we could get on one and just disappear once there. But we do have to get past the guards before anything.”

Jack cracked her knuckles and rolled her shoulders. “I can take care of that.” She bared her teeth fearlessly and, without another word, walked out of the alley and lit up her biotics.

“Jack, get your ass back here!” Shepard tried to go after her but immediately fell back against the wall with a pained gasp. Miranda slung her arm over her shoulder and wrapped hers around her waist, walking them to the mouth of the alley. They watched a group of guards trot toward the end of the port where a small cloud of smoke floated into the air.

“Fucking fool; I’m going to beat her ass when I see her again,” Shepard hissed as they skirted the distracted crowd and disappeared up the ramp of a ship being loaded with crates. She propped herself up between two and watched Miranda arrange a nest of sorts from the sheets they had taken from the stolen ship. She settled thankfully on them, confused when the other woman stood up and looked toward the ramp. “What are you doing?”

“I can’t just leave her.”
“She’ll come back.”

“What if she doesn’t, though? She’s never been out of the Facility before…and neither have you. She could get turned around, or caught, or kill someone if she’s threatened. I have to get her, Shepard.” Shepard reached out to grab Miranda’s hand but missed and sat back with a pained groan. “I’ll be back, just stay here. Don’t make a sound, don’t move, and don’t do anything.”

Miranda disappeared before Shepard could call to her and left her in the semi-darkness of the hold, listening to the bustle of the port outside the ship and forcing down the panic that colored her thoughts every time someone walked up the ramps with more cargo to leave the port. She struggled to her feet when she heard the ramps go up and the hold sunk into blackness for a second before a soft orange glow lit up the ceiling. The floor under her rumbled to life with the ship’s engine and her stomach sank when she realized that neither Miranda nor Jack were getting onboard with her.

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Jack dumped Miranda unceremoniously on a pile of trash in an alley and paced frantically, expression thunderous as her gaze turned on the wounded woman leaning against the wall. “What the hell were you thinking?!”

“I was thinking that the guard had a gun and you were too busy throwing around the others to not get shot!” Miranda retorted, groaning as the bullet wound in her side pulsed angrily.

Jack paused in her pacing to stare down at her with a worried crease between her eyes, then growled and kicked her foot gently. “More fool, you. I would’ve been fine.”

“I would disagree, considering the state I’m in.”

“You got no one to blame but yourself, Princess.”

“Don’t…ugh, don’t call me that.”

Jack smiled toothily and crouched before Miranda, taking her chin in hand to draw her gaze upward. “Or what, Princess?”

Miranda grumbled weakly, tapping Jack’s jaw with a bloody hand. “You’re lucky I’m wounded, or I’d kick your ass.”

“I’d like to see you try.” Jack snorted and rolled her eyes. “We need to get onboard a ship.”

“What about that one?” Miranda jerked her head at the mouth of the alley where a ship was docked and apparently left empty for the moment.

“Perfect.”

Jack scooped Miranda into her arms with a quiet huff and carried her down the path. “I’m perfectly capable of walking,” she complained, although her skin paled several shades when Jack accidently jostled her while skirting some trash and she laid her hand protectively over her wound.

“Obviously. Just shut up and let me carry you, Princess.” Miranda subsided with a few final mutters under her breath and Jack deposited her atop a table in the hold. “Don’t move; I’m going to find something to bandage that with.”

“Jack,” Miranda hissed as she turned away. “We need to get back to Shepard! What if the ship
left already?"

"She’s fine."

Jack waved her hand lackadaisically and Miranda smacked her open palm on the table top. "She’s injured! In what universe is that okay?! She could be bleeding out right now; we should have gone straight back to her, not taken some scenic, roundabout jog across the bloody port!"

Her voice rose with each word and Jack took several long steps toward her, laying her hand roughly across her mouth. “Will you kindly shut it? Someone’s going to hear your loud mouth!” Miranda bit Jack’s palm and grinned darkly when the young woman cursed colorfully and jerked her hand back. They both froze when they heard voices outside the ship and Jack stepped into the shadows of the hold.

A spark of blue indicated that she was ready to use her biotics and Miranda barely had time to hiss, “Jack, wait, don’t,” before she had run into the light with an inhuman snarl and, if the surprised yelps were any indicator, barreled through the group of people at the foot of the ramp. Miranda sighed and leaned back, laying her hand over the wound, and shut her eyes. "Goddamned bloody stupid fool."

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Jack giggled victoriously as she vaulted over some debris in the back alleys of the port and used the brief moment of invisibility to duck around a corner and then hauled herself, hand over hand, up an escape ladder to the roof of a dilapidated building. She perched haphazardly on the edge of it and watched the guards run past the corner, toward the other side of the port, and swung her legs against the corner of the building. She sat back for a moment until they were out of sight, then descended the building and jogged easily back toward the ship she had left Miranda stewing in. She ducked behind some cargo when she heard people coming, peeking over the top to watch them disappear between some docked ships, and snuck aboard the other.

“Princess, you won’t believe what those dumbasses did; I just – the fuck?” Jack peered into the half light of the hold but couldn’t see Miranda’s profile anywhere. “Dammit all, Cheerleader, where the hell did you go?”

There was a dark chuckle behind her and Jack whirled on her heel, fingers hooked as her biotics flared along her arms and flashed blue in her eyes. “Who the hell is here? You’d better not have hurt–”

“Ooh, baby biotic has claws.” There was a quiet chastising sound from the shadows of the hold, then a blue glow lit up the expressionless visage of an asari. She grinned ferally, facial markings giving her a permanently dangerous look, and snapped her fingers, extinguishing her biotics. “You know, you should really respect your elders, kid. Humans, think they know everything. And a biotic…you’re special, aren’t you?”

Jack growled deep in her chest and clenched her fists.

“The first rule of combat, kid, is not to give away your position.” Jack whirled when she heard a step behind her, then grunted when something hit the back of her head. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she never felt the cold steel of the hold floor when she hit it.

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Shepard gradually uncoiled herself from her curled position between some crates when she felt the hum of the engine cut out under her feet. Her clothes were stiff with dried blood and smelled
strongly of copper and sweat; she grimaced and bit back a pained groan when they peeled grudgingly away from her wounds as she stood and leaned heavily against the wall of the hold. Her leg trembled from the bullet wound and she couldn’t move her upper body at all without intense pain lancing into her neck and down her arm, but she pushed through it as she staggered toward the hold ramp that was slowly inching down. When it was low enough for her to see light glinting off metal, she bolted past the surprised dock workers and into the thick of a crowd of aliens and humans.

She was assaulted by the smells of hundreds of bodies moving together, scents she had no names for floating on the air and the noise of too many voices blending together into a loud, droning buzz that threatened to overwhelm her almost immediately. Her eyes widened at the sight of so many people in close proximity to her and she backpedaled from a large human carrying a pack bursting with goods. She yelped when she ran into someone else and barely heard their muttered apologies as she disappeared into the mouth of a road that ran between two buildings.

Her hands shook with fear and adrenaline as she earnestly avoided the curious gazes she felt on her back, one hand clamped over the reopened wound in her thigh and the other pressed tight against her side to avoid jostling the bullet still lodged in her shoulder. She stiffened when someone put their hand on her uninjured shoulder.

“Hey, are you alright? Is tha-”

She violently threw off their hand and clenched her jaw when her myriad wounds protested the movement, lengthening her stride to get away from the person. She heard them call out to her but, thankfully, not follow as she struggled to process all of the new things assaulting her senses. She found herself at the mouth of a wide, densely populated avenue, buildings boasting large, vibrant signs and people of all races and species talking over each other in so many languages that it turned into noise that echoed in Shepard’s ears as her vision suddenly darkened at the edges. She staggered against the wall of a building and shook her head, blinking to clear her sight as she felt something warm slide down her skin. She looked down through blurry eyes at the blood dripping off her fingertips and felt the urge to just sit and close her eyes. Her throat was dry and the heavy taste of copper sparked on her tongue. She stared across the busy avenue at the door of some building, large windows framing dummies wearing brightly colored clothes that she could barely understand, there were so many odd straps and buckles that comprised them.

Something suddenly filled her sight, a color – yellow, her mind supplied numbly – that was nicely offset by the dusky blue skin it covered. Long, elegant fingers took a hold of her arm and she tried to yank herself away but cried out as she disturbed her shoulder. “Hush, little one. Come here, let me help you.”

Shepard panicked as she was carefully but inexorably pulled away from the populated avenue and propped up against a wall close by. She forced her eyes to focus on the face in front of her; full features highlighted by large, dark facial markings, blue eyes narrowed in concern and lips pursed. Shepard’s breath came fast and uneven as the alien face bent closer, her vision slipping in and out of focus as she hyperventilated.

“It’s okay, you’re safe,” the asari murmured.

Her voice was low and comforting but Shepard flinched away when her hand came up, shuddering as it came to rest gently on the top of her head. She lifted her hand and wrapped her bloodied fingers around the delicate blue wrist, feeling the strong thrum of life pulsing under scaled skin, and pulled weakly at it. “Please, don’t…I’ll behave, just…don’t…”

She trembled when the asari’s other hand cupped her chin and drew her gaze upward until she was looking into her eyes again. “You’re safe,” she repeated firmly. Her fingers drew circles on
Shepard’s jaw and ventured up while her other slipped down, mirroring the other hand until her thumbs were pressed against the ends of two scars on her temples and her fingers threaded through tangled sable hair.

“I apologize for the intrusion, but I only want to help you.”

“What-”

Shepard nearly swallowed her tongue when the blue of the asari’s eyes were swallowed by her pupils and something pushed at her mind. She panicked immediately, thrashing to get away from the asari, but she was easily held against the wall; the presence in her mind grew and pressed soothingly against her as a small tendril tapped against her memories. Shepard lost sense of herself as the presence enveloped her mind and drifted into a dark space filled with all her darkest memories.

What is-

Let me in.

Who-

I only wish to help.

Shepard snarled within and without, her blank eyes glaring into the inky blackness facing her.

Lies! No help, only hurt! Can’t trust anyo-

Please, just-

-only my team, need my-

What happe-

-safe with them. Safe with Nou – Jack, Ashley, Miranda-

Who are th-

-always have my back-

Let me in.

-shley, Jack, Mir-

It’s okay. You’re safe.

-randa, Jack…Ashley…Mir…anda…

Shhhh. It’s okay…let me in.

Shepard heaved a heavy sigh and slumped forward, barely caught by the asari as she pillowed her head against her chest, hands carding through her hair as the connection was established. Her eyes remained open, staring through the yellow of the robes she was wearing and flicking slowly back and forth.

Not hurt?

I promise.
There was a violent recoil in Shepard’s mind and the asari tightened her hold a little as she jerked in her arms.

*Worthless. Always hurt us.*

*No. Not me. Not here.*

…*lies.*

Shepard felt sincerity and warmth pushed at her. She grudgingly soaked it in but didn’t relax. The asari slipped a hand down to the back of her neck, pausing when she felt another thick, ropy scar at her nape.

*How?*

*Don’t remember.*

*Let me in?*

*I…I don’t…*

*Please.*

…*okay.*

It was as if a door had opened and the presence in her mind – the asari, the *alien* – dove through quickly, before Shepard could change her mind. Memories, feelings, down to the faintest impression, rushed through her mind’s eye in flashes.

*Hurt? I don’t like needle—*

- *turn ‘round, keep walkin’ girl—*

- *A 9 30…many possibilities—*

- *fucking bitch…stop it!...let go, you’re hurting her!*-

*Shepard? But, I—*

- *o idea what we’ve gon—*

- *relax, Shepard. This wi—*

- *deep telling yourself that, Shepa—*

- *Shepard, help me—*

- *nly for you, Shepard—*

- *on of ‘fine’ needs some work, Shep—*

- *well done, Shepard…ke a proper killer of you ye—*

Shepard gasped as she wrenched herself out of the meld, eyes wide and panicky as she backpedaled into the wall. The asari reached out for her, eyes slowly returning to blue, and Shepard recoiled. Her back hit the wall again as she jerked around the asari’s arms and bolted from the side street onto the road. She ran into someone, a batarian that snarled at her and shoved
her away, and barely avoided bowling over a hapless asari couple that stared at her with wide eyes.

She heard the low, melodic voice begging her to come back as she evaded the grasping hands and encroaching bodies that threatened to cut off her only means of escape. She bolted through the gathering crowd, scattering the myriad species that were staring at her like some displayed thing as she disappeared around a corner and kept running, ignoring the burn in her lungs and the pain blossoming across her body.

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Liara closed her books with a sigh and rubbed her eyes. The words had long since stopped making sense to her but she kept on until she felt a headache brewing behind her eyes. Tiredly rubbing her temples and muttering lowly to herself, she almost missed the quiet sound that echoed through the otherwise empty ship.

“Mother?” Liara pushed away from her desk and peeked out of the doorway. “Mother? Are you back from meeting Councilor Tevos already? I thought you would be gone longer; you did say you were disc-”

Liara froze in the middle of the room when she saw an unfamiliar person in the door. The human woman was standing unnaturally still and staring with oddly colored eyes at her. Some emotion she couldn’t place floated through her heterochromatic gaze, then she darted forward and caught Liara’s throat in her grip. Up close, Liara could see blood liberally staining her dark colored clothes; the sharp, coppery scent rose off her skin and made her stomach roll sickeningly.

“Who – what are you doi-”

The woman snarled wordlessly at her and her grip tightened until Liara was gasping for air and scratching at her arm uselessly. “Don’t speak,” she rasped dangerously. “I’ll let you go if you keep your mouth shut. Understand?” Liara nodded frantically and inhaled deeply when her airway opened up, stroking her neck and eyeing the stranger warily. She slid her other hand behind her back and called forth her biotics, letting them simmer just under her skin.

The woman narrowed her eyes and grasped her wrist in an iron grip. Liara yanked her arm away and pushed a wave of energy at her, watching the woman fly across the small room and slam against the wall. Her head snapped to the side as it bounced off a shelf and she dropped to the ground. Liara cautiously approached her with her biotics at the ready and panicked when the woman launched herself at her legs, sending them both to the ground in a tangle of limbs. She quickly found herself subdued beneath the woman’s body, arms pinned against her sides and all leverage gone from her position on the floor.

The woman leaned low over her with steel in her gaze and growled, “That wasn’t smart, asari.” She was up and hauling Liara to her feet before she could react, pushing her bodily toward the cockpit of the ship and shoving her into the captain’s chair. “Start it.”

“Wh – what?”

“Start the damn ship!”

Liara jumped at the explosive reply and got the engine running, feeling the thrum beneath her feet as the ship powered up. She watched the woman from the corner of her eyes as she slumped into the seat beside her and grasped her side with her hand. “Where to?” Liara asked deferentially.

“Just get us off this damn port.”
She navigated them into open space and headed toward the relay under the woman’s suspicious gaze. She hesitantly met her eyes as they approached the relay and studied her, taking in the copious amounts of blood and scrapes, the torn clothing riddled with singes and, to her horror, more than a few bullet holes. “What happened to you?”

“It doesn’t matter,” the woman muttered, turning away from her to stare out the window. Her grip on the armrest tightened when they were suddenly propelled forward at FTL speeds and she didn’t relax until the ship stabilized, setting her head back against the rest and exhaling heavily.

Liara let the ship go to autopilot and set her hands on the arms of the chair, slowly pushing up until she was standing. The woman regarded her from half closed eyes, body tensed to move but staying sitting as she watched her take a step toward her. “Stay back,” she muttered.

Liara froze midstep. “I mean no harm, I was just going to wet a towel so you could…clean up.” The woman studied her blood covered skin and clothes with a sort of detached familiarity that sent a cold chill down Liara’s spine and she left the cockpit without a backward glance. She wet a towel and brought it back, setting it on the armrest as she passed by.

She sat back in the captain’s chair as the woman took the towel and swiped halfheartedly at her arm, movements sluggish and clumsy. As she lifted her arm, she gasped and dropped the towel. Liara reached out for it as the woman tucked her arm tightly against her chest and watched her with concern in her eyes. “Are you injured?” She shook her head immediately and groaned. “Of course you are; that was a stupid question. Do you need me to-”

“I’m fine. Just…pilot the ship. I’ll be fine.” The woman groused and settled deeper into the chair, arm still firmly against her body, and let her head fall to the side so she could watch Liara. “I’ve had worse, asari.” Her gaze – blue and brown eyes, how odd; asari didn’t have that particular anomaly – was sharp despite the obvious lines of pain carved around her eyes and mouth and the exhausted slump of her posture. Her long hair was tangled in a half escaped braid, the color unrecognizable past the blood that had congealed in it.

Liara offered a faint smile that went unreturned and turned her gaze outward, watching space slip by in a blur of stars. She heard the woman shift in her chair but ignored her, opting to listen to her raspy breathing slowly deepen and steady. She counted in her head until fifteen minutes had passed and then chanced looking over to find the woman passed out, uncomfortably tucked into the chair completely with slack features and twitching fingers. Liara let out a relieved breath and silently got out of her chair, walking back to her room and shutting the door. She leaned heavily against it for a long moment, then opened up her omni tool and made a call.

A smile spread across her face when her mother appeared on-screen, a cool smile on her lips and brow arched in question. “Liara? What are you calling about? I told you I was meeting with council-”

“I know. I apologize, mother, but I don’t believe this can wait.” Liara quickly explained what had happened and watched Benezia’s expression slip from cool detachment to barely concealed panic and worry.

“Where are you, Little Wing?”

“In my room. She passed out, she’s very badly injured, mother.”

A speculative expression took over Benezia’s face and she pursed her lips. “This human…does she have mismatched eyes?”

“I…yes, but how-”
“I may have run into her earlier today. If you can safely do so, go back into the cockpit and let me see her face.”

Liara’s brow furrowed in confusion but she edged back into the main room and took slow steps toward the chair. She angled her omni tool so Benezia could see the human’s face and then slipped back to her room. “Mother?”

“I know her. Well, know is a bit strong, but I did meet her today.” Benezia scraped a finger along the slowly fading mark on her chin and hummed thoughtfully. “Bring her to the estate, if you can.”

“What?!” Liara jumped at the sound of her own voice and cringed. “What do you mean,” she hissed quietly, watching the human shift in the chair.

“I mean exactly what I said, dear. Bring her to the estate in Armali; I think she needs help.”

“She needs a doctor and a pair of cuffs, not necessarily in that order,” Liara retorted.

Benezia smiled sadly and said, “Don’t take her appearance at face value, dear. Do as I’ve asked?”

Liara closed her eyes and squeezed the bridge of her nose as her headache surged back to the fore of her mind. “Fine. But if she tries anything…”

“She won’t.”

“You don’t know that,” Liara shot back.

Benezia only smiled and said, “Oh, and take the long route to Thessia, Little Wing.”

“Why?”

“So I can take ship and get to the estate before you; your father won’t be happy at all about the marks on your skin.” Liara reached up where Benezia’s hand fluttered around her throat and she felt bruising when she swallowed. “I’ll get there beforehand and prepare her for your arrival. Be safe, Little Wing.” Benezia disappeared from the screen and Liara stared at the floor, hand still idly rubbing her throat.

“Farewell, mother.”
Hey, guys. So, so many apologies for the sudden hiatus. I attempted NaNoWriMo for the third time in my life; it didn't go well, so you know...yeah. I will return to my semi-regular postings of this story and the other Warlord story, and this story is more or less completely mapped out, it's just a matter of putting it to paper and hoping like hell the characters cooperate with me. Forewarning y'all, my sixty hour workweeks are going to jump to eighty hours once the new year begins, so updates will continue to be every other week in an effort to give myself time to write when I'm NOT half-dead from lack of sleep. I will never leave a story half done, so don't worry about that, but I will warn ya'll when shit hits the fan :) 

Read on!

“Go!” Ashley shouted at Shepard and Jack. She didn’t watch them when they left cover, only fired into the thick of the group of soldiers and watched grimly as one fell to each pull of the trigger.

“Fuck,” she cried when the slide ejected a final cartridge and stayed open. She dropped the pistol and picked up the shotgun, listening to the hum of the ship’s engines grow quieter as she fired into the group again. A couple of men clutched at their wounds, quickly replaced by more, and she spent the next two shots rapidly.

She ducked behind her cover and shoved three more shells into the chamber, firing blindly over the top of the crate before poking her head out of cover. The soldiers had ducked behind what cover they could find and were barking at each other. Ashley smirked as she sat heavily and grabbed her helmet, staring at her bloodied reflection in the visor before slipping it over her head. She put the last shell in her hand into the chamber and stared at the shotgun in her hands for a long moment, then got to her feet and left the safety of the crate. A couple of men stood up from behind a vehicle’s tires and she fired, watching them drop and the blood begin to pool around their bodies.

Her feet left bloody prints as she walked through the puddle, hitting another man in the face with the butt of her shotgun and smoothly swinging the weapon around to fire at a soldier who was attempting to sneak up on her. He went down with a cry and her ears rang as the crack of gunfire rang through the hangar. New pain bloomed across her body and she looked down in a detached manner at the red streaks running down her armor. She smiled mirthlessly at the remaining men, teeth stained pink with her blood, and charged them with a battle cry on her lips. She fired her last shell into the quartet of men and watched with satisfaction as two fell back into the side of the vehicle they were hiding behind and didn’t rise again.

The other two panicked, eyes jumping between their downed comrades and her bloodthirsty grin. One managed to get his rifle up before Ashley swung her shotgun at the side of his head. By the time he hit the floor, she was grappling with the last man, spitting a wad of blood into his face and yanking his assault rifle out of his grasp. She turned it on him and fired at point blank range, watching impassively as he sank to his knees, holding his spilling guts in his hands and staring up at her with blood dripping from his lips before he fell onto his face and didn’t move. Ashley felt
her legs fall out from beneath her as her vision tunneled and her breath stuttered in her chest, heartbeat echoing hollowly in her ears as she passed out.

Ashley bolted upright and cried out as pain lanced through her body, clutching one hand against her abdomen as her other barely managed to keep her upright. A cold sweat broke across her skin as her eyes slid down to her bandaged torso. “What the...” She rested her hand against the bandages, stained pink with her blood and hiding an impressive amount of skin from sight.

Her head jerked to the side when she heard a door open and shut and she stared, wide eyed, at a young asari. The maiden, with her dark, sparse markings and wide eyes standing out against her pale blue skin, wrung her hands nervously. “Oh, you’re awake! The consort will be so pleased!” She was out the door before Ashley could do more than open her mouth, and she laid back in frustration against the pillow behind her.

As she slowly got her bearings, Ashley took stock of her body. She wiggled her fingers and toes, then slowly flexed her limbs. A deep, insistent pain radiated through most of her body, but was manageable and, better yet, didn’t restrict her movements as long as she was slow. She sat up again and cautiously set her feet on the stone floor, wiggling her bare toes again as she took several deep breaths. She pushed off the mattress and grunted when something pulled painfully across her back, setting her hand on the corner post of the bed to balance herself. She stood on weaving legs and took a shaky step toward a low dresser across the room, managing a handful of steps before her legs started to tremble.

The door clicked open as she locked her legs to stay upright and a smooth voice gently chastised, “You really shouldn’t be up. You’re going to reopen your wounds, and then all that time my acolytes spent on you will have been for naught.” Ashley whipped her head around and nearly fell over as the room spun before her eyes. The asari, clothed in pale pink robes that bared a startling amount of cerulean skin, reached out to steady her, eyes kind and appraising when Ashley flinched away. The asari slowly reached out again, closing her fingers around Ashley’s waist when she wobbled on her feet again.

"Please, let me take care of you.” Her thumbs swiped across the bandages covering her torso and Ashley let herself be led back to the bed and gratefully sat down. The asari pushed on her shoulder to get her to lean back and sat beside her on the edge of the bed, dark blue eyes fixed on the red slowly seeping through her bandages. “These need to be changed; I’ll be right back.”

When she went to stand, Ashley grasped her wrist and pulled her back. “Wait. What – where am I? And who are you?”

“Oh, my apologies. My name is Sha’ira, you are within the walls of my private chambers.” Sha’ira eased her wrist free and pulled some medical supplies out of a cabinet against the far wall. She sat back on the bed with a leg pulled up and reached for the end of the bandages. “May I?” Ashley hesitated and nodded stiffly after a moment, allowing Sha’ira to pull the bandages apart.

She watched the asari bend to her task as a stilted silence fell between them; Sha’ira humming tunelessly to herself as Ashley winced whenever the cloth pulled at the edges of her wounds. The asari applied a bitter smelling salve to the numerous wounds covering Ashley’s torso, lingering over the bullet wounds that littered her abdomen and ribs. “You are very lucky,” she murmured. “These should have killed you.”

“My armor did its job, then.”

“Ah, yes. Speaking of that,” Sha’ira said, “I don’t believe it to be salvageable, but I asked my acolytes to take your armor to a shop to be looked at nonetheless.”
“I…thank you.” Ashley felt heat rise in her cheeks when the asari smiled in her direction and began rebinding her wounds. She inhaled sharply when curious fingers traipsed over an old scar half hidden beneath fresh wounds near her ribs and grabbed her hand. “Don’t.”

“I didn’t…my apologies.” Sha’ira bound the rest of her wounds and asked Ashley to lay back. She took her arm and inspected the wounds there, then the others littered across her body, and handed her a cup filled with some pungent liquid afterward.

“What’s this?” Ashley asked suspiciously.

“It is safe, I promise you.” When Ashley didn’t look reassured, Sha’ira took the cup and lifted it to her mouth to take a sip, then handed it back. As Ashley drank from it, she said, “It is a remedy my acolytes make to treat anything from migraines to muscle strains to…more severe wounds.” Her hand ghosted across Ashley’s abdomen as she spoke and the soldier trembled, eyes flashing with emotion.

“It will help you sleep and to heal. Perhaps when you wake again, we can talk about where you came from.” Ashley felt faint stirrings of panic bubble in her stomach but they were quickly overshadowed by the lethargy overtaking her. As her eyes shut, she saw Sha’ira pull the covers up to her waist and lean over her, murmuring, “You can rest easy; I will keep vigil through your sleep.”

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In a spacious office overlooking the Teltin Facility, a man sat behind an expansive desk with a cigar perched between his lips and a shrewd look in his eyes. He stared at the man standing before him with an appraising eye, sizing up his lean musculature and the cuffs around his wrists. “Alenko.”

“Sir.” Alenko snapped to attention, wincing as his hand brushed against a livid bruise at his temple. “I apologize for my appearance, Shepard.”

“Will be brought to heel, along with the others, one way or another. I have a proposal for you that concerns them. A trade, if you will.”

“Of course, sir. Anything.”

“You and another will be sent after our wayward biotics. You will return them all, preferably alive, and in return, you will be given leadership of them all. I know you and Shepard were…rivals, more often than not. According to your files, she continually usurped your placement in most categories, including biotic control and hand to hand combat.” Alenko’s face darkened as he spoke but he didn’t speak. “I give you a chance to reclaim your place at the head of the squad and reassert your power. To undo the damage their escape has caused and put you back in my good graces.”

Alenko paled at the subtle threat in his voice and nodded. “Of course, Sir. I am yours to use however you wish, you have only to direct me.”

The Illusive Man smiled coldly and nodded, tapping the end of his cigar into a glass tray on his desk. “That’s what I like to hear; dedication, loyalty, all too rare these days, what with all the humans sidling up to the aliens and currying favor through deals.” His lips pursed in distaste as he scoffed in disgust. “Humans belong at the top of the chain, as we always have. We have no place beneath these creatures we have come into contact with. That is Cerberus’ purpose, which you are aware of.” Alenko nodded and the Illusive Man smiled again. “Very well, let me introduce you to your companion while you search for the…deviants.”
He gestured at a soldier standing inside the door and Alenko turned his head to watch as another man was led inside. Small of stature with compact muscle lining his body, the man swept aside dark hair and turned cold black eyes on them. “Kai Leng reporting, as requested, Sir.”

“Thank you for coming, Kai Leng.” The Illusive Man gestured for Kai Leng to step up to the desk and handed him a thick folder. “These are the marks I told you about. As I was telling young Alenko, I wish them to be apprehended alive if at all possible. Cerberus has put years of time and resources into these subjects, I would prefer them to remain viable, useable tools.”

Kai Leng smiled coldly. “Of course, sir. And…Alenko, was it?”

“He will be assisting you. Alenko has remained a steadfast supporter of our doctrine from the time he arrived here. He displayed admirable determination when the deviants were escaping, even if he was put down in the end.”

Alenko lowered his head in embarrassment as his cheeks burned with humiliation. Kai Leng looked him over with a barely disguised look of disdain. “I don’t work with others.”

“But you will with him.” The steel lacing the Illusive Man’s voice was unmistakable. “Alenko is one of my brightest and has been given this chance to prove his worth once and for all.” He turned electric blue eyes on Alenko and tapped something into his omni tool. “You are leaving at 0600 tomorrow, ready yourselves.”

Kai Leng nodded tersely and departed and Alenko was stopped when the Illusive Man called his name. “I have a couple final things for you that I believe you will like.” He pulled a long, narrow case from a crate on the edge of the room and opened it on his desk. Within lay a pistol and new armor, unmarked and shining beneath the overhead lights. He ran his hands over the unblemished metal reverently as the Illusive Man smiled.

“To replace yours, which was damaged in the fight with Shepard. And as a final reward for your loyalty…your name.” Alenko’s head snapped up and he gaped at the man behind the desk who was idly chewing on the end of his cigar. The Illusive Man’s eyes glittered cruelly as he pushed the box containing his new arms and armor toward him. “Kaidan Alenko, I welcome you to Cerberus’ ranks. Prepare yourself and be ready to ship out at 0600.”

The bright sunlight reflecting off the ocean made Miranda’s eyes water but she didn’t look away from the vast waterscape before her. She watched some unknown water birds dive at the waves and come up occasionally with some fish to fly toward the nearby natural spires with, calling to their nestmates with warbling cries that lingered past their end. She closed her eyes and listened to the quiet breeze that whipped through her hair, feeling her legs wobble under her as the past several days’ worth of travel and lack of food caught up with her. When she opened her eyes she was struck with a sense of vertigo and sat heavily on the pebbled ground before she fell over, planting a hand on the smooth stones to ground herself when her vision lurched sickeningly. Her other firmly covered the wound in her side, crusted over with dried blood and pus that had started leaking from the deep bullet graze the previous day. She experimentally pressed against the edges of the wound and hissed when a deep, aching pain radiated from it, then slowly dragged herself down to the water’s edge and dunked her hand into it.

The clear water gradually went pink as her blood washed away and she leaned over carefully to scoop some into her cupped hands and, before she could talk herself out of it, splashed it against her side. She gasped loudly and bit her cheek hard enough to draw blood to bite back the pained cry that was crawling up her throat and did it again until the wound was free of blood and leaked infection steadily. She took deep, shuddering breaths to distract herself from the pain that felt like
it was lancing into her ribs and twisted her body just enough to study the bullet wound. A deep, long crease ran along her ribs, the parted skin an angry color that was offset by the sickly looking infection that slipped from within the wound. She sighed and tried to get her legs underneath her but couldn’t make them cooperate as another wave of nausea washed over her. She leaned to the side and retched, nothing but stomach bile coming up and burning as it rose in her throat.

When she spit and opened her eyes again, a shadow had fallen across her small stretch of pebbled shoreline and she looked up into the face of an older human woman. Her short, silver hair tossed about in the breeze as her soft blue eyes stared down in concern at Miranda. “Are you alright, child?”

Miranda’s jaw worked soundlessly as her eyes filled with tears at the maternal tone, and the woman crouched down beside her. She coaxed Miranda’s hand away from her wound and her lips pursed as she studied it. When she stood up and dusted off the knees of her pants, Miranda felt a moment’s panic that she going to be left until she realized the woman was offering her hand to her.

“Come with me; let me help you.”

Miranda hesitated for a long moment, then slowly placed her hand in the woman’s and was pulled to her feet. She grit her teeth as the wound pulled when she stood and was relieved when her arm was slung around the woman’s shoulders to help her balance. They laboriously made their way up the beach toward the skycar Miranda could just see past the small hillock she had crested hours before, stopping a couple times so she could dry heave as the pain overwhelmed her again.

By the time Miranda was sitting in the passenger’s seat of the vehicle, she was coated in a layer of sweat and shaky with pain. The woman got behind the wheel and they slowly drove away from the beach with Miranda fidgeting under the woman’s frequent, worried gaze.

“Where are you from, my dear? Who did this to you?” Miranda didn’t answer, but she began breathing more heavily the closer they got to the cluster of buildings in the distance. She put her hand on the woman’s wrist when she went to turn toward them and shook her head frantically.

“Did someone there do this to you?”

Again, Miranda shook her head, searching desperately for her voice and her wits even though she just felt like sleeping until the abject exhaustion that had settled in her bones passed. “No…no, I – not there, not…” She grunted in frustration as her tongue seemed resistant to working properly but hoped her faint, pained smile was enough thanks when the woman smoothly turned the wheel the other way and began driving again.

“Okay. It’s okay, we’ll go back into the city proper, to my offices. Is that alright?”

“You…you are a doctor?”

“Yes, I am.” The woman extended her hand across the console and offered a cautious smile.

“Doctor Karin Chakwas.”

“…Miranda.”

Miranda took the doctor’s palm and was surprised by the strength in her grip. She felt the calluses on her fingertips as they parted and inched closer to the door of the skycar, warily eyeing the woman in the driver’s seat. Karin glanced at her from her periphery and sighed. “I won’t hurt you.”

“Where are we?” Miranda blatantly ignored the doctor’s reassurance, looking out the window at
the rolling forest that was dotted intermittently with clusters of buildings large and small. Rivers frequently broke through the trees, many dotted with boats of every size and purpose imaginable.

“We’re currently headed toward Attena, where my offices are. I’m the head doctor at the university there, and the students do keep myself and my staff busy.” Karin chuckled while Miranda’s mind worked out where that was.

“Attena…Thessia?”

“Yes?” Karin’s eyes flicked back over to Miranda in concern. “Did you not know that?”

“No…I didn’t.”

They spent the rest of the ride in uncomfortable silence. Miranda shifted as her wounds complained until they had landed behind a large, organic looking building situated amongst a cluster of similarly built places. She took the offered hand that helped her out of the skycar and limped into the building beside the doctor, studying her long gait, neatly pressed clothes, and the firm set of her shoulders as they got into an elevator. When they came out of the elevator, Miranda was treated to a view of the campus that sprawled around the medical building. Trees rose up even to the fourth floor and partially eclipsed her view of the surrounding forest and a nearby river that teemed with asari swimming and enjoying the warm weather.

Karin gently led her to a table littered with papers and equipment and bade her sit in a chair beside it. As she rifled through a cabinet and muttered to herself, Miranda studied the office. Large and open but for a couple rooms to the side, the room was filled with natural light and plants that flourished in the warm light that spilled over them. Short bookcases littered the room and vials filled with unknown substances sat atop tables.

“Ah, here we are.” The doctor brought over an armful of supplies and set them on the table. “Can you remove your clothes for me?”

Miranda turned her gaze down to the compression shirt and shredded pants she still wore. She lifted the shirt up as far as she could and, when she hissed in pain, Karin eased it the rest of the way and tossed it aside. She helped Miranda stand to unbutton her pants and let them fall to the floor, then sat heavily back in the chair as the doctor reached for a box of cleansing wipes. She silently worked on her, wiping dried blood away from each wound, superficial or not, and then reached for the medi-gel. She applied it liberally to her myriad wounds covering her arms and torso, then turned her attention to the bullet wound on her side.

“I need to make sure the infection is out completely before I can work on this, but I can bind it for now.” Karin looked up at Miranda’s face and smiled faintly. “Using the salt water to clean it out was a good idea, if poorly executed. What if you had passed out?”

“But I didn’t, and you showed up anyway.”

“But you may not have been that lucky.” She sighed and pressed a salve into the wound. “You’re incredibly lucky I decided to take a ride today.”

She quietly asked Miranda to turn around so she could look at her back. Miranda hesitated until Karin set her hand on her shoulder and gently urged her to move. She stiffened when she heard the sharp intake of breath from the doctor and shuddered when she felt callused fingers brush over the sensitive, scarred nodes implanted along the length of her spine.

“Oh my…Gods above, who did this to you?” Miranda felt Karin’s hands cover her back, mapping out the old scars that streaked across her shoulders and ribs, lingering on the arcing
marks that radiated out from her spine. “My dear girl…” Miranda shuddered deeply when Karin’s hands settled on her shoulders, curling protectively in on herself.

“Just relax and let me take care of these wounds, then how about we get to know each other a little? Do you like tea?” Miranda swallowed and closed her eyes against the sudden press of tears behind her eyes, nodding silently. “Good. Let’s get started then, shall we?”

Liara stared at the woman, still passed out in the chair next to her. She hadn’t ever woken up and had barely even wiggled through the long flight to Thessia. Liara took control of the ship as they approached monitored space and put on a rarely-used headset to keep the noise to a minimum. They landed in the private port her family owned and Liara let the ship’s engines die, her attention on the human.

The woman’s tangled, greasy hair covered part of her face and some of the wounds that dotted her forehead and cheeks, but the blood had dripped down her face and dried in vivid streaks that turned Liara’s stomach. She chewed on her lip as she wondered how she was going to get the woman to her family estate and found the question moot when the human’s hands suddenly clenched and she jerked upright. Her eyes, hazy and unfocused, darted around the ship’s interior as she nearly fell out of the seat and came up in a crouch. Liara froze under the brown and blue eyes that were locked on her, barely daring to breathe as the woman slowly stood upright. Her face twisted as she put weight on her injured leg and Liara opened her mouth when she snarled and lurched toward her with her hands extended.

“Where have you brought me? What is this place?” The woman stared out the glass at the busy port, expression visibly shaken, and took a threatening step toward Liara when her leg buckled. She cried out as she collapsed against the chair and Liara shot up, ignoring the warning bells in her head in favor of tucking her shoulder beneath the human’s uninjured arm and propping her up.

“I’m fine – let me go, don’t!” She tried to pull away from Liara’s grip and nearly fell over again.

Liara readjusted her grip around her waist and took a step away from the control panel, wincing as the woman dug her nails into her arm in her efforts to get away. “Will you just – settle – ow, Goddess damn you – down! I’m not going to hurt you!”

“Lies! Only lies!”

The woman fought like a demon and fell back against the side of the ship, cradling her injured shoulder with her hand and keeping as much weight off her leg as possible. Liara pinched the bridge of her nose between her fingers and muttered under her breath, then took a few moments to clear her head and let the adrenaline fade from her body. She watched the woman from beneath her eyelashes, the way she stiffly held herself, how her mismatched eyes never left Liara’s body and she subtly readjusted her stance with every motion Liara made.

She let her hands fall to her sides with the palms open nonthreateningly and stayed where she was as she spoke gently. “I swear that I’m not going to hurt you. I only want to help, get your wounds looked at.” The woman’s expression didn’t change but she didn’t edge any further away either, so Liara continued.

“You met another asari on the Citadel – the place we were at previously,” she clarified when the woman looked confused. “A matriarch dressed in yellow? Faded markings around her eyes and her chin?” She fluttered her hands around her face and watched realization dawn across the human’s face. “Yes?”
“Yes…”

“She is my mother. She asked that I bring you to…to our home, so we could assess and heal your wounds.” Liara took a step toward the woman and froze when she flinched away, turning her body slightly to guard her injuries. “We have a doctor that lives in the com – in the house. She tends to us when we need it; she could help you.” The woman’s lips thinned as she frowned and curled further in on herself protectively.

Liara bit her lip, rocking on her feet as she fought not to close the distance between them. Her eyebrows furrowed when the human removed the hand over her thigh and her palm came away smeared with blood. “You’ve reopened your wounds. Please, I just want to help you. I don’t know what happened to you, but I swear, to whatever you want, that I will not harm you.”

She watched the human silently and caught her eyes. She forced herself to keep contact with the intense gaze until the human closed her eyes and nodded once. Liara took a step toward her, freezing when heterochromatic eyes opened again, but relaxed slightly when she offered her bloodstained hand to her. Liara put her palm in the woman’s and silently pulled her into her side, taking the weight off her injured leg as they made their way out of the ship.

A skycar was waiting by the dock and a commando for their house opened the door for them, wide eyes locked on the human’s body. “I’ll drive, if you don’t mind. Sit in the back, please.”

“But Mis-”

“Now, please,” Liara said with ice in her voice. The commando ducked her head and climbed into the back of the skycar. Liara helped the human into the passenger seat and got behind the wheel after her. They drove through the city of Armali and Liara kept stealing glances from the corner of her eye at the woman as she openly gaped at the opulent buildings and plentiful flora that dotted the wide boulevards with a sort of wonder in her face that was out of place amongst the bloody scrapes and scarring on her skin.

They stopped at the gates of the T’Soni compound and Liara nervously cut the engine while the woman gaped up at the scrolling on the gate. She groaned when she noticed the contingent of commandos standing at attention inside the densely wooded courtyard and two figures at the end of the line that could only be her parents.

“Goddess, this just…” She sighed and got out as the gates slid open and the commando followed her out of the backseat. Liara went to the other door and opened it for the human, offering her hand to help her out. She wasn’t surprised when her hand was pushed away and the woman stepped out of the skycar with a stoic expression on her face.

Liara walked slightly behind her as they entered the compound and saw the woman jump as the gates started closing. She looked over her shoulder with barely concealed panic in her eyes just as the commandos broke rank to circle them and the two asari standing on the path walked their way.

“Liara! When your mother told me that you were arriving with a stray in tow, I didn’t believe her, bu-”

Liara watched nervously as her father smiled broadly at her and swore under her breath when brown eyes noticed the scrapes on her face and the circle of bruises around her neck. Benezia stepped forward with her hand extended to catch her shoulder.

“Aethyta-”
“Did she do that?” Aethyta rounded on the human and glared venomously at her. Blue wisps flickered to life around her clenched fists as she snarled. “Did you hurt my Little Wing? I’ll tear you apart, human!” She lunged at the woman just as Benezia tried to snag her shirt and Liara was unceremoniously pulled back into the arms of a waiting commando.

“No, father, please! Stop!”
HI, guys. So so sorry for the stupid long delay, life and work and....basically everything have colluded to keep me from doing much productive ANYTHING in terms of writing. Nonetheless, I persevered!

Updates will continue to be sporadic, because I have no wifi unless I go to my parents house or my friends' house, and my eighty hour a week job doesn't provide many opportunities to go anywhere.

As an apology, have a super long chapter!

Read on!

Liara watched nervously as her father smiled broadly at her and swore under her breath when brown eyes noticed the scrapes on her face and the circle of bruises around her neck. Benezia stepped forward with her hand extended to catch her shoulder. “Aethyta-”

“Did she do that?” Aethyta rounded on the human and glared venominously at her. Blue wisps flickered to life around her clenched fists as she snarled. “Did you hurt my Little Wing? I’ll tear you apart, human!” She lunged at the woman just as Benezia tried to snag her shirt and Liara was unceremoniously pulled back into the arms of a waiting commando.

“No, father, please! Stop!”

She tried to pull away but her arms were pinned at her sides as Aethyta quickly closed the distance to the human. She watched in horror as Aethyta landed a biotically enhanced punch on the human’s already bloody cheek and the woman’s head snapped to the side. A wad of blood landed on the pavers, bright red against the pale green stone, and Liara’s stomach lurched sickeningly as the human spit out another mouthful as she coughed. Mismatched eyes briefly met Liara’s and the woman snarled with pink teeth bared.

Blood spilled in thick streams from the wide gash on her cheek but she seemed unaware of it as she rounded on Aethyta and barely managed to duck beneath her next biotically charged swing. She came up inside her guard and hit her several times in quick succession in her stomach, watching in satisfaction as the asari reeled back and gasped for air. She stalked toward Aethyta, all dangerous grace and fluid movements, and Liara gasped as she saw a blue flicker around the woman’s hand. A line of blue extended from her wrist and dragged over the pavers behind her feet as the whip quickly materialized.

The gathered commandos seemed to gasp simultaneously at the appearance of the biotic whip, but none reacted fast enough to stop the human from flicking her wrist out. The snap of the whip as it cracked through the air broke the spell cast over the courtyard and the commandos moved as one to try and restrain the human. They were thrust back in waves as the woman let a pulse of energy flow out from her body and sent several asari skidding across the ground. She growled loudly as she flung her hand out and caught several commandos in a singularity, then whirled around to throw a punch at another with blue energy wreathing her fist. The commando grunted as she immediately crumpled and didn’t rise again, and the remaining asari rallied as their sister fell.
They set upon the human with renewed vigor, trying desperately to subdue the terrified and enraged woman as she fought with increasingly powerful strikes that sent commandos flying out of the circle with each hit she landed. Liara watched helplessly as the commandos chipped away at the woman’s rapidly depleting reserves of energy and a few managed to tag her with their biotics or fists.

“Stop!”

All movement ceased at the furious word that echoed across the suddenly silent courtyard. The handful of commandos that were still standing backed away as Benezia stalked toward them with anger plain on her face, taking their unconscious sisters with them as they retreated. Aethyta was right on Benezia’s heels with a cautioning word on the tip of her lips. She jerked back when the matriarch glared at her, biting her tongue and swallowing nervously as she stopped in her tracks. Liara ran toward her mother and stopped as pale blue eyes met hers; she shifted on her feet when Benezia shook her head subtly but didn’t move as she stopped a few paces away from the human.

The woman was weaving dangerously on her feet but her head never stopped moving as she watched the commandos warily. Blood puddled at her feet from new wounds and the older ones that had reopened, including the one in her thigh and the bullet wound in her shoulder. Heterochromatic eyes tracked Benezia’s every movement and her body tensed the closer she got, although she seemed too exhausted to do anything but stumble back a step. She cried out as she landed on her wounded leg, the first sound of pain she had made since being attacked, and Benezia made a soothing sound in her throat.

“Oh, my poor girl, it’s alright. They won’t hurt you anymore.” The woman shook her head and listed to the side as she lost her balance, muffling a pained whimper behind her lips when she put weight on her leg again. Benezia took a small step toward her and paused when she edged away. “Can I come closer? I don’t want you to fall; you’ll only hurt yourself more. Maybe my daughter could help, too? You know Liara, don’t you?”

“Benezia, are you sure…” Aethyta began with a cautious look on her face.

Benezia hissed over her shoulder, “Silence, Thyta. You and I will have words after this.”

She winced when the woman shrunk in on herself and immediately softened her voice. “I’m sorry. I’m not angry at you, only with my idiotic bondmate.” She lowered her voice so only the human and Liara could hear her and slowly took another step. “Can we come closer, child? Only us, just so we can take some of the weight for you.” She edged closer when the human didn’t answer and gestured for Liara to follow. They slowly closed the distance under the watchful eyes of Aethyta and the commandos, stopping whenever the woman tensed up to let her adjust to their proximity.

Eventually, they were on either side of her and Benezia brushed her bloody cheek with her fingers. The woman shuddered and jerked back, eyes panicky and jaw bunching as it flexed, but allowed Benezia’s next touch to her jaw although she shuddered continuously. “You’re safe here, child. You are safe, you will come to no more harm here. This I swear.”

Liara watched Benezia as her mother soothingly pressed her palm against the woman’s cheek and rubbed her thumb across a clean patch of skin. Her pale eyes flicked across bloody features and she smiled a little, relieved as mismatched eyes finally lost their panicked edge but remained guarded.

“There you are.” She cupped the woman’s face in both her hands and her eyes swirled with darkness as she murmured, “May I meld with you?” The woman nodded and her shoulders slumped as Benezia initiated the meld. Quietly, she requested, “Little Wing, come here and take
her weight, please.”

Liara slipped her arm around the human’s waist just as she slumped and her head lolled against her shoulder. “What did you do?”

“I only suggested she go to sleep, Little Wing. She’s fine, besides her injuries.” Benezia gestured for a commando to help Liara with the woman’s dead weight, her hands stained with her blood, and turned to Aethyta with a cold eye. “Get the commandos back to the barracks, then find Doctor T’Perro. Tell her to head to the guest suites.”

She ignored her bondmate’s stuttered affirmations as she helped Liara get a better grip on the human and they maneuvered her into the main house. As they slowly walked up the stairs to the second floor, Benezia caught her daughter’s confused and worried gaze. “Are you alright, Little Wing? She didn’t hurt you too badly, did she?”

Liara offered a faint smile that quickly vanished as the woman between them whimpered quietly. “No worse than I gave her.” The conversation lapsed as they carefully lowered the woman onto a bed and Benezia lifted her feet onto the covers as Liara stared at the human pensively.

“Mother,” she began cautiously, “why did you ask me to bring her here?”

Benezia unlaced worn boots and set them at the foot of the bed. She glanced up at Liara as she pulled socks off and moved to the other side of the bed. “She needs help.”

“Others have needed help and you’ve refused them before.”

Benezia nodded as she unfastened the woman’s pants and gestured for her daughter to lift her hips so she could slide them down her legs. “Others have had alternative options. This human…” She gestured at the scars that crisscrossed her skin, the skinned knees and sluggishly bleeding wounds inflicted by their commandos. “She has had no choices, I think.”

Liara ghosted her hand over the bullet wound on her thigh and stared at the blood that coated her palm. “Are you sure she isn’t a fugitive running from some justice? She certainly is dangerous enough.”

Benezia pursed her lips as she plucked at the woman’s compression shirt. She cautiously lifted the hem to display more scars and wounds, old and new, and sighed. “There are scissors in the drawer over there. May I have them?”

As Liara got them, Benezia studied the human’s face; her drawn, wan features, the minute twitches of her eyes beneath closed lids, the scars dotted across her cheeks and forehead. She cut away the filthy shirt and Liara wordlessly lifted the woman so she could pull the material away from her skin. It came away reluctantly, taking bits of ragged skin and leaving flakes of dried blood behind.

“I melded with her,” she admitted quietly. She met Liara’s eyes squarely and tightened her jaw. “I melded with her and saw…horrible things. Only glimpses, but enough to convince me that she isn’t a criminal, or that if she is, she is much better off here than wherever she came from.”

Before Liara could speak again, the door opened and another asari appeared with a medical bag in hand. Her professional countenance faltered as she saw the battered human laying on the bed. She set the bag aside and pulled a stethoscope out of it along with some other tools. “Matriarch, I didn’t expect this when your bondmate came calling for me. What is this?”

“Will you tend to her?” Benezia ignored the question blatantly.
“Of course, Matriarch. If you could ask someone to fetch water and rags though, I would appreciate it. This is...excessive,” she said quietly.

Benezia took Liara’s arm and pulled her from the room until her daughter followed her on her own. “We will need to keep an eye on the human for a while. Until she can get around on her own, at least.”

“Of course, mother. I just...”

“I know, Little Wing.” Benezia laid her hand on Liara’s arm before they walked into the kitchen and offered a conciliatory smile. “But we have nothing to fear from her. I truly don't believe she means any harm; your father just...was a little overprotective.”

Benezia’s face darkened as she mentioned her wayward bondmate and Liara winced. “It isn’t as bad as it looks,” she said quietly.

“But you are her child, and so she’ll keep you as safe as she can. Come, we need water and rags. We have a long day ahead of us.”

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“...n, wake the hell up. Dammit, did you kill the human, Bray?”

Jack groaned as something experimentally poked her sore side and swiped lazily at it. “Go the hell away, Shepard...”

“Ooh, the human is alive.”

Jack felt unease prickle at her the back of her mind as she struggled to recall why the voice sounded familiar and jerked upright as the memory resurfaced. She winced as her aches made themselves known when she skittered away from the Batarian leaning over her. She bared her teeth in a snarl and shot to her feet, feeling a wall at her back as her eyes skimmed over the nearly empty room for an escape.

Her gaze froze on a tall asari with striking eyebrow markings and a confident smirk on her lips who was cradling a tumbler filled with some amber liquid. The asari took a sip of the drink and continued to eye Jack over the rim. “I have to admit, you’re more resilient than I gave you credit for, especially considering how scrawny you are.”

“Who the hell are you?”

Jack felt the Batarian jab her hard in the back and rounded on him with a growl, fist raised and wreathed in biotic blues. She heard the asari chuckle and wheeled so she could see them both, fists raised defensively.

The asari lazily swayed her way with the tumbler tinkling quietly as the ice sloshed about. “I think I’ll ask the questions, kid; first, who are you and how in the blue hell do you have biotics?”

Jack sneered at her and flipped her off with a biotically charged finger. The asari sighed in a put upon manner. “Okay, let’s try something else.”

Before Jack could react, she was shoved hard against the nearby wall with choking pressure pushing against her chest and throat. The asari held her hand out, biotics flicking around her fingers, and took another sip of her drink as she got in Jack’s face. “Who are you,” she repeated slowly.
Jack spit at her and watched in satisfaction as the wad of saliva slid down the asari’s startled face. She struggled against the bonds holding her in place, panic slowly building in her chest as the asari wiped away her saliva with an offered cloth from the batarian standing beside her and regarded her with fire in her eyes. “Don’t you know who I am, you scrawny little asshole?”

Jack forced an insouciant smirk onto her lips and tipped her head to the side thoughtfully. She shook her head slowly and shrugged as much as she could in the biotic restraints that corded across her body. “All I know is that you’re the asari bitch who can’t make a kid talk.” Jack watched with no small amount of confusion as the Batarian’s eyes widened dramatically and he rapidly backed away a handful of feet.

The asari, meanwhile, squarely met Jack’s eyes. Jack shivered when she saw the murderous glint in icy blue eyes and swallowed thickly. She couldn’t do anything as she was biotically thrown across the room and skidded along the floor until she was stopped by another wall. She groaned and coughed, trying vainly to regain her breath as the asari casually stalked toward her, tumbler still in hand. The Batarian trailed behind her, eying the door cautiously as the asari crouched in front of Jack and slowly swirled her glass in her hand. “Care to run that by me again, kid?”

Jack slowly pushed herself onto all fours, warily watching the asari’s idle hand. “No…I think I’m good.”

“Good.” She patted the top of Jack’s head condescendingly as she stood and looked at the door. “I suppose the eavesdropping shithead can come in now,” she said, speaking louder toward the end. Jack’s head twisted toward the door as it slid open and another asari slid in with a sheepish grin on her face.

“Spawn.” Aria jerked her head toward Jack as she took a sip of her drink. “Tend to the human, put her in the lower wing, get her some clothes and food; she looks ready to fall over and smells like a varren.”

“Hey!”

Piercing blue eyes slid over to Jack as Aria smirked. “I don’t want to hear it, kid. You do, and if you don’t get clean by the time I come back around, I’ll strip you and throw you into the bath myself.”

The asari by the door piped up, “You don’t want that, trust me. The last time she did it to me, I nearly drowned.”

“Liselle.”

“It’s true! You didn’t even let me take my clothes off!!”

“Because you smelled like a sewer and looked like something a thresher maw used as a chew toy,” Aria deadpanned. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, kid, I have some business to attend to.”

Aria swept by Liselle with her tumbler in hand, followed by Bray, and Liselle slowly approached Jack with a cautious smile on her face. She helped Jack to her feet, putting her hands up with a disarming grin when the biotic snarled and violently shook her off. “Mom has a bit of a temper on her.”

“No, you don’t say.”

“Don’t get snippy with me, I’m not the one who threw you into a wall.” Liselle led Jack down a
long corridor and stood aside so she could enter a small but well furnished room.

Jack prowled around the outside of it suspiciously, avoiding the plush looking bed in favor of looking out the expansive windows that filled the back wall over the low headboard. “What the hell?”

“Oh yeah, sorry. Welcome to Afterlife!” Liselle opened her arms wide and followed Jack to the window. “These are, technically, the guest suites for visitors that are important to mom for her… uhm, business. Right now, you’re the only occupant of this wing; she thought you might be more comfortable by yourself.”

“She doesn’t strike me as the sort to care about others’ comfort,” Jack said cautiously.

Liselle cocked a crooked grin at her, vibrant green eyes shining with mirth and mischief, and said, “Oh, she didn’t say so in so many words, but I know how she works. She specifically told me to put you in the lower wing, which is the only one with no other people currently.”

“Maybe she’s just worried I’ll throw someone over the balcony,” Jack shot back as she stared out the window at the walkway over the club’s main floor.

Liselle chuckled and went over to the door on the side wall. “Not the first time that’s happened. Here, there’s a shower with some soap; no shampoo but I can get some for you. Towels are beneath the sink, toothbrush and paste in the drawer… uhm, I’ll bring some clothes by when you get out. You should fit into Claire’s things.” Liselle eyed Jack contemplatively, tipping her head to the side in thought. “Yeah, she’s got some pants, a top… how do you feel about leather?”

“What the hell is leather?”

“Oh boy.”

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“No!” Ashley jerked upright in the bed and cried out again as her just-healing wounds pulled painfully. Her eyes wheeled wildly around the shadowed room as she broke out in a cold sweat and her fingers knotted in the blanket. She felt her heart pick up speed and panicked more when she couldn’t draw a complete breath, vision darkening when oxygen became lacking. She didn’t notice the door had opened until a hand was cupping her cheek and drawing her head up. She looked into dark blue eyes without recognition, still struggling to breathe, and barely heard any sound over the roaring of her blood in her veins. She saw unpainted lips move without understanding what was being said and struggled as she was pulled firmly against a soft, giving body. The hands around her shoulders rubbed soft circles into her back to the tempo of the steady heartbeat she was just beginning to hear over the ringing in her ears. Ashley curled one arm tightly around the body as her other hand twisted tighter into the sheets and squeezed her eyes shut.

Eventually, she became aware of long fingers carding through her tangled, sweat soaked hair and kneading at her scalp soothingly. She relaxed into the warm body when the fingers switched to making light swirls at her neck and behind her ears, listening to the comforting, steady pulse under her ear. A quiet chuckle rasped out above her and she reluctantly pulled back as firm hands coaxed her up.

“Are you alright?”

Sha’ira’s concerned whisper sent chills down Ashley’s spine for reasons unknown and she fought back the urge to rub away the concerned crease between her eyes with her thumb. “I’m fine,” she
said curtly. She unwrapped her arm from around Sha’ira’s waist but couldn’t move far as the asari kept her fingers firmly in her hair, anchoring them in place. Blue eyes the color of midnight in the low light searched hers for a long moment; Ashley squirmed uncomfortably under the gaze but quieted as Sha’ira carded her fingers through her hair again.

She swallowed when Sha’ira tipped her head to the side and adjusted her legs, suddenly hyper aware of the way the asari was nearly in her lap and how their faces were close enough that she could see small markings like freckles that curled around the corners of her eyes and trailed up into her crests. “You had a nightmare,” she whispered. “You were calling out in your sleep for…your comrades?”

A fragment of the dream came back to Ashley then, of Shepard’s face as she was forced to shoot a young girl to save Jack’s life. Her memory recalled the look of abject horror and rage on her face, but asleep her mind twisted it so she was staring down the barrel and up into Shepard’s malevolently smiling visage just as she pulled the trigger. *You aren’t any better than the others,* the nightmare whispered between her ears, and Ashley squeezed her eyes shut as she clamped her jaw tightly.

She jumped when she felt Sha’ira slide fully into her lap, looking up past the robe cinched tightly shut against the chill in the room into the asari’s eyes. Her thumbs pressed lightly against Ashley’s temples, exerting gentle pressure as her eyes seemed to swirl with some darker light and coaxed her to lean into her touch. “What…”

“Let me help you. Please, I don’t wish for you to hurt any longer than you have to, and I have the tools to put your monsters to rest. Please.” Sha’ira sat lower in Ashley’s lap, knees squeezing her hips as she readjusted, and Ashley’s hands automatically fell to her thighs as she got lost in the growing shadows that eclipsed the dark blue of her irises. “Let me meld with you; we can face your demons together.”

Ashley’s eyes snapped open and she jerked her head away, simultaneously pushing Sha’ira from her lap as she scrambled away toward the wall. “Stay out of my head, asari,” she snarled, baring her teeth viciously.

Sha’ira looked up at her from the floor with wide eyes and slowly got up, keeping her hands in sight as Ashley tensed with each small movement. She kept her actions smooth and nonthreatening, staying out of arms’ reach while Ashley rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet atop the bed in preparation to strike if she made any aggressive moves. “I apologize, I didn’t-”

“Get out.”

Ashley bowed her shoulders up dangerously when Sha’ira didn’t immediately depart and leapt at her when she took a hesitant step toward her, bearing her down to the ground in a flurry of limbs and cloth. She sat atop her with her hands pinned beside her head and legs trapped uselessly beneath her weight and snarled in her face. “What do you want with me? Haven’t you tortured us enough?”

Ashley stared sightlessly down into Sha’ira’s face, fingers flexing restlessly around her wrists; Sha’ira made a small hurting sound when they tightened painfully and the delicate bones in her wrists creaked beneath the strain. Ashley came back to herself when the soft sound reached her through the fog of pain and threatening figures just outside her field of sight. She blinked and really looked at Sha’ira, still lying loose and pliant under her, and gasped as she fell backwards and skittered away. She hit the frame of the bed and the sound of it hitting the wall seemed as a gunshot in the heavy silence of the room.
Ashley curled in on herself, trembling violently, and jolted when she felt a hand on her shoulder. “Please leave me alone,” she whispered. “I won’t…please – it hurts…” She shuddered again as the hand slowly travelled from her shoulder down to her hand where her nails dug crescent marks into her skin and gently pulled it away. She chanced a glance up as Sha’ira began gently kneading her knuckles, intently studying the scars that dotted the backs of her hands.

“Where did you get these?” She asked quietly. “Can you tell me their stories?”

Ashley curled her fingers in on her palm when the asari hit a tender spot that was just beginning to bruise near the base of her thumb and Sha’ira soothed it with the barely-there brush of the pad of her finger. “I won’t demand anything of you that you aren’t comfortable with. We can just sit here and I can do this until we’re both tired, or I can keep talking until you feel like it, if you do. I could also return to my room if you want to be alone.” Sha’ira briefly met her eyes, the blue returned to her gaze as she continued to slowly massage Ashley’s hand from her wrist to her fingertips.

Ashley curled her fingers around her hand when she began to pull away and flicked her eyes between Sha’ira’s for a long minute before nodding minutely. She settled against the bedframe as Sha’ira sat cross legged before her and silently offered her hand to set hers in, tipping her head back against the edge as the soothing kneading began again.

The silence remained unbroken until Sha’ira had switched hands and lingered over a jagged scar that cut along the length of her index finger. Her fingers twitched at the faint touch but she remained still otherwise, brown eyes watching the top of Sha’ira’s crests as she studied her hand. “Shrapnel,” she offered quietly. She turned her gaze aside, staring studiously at the floor as she felt Sha’ira’s eyes burn into the side of her face. “I got too close to a training dummy during exercises one day…”

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Liara stared furtively over the edge of her holopad at the human sleeping in the bed. For the past several hours, she had noticed her gaze lingering longer and longer on the battered body lying on the sheets, curiosity warring with hesitance warring with horror the more she caught her eyes sliding over the edge of the research document she was reading to the woman’s face. Even slack in sleep, her sharp features and myriad scars made her look fearsome. Liara’s eyes lingered on the pink scar that split her eyebrow and then followed the hollow line of her cheek to the bow of her lips. Another smaller scar broke the line of her upper lip, some long-healed wound that Liara felt an inexplicable urge to run her thumb over.

She shook her head and returned her eyes to the holopad in her hands, although she realized it was useless when she reread the same sentence for the fifth time and still had no idea what it said. She set it aside with a sigh and checked her omni tool for any new messages, then stood up and walked over to the bed. She watched the woman breathe for a minute, her slightly parted lips and the rapid twitching beneath her eyelids and the tiny movements of her features as she dreamed. Giving in to temptation, she reached out and slipped her fingers into sable hair. Even greasy and caked with…whatever as it was, she could feel how thick it was, and she indulged herself as she combed through the long strands. She gently picked apart snarls, losing herself in the calming motions, until she heard the door open behind her and jerked away, wincing when she saw a few pieces of hair still in her grip. She looked over her shoulder at Lexi as she opened her bag at the foot of the bed.

“Liara, you’re still here?”

“Ah, yes…I was worried…she hasn’t woken yet.”
Lexi hummed as she stopped on the other side of the bed and pulled up a tab on her omni tool. “Well, her vitals are reading better than they were. Blood pressure is up, brain activity is... very good, she’s probably dreaming; her wounds have already clotted, but I want to change the bandages and apply some medi-gel to the less severe ones.”

“Why not the worse ones?” Liara gestured at the bullet wounds in the woman’s arm and thigh.

“I’m concerned about infection; between the length of time the bullets were lodged under her skin and the condition she was in when she arrived here, I would rather wait to make sure it was healing on its own before doing anything. If you don’t mind, could you help me? I need her rolled onto her side so I can look at her back.”

“The scars on her spine?”

“Yes, I’m... as a doctor, I’m horrified by the connotation of the placement, but as a scientist... I’m intrigued,” Lexi admitted with a wince.

Liara took the woman’s far shoulder and eased her onto her side, subconsciously running her finger over a ropy scar on her bicep as she watched Lexi pull up the thin shirt they had found and cut away the bandaging. She muttered under her breath as she worked efficiently on the wounds covering the human’s back. Liara readjusted her grip when she felt the woman stir under her hand and looked down, startled to notice her face scrunching up uncomfortably as Lexi pulled the old bandages, saturated with blood and stuck to her skin, away from the wound. “Lexi, I think she’s waking up.”

“Nonsense, the sedative I gave her should keep her out for the rest of the evening and through the night.”

Lexi straightened just as the woman’s eyes snapped open and she jackknifed out of Liara’s grasp. She fell against Lexi, heterochromatic eyes wide and swirling with too many emotions for Liara to sort through before she disappeared off the edge of the bed. Lexi stumbled back against the wall as she rolled to her feet and made a dash for the door. Liara reacted before her brain consciously made a decision as she bolted after the woman and barely managed to grab her shoulder. She ducked beneath a swinging fist and charged at her, throwing them both against the wall beside the door and struggling to keep the woman in place as she fought savagely, kicking her legs and clawing at any part of Liara she could reach. Liara’s eyes watered when her crests were yanked hard and grabbed one of the woman’s hands, pinning it beside her head as she flailed wildly for the other.

Lexi finally caught it and pressed her hand against the wall while Liara flattened herself against the woman’s front to take away any leverage she had. She braced her legs, hips pressed against the woman’s pelvis, and suddenly realized just how small she was. Liara’s eyes were level with her hairline and, although she could feel the power in her body as she flexed under Liara’s restraining weight, she found she completely covered her with her own body. She blindly curled her fingers around the woman’s wrists as she stared down into her eyes and was caught off guard when she read the panic barely hidden beneath the rage that covered her face.

“Lexi,” she said quietly, never looking away from the wide blue and brown eyes in front of her, “could you leave us? We’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure? You don’t want your father?”

“It’s alright; just leave your bag here so I can tend to her wounds. If you run into someone in the hallway, would you ask them to bring us some fruit?”
Liara, are...as you wish.”

Liara listened to Lexi’s quiet footfalls, the near-silent snick as the door shut behind her, and then only their quiet breaths filled the heavy silence. Liara watched the human’s eyes dart between hers with barely restrained panic as she futilely tried to free herself from the manacle of Liara’s hands and a restrained whine filled the space between them as she pulled on her wounds. Liara relaxed and pulled away a little, loosening her grip around the woman’s wrists as she did.

“I’m going to release you. Please don’t try to leave again; you aren’t well enough.”

Mismatched eyes searched hers and then she nodded tersely; Liara immediately released her wrists and stepped back several paces. She watched the woman as she slunk along the wall away from Liara and also, thankfully, away from the door. She followed the woman’s progress with her eyes as she edged toward the bed, sneaking furtive glances at Liara from behind the tangled curtain of hair that partially hid her face, and cautiously sat on the lip of the mattress.

Liara leaned back, careful to keep her posture loose and nonthreatening, and pressed her palms into the wall. They stared silently at each other, both startled when a hesitant knock interrupted the silence and a quiet voice said the tray was there. When the faint footsteps faded away, Liara asked, “May I get the tray? I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry.”

As if on cue, the woman’s stomach grumbled loudly and she flushed faintly and nodded. Liara brought the tray in and set it on the tabletop, gesturing at the array of fruits. “Help yourself to anything.”

The woman eyed her, then the tray, and then her eyes fell back on Liara as she got up and sidled over to the table and picked up a piece of fruit. She rolled it around in her hands, lifted it up to smell it and, apparently put off by the sweet scent, set it back on the tray and picked up another. She repeated it with the other fruit and then looked over her shoulder at Liara with a confused and somewhat offended expression on her face.

Liara chewed on the inside of her cheek to avoid smiling as she took a couple steps toward her. “Don’t you want them? They taste good, I promise.”

“They smell odd.”

Liara was enraptured by the low timbre of her voice, the slight rasp and crisp pronunciation of each word. Her lips crooked in a lopsided smile as she picked up a fruit and palmed it. “Some of them do, yes, but they taste delicious.” She picked up a small knife from the tray and started peeling the fruit, noticing belatedly how still the woman had gone. She pretended not to notice as she cored the fruit and sliced it neatly, then offered a piece as she popped one into her mouth and hummed happily.

The woman took the offered food, careful to avoid touching her fingertips, and studied the slice for a long moment before putting it in her mouth. Liara watched her eyes light up and she barely seemed to chew before swallowing and reaching for another piece. She froze as she realized that she had closed the distance to Liara and withdrew her hand as she glanced up at her, suddenly wary again. Liara silently offered another piece and set the remaining fruit within easy reach of the human as she picked up another fruit and bit into the skin. She watched the woman surreptitiously eye her before bolting down the remaining pieces of fruit and eagerly reach for more. She subtly edged the tray toward her as she picked up the pitcher and poured them both water from it, watching in fascination as the woman drank deeply and she refilled her glass.

Liara waited until she was munching on more fruit – after carefully watching Liara to see if she was eating it correctly – and walked to the bed to pick up Lexi’s discarded bandages and salve. “I
She showed the supplies to the woman and waited for her nod of assent to sit in the chair at the table. The human stiffened but allowed Liara to lift her shirt to tend to the wounds on her back. Liara watched the subtle play of muscle under her skin as she shifted and she bent to her task. “This will sting; I apologize, but it will clean out any infection that may have set in,” she murmured as she scooped out a finger of the salve and dabbed it on the many small wounds that dotted the human’s back and sides. She was surprised and saddened when the woman didn’t react to what she knew was an itching pain beyond a silent shiver, quickly applying the salve and then quietly asking her to turn around so she could tend to her stomach.

Her mouth opened in awe as the shifting musculature of her abdomen appeared when she lifted her shirt and she stared blankly at the sculpted dips and planes of her stomach. “I want…uhm, I will wrap the bandages when I’m done here, then I want to look at your thigh.” She cursed inwardly when she realized the human would have to remove the loose pants they had put her in and sighed outwardly.

As she slicked the salve over her stomach, she felt the muscles under her fingertips flutter and tensed and chanced a glance up into inscrutable eyes. Liara opened her mouth as she considered how best to set her at ease. “My name is Liara.” She felt her gaze burning into the top of her head but focused on wrapping the bandage around her waist. “I work as an archeologist, searching for Prothean ruins on various worlds. I usually work alone, or with only a small crew on particularly unsettled worlds, and have done so for most of my adult life.” She continued talking about her work as she tied off the end of the bandages just beneath the shadowed curve of the woman’s breasts.

Liara cleared her throat as she looked up past the bunched up material of her shirt into mismatched eyes. “I need to look at the wound in your thigh, as well.” The woman unselfconsciously dropped her pants and perched herself on the lip of the table, letting her shirt fall to cover her new bandages as Liara’s gaze travelled across the smooth, sloping muscle of her thigh. She focused on the irritated, weeping wound, pursing her lips as clear fluid slowly leaked from it and ran down her skin. “It’s infected,” she murmured. “I can flush it with the salve, and in the morning I will pack it with herbs.”

She dabbed her finger into the salve and pressed it against inflamed skin, surprised when the woman jerked back and nearly fell off the other side of the table. She pressed her hand against her hip to hold her still and cupped her fingers around her thigh as she smeared the salve into and around the wound with her thumb. “I know it hurts, but it will help.” She heard the woman inhale shakily and watched her white knuckle grip on the lip of the table as she blindly grabbed for the roll of bandages.

Liara gently pulled her pants up after binding the wound and the woman silently offered her shoulder to be tended to, clenching her jaw at the now-familiar sting of antiseptic and the salve. Liara worked efficiently, occasionally breaking the silence to distract her while she worked. She threw the old bandages away as the woman picked at the final fruit on the tray and turned to find herself being studied from beneath sooty lashes. She paused midstep as the woman popped the fruit into her mouth and slowly approached her with predatory grace.

Liara felt a chill jump across her shoulders when the woman slowly circled her and stared at her with cold eyes. “What do you want,” she asked bluntly.

“What do you mean?”

The woman gestured at the dressings and clothes broadly, then the room at large. “You’ve brought me here, patched me up. You didn’t warp me out of the vehicle when we landed here, or
have someone ready to pick me up.” She took a step closer, all aggressive anger, until they were standing toe to toe. “What do you want from me?”

Liara’s mouth worked soundlessly for a long moment, her eyes arrested by the bright blue that radiated out from her irises. The woman scoffed and turned away, striding with long steps toward the door. “Thank you for not letting me die, but I think I’ll be leaving now.”

Liara’s chest filled with panic as she walked away and she reached out toward her. “Wait!” The woman paused with her hand on the knob, shoulders stiff beneath the fabric of her shirt and head tilted ever so slightly to the side as she listened. “Your name.”

“What?”

“What I want…is your name. Just that.”

Liara held her breath and watched the woman’s fingers flex around the doorknob. The shirt pulled taut across her shoulders as she breathed, then she stepped back and her posture slumped in exhaustion. The woman turned her head toward Liara, eyes still hidden behind the tangled heap of hair that clouded around her head.

“My name.”

“Yes.” Liara felt like she was treading on something very volatile, a spark that, if she trod too heavily, she might ignite mistakenly and not be able to control. “What are you called?”

A sharp bark of laughter, bitter and edging toward hysterical, startled her. “I’m called many things, Liara.” Liara flinched as her name was spoken like it was something barbed to be used as a projectile. “Most of which aren’t fit for everyday conversation. Very little of my life is fit for conversation,” she muttered to herself. Liara barely caught the end of her sentence and had no time to process it before the woman was rushing on.

“Would you prefer the castrated version? That is much shorter than the other.” Liara’s hands trembled at her sides and she balled them into the hem of her top to hide the tremors. She watched the woman’s mouth wobble as her body tensed and seemed to shrink in on itself somehow. “No, I don’t think you want to hear those. You want my name, you ask for it like it’s something to be given freely, on a whim.”

Liara’s heart sped up as the woman’s voice slowly rose and she turned to face her fully. Her eyes, no longer hidden behind her hair, were lit from within with some emotion Liara was wary to put a name to; they seemed iridescent and shimmered with a dozen different colors in an instant that lasted until the edges of her vision hazed grey. She drew in a ragged breath and backpedaled when the woman slowly stalked toward her, posture once again feline and dangerously fluid. Silent steps mirrored her increasingly panicked retreat across the room as heterochromatic eyes zeroed in on her face.

“You’re scared?”

The woman abruptly closed the distance between them and pinned Liara against the window at the other side of the room. She leaned in close enough that Liara could feel her breath wash across her throat and the heat from her body was shared between them. She couldn’t focus on anything but the feral grin aimed up at her and the detached gaze that bored through her.

“You should be.”

Blue wreathed her hands and framed Liara’s wrists in an eerily accurate reversal of their earlier position. “Because I’m much more terrifying than anything your nightmares ever dared dreaming
of becoming.” She retreated suddenly, leaving Liara feeling cold and shaky; the impression of her biotically charged hands still at her wrists and the warm wash of her breath on her skin. She walked toward the door and, on the way, picked up Lexi’s medical bag and the duvet from the bed.

“My name, for what it’s worth,” she said caustically, “is Shepard. It’s all I’ve ever known.”
Interlude - The Psychotic Biotic

Chapter Notes

I'm super duper sorry about the delay, guys. I had no time to write, and then I simply couldn't, and then my gods be damned laptop decided to have a stroke and the fan quit working so THAT WAS A THING. Nonetheless, I prevailed! Slightly shorter chapter, but bear with me as we get rolling along again!

Read on!

Jack trailed Liselle through the lower levels of Afterlife, turning her head and feigning interest in whatever was nearby whenever the young asari looked over her shoulder. She goggled at the empty room, the chairs atop tables and the long bar along the wall, the massive empty space at the far end of the room that was ringed with stages and the catwalks which ringed the entire floor.

“What is this?”

“This,” Liselle said grandly, gesturing at the room, “Is Afterlife. The center of Omega, the place where all the action takes place!” She grabbed Jack by the arm and dragged her toward the center of the room.

“Up there,” she said, pointing to the balcony overlooking the entire club, “is my mother’s seat of power. Don’t let her tell you any tales, though, it’s just a couch. A rather nice couch, with leather that’s great for cleaning up – er, messes.” Liselle cleared her throat awkwardly and looked away, neck flushing delicate indigo. “Anyway! Bar’s over there, stages are for the shows, downstairs are more rooms for entertainment. You’ve seen the upper levels for guests…aaand, I think that’s all!”

Liselle nearly bounced over to the bar and draped herself over the top, fishing for something beneath the counter. She came up with a victorious shout and a bottle of blue liquid, two glasses in hand. “Hey, you like alcohol?” Jack stared blankly at her, approaching slowly as Liselle gasped dramatically and poured a healthy amount of the liquid into one glass and a splash into the other, offering it to her.

Jack took the glass and stared at it balefully, sniffing and wrinkling her nose. She held the glass at arm’s length as Liselle took a long sip and sighed happily. “Oh, come on! Give it a try!”

“It smells like ass.”

“But it’s so good!”

Liselle pushed the glass back to Jack and they entered an odd, backwards sort of tug-of-war, pushing the glass toward each other until a throat cleared next to them. Jack leapt backwards and Liselle barely managed to catch the glass before it shattered on the floor, glaring up at her. “That’s expensive!”

“Really, love? Giving alcohol to minors? What would your mother say?”

“Probably that I was being soft, giving the kid something that wasn’t deadly to humans,” Liselle
She smiled over at the woman who spoke with a rich Irish accent, blatantly eyeing her up and down as she swayed over with a lopsided smirk on her red painted lips. Long, black hair shone beneath Afterlife’s lights, bringing to the fore her pale, aristocratic features and grey-green eyes that danced mirthfully even while she took the glass out of Liselle’s limp grip and knocked it back professionally. “Really? So instead, you thought that cheap, Asari liquor would be alright?”

“Eh, better than getting the ryncol out.”

The woman laughed and extended a hand to Liselle, pulling her to her feet and showing off lean, defined musculature in her arms as she yanked her into her arms for a thorough kiss. Jack curled her lip and made a disgusted sound, averting her eyes when Liselle made a surprised sound and cupped her fingers around the woman’s ass possessively.

“Wow, hello to you, too!” Liselle panted when they separated. Jack scuffed her toe over the tiles and grey-green eyes met hers.

“Now that we’ve gotten that out of the way, care to introduce me to the urchin?”

“Ah, sure. Jack, meet Claire. Love of my life, father of my child, best dancer in Afterlife! Claire, Jack; stowaway, scrappy, mouthy, and now proclaimed urchin.”

Arm wrapped around Liselle’s waist, Claire faced Jack fully and regarded her coolly for long moments. A wide, toothy grin broke across her features, crinkling at the corners of her eyes and wrinkling her nose as she extended her hand. “A pleasure.”

“Sure.” Jack glanced away, fingers tapping an anxious rhythm on her leg as an awkward silence fell over the trio.

Claire roused herself after a moment and squeezed Liselle’s hip. “Your daughter won’t stop crying for you, darling.”

“Why is she mine when she whines, but yours the moment she does something amazing?” Claire lifted an expressive eyebrow and Liselle colored. “Oh.”

“Yes. So, go tend to your child; I’ll take our guest back to her room?”

“Sure, sweets. The lower wing, ‘kay?”

“Really?”

“Yup. Mom decided it would be…best for everyone.” Liselle glanced at Jack as she sniffed the bottle of liquor and wrinkled her nose again. “Get the kid a bath, too. She still looks like something one of those wild varren drag through Omega occasionally.”

Jack’s head snapped up, a scowl fixed firmly on her face as she dragged a hand through her tangled hair. “You try keeping this clean, tentacle head.”

Liselle snorted and Claire bit her lip. “I may not have hair, but I do know that humans tend to braid theirs when it gets that long.”

Jack’s expression cleared suddenly and she looked away, stuffing her hands into the pockets of the large jacket she was wearing. “Don’t know how to,” she muttered, surly and despondent.

Claire and Liselle shared a look, and then Claire brushed her palm over Jack’s shoulder to get her
attention. “Let’s go upstairs, yeah? I’ll run you a bath, and I can braid your hair after?” Jack narrowed her eyes suspiciously, eventually nodding and walking silently past Claire, careful to avoid touching her on her way to the upper levels.

Claire ducked the bar of soap thrown her way, baring her teeth in exasperation. “Dammit, you little shit, I’m just trying to – stop throwing stuff at me!” She batted aside the towel and the hand mirror thrown together and ducked into the bathroom, skidding on the puddles of bath water that covered the stone floor. She slammed into the wall and cursed, grunting as a wave of biotics pushed her harder into the tile, and snapped her fingers to turn the showerhead on Jack. She yelped and Claire took the opportunity to dart to the edge of the recessed tub and grab Jack’s arms. “Will you calm down, you silly cow! I’m just trying to wash your sodding hair!”

“If you’d quit yanking it, I would – go the hell away!” Jack thrashed wildly, splashing water everywhere, and low grunting and cursing filled the room for a few minutes.

An eerie quiet, disturbed only by the faint slosh of water and heavy breathing, reigned soon after as the occupants of the bathroom caught their breath. Claire was half submerged in the tub, her shirt soaked and hanging off her and her legs still on the floor and mostly dry, one arm wrapped around Jack’s midsection and the other planted on the lip of the tub to keep herself from falling in completely. “Will you calm down, please?”

Jack quivered, her hands clenching around Claire’s wrist but not pulling any longer. Claire sighed and let her temple land on Jack’s bony shoulder, smelling the soap she had been washing herself with before she chucked it at her head. “I’ll try harder not to pull your hair, but you have to relax. It’s going to take some time because it’s so tangled and knotted with…stuff.” She felt Jack gradually relax in her arms and sat back, reaching out to turn the hot tap on and let the tub fill again.

As the water rose, Jack sunk back into it and submerged herself for a moment before coming up for air and pushing the tangled nest of dark hair out of her face. She looked over her shoulder, anxiety quickly hidden by distrust and aggressiveness. “I’ll warp you through the wall if you pull it again,” she growled, baring her teeth.

Claire hummed and reached for the shampoo, pouring some into her hand and sinking her fingers into Jack’s dirty, knotted hair. She worked the shampoo into a lather and gently worked out the easiest snarls, pushing on Jack’s shoulder to get her to dunk her head again and rinse out the bubbles, then poured a liberal amount of conditioner on top of her head and spent long minutes working it into her hair, and longer still easing the tangles apart as Jack’s shoulder slowly lost their hard edge. She felt the sloped ridge of scars under her fingertips but made a point of not lingering over them, choosing instead to gently massage her scalp and drag her nails lightly over her skin.

She took an empty cup and dipped it into the cooling water, pouring it over Jack’s head with her hand on her forehead to divert the conditioner from her eyes and mouth. She ran her fingers through the thick silky strands afterward, checking for missed snarls, and tapped Jack on the shoulder again. “You’re good to go, darling.”

“Don’t – I’m no one’s darling.” Jack yanked the offered towel out of Claire’s hands and stood up in the tub, roughly drying herself and muttering beneath her breath.

Claire stared at the ropy scars that dotted her back like miniature galaxies, the subtle play of muscle beneath her skin and the too-thin jut of her shoulder blades and ribs. “I’ll bring another change of clothes.” She spent long minutes in the adjoining bedroom, sorting through the duffle bag of clothing and letting her mind turn over the obvious signs of malnourishment and abuse.
She set a pair of worn, comfortable jeans and a soft button down on the sink by the tub, offering a new set of underwear and a bra to Jack when she stood, dripping on the tiles. Jack slid the underwear up her legs and pulled the jeans on, holding them up with one hand when they threatened to slide off her hips.

“I think I have a belt in here – just a moment.” Claire brought the duffel bag into the bathroom and sifted through it, holding a belt up for Jack as she set another, smaller bag on the counter.

Jack pulled the button down over her shoulders, letting it drape open and bare the curve of her small breasts and flat stomach as she idly twirled a strand of long, dark brown hair around her finger. “What’s that?”

“Scissors and some razors.”

“Why?”

“Your hair is still pretty ragged looking. It looks like someone took scissors to it at some point and just hacked some off the end.” There was a thick silence following Claire’s words and she looked over her shoulder, scissors in hand, to find Jack staring at the hair in her grip with a frown.

“Jack?”

“Don’t bother.”

“Wh-”

“Get out, I want to be alone.” Claire opened her mouth and Jack’s eyes cut up to her, glaring through her lashes and the sweep of hair that fell across one eye when she suddenly straightened. “Are you deaf and dumb? I said to get out.”

Claire ignored the icy tone as she nodded and set the scissors on the counter. “I’ll have someone send some food up in a couple hours. If you need anything, just use the phone, it connects to the bar.” She walked to the door, Jack close on her heels, and turned in time to see her slam it heavily and the sound echoed hollowly down the hall, seeming to follow Claire back downstairs.

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Jack counted to five hundred, ear pressed to the door, and then sighed and stepped back from it. She looked around the spartan room, lingering on the bed and items thrown near the bathroom door where she had chucked them at Claire. She began tidying up, hearing Shepard’s voice in her head chiding her fondly for leaving a mess, and almost expected to see her barely smiling when she turned. The lump in her throat thickened when she was faced with nothing but empty walls and clean floors, so she stalked back to the door and yanked it open to stride into the hallway.

Buttoning up the shirt as she strode silently down the corridor, she poked her head into doorways and eventually found herself back on the ground level. Patrons were streaming thinly into the large room, sidling up to the bar and gesturing at the impressive display of alcohol behind the counter while others sat at tables and pulled cards and tablets from their pockets. Waiters stood on the fringe of the room, mostly asari with a few humans and even a couple turians mixed in, and others dressed in scraps of fabric were standing on stages dotted around the barroom stretching and chatting up those who were standing beneath them with lecherous grins.

Jack felt a ripple of discomfort slip down her spine and forced herself to walk to the bar. The asari behind the counter eyed her dubiously but lifted her brow in question and Jack waved her hand at a display of liquor.

“Surprise me.”
Lip quirked mischievously, the asari brought back a shot of amber liquid and Jack sniffed it warily before throwing it back. Her eyes watered fiercely as it burned its way down her throat but she victoriously slammed the glass onto the countertop and the asari poured her another before walking away. Jack lifted the glass and stared through the liquor at her amber reflection in the mirror behind the bar. She sipped the alcohol, ears adjusting to the growing noise as more patrons filled the bar. By the time she finished her second drink, her stomach was buzzing warmly and everything seemed soft at the edges of her vision. She tried to summon up her usual awareness but found it easier to stare at the scarred bar top, finger tracing the whorls in the metal and listening to the loud buzz of voices in her periphery.

Someone touched her elbow and she jumped, jerking her head sideways and nearly falling out of her chair until she was propped back up. She looked over and saw a tall, stocky man planting himself in the chair next to hers, his hand still on her elbow as he flagged down the bartender. She slid a large mug in front of him, flashed a look at Jack that she couldn’t decipher, and then disappeared again.

“You looked like you could use some company, gorgeous.” Jack blinked as he took a long drink from the mug and his hand slid down her forearm. He set the drink on the bar and turned to her. She vaguely noted his five o’clock shadow and grey eyes, the frayed edges of his shirt and the unconscious tic near his jaw as his eyes roved over her. “You’re a beauty, aren’t you?”

“Excuse me?”

“A shame you look like you just came off the boat, but I could work with it,” he said with a grin. His hand slid off her arm and landed heavily on her thigh, squeezing hard.

A hard ball of something disquieting slid into place behind Jack’s ribs and she shifted, feeling her balance go as she tried to get up. “I think I need to go,” she said shakily.

“No, no, stay, have another drink. We can sit and chat.” He pulled her back onto her seat and pushed her half finished glass at her, smile suddenly less charming and more predatory. “I plan on doing a lot more than chatting later tonight; I should probably know your name though, sweet cheeks.”

“Let go of me.”

“Don’t be like that, c’mon. Hey, how about this? We skip talking and go to my room now? I’ve got a place on the Strip, nice and private. We could have some fun, maybe you could indulge a couple friends of mine, too…”

He slid his palm up her thigh, fingers inching between her thighs, and Jack shuffled back as she started to panic. She nearly fell off her chair but her back hit someone else and a hand on her shoulder steadied her. Jack twisted her neck and saw a newly-familiar jawline that could cut glass, miles of neck on display as Claire glared at the man over her head. “I believe we have somewhere else to be, don’t we?” She turned an eye down to Jack, her gaze softer but still filled with steel, and Jack sunk back into her, letting her take her slight weight.

Behind Claire, the bartender stood with her arms crossed, biotic blues winding around her hands subtly as she stared at the man. He lost his easy grin, fingers clenching around Jack’s thighs before he reluctantly removed his hand. “I’m just here for a drink and a good time, ladies.”

“Find a lay somewhere else,” Claire said darkly.

“Why don’t you let her speak for herself, eh? Girl hasn’t said anything yet, maybe she wants to
come with me. How do you know she doesn’t want my cock, eh? You could be ruining her night,” he insisted.

When he looked at her again, Jack shrunk back into Claire’s warmth and bared her teeth. “Touch me again and I’ll rip your cock off and shove it up your ass.”

Claire laughed lowly and squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. “You heard the girl; go fuck yourself.” The man opened his mouth to argue some more and found himself lifted unceremoniously from his seat by a massive, scarred krogan bodyguard who carried him effortlessly by his shirt to the exit of Afterlife. No one batted an eye as he started yelling and cursing, but the three women stared until he had disappeared through the doors and the krogan had planted himself by them again.

The asari brushed her hand over Jack’s temple when she walked by, vaulting easily over the bar and pulling the glasses off the bar top with an efficient motion. She winked at Jack and nodded at Claire, walking away and leaving them by themselves amongst the growing crowd. Jack’s jaw clenched and she shrugged off Claire’s hand, standing and locking her legs until her balance came back. She could practically feel Claire following her back upstairs but didn’t turn around until she was back in her room. She went and sat on the ground beneath the long windows, folding her long legs up against her chest and wrapping her arms around her knees as she watched Claire lock the door and stand near it.

“Are you alright?”

The question put Jack further off balance and she felt traitorous tears spring to her eyes. Claire made a motion like she was going to approach her and Jack stumbled to her feet and into the bathroom, slamming the door in Claire’s face and throwing the lock before she could barge in.

“Jack? Jack! What are you doing?”

Jack ignored the pounding on the door and started throwing things, clothes and bottles of shower supplies all scattered across the floor. She stared at her reflection with tears still stubbornly in her eyes and fingered the long hair covering her shoulders.

“Beauty…”

Her lip curled as her hand landed on the scissors still out from earlier. She opened and closed them experimentally, the metal-on-metal sound of the shears coming together deafening. A small chunk of hair fell into the sink when she closed them again and she felt her rage rise.

“Gorgeous.”

Another, larger piece landed in the basin. Faintly, she heard cursing and pounding, but it was overrode by the buzzing in her ears, the faint echoes of the man’s comments about her making her feel nauseous.

“I am not his sweet cheeks.”

His voice was replaced by the myriad guards at the Facility who, over the years, had made subtle and overt passes at her. Offers to put her smart mouth to better use, promises about showers, every leer and cupped palm and stolen touch flickered behind her eyes. The scissors snipped rhythmically, locks of hair littering the basin as shudders rolled down her spine. She jumped when the door behind her splintered and wheeled with the scissors held up threateningly, eyes wild and teeth bared.

“Hey, hey, it’s alright, Jack. It’s only me.” Claire stood nervously in the doorway, the remains of
the door scattered around her as she held her hands up nonthreateningly. “It’s alright; I’m not going to hurt you. can I – can I come closer? I just – you cut yourself.”

Jack noticed the warm slide of blood down the side of her face, tasted copper as it slipped into the corner of her mouth. She swallowed, eyes following Claire as she took a couple slow steps closer, her piercing gaze darting over her face.

“Can I take the scissors?” Jack stiffened and growled. Claire froze and they stared at each other for long moments. Jack eventually let her grip loosen and the scissors fell out of her limp hands, clattering on the floor noisily. “Okay, that’s good. Very good. There’s a first aid kit beneath the sink. Can I get it for you?”

Jack’s jaw clenched but she stepped back and watched Claire pull a small box out. She pulled antiseptic and a box of band aids out, then stepped closer to Jack and held them up. “May I?” Jack twisted her head slightly, baring the shallow cut from the scissors, and watched Claire from the corner of her eye as she dampened a cloth and dabbed at it, then covered it with the gel and band aid.

“Good as new,” Claire said quietly. They stood silently in the bathroom, Claire’s gaze skirting over Jack’s face while jack stared at her feet.

“Your hair…”

Jack flinched back when Claire grazed her cheek, barely daring to breathe as her fingers carded through the hacked lengths of hair. “I don’t…why did you do this?” Jack ducked her head and stared at the cut strands of hair in the basin, feeling her stomach sink at the sight.

“It’s alright, darling – I’m sorry, Jack.” The soft apology made Jack lift her head slightly. Claire was biting her lip, fingers still drifting through her hair. “I can even this out, if you want. I think I know a haircut that will look rather nice on you.”

“I’m not beautiful.”

“You are…perfect the way you are, scars, lopsided hair, and all.” That coaxed a nearly invisible smile from Jack that Claire caught. “There, I knew there was a smile in there.” She gently took her hand and squeezed it. “What do you say I work on your hair, then we go show it off to Liselle and get some dinner?”

Jack nodded and let Claire lead her out of the bathroom to a chair at the table by the door. Claire launched into a quiet story about Liselle and their daughter, distracting Jack from the snip of scissors and the hair still falling off her shoulders.
Liara wandered down the hall of her parents’ estate, thinking about possibly going back to see Lexi in regards to the human’s injuries, when she heard raised voices and dull thuds downstairs. She found several commandos huddled close together, occasionally throwing wary glances over their shoulders toward one of the little-used sitting rooms that the lower level of the house was dotted with.

“Did the human come this way?”

One of the commandos stepped forward and nodded. “She’s in there.” She gestured at a closed door and glanced aside at Liara. “We tried to stop her from going in, but she threatened to warp us through the wall if we bothered her, then slammed the door shut. Arissa tried to stop her and ended up thrown against the wall.” The commando she spoke of rubbed the back of her head sheepishly and winced when she probed tender skin.

Liara strained to hear anything through the walls as she stopped before the door, closed and unwelcoming – and in her own home, no less. She knocked and waited for a reply, then knocked again more forcefully.

“Go away,” she heard muttered on the other side.

She knocked once more, her knuckles rapping sharply on the wood and heard something break in the other room. “Let me in, Shepard.” She stumbled over the name and flinched when something smashed against the door, sending vibrations through her palm splayed on the surface. The commandos crowded in around her with the blue flare of their biotics wreathing their hands. She felt her power itch at the nape of her neck instinctively, alert to the danger on the other side of the door, and flexed her fingers. “Please,” she said louder. “I don’t mean any harm, I just want-”

“I don’t care!” She heard Shepard’s raspy voice call out on the other side of the door, followed by something heavy being pushed over. The floor vibrated under her feet as it landed and she sighed. “Leave me alone! I didn’t ask you to bring me here; I could have helped myself! I only wanted you to get me away-”

Her voice broke off abruptly. An eerie silence filled the spaces between them, broken by the stuttered breathing of the commandos at her back and the whispering snap of their biotics wrapping around their hands. Liara wrapped her fingers around the doorknob and twisted it, surprised when it gave way. She felt restraining hands on her arm and shrugged them off, passing a look over her shoulder.

“I don’t think you should go in there,” a commando said.

Liara pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. “I will be fine. You may return to your duties.”

When the commando opened her mouth to protest, Liara fixed her with a look. “I can defend myself against a wounded human, even one with biotics. You may go.” Properly chastised, the
commando bowed perfunctorily and her comrades fell into step beside her as they retreated.

Liara listened to their steps fade away and counted her breaths until she felt calm enough to twist the handle again and slide inside the door. The shattered remains of a vase, flowers and water scattered across the floor, crunched underfoot. The sitting room looked like a natural disaster had upended every piece of furniture; sofa shredded and pushed out of place, the end tables and their delicate legs laying like broken soldiers on the floor, and any fixtures on the walls torn down and irreparably twisted. Leaning against the far wall, Shepard eyed Liara darkly and pushed a wad of bandaging against her shoulder.

“You’ve torn open your stitches.” Shepard didn’t reply, her expression wiping itself clean as she stepped around the chaotic mess on the floor. “I can-”

“I don’t want your help,” she insisted vehemently. She pressed the bandages tighter against her shoulder and growled lowly, biotic blue wreathing her free hand. Liara itched to bite out a retort but stifled the urge behind a deep breath and took a handful of slow steps until Shepard snarled in warning.

“Stay back.”

Shepard clenched her fist and blood seeped onto the floor.

Liara watched it land, starkly red against the pale stone floor, and drip steadily. She flexed her jaw, chanced another step, and ducked rapidly as blue flared brightly at her head. When she stood up again, Shepard was eyeing her alertly, body turned partially away to minimize the target she made. Liara noticed the rapidly growing dark spot on her shirt and watched blood slip down her arm to join the drops already there. “You’re only hurting yourself,” Liara said quietly. She held her hands up disarmingly. “I only want to help you.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Liara blinked at the frank admission, taken aback by the blunt words and the scathing expression on Shepard’s face. Her eyes widened when she heard steps approaching the room and she had barely twisted on her heel when Benezia appeared in the doorway. Dark blue eyes took in the destruction and systemically ignored it as she stepped elegantly over the broken vase and shut the door behind herself.

“Little Wing, I heard quite a bit of noise.” Her eyes conveyed her worry but her face was arranged in a careful caricature of calm disaffection. She looked over Liara’s shoulder at Shepard and her brow creased. “You’re bleeding.”

She walked across the room as Liara gaped and made incoherent sounds in her throat, paralyzed as her mother brushed her hand when she strode by. Shepard flattened herself against the wall, biotics flashing at her hands but apparently unwilling to unleash them. Benezia stopped a couple steps past Liara, subtly putting herself between her daughter and Shepard.

“What happened?” Shepard didn’t answer, jaw clenched tight and hands visibly trembling from where Liara stood. Benezia made a worried sound as more blood dripped onto the floor. “I’m not angry, Little Lion; I only want to hear what caused this...outburst.”

Shepard eyed her from beneath the curtain of her hair and the sharp tinge of her biotics stopped snapping at the fringe of Liara’s mind. “I…I don’t...you...”

She blinked and suddenly the angry, destructive soldier disappeared, replaced by an incredibly uncertain young woman; Liara realized just how young she actually was when all of the hard
angles and unrelenting rage gave way. Her heterochromatic eyes blinked several times and her biotics faltered; the slow tremble of her hands spread up to her shoulders and down to her knees. She slid a few inches down the wall and left behind a bloody smear that immediately called both asari to her.

Benezia knelt in front of her while Liara hovered worriedly behind her and dug through the ransacked medical bag that was abandoned nearby. “You’ve reopened your stitches,” Benezia said quietly, one hand on Shepard’s wounded shoulder and the other cradling a hand. “What did you do this for, child?”

Shepard blinked up at her with wide eyes that were just a little hazy and lazily flexed her fingers, straining the bruised skin and reopening the congealed cuts and scrapes on her knuckles. “I don’t…”

“Take your time, Little Lion.” Benezia reached blindly for the bag Liara offered to her and took out a roll of bandages and some salve. “I’m going to wrap this, okay?”

Shepard nodded and watched with detachment as Benezia efficiently smoothed the ointment across her wounds and wrapped her hands, then rewrapped her shoulder. “You’re really good at that.”

“I’ve had a lot of practice,” Benezia said wryly. “My bondmate still likes to keep me on my toes with her antics, even this long into her matriarch years.”

Shepard studied her covered hands and looked up at Benezia with increasingly unfocused eyes. “I have a lot of practice, too. But I’ve never had this before…” She brushed her thumb over her knuckles, head lolling to the side limply.

“Hey, hey, stay awake, Little Lion. What haven’t you had before?” Benezia set her hand on Shepard’s shoulder and shook it gently, drawing blue and brown eyes up to her face.

“Someone to take care of me when I’m hurt.”

Her head dropped back against the wall and her eyes slipped shut, fingers limply dropping from Benezia’s hand into her lap. Liara inhaled sharply but Benezia seemed unconcerned as she pressed her fingers to Shepard’s neck. “She’s alright, Little Wing. She exhausted herself, that’s all.”

Her posture became regal as she stood and she addressed the shut door. “You may enter,” she said sternly. The three commandos Liara had found earlier sheepishly walked in and stared in awe at the chaos until Benezia cleared her throat pointedly. “Take her back upstairs, to the bedroom that overlooks the forest.”

“Of course, Matriarch.” They hastened to pick up Shepard and cradled her carefully between them, leaving Benezia and Liara alone in the destroyed sitting room.

“Mother?”

Benezia sighed, staring at the bloody spot on the wall. She pinched the bridge of her nose and set her other hand on her hip, breathing deeply for several moments. “Liara…she’s very…damaged. Do you understand that?”

“Her responses earlier do indicate-”

“Yes, but I’ve seen some of it. It was very muddled, but…Goddess. I don’t know how much help we can be to her, but I will do my best to aid her however she allows me.”
Benezia set her hand on Liara’s shoulder and opened up a shallow meld, allowing the moment of contact she’d had with Shepard on the Citadel to wash through their minds. Liara reeled at the influx of information and the blur of voices washing over each other. Shepard’s name echoing and layering until it was indecipherable noise amongst the split second images of faces blood fists walls that formed the basis of her entire person. She came back to herself panting, a faint sheen of sweat covering her skin, and unconsciously stepped closer to Benezia in search of comfort.

“That was…”

“When I saw her, she was on the verge of a panic attack,” Benezia murmured, showing Liara her first glimpse of Shepard, half hidden in the shadow of a building as she stared across the busy boulevard on the Citadel with a panicked expression on her face. “Before she ran off again, I found those…impressions. There’s something else there though, something she’s buried deeply, or doesn’t remember. I could feel it hovering behind those thoughts.” Benezia tipped Liara’s head back to look into her eyes. “Tread carefully around her, Little Wing. Let her adjust to this, us, and then worry about getting to the heart of the matter.”

“Okay, mother.”

Benezia bussed Liara’s temple and smiled at her. “That’s my girl. I have to go find your father and make sure she hasn’t ordered the human hunted down for the incident earlier.” Her fingers gently touched the faint bruises at Liara’s throat and then she was gone, leaving Liara alone in the sitting room amongst the shattered furniture.

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Ashley aimlessly wandered the compound, eyes tracking the skittish motions of the acolytes as they watched her passing with wide eyes. Small groups of them huddled together, lips whispering and echoing down the marble corridors, putting her on edge. She hunched her shoulders as she limped on, determined to see more than the four walls of her designated room. With one hand splayed protectively over her abdomen, she stalked through the compound like a violent ghost, startling acolytes and attendants with her pale, washed out appearance and ready growl rumbling in her throat.

She ended up staring out over a garden from beneath a terrace, eyes traipsing over the brilliant blossoms and the few small trees that towered over them like sentinels. The fragrant scent of the blooms made her sneeze and her abdominal muscles seized violently, making her grunt in pain. She inhaled sharply when her vision swam and the pain didn’t immediately dissipate, hand gripping the railing of the terrace until she was white knuckled and sweating.

“Do you need assistance?”

Twisting awkwardly on her heel, Ashley barely caught herself before she fell and stared blankly at the nervous acolyte who had addressed her. “What?”

“You just – looked like you might…I’m sorry, but you – oh dear.” The acolyte broke into inaudible muttering, twisting her fingers anxiously around the simple robes she wore. Ashley watched her nervously bite her lip, eyes drawn to the nearly indigo hue of her skin and the pale yellow markings that dotted her face like lightning strikes, accenting her sharp features and drawing her gaze down her bobbing throat.

“Stop.” The acolyte froze, mouth hanging on a half formed word, and Ashley grunted again as she adjusted her stance. “Where is Sha’ira?”

“The – the Consort is holding audience currently.”
“Take me there.”

“I can’t – I don’t think-”

Ashley brushed past her when she continued stammering and started limping down the hallway, smirking faintly when she heard the whisper of slippers on stone behind her and the anxious rambling became audible once more. “I really don’t think you should – she is quite busy today, her schedule…but she also did say. Oh, Goddess, I’m going to be in such trouble.”

The acolyte stepped up next to Ashley, directing her down the endless corridors, past a wide arch that led to a massive bath littered with asari talking animatedly and washing each other familiarly, through a hall lined with long tables, past several empty rooms that were dusty and unused. The acolyte paused uncertainly in front of two large doors, her hand dancing on the handle in an anxious rhythm that made Ashley itch. “Just – stay here? Please – I need to announce – ask-”

She gave a helpless little moan and slipped inside, shutting the door behind herself. Ashley stood in the middle of the hallway, one eye on the doors as she watched a few asari wander past with a scowl on her face. A few minutes later, just as the ache in her leg was becoming increasingly uncomfortable, the door opened again and the acolyte slipped back out.

“Just a minute, please,” she said with a shy smile, brown eyes crinkling at the corners.

A human, soft and fat in his suit and tie, walked out a couple minutes later, holding the door open for Sha’ira and shaking her hand. “Thank you so much for your time, Consort. I greatly appreciate your efforts, and can I just say-”

“You are welcome, Mister Bering, but I’m afraid my next appointment has been kept waiting for too long, if you’ll excuse me.” Sha’ira offered a conciliatory smile to the man in the suit as his chins wobbled in vague affront. She gripped his hand, thumb sliding back and forth across the back of his palm, and stood too close to him as she bade him farewell.

Ashley watched the exchange with narrowed eyes, unaware of the way her leg trembled and her abdomen ached in the wake of her disgust as he blatantly eyed her figure hugging robes and held her hand for too long. When Sha’ira finally managed to shake him loose and watched him depart down the hall, escorted by a duo of acolytes who made light conversation with him, Ashley was weaving on her feet with her eyes glaring daggers at his back. She jumped when the Consort laid her hand lightly on her forearm, caught on one side by the stuttering acolyte who had found her as her injured leg finally buckled.

Sha’ira easily shored up her weight on her other side, slinging her arm around Ashley’s waist, and they stumbled into her private chambers together. Ashley fell on the couch in an uncoordinated tangle of limbs as the acolyte buzzed to the far side of the room, rooting through a long cabinet and setting a kettle on a low stove. Sha’ira knelt at Ashley’s feet, ducking to catch her eyes. “What in Athame’s great world are you doing out of your chambers?”

“I was going crazy, if I stayed there any longer I was going to tear something apart.”

Sha’ira’s lips pursed in disapproval. “You could have just set your recovery back, you foolish, stubborn woman.”

Ashley clenched her jaw mulishly and crossed her arms, wincing as the stitches dotting her abdomen pulled. Sha’ira sighed, coaxing her arms apart, and lifted her loose shirt carefully. She let out a disappointed burst of air, something between a scoff and a sigh that set Ashley’s teeth on edge and made her stomach curdle with something like remorse, something that sat heavily in her
gut and turned her lips down. “It’s better than I feared,” Sha’ira said quietly.

The acolyte walked over with her arms full of bandages and a strong smelling salve in a small jar. She leaned over to take Ashley’s shirt off and squeaked when her wrist was grabbed in a vice like grip.

“Don’t touch me.”

“I’m just – only need to – Mistress!” Wide brown eyes turned on Sha’ira, pleading silently, and the Consort sighed again.

“Can you please cooperate for five minutes?”

“What are you doing?”

“Currently I’m sitting on my heels, hoping you’ll be sensible and let us bind your wounds again.”

Ashley sneered at Sha’ira silently, prompting another sigh. “How about this,” Sha’ira said, lifting herself so she was half sitting on the couch, nearly in Ashley’s lap as she leaned over her with a glint in her eyes that made Ashley lean back. “You let Ta’risa remove your shirt and we will bind your wounds again, and I will show you some places close to your rooms where you can go without straining yourself.”

Behind her, Ta’risa made a disbelieving little sound and Ashley’s eyes flicked over Sha’ira's to find her flushed dark blue, fingers playing with her robe again. “Eyes on me, soldier,” Sha’ira murmured, just loud enough for Ashley to hear as she leaned further in so her lips nearly brushed her ear. “Do we have an accord?”

Ashley found herself nodding without her brain’s permission to do so and Sha’ira sat back with a smug grin. She tugged Ashley up from the couch, half carrying her over to the settee nearby and sitting her on the edge of it.

“Go ahead, Ta’risa, while I make her a drink.”

Sha’ira wandered over to the kettle which was beginning to squeal shrilly and the acolyte slowly approached Ashley, eyes darting across her face and to the Consort and back again. “I need – shirt – uhm, off. Please!” Ashley’s eyebrows drew up in confusion and a little amusement as the young asari bit her lip. Her hands went to the hem of her loose shirt and she got it partway off before her muscles pulled painfully and she grunted again. “Oh! I’m sorry, I just – let me-”

Ta’risa grabbed her shirt and pulled it up, letting Ashley slowly pull her arms out of the sleeves and discarding it on the seat. She reached for the end of the bandages and slowly unwound them, her heated face startlingly close to Ashley’s, so close she could see the flecks of gold in her brown eyes and feel her breath on her shoulder as she unwound the bandages. Ashley felt the cool rush of air as the bandages fell away, goosebumps raced across her skin as her nipples pebbled and Ta’risa made a worryingly high squeak, eyes wide and hands fluttering in the air.

Sha’ira came back with a tray in her hands, cups steaming on it. She set it on the low table beside the settee and touched Ta’risa’s shoulder, lifting her eyebrow in question when the acolyte gaped wordlessly. “Are you alright?”

“I, uhm – skin and – yes, Mistress ,” she insisted loudly, startling both Sha’ira and Ashley. She grabbed the jar of salve and asked Ashley to lay back, dabbing it across the stitches and scrapes covering Ashley’s torso while Sha’ira looked on pensively.
“Can you sit up? I need to check your back.” Ashley grunted as she sat up and Ta’rissa spread more of the salve across the wounds on her back. Sha’ira stepped up and offered a roll of bandages, helping the acolyte wrap her torso again until she was firmly bound and the end had been secured with a butterfly clip.

Ta’rissa shook her head when Sha’ira offered a cup to her and nearly ran out of the room, slippers sliding across the polished stone floors as she disappeared out the door in a flurry of robes. Ashley hesitantly took the cup from Sha’ira and sniffed it, blinking at the sweet scent.

“Honey and tea, with a few herbs to encourage healing.” Sha’ira took a sip from her cup and they lapsed into silence, the sound of footsteps outside the room the only interruption to the quiet permeating their space.

Ashley was gently bending her knee, trying to work out the ache in the joint when Sha’ira set down her cup on the table and turned to face her more fully. She played with Ashley’s shirt, tugging on a loose thread in an unusual display of unease. “She finds you alluring.”

Ashley choked on her mouthful of honeyed tea and her eyes watered as she coughed hard. “What?” She croaked after she regained her breath.

“Ta’rissa. Of course, I can’t say I blame her; even with your injuries you are a rather impressive example of the human race.” Sha’ira’s eyes roved over her unapologetically, tracing muscles and scars and the sloping lines of her shoulders. Ashley hunched her shoulders and made a grab for her shirt, tugging it over her head and nearly upending her tea onto the settee in her haste. Sha’ira stared at her shirt with narrowed eyes, making Ashley swallow uncomfortably as she clenched the hem in her fists. “It’s a shame, really.”

“What is?”

Sha’ira only hummed and took their cups away, leaving them on the tray on the table as she extended her hand to Ashley. “Why don’t I show you those rooms, soldier?”

Miranda woke with a groan, feeling familiar cramping in her lower abdomen that made her curse colorfully beneath her breath and curl more tightly beneath the covers. “Bloody cocksucking biology…”

She laid under the covers for a few more minutes until she heard Chakwas stir in the other room, then reluctantly got out of bed. Karin appeared just as she was stretching with a cup of coffee in one hand and a datapad in the other. “Good morning, dear girl.”

The endearment brought a flush to Miranda’s cheeks that she privately denied, even as she smiled shyly and offered a quiet ‘morning’ to Karin. “Are you alright?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re a little pale looking, my dear. Are you getting sick?” Karin rested the back of her hand against Miranda’s forehead and stared into her eyes probingly.

“Ah, it’s not actually anything serious. My…monthly – has decided to reappear.” Miranda flushed scarlet at the admission, ducking her head and toeing the wooden floor.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of, Miranda,” Karin said wryly. “We all go through it, it’s just biology.”
“Unfortunately,” Miranda muttered.

“Yes, there is that, isn’t there? I have some pills for cramping, and you can stay up here today if you want. I can do the rounds myself if you need a day.”

“No, no, just – the pills are fine. The one bloody good thing about…I did not miss this feeling.”

Karin led the way into the open kitchenette-living space that was part of the small apartment separated from her work space by a door, rummaging through a cabinet for a small bottle of pills. She shook a couple out for Miranda, then gestured at the breakfast laid out on the table. “Eat, then we’ll get going. I have to make sure our tools are all packed, I’ll be back in ten, alright?”

“Oh, mum.” Miranda rolled her eyes as Karin chuckled and tweaked the end of her hair, then disappeared into the other room.

Miranda took a piece of toast between her teeth as she hurried back into her bedroom, digging beneath her mattress for a datapad she had swiped from a classroom the other day. She kept her ears pricked for Karin’s return as she waited for it to power up, muttering around the food in her mouth as she checked the status of the full data erasure she had started the previous night. She connected to the extranet via the w-fi on the upper floor and began downloading several programs she had become familiar with during her time under Cerberus’ wing, deftly routing everything through several backdoors and backtracking repeatedly to confuse any potential tracers.

She put the datapad in standby mode when she heard Karin’s footsteps approaching, throwing it back beneath her mattress and putting everything to rights just before she appeared in the doorway. “What are you doing?”

“Jus’ ‘ookin’ f’r a shir’.”

Karin lifted her eyebrow as she pulled the soggy toast from Miranda’s mouth. “English, please?”

Miranda swallowed her bite of food and waved a shirt between them. “Sorry, I was looking for clean clothes.”

She turned and pulled her sleeping shirt off, holding her breath as the cool air washed over her skin. She could feel Karin’s eyes wandering her back, no doubt cataloguing the remnants of wounds and scarring that crisscrossed her skin. She hurriedly pulled the thin, long sleeved black shirt over her head, feeling the tension drop from her shoulders with the simple coverage of skin, and busied herself with finding a pair of pants amongst the sparse belongings that dotted her room. “What’s on today’s list?”

“The usual; a few minor injuries, some allergies that need scripts for medicine, then to the lab for testing.”

“Ooh, fun.”

Karin snorted as Miranda pulled her pants up and threaded a belt through the loops, checking her pockets for her ID card, her small knife set she carried everywhere with her, and a couple more pills she put into a bag in her back pocket. “Let me guess, a couple students got rowdy during a race, or someone got cocky cliff diving?”

“Add a couple minor lacerations from engaging the local fauna,” Karin said with a faint sigh.

“You’d think for such a long lived, evolved race, the asari would be less prone to…this.”

“Kids are still kids, no matter the species.”
Miranda stuffed another piece of toast in her mouth and snagged an apple as she followed Karin out the door, taking the steps two at a time to wait impatiently just outside the building. She threw her apple core into the bushes as they walked down the wide, stony path toward the tall, organic building that housed the medical students and their fellow students-cum-study subjects. As they walked into the air conditioned building, Miranda peeked into the rooms, finding most full of asari studying bodies and taking notes, along with a handful of other species who had lucked out on a scholarship to attend the prodigious university.

They walked up to the second story and were immediately immersed in a hospital like setting. Open windows let in a warm breeze, and the myriad plants flowering through the room leant a sweet scent to the otherwise sterile air. A couple dozen students were lounging in the open room, most of them talking amongst themselves with grins, happy for the excuse to skip class, while a few others slept off the drugs in their systems from more severe injuries. Karin walked over to the group of students with Miranda on her heels and they automatically separated, splitting the group between them. Miranda took the datapad Karin offered her, logging into the university’s system so she could take notes on who she was treating, then turned to her first patient.

Within a couple hours, they had all but a few of the worst cases back out in the sunshine, and were checking on an asari who had taken a tumble while cliff diving over the weekend and had a concussion. Her warm grey eyes were still unfocused as she tried to follow the penlight Karin shone at her, and her speech was slow and careful, precise in the way a drunk or disoriented person spoke. Miranda took her wrist and felt the fine, dense scaling beneath her thumb as she checked her pulse, letting her hand linger on the asari’s cool skin for a moment. She turned to grab a couple pills off the counter and casually stuck a thumb drive sitting there – one of the students had left it for her concussed classmate with notes on an upcoming test – into her pocket, smoothly turning back to offer the pills and a cup of water to the asari, holding her breath until she had nodded off and they left.

By the time they finally got back to Karin’s apartment, they were both tired and joking quietly about the students’ injuries. “Seriously though, the fact that she managed to scrape her knees and arms raw taking a tumble of the cliffs and then thought she could just waltz into class the next day looking like something from a twenty first century horror film is a little entertaining.”

“Hm, yes, it does make me wonder at the future of our galaxy if these are the kids we’ve raised.” Karin put her hand on Miranda’s shoulder to stop her, the sunset hitting her silver hair and making it shine almost blindingly. “Though if half of them are as strong and resilient as you, dear girl, I think I can safely say we’ll make it.”

She smiled faintly and Miranda felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes. She swallowed and clenched her jaw against the rush of emotion. Karin searched her eyes for a moment and her hand caught Miranda’s hand, trailing over the thumb drive hidden in her pocket. “I don’t know what you’re running from, or what happened to you,” she said quietly, fiercely, with all the passion of a mother and teacher and soldier, “but whatever you have to do in order to be safe, you do.”

She cupped Miranda’s cheek, callused thumb stroking just beneath her eyes. “Keep your eyes open and your hands steady, and don’t miss.” Miranda stuck her hand in her pocket, tracing the thumb drive gently as she nodded.

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Deep in space, Kai Leng sat back in the captain’s seat of the tiny ship, stretching and rolling his shoulders. He grit his teeth at the pacing that had yet to stop, just barely resisting the urge to unsheathe his katana and bury it in the throat of the man behind him.
“Alenko! If you don’t stop pacing like a caged dog, I’m going to do very uncomfortable things to your anatomy.” He felt a deep satisfaction when the footsteps ceased, turning his attention back to the starscape flashing by the window, then grit his teeth when it started again, somehow more frantic sounding than before. “Alenko!”

“My name is Kaidan.”

Kai Leng gasped as his throat was grasped in a large, powerful hand, immediately going for his weapon and pressing the point to Kaidan’s inner thigh, where his femoral artery lay within reach. “Let go,” he rasped quietly.

One finger at a time, Kaidan loosened the grip on Kai Leng’s throat, and he pivoted in his seat as soon as he could, stepping into his space until he had backed into the wall. His weapon lay poised at Kaidan’s throat, a deadly gleam in Kai Leng’s eyes as he pressed it just a little harder against his skin and watched a bead of bright red blood roll down the tempered steel. “Do that again, and I’ll gut you and leave you for the worms.”

“We’ve been searching for a week and haven’t found them yet, we need to find them!” Kaidan’s fist tightened, biotic blue flaring around it with the surge of emotions, and more blood trickled down the katana as he pressed into it slightly. “I need…Shepard. She needs to pay.”

Kai Leng’s eyes narrowed as he retreated slightly. When Kaidan didn’t do anything, he flicked the blood off his blade and sheathed it, standing at ease within the tiny cockpit. “Shepard is the one who did this, isn’t that right?”

Kaidan flinched, lip lifting into a sneer at the reminder. His face, still bruised from the fight against Shepard, hardened further, the fading bruises around his eyes from his broken nose making his expression even darker. The deep gash on his cheek threatened to bleed as the scab pulled on the skin and his lip split again as he sneered. “That bitch robbed me of my rightful place as leader! She upstaged me at every opportunity, denied me the chance to prove myself!” His nostrils flared and the blue of his biotics spread up his arms.

Kai Leng smirked faintly, a plan formulating in his mind. “You want Shepard?”

“Yes.”

“Get to her other teammates first. Show them what happens when they don’t follow their true leader, then go after her and show her what happens when you’re disrespected. Tell her every single detail about what you did to the other defectors. Make her pay.”

Kaidan’s eyes lit with an unsettling gleam, his biotics momentarily calmed as his chest swelled and his thoughts nearly screamed between them. “Make them pay.”

“Yes.”

“Leave only corpses.”

“And Shepard will beg for mercy.”

“She won’t find any.”

Chapter End Notes
You're welcome.

End Notes

There you have it! Promise these won't be frequent, but I'm leaving this here to let you guys know that I'm ready and willing to ramble, fangirl, explain, cajole, and discuss whenever you want. Also over on FF if you want to PM me instead, under the same penname. Otherwise, leave a note with your thoughts, and I'll see you on the other side! Have a fantastic September!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!