

## A Time to...

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# **A Time to...**

by [ToItsPortsIveBeen](#)

## Summary

Mass Effect 3: Destroy ending and post-destroy epilogue. The closing events of the war against the Reapers and how the galaxy faces the consequences of the events leading up to it in its recovery.

Special thanks to Kunari and Andrew Ryan whose works were very inspiring to me. And there are also other authors and artists who have just helped me find the right moods, and random people who helped me out when I had little what if questions.

# Stand

"You did good, son. You did good. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you, sir," Lieutenant Commander John Shepard knew Admiral David Anderson hated being called 'sir' but in this moment, it was fitting. He never replied. "Anderson?" He turned to see Anderson, still sat in the same position, head slouched, those had been his final words. Shepard had never known his real father and his mother had never explained it to him in any detail but Anderson had taken it upon himself to fill that role better than any stranger could ever hope to, and Shepard in turn, had given Anderson the relationship he never had with his own son, a regret he ended up taking to his grave. Shepard gave a soft sigh, he looked down at his blood-soaked hands, he'd been injured before but not like this, his near miss with Harbinger's beam and the shock from the Citadel's relay had taken their toll on him. He couldn't help but be mesmerised by the view of Earth as he felt his consciousness slipping.

"Commander," the voice of Admiral Steven Hackett roused Shepard back to reality.

"I..." Shepard tried to stand but instead rolled forward, unable to find the strength to pull himself up, "what do you need to me to do?" Shepard was an Alliance soldier, nothing had ever stood in the way of him doing his duty, and he would not let that change now.

"Nothing's happening, the Crucible's not firing," Hackett replied. Shepard managed to get to his feet but immediately fell down, "it's got to be something on your end," he dragged himself to the nearby console as Hackett continued talking. "Commander Shepard!" Hackett's voice was filled with concern.

"I don't see..." Shepard reached towards the console, desperately to will it closer to him, "I'm not sure how to..." his strength was draining rapidly.

"Commander?" Hackett was still there, but Shepard couldn't move, he felt the platform he was on rise and as his vision blurred he was sure he could see signs of life on the Wards. Then everything faded to black.

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"We need to get the emergency shelters secured, the station's mass effect fields can't hold up for long with the arms fully extended like this!" Commander Armando-Owen Bailey rallied his resistance cell, they'd been fighting since the Reapers landed on the Citadel and pushed from the Presidium to Shalta Ward. "Noles!" Bailey yelled back to one of the stragglers, C-Sec officer Jordan Noles, she screamed as she was ambushed by two Keepers who dragged her into the tunnels.

"What are they doing?" Aria T'Loak thought aloud.

"The Keepers were created by the Reapers. They seem to be abducting humans much like the Collectors did," a Salarian answered.

"And just who are you?"

"My name is Chorban. I've been studying the Keepers for years ever since I got extensive scans of them from..."

"Must all Salarians always talk so much?"

"Doctor, how's Lang?" Bailey asked between shooting a swarm of creepers, Salarian based husks that could crawl flat on their fronts and effortlessly scale vertical walls.

"I've stopped the bleeding," Karin Chakwas reported, if there was any doubt left in her mind, the invasion of the Citadel had fully convinced her that Shepard made the right decision in persuading her to stay onboard, her expertise as a field medic proved invaluable.

"I'm good, Commander. I can fight," Captain Eddie Lang tried to lift himself up.

"No you can't," Chakwas pushed him back down with ease, "how are the rest of you holding up?" She turned her attention to the Salarian, Turian, Asari and Human ambassadors, the Presidium was the first area of the Citadel hit when the Reapers invaded, the Citadel Tower had been cleared, either the Councillors were dead or they would soon show up on the battlefield as Reaper creatures.

"We're okay," Ambassador Dominic Osoba of Earth replied on behalf of his colleagues, they were scared but unharmed.

Two sirens advanced, Reaper husks formed by combining Asari and Salarian DNA, they were swiftly taken down by a Turian weapon.

"Are you sure you're up for this, General?" Bailey asked.

"If tailor-made poison couldn't keep me down, neither will this," General Septimus Oraka barked.

"Someone get that door closed!"

"Does anyone know how?" Chakwas asked.

"I think I might be able to," a nervous young man spoke up.

"What's your name?"

"I'm Simon Michel."

"Are you Chloe Michel's brother?"

"Yes, she's a doctor too."

"I know, she's working with my friends right now. They'll save us, Simon." Chakwas gently urged Simon towards the door and he began working on the locking mechanism.

Another type of husk scuttled towards the door, an exploder, a creature based on the volus, its three mechanical legs allowed it to move faster than before it was converted and it held a

detonator in its hand which was wired into its torso. Aria rose and shot the creature; her precision strikes hit its head splitting open the casing formed from the suit. Flesh spurted out of it; it was evident that the Volus' fragile physiology, while converted into a weapon by the Reapers, was still a vulnerability.

"How did you know how to do that?" Lang asked.

"It's just a matter of knowing the right spots," Aria grinned.

A tank created from an Elcor rose up and fired the large cannon on its back, the blast struck Oraka in the chest, killing him. Bailey took cover and looked up as another nightmare arose; it was an apostle, a creature created by fusing a Hanar and a Drell. Bailey knew the face of the Drell, it was Kolyat Krios. "Forget about me and close that damn door!" Bailey ordered.

The door to the emergency shelter shut but it wasn't sealed yet, Chakwas helped Simon regulate his breathing so he could remain calm. He struggled to get the door locked, "something's fighting it," he realised. Outside of the door was a hacker, a converted Quarian which was attempted to bypass Simon's attempt at locking the door. It was succeeding. "I can't fight it."

"Then I'll buy you time," a woman stood up.

"I know you," Chakwas realised.

"Kalisah Bint Sinan Al-Jilani. Commander Shepard was always polite to me; he showed far more integrity than I ever did. If I can help any friends of his then I'll feel like I've really done my part."

"You're pieces on Earth were..."

"The least I could do."

Meanwhile, Bailey stood and fired at the apostle, he continued to drive the creature back, it was unaware it was nearing a precipice as it lashed out with one of its modified Hanar tentacles, the claw pierced Bailey's body, he grinned as he threw himself forward over the edge, taking the apostle with him.

As Bailey fell, Kalisah dived onto the hacker; the door behind her was successfully sealed as she succumbed to the creature's sharp claws.

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Shepard stood, he had heard enough. The Catalyst, the intelligence created by the Leviathan race and the embodiment of the collective knowledge of the Reapers had issued him with a choice. It was not something he needed to think about, the past years had been about a singular goal, destroying the Reapers. Shepard had been offered the ability to control them, to override the Catalyst with his own thoughts and morals, in essence to become what the Illusive Man had always hoped to be. This was unacceptable, he had brought down Cerberus, he had even heard of Protheans attempting to achieve the same goal, all of them indoctrinated, he could never believe the Illusive Man was right. He was also presented with

synthesis, the ability to fuse organic and synthetic life, changing everyone everywhere was playing god, to Shepard this act was an abomination, it was reminiscent of Saren's ravings. But more than that, both of these resulted in Shepard's death, he hadn't come this far to lose everything he had, he was willing to lay down his life for the cause, but for his cause. He wasn't fooled, beneath its exterior this was the Reapers he was talking with, their agenda, their survival. Not an option.

Shepard took up his gun and fired and the power conduit, the force of the energy release was explosive. He thought back to Anderson, who would've done the same in his position and he truly felt like a son fulfilling his father's wish. He thought about EDI and the Catalyst's ambiguous threats about all synthetic life being wiped out if he destroyed the Reapers, he didn't fully believe it but even if it was true he knew she would've done the same thing. And finally he thought of Kaidan Alenko, the man he loved, their relationship had had its up and downs but it was worth fighting for and Shepard knew if there was even a remote chance he could survive, it would be for Kaidan, he had heard him say 'I love you too' and that was more than enough reason to live.

# Mourn

The red energy swirled around the Citadel. The hacker husk did not have the time to make it back to the emergency shelter door as it, along with the rest of the Reaper creatures, were vaporised as the energy rushed over them.

"All fleets! The Crucible is armed. Disengage and head to the rendezvous point," Hackett ordered, "I repeat. Disengage and get the hell out of here!" The armada of Human, Asari, Turian, Salarian, Quarian, Geth, Batarian, Elcor, Hanar, Volus, Vorcha and various mercenary fleets jumped away from Earth, as the last ships powered up their engines, one remained.

Flight Lieutenant Jeff "Joker" Moreau of the SSV Normandy SR-2 refused to leave, he couldn't give up on Shepard, he blamed himself for Shepard dying once, he urged himself to keep waiting just a few more seconds.

"Jeff, we need to go." Liara T'Soni gently placed a hand on Joker's shoulder.

"Damn it," he knew she was right but it felt wrong, he knew Shepard would want him to save the Normandy and its crew before himself so he reluctantly set a course away from Earth.

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"We can't leave!" Major Kaidan Alenko protested, "we can't...oh god not again."

"Lie still, Major." Doctor Chloe Michel tried to calm him and apply medi-gel at the same time.

"Kaidan," Lieutenant James Vega rested a hand on Kaidan's shoulder, partly to comfort him and partly to assist Michel, "he'd want you to live," James had known about Shepard and Kaidan's relationship but it wasn't until they evacuated London that he understood how close they truly were. He couldn't imagine what Kaidan was feeling at that time and tried to comfort him but knew he'd never find the right words.

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"Do you think Shepard's..." Tali'Zorah vas Normandy began to speak when she noticed Garrus Vakarian was leaning on the console, just staring at it, his hands shaking. She placed a hand over his and hugged him; she knew he probably just lost his best friend. Lieutenant Gregory Adams and engineers Kenneth Donnelley and Gabriella Daniels maintained a respectful silence.

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The energy erupted from the Crucible, washing over Earth, the Human soldiers fighting to defend their home alongside newfound Turian, Asari, Salarian, Elcor, Kogan and Geth allies across the planet watched as each variant of husk vanished as the red shockwave passed over and the larger Reaper capital ships and destroyers toppled over lifeless. This was not a victory for the people of one planet, but all the species of the galaxy. The energy fired from relay to relay and each world celebrated as Earth did, watching an undefeatable enemy finally fall.

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"Come on, girl, hold it together," Joker urged the Normandy as the shockwave closed in, the Normandy hadn't long entered the relay and was still far from the designated rendezvous point. "EDI, help me out here."

"I am attempt...stab...traject..." EDI was cut off as sparks of the red energy engulfed the Normandy. The body of the Cerberus synthetic Eva that EDI had commandeered was destroyed as the energy zeroed in on it.

Joker was terrified by what he had just seen, he wondered if EDI has just died in front of him, but he didn't have the time to speculate as the Normandy was thrown back into normal space. The force of the departure from the relay system hurtled the ship backwards at faster than light speeds, Joker was unable to set a course before the Normandy was caught in the gravitational pull of an anonymous planet.

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Kaidan and James headed from sickbay to the bridge; they found Joker hobbling towards the airlock. As the door opened, he shielded his eyes from the glare and stepped down looking out at the vast jungles which stretched out beyond each horizon line. Kaidan followed shortly after and then James.

Kaidan looked to Joker and then back to the strange new world, it was sickeningly beautiful to him, after everything he'd been through and everything he'd lost; it shouldn't be a beautiful day. "The ship looks to be in one piece," he focused on his duties as the senior officer, "I want a full damage report, we need to begin repairs as soon as possible. James, will you co-ordinated with the departments?"

"Yes, sir," James said simply as Kaidan headed back to the ship.

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It was their cabin, Kaidan had unofficially moved in although if Shepard had important work to do he would vacate. They had both agreed that no matter what, their relationship could not interfere with the mission, they were fighting for their future and one night alone couldn't compare to the rest of their lives. The night before the assault on Cronos Station was one such night, not that Kaidan ended up staying away for long.

He looked around at the empty room, Shepard's things were in remarkable condition, Kaidan had once joked that when Shepard upgraded the Normandy's armour and shields, he set some aside for his models and fish. Though the room was a mess, everything was in one piece, there was a scorch mark in place of the Bryson husk head, there were chess pieces strewn across the floor and the hamster was running loose. The Alliance Dreadnought model caught his eye, he remembered the day Shepard had first bought this model, not because of the model but because it was the same day as their first date...

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Kaidan shook his head and smiled as Shepard bought the new model; it was like watching a child getting a new toy, a simple happiness.

"What?" Shepard smiled.



"Nothing," Kaidan replied as they walked to the lower area of the Presidium. Despite the war and the Cerberus attack, the lake was still beautiful, the water shimmered and glistened.

"Would you look at that."

Shepard looked up as Kaidan pointed out the Conduit, "I remember. You, me and Garrus came flying out of that thing. We totalled the Mako."

"We put it out of its misery, you never could drive."

"It wasn't my fault."

"Whose fault was it the tank's? I've also been told about you driving a Hammerhead and Liara mentioned something about a taxi on Illium...*what kind of guns does this thing have?*"

"Liara is the worst back seat driver; maybe you should ask Garrus about that."

Kaidan laughed and then sighed, "I missed a lot."

"You're here now, that's all that matters to me," Shepard took his hand.

"You know, already people are only thinking of this as just a statue of a mass relay, but we know better."

"What old soldiers we are."

"Speaking of statues, I visited the old Normandy site. That was a beautiful thing you did."

"I always try to make sure no-one gets left behind, but sometimes the best you can do is make sure no-one gets forgotten."

"Should we head back to the Normandy or do you want to stay here a little longer?"

"We can stay; it's still a great view. You know, building models was always something I did when I was feeling lonely, but maybe now it could be something...we did, together."

"I'd like that," Kaidan smiled as he pulled Shepard closer. He rested his head on Kaidan's shoulder and as the two men looked out over the water, they thought about how everything they'd been through had led them to this point, and somehow the future seemed that much brighter.

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Kaidan ran his hand down the glass, as if touching the case was touching a memory. He would've given anything to spend just one more minute in that day and let reality as it was just melt away.

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Joker hobbled towards the pilot seat, the cockpit of the Normandy had never felt so big, so empty and so quiet, "EDI..." he lent against the chair for physical and emotional support.

"Yes."

Her voice surprised him, "wait, you're alive? How? When our systems went down and the Cerberus mech was destroyed I thought..."

"That platform was disposable. The energy from the shockwave was specifically targeting Reaper code, but due to the fact that I gained awareness as the Hannibal-class VI on Luna and have continued to evolve from that basis and not the Reaper technology Cerberus augmented me with; I was able to salvage my core intelligence and personality. It was not a seamless transition."

"That seems to be a theme with you," Joker quipped.

"I do not have access to the Normandy's systems and my cyberwarfare suites have been destroyed. And without a body for you to interact with, I do not see what value I have left."

"Then you're the only one, EDI. Now you're free, not the Normandy's AI, not some Cerberus weapon, now you're just a person. And that's the person I want to be with."

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"I heard you were hurt," Specialist Samantha Traynor ran into the room.

"Just a bump on the head," Diana Allers dismissed it.

"You scared me," Traynor put her arm around her.

Allers smiled, "you know, piece about the end of the war in the words of the crew could really be a hit."

"How about an exclusive? I can't really start my work on repairing the QEC without Liara's help and she's still busy with whatever she does in her cabin."

"Well you certainly have my undivided attention."

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"Glyph, see if you can..." Liara started before something else caught her attention, "Javik! What are you doing here? I'm..."

"Attempting to conceal your true nature as the one known as the Shadow Broker," Javik interrupted.

"How did you..."

"You cannot lie to me, have you learnt nothing about my people?" Javik stood still, the way he delivered his lines made it impossible to tell whether he was being aggressive or was merely curious.

"I guess I've been too busy to think about it," Liara sighed.

"That is actually why I am here. I am planning on tracking down the Cronian Nebula, I will set the ghosts of my men to rest and then join them as it should be, but before that I want to help you with your book."

"You do?" This surprised Liara.

"My time onboard the Normandy has shown me the true importance of remembering the lost. Even after the last voice has fallen silent, I want make sure that history never forgets the name Prothean."

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"Casualty report, Doctor," Kaidan ordered as he entered sickbay.

"Some bumps and bruises, I want to keep a few crew members restricted to lighter work but I'd say everyone held up remarkably well. I'm really happy to report there were no fatalities," the soft tone of Michel's voice and her warm smile always put people at ease, an essential skill for a doctor. Kaidan still remembered the day they first met her, he couldn't stand watching anyone getting bullied like that, no one could consider themselves strong by picking on the weak and vulnerable in his eyes.

"That's something..." Kaidan rested his hand against his forehead and massaged his temples.

"Are the headaches bothering you, Major?"

"I used my biotics a lot in London."

"Have a seat; I'll get your meds."

"Doctor I really need to..."

"To take your meds. You should not be looking after the crew at the expense of yourself. When was the last time you slept?"

"Major," James interrupted the conversation, "repairs are mostly underway but the shuttle bay's a lost cause, there's no way anyone's getting in there and even then there'll be nothing but scrap metal to salvage."

"Then I think you've got some time to have a rest," Michel said. "Doctor's orders."

"It's alright, Liara and Traynor have started work on the QEC and I can't pry Garrus away from engineering."

"Since when was Garrus an engineer?" Kaidan asked.

"Hey, I never said it was the engines he was interested in," James laughed. "Seriously, get some rest, I got it covered."

"Thanks James, Doctor," he didn't want to sleep. He didn't want to dream.

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Shepard climbed into bed beside Kaidan who remained silent, "something on your mind?"

"Shepard, I really meant it when I said you scared the hell out of me today," he gave the ceiling a steady stare.

"Did you also mean it when you said it was part of what you loved about me?"

"Don't change the subject," Kaidan couldn't help but smile however.

"I got out okay, and the Leviathan has joined the war."

"That's not the point; I can't be there for every mission. Hell, you summoned a thresher maw to a Reaper and..."

"Kaidan, I promise I won't take any unnecessary risks."

"You can't promise that. But thank you for saying it," he moved closer to Shepard and put his head on his chest.

Shepard wrapped his arm around Kaidan's back, "I'll always be with you."

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Kaidan awoke with a jolt, "always..." he repeated to himself, running his hand across Shepard's side of the bed. There was a knock on the door, he was grateful for it as the last thing he wanted was to lie back down in the big empty bed. "Garrus. Tali."

"Hey, Kaidan," Tali patted him on the arm.

"Liara asked us to come up here, she figured you probably weren't sleeping and needed the company," Garrus explained.

"It's scary how much the Shadow Broker knows," Kaidan tried to joke but his heart wasn't in it.

"Tell me about it," Garrus humoured him anyway.

"I'd offer you a drink but I'm afraid I don't have anything dextro compatible."

"That's alright."

"Actually, Kaidan, we've come to ask you about something..." Tali started cautiously.

"What?" Kaidan was suspicious.

"We were planning on a memorial and wondered if you wanted to add Shepard's name to the wall," Garrus continued as Tali couldn't bring herself to say it.

"I don't..."

"Look you don't have to, it was just an idea that was going around."

"No. He'd want me to. I just never thought..."

"We can come back," Tali prepared to leave.

"Wait, I can do this, I can't stay in here all day."

---

Kaidan took his time getting to the memorial wall; he politely encouraged Garrus and Tali to go ahead. He past familiar faces on his way; Mitchell Copeland, Bethany Westmoreland, Sarah Campbell, but they just seemed to blur past him. He wasn't ready to say goodbye and far from the point where he could get over Shepard but he knew he'd want him to eventually, he'd want him to love again. Though that felt like it would take a lifetime, Kaidan knew the first step would be to at least accept that Shepard was gone and not wallow in the past. Somehow it all felt wrong though.

Allers was filming around the ship, however she deactivated the camera when she saw Kaidan, "Major," she acknowledged him, "I've been recording the crew, people need to see that working together is still just as possible even with the war over, but some things need to stay private."

"Thank you, Allers. You could join us if you want," Kaidan offered.

"I saw this Salarian's documentary on the Citadel refugees, I have some fierce competition out there," she tried to politely decline as she didn't feel it was her place to be there.

"I know Shepard considered you to be part of the crew, and I'm sure it would mean a lot to Specialist Traynor."

"Well, when you put it that way."

As they reached the memorial wall, Liara approached Kaidan and hugged him.

Joker was also there with a plaque, "Kaidan, I have an idea."

"Go on, Joker," Kaidan nodded.

"I want to put EDI's name on the wall, she's technically no longer the Enhance Defence Intelligence and if we put her name on a memorial, then we can remove her from the ship so no Alliance officials will think to try and find her."

"Sounds good. So if you're not the Enhanced Defence Intelligence, what will you call yourself?"

"Edi is my name, I do not wish to change that; however it will no longer be an acronym," her voice was piped in.

"Is everyone here?" Liara asked.

"Engineer Adams isn't joining us?" Kaidan knew he was friends with Shepard.

"No, he's volunteered to monitor the QEC. James..." Liara gestured to him that everyone was ready.

James stepped forward and looked up at the wall, "hey, when it's my time to go, I expect you to be flying me there in style. See you on the other side, Esteban," he attached the plaque for

Steve Cortez on the wall, the shuttle pilot had been killed during the initial assault on London.

As James stepped back, Joker stepped forward, he attached EDI's name to the wall, "goodbye Enhance Defence Intelligence, say hello to the rest of your life, Edi."

"Jeff..." she began, "I love you."

"I love you too," Joker smiled, this had been the first time they'd said that to each other.

Kaidan was the last to head up to the wall; everyone knew it was important for him to take his time. His legs seemed to control themselves but he froze at the wall, he looked down at the plaque with Shepard's name on it and ran his hand along it...

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Shepard was pacing, his fists were clenched, the mission had taken its toll on him, he'd even snapped at Joker, just one more reason he had to feel guilty. He was muttering under his breath.

"Shepard..." Kaidan broke the silence.

"I failed," Shepard dropped to the floor leaning against the fish tank. Kaidan had seen him do this once before and remembered what he'd asked for that day, a shoulder.

"I'm here," Kaidan knelt in front of him, "and I was there, you did everything you could. I know you. You will find a way to get Thessia back," he put his hands on Shepard's sides and gently pulled him up. Shepard buried his head in Kaidan's chest; this was the first time he'd seen Shepard cry.

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Kaidan looked to the side, he knew everyone was waiting for him, but he just couldn't bring himself to do it, the plaque started to feel heavy in his hands.

"This is Adams, the QEC is online and we have a message from Admiral Hackett!" Adams' voice broke the silence.

As the message played, Kaidan lowered the plaque and looked up. He started to cry, but not only that, he laughed. It felt like years since he could laugh, suddenly the future seemed bright again.

# Rise

The Normandy was surprisingly close to Earth, its ejection from the relay network had hurtled it back to the Alpha Centauri system. The Citadel over Earth was a strange sight, but its location was the last thing on anyone's mind, the Wards were splintered and fractured and the Presidium looked scorched, evidence that there had been a chain of explosions across the station. It was a miracle anyone survived at all.

The docking bay at Kithoi Ward was the only one still in operation, so it became the temporary hub of operations on the Citadel, it was where the repair teams were co-ordinated and casualties from the Citadel were cared for, any casualties from incoming ships were re-directed to Earth.

Kaidan ran from the docking bay to the hospital, he was running on adrenaline, anxiety and hope. He stood at the alcove to Shepard's room, it was a small room, there wasn't even a door but he was the only one with a room to himself. The hospital was a crowded menagerie of stretchers, the living, the dead and the unlucky in between. Doctors darted around, the triage testing the limits of their training.

"I'm glad you're here, Alenko," a familiar voice said.

"Doctor Chakwas!" Kaidan was glad to see her, "how is he?"

"His vitals are good, but he's not regained consciousness yet. That's why I'm glad you're here, it's my hope that familiar stimuli will help...guide him."

"Guide him?"

"He's been in and out of REM sleep."

"He's dreaming?"

"Yes and if he can hear you...it's clutching at straws but I can't think of any other reason why he hasn't regained consciousness other than a psychological one. He needs to find a reason to live," Chakwas was summoned away but gave Kaidan a reassuring smile.

He entered Shepard's room, he was in worse shape than Kaidan realised. But he was alive. Garrus stood by the alcove, facing outward, guaranteeing Kaidan his privacy with Shepard. "I imagine this is how you must have felt after Mars," Kaidan gently put his hand on Shepard's.

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It was as the dreams were before, but this time the shadows were different, they were no longer whispering ghosts but they were the world. He was surrounded in a tangible darkness, suspended in the liquid black and the voices were louder, they called to him from the untold depths. He was haunted by this abyss, it was impossible to tell whether oblivion was near or far, but he could feel himself sinking deeper.

*"The lines between friend and foe are getting a little blurry from where I stand."*

*"Does this unit have a soul?"*

*"Kalahira, mistress of inscrutable depths, I ask forgiveness."*

*"Damn it. I'm hit."*

*"God...feels like years since I just sat down."*

*"In the darkest hour, there is always a way out."*

*"We held the line."*

*"Now go back and get the Lieutenant, and get the hell out of here!"*

A hand reached down, piercing the surface of the shadows, as he grabbed ahold, he felt himself being pulled up out of the darkness.

---

"You said you'd be waiting for me," Kaidan recalled.

Sheppard's fingers gently clenched Kaidan's hand, "and you showed up," his eyes flickered open.

"Shepard! I love you."

"I love you too. Kaidan, I can't feel my legs."

"They're still there."

"I think I'll be in here for a while."

"And I'll be right here with you."

Shepard managed to hold Kaidan's hand a little tighter, then turned his head, "Garrus? You don't have to stand out there."

"My friend miraculously survives yet another suicide mission, the least I can do is make sure he gets some privacy with his boyfriend," Garrus explained, "besides between the doctors and journalists you might not get a lot of it."

"Is everyone okay?"

"It's alright, Garrus. Go find everyone," Kaidan insisted, he was grateful to have been there when Shepard woke up, but his friends were important too. Besides, he could now breathe easier knowing they had the rest of their lives to be together.

---



Many of Shepard's old friends and colleagues had assembled in a makeshift waiting room, it was a clear enough area for the group to stay, but not intrude on the treatment of the casualties.

"Cheerleader," James decided.

"Cheerleader?" Jack had urged James to come up with a nickname for Miranda Lawson.

"Yeah, she's got that perky superiority complex that just makes me think...Cheerleader."

"I couldn't agree more."

"Guess we have a lot in common."

"Are you flirting with me?"

"Maybe."

Jack biotically shoved James into the wall and slowly walked up to him, with a cheeky smile she whispered, "I will destroy you."

Tali, Liara, Samara, Kasumi Goto and Zaeed Massani had continued conversing, none of them distracted, or surprised, by James and Jack's exchange.

"Garrus," hope filled Tali's voice.

"He's awake," Garrus gave the Turian approximation of a smile.

---

"Specialist Traynor is helping co-ordinate incoming ships and supplies, Ms Allers is with Admiral Hackett and Adams, Donnelley and Daniels are helping Joker with his project," Liara explained some of the absences.

"Project?" Shepard wondered.

"Finding Edi a new home," Kaidan explained.

"She's alive?" Shepard looked like he wanted to dart up.

"Of course," James was confused.

Shepard gave a sigh of relief before relaxing again, "what is it?" Kaidan asked.

"I'll tell you later," Shepard smiled to him. "And Jacob? Miranda?"

"Jacob is with Brynn," Tali answered.

"Miranda wanted to spend time with her sister but if you get the chance you should thank her."

"Doctor Chakwas!" Shepard smiled.

"The implants from the Lazarus project practically held you together, at least long enough for us to get some vital surgery done. Miranda's expertise at bringing you back to life certainly came in handy," Chakwas gave a warm motherly smile.

"I couldn't have been in better hands,"

"Doctor Michel is helping out with our other patients, I'm afraid I can't stay and chat. I just wanted to thank you, Commander, had I rejoined the Normandy we would have lost a lot more lives here when the Reapers hit..." her tone became sombre.

---

"I'm just glad you stocked the ship with enough dextro rations so that we wouldn't starve. It also kept us off the menu," Garrus joked.

"Which is good because I figure Turians taste about as good as you look," James laughed.

"So, delicious." The conversation was winding down.

"So what's next for all of you? Don't think the galaxy will need saving again any time soon," Shepard asked.

"I'm going to sit on a tropical beach and have a goddamn drink," Zaeed replied.

"I will be assisting Falere with reconstructing the Ardat-Yakshi monastery," there was pride in Samara's voice.

"There are still so many lovely things I don't own. But someone does," Kasumi smiled.

"I've got to keep the little shits out of trouble until someone builds a new Academy." Jack joked.

"We're heading to Rannoch," Tali said.

"Figure they could do with a pair of strong arms to help them rebuild," Garrus added.

"I'll be sticking around, I'm just waiting for orders now," James shrugged.

"Business as usual for me," Liara stood.

"Actually I had an idea about that, there's an old apartment on Intai'sei. The Reapers never hit there and there's no one around for miles..." Shepard offered.

"Do you mean it?"

"Of course I do, Liara. You could have a base and a home."

"You did wonder if I'd settle down after the war."

"I'd say this is halfway there."

"Actually, I've been thinking of asking Feron to be my bondmate."

"He'd be wise to accept. Congratulations, Liara."

"I'm not sure how many Shadow Brokers have made it a family business."

---

Shepard had not paid much attention to the vids of the inauguration ceremony for Councillors Osoba, Esheel, Quentius and Irissa, "hospital food..." he groaned. Though a little clumsy, he could eat by himself. The only real problem was the taste.

"Been there. I told you it was a good thing you missed snack time," Kaidan gave a sympathetic smile.

"They are sure they didn't give me dextro food by mistake, right?"

Kaidan laughed, tenderly placing a hand on Shepard's shoulder "Hackett's speech is about to start."

"The war is over. The Reapers have been defeated. Against all odds, and in the face of the greatest threat this galaxy has ever known, we survived. We suffered many losses. The relays are severely damaged, but we won. This victory belongs to each of us. Every man, woman and child. Every civilisation, on every world. Now as we take our first steps to restoring what we lost we must remember what it took to win. This wasn't a victory by a single fleet, a single army, or even a single species. If this war has taught us anything, it is that we are at our strongest when we work together. And if we can put down our grievances long enough to stop something as powerful as the Reapers, imagine what we can achieve now that they are defeated. It will take time. But we can rebuild everything that was destroyed. Our homes, our worlds, our fleets and defences. All of this and more. Together we can build a future greater than any one of us could imagine. A future paid for by the sacrifices of those who fought and died alongside us. A future that many will never see. And while we still have many challenges ahead of us, we can face them together. And we will honour those who died to give us that future."

A pained look came over Shepard's face, Kaidan turned off the vid. He set aside the food, which by this point Shepard was just moving around on the tray, placed his palm on Shepard's cheek and lent in to gently kiss him on the lips.

# Confess

"Have lots of friends, Shepard. Even at times like this, still send cards. From Conrad and Jenna. Shiala and Zhu's Hope. Helena Blake. Resembles Grissom Academy, from Kahlee Sanders and Jason, Octavia, Isaac, Rodriguez. Reiley and Seanne Bellarmine. Couple? No. Siblings. David Archer? Remember him, from Project Overlord. Glad to know he's safe," Mordin Solus began narrating Shepard's get well soon cards.

"I'm glad to know some things don't change," Shepard smiled, though he was interrupting Mordin to subtly get him to stop.

"No. Change can be dangerous, wouldn't be alive, galaxy would be about to face second Krogan war. Past is set in stone; we hold the line, not draw new ones."

"Kirrahe would be proud of us."

"Yes. Gratifying that his death on Vormire was not in vain."

"Does that sort of thing worry you?"

"Old, Shepard. Need to make the most of short time left."

"I think saving the galaxy counts."

"True but still more I can do. As I said, past set in stone but future is not. Still have a chance to make a real difference, save Salarians from themselves. History cannot repeat."

"What are you going to do?"

"Have friends at STG, still in favour with government for sabotaging genophage cure. Will contact a friend, sparring partner actually."

"Sparring partner?"

"I ended up with a black eye, he broke his fingers. A draw. Went back to drinking. Scientific debates can get heated among my people."

"Clearly."

As Mordin prepared to leave, Kaidan entered the room, "excuse me. Was just leaving."

"Kaidan, this is an old friend..."

"Mordin Solus. We met on Horizon," Kaidan recalled.

"Problematic," Mordin backed away.

"It's okay, I know. I know you, Shepard and I never brought it up because I've got your back."

"Should leave you alone. Private moment."

"Goodbye, Mordin. Stay in touch," Shepard said.

"One call to make. Then to run tests on the seashells!" Mordin was ecstatic at the prospect. Even though it seemed odd to him, it brought a smile to Shepard's face, deep down, he had no regrets about what he did. "I am the very model of a scientist Salarian! I've studied species, Turian, Asari, and Batarian. I'm quite good at genetics (as a subset of biology), because I am an expert (which I know is a tautology)," he started to sing to himself on his way out. Kaidan went to speak but Shepard raised his hand to stop him, knowing what was coming next. "My xenoscience studies range from urban to agrarian. I am the very model of a scientist Salarian!" Mordin could still be heard down the hall.

"How did you know?"

"You never mourned him; you never even put his name on the memorial. You mourned every name you put on that wall. Look I've seen the reports on Wreav, if he had an army of millions of Krogan behind him, the galaxy would be in chaos. You did the right thing, I've never seen you act selfishly or with prejudice. You're a peacemaker. You're standoff with Wrex, when you took the shot against Udina...you act with integrity. I may not be an authority on what the moral thing to do is, but I know you always do the right thing. You're a brilliant leader, Shepard. That you sometimes question yourself makes you an honourable one," Kaidan comforted him.

"I don't deserve you."

"And the galaxy doesn't deserve you," Kaidan then handed him a package, "I picked this up for you."

Shepard opened the package to find it was a model, "An A-61 Mantis!" He grinned, "where did you get this, I thought they stopped making them."

"It came care of a Quarian named Kenn'Amel, does that name mean anything to you?"

"Kenn? I remember him; the kid had all his money stolen during his Pilgrimage. I gave him a thousand credits so he could leave Omega."

"Shepard...you are the paragon of virtue," Kaidan was deeply touched by this story.

Shepard took his hand, "what's going on Kaidan?"

"I finally got through to home; Traynor told me I'm lucky to have friends in high places."

"How's your family?"

"My parents are fine."

"Parents?" Shepard noticed the plural.

"Yeah, my dad made it!" Kaidan beamed with the subtle tears in his eyes.

There was a knock at the entrance to Shepard's room, it was James. "Come in...Commander," Shepard noticed the bars on James' uniform.

"Yeah. I guess they were short on officers," he joked.

"Congratulations, James. You definitely earned it."

"Thanks, Loco," James noticed the model Kaidan had brought, "you bringing him presents, Romeo?"

"Romeo?" Kaidan gave James a blank look.

"I had wondered when you'd give Kaidan a nickname," Shepard smiled.

"I get requests nowadays whether someone suits their name or not," James shrugged.

"So do you have your orders?"

"Yeah, I'm escorting the Rachni queen back to her homeworld. Repairs to the relays have been unbelievable; they're ready to send ships through the network. One ship and one relay at a time for now but still..."

"It's a shame the repairs to the Citadel aren't going as quickly," Kaidan commented.

"Why?" Shepard wondered, "what about the Keepers?"

"Gone, Shepard. Along with everything else the Reapers brought with them."

"So my ship's taking her home, while her workers stay behind to help with repairs for now," James added.

"Your ship?" Shepard noticed, "they gave you your own command?"

"Yep, the SSV Shepard. The boys at drydock nicknamed her Jane but personally I'm going with Lola."

"The Shepard huh? What's she like?"

"How much do you know about Alliance ship construction?"

"I had my hands full, James. I didn't really get to see specifics on what the shipyards were up to." James' omni-tool lit up and a projection of his new ship appeared, Shepard was taken aback by its familiar form, "is that...?"

"She's Normandy class. The Alliance was planning on putting them into service shortly before all hell broke loose and most resources went into maintenance instead of construction."

"So what happened to the Normandy?"

"The ship is being preserved for posterity," Kaidan replied.

"They're making the Normandy a museum piece?"

"They're making the Normandy a museum. They've not decided where though but I plan on putting in a good word for Vancouver."

"The Shepard's going to be taking on all the students we rescued from Grissom Academy which means Tats will be my on my crew," James smiled, then realised Shepard and Kaidan noticed he was smiling, "but she's got this biotic varren that has no sense of humour. I tried playing fetch with it..."

"Been there," Shepard interrupted, "you're a good man, James and a hell of a soldier. Mars, Palaven, Tuchanka, Earth..."

"Waking up Buggy on Eden Prime, watching you enter the Geth consensus, taking point with you and Kaidan in the Citadel archives, kicking Cerberus ass...I'm honoured I got to see so much, sir."

"The honour was mine, Commander. We'll see each other again."

"Damn straight, Loco. Probably after Romeo there proposes," James laughed.

"Hey, James..." Kaidan stopped him on his way out, "I never really mentioned this before but thank you for looking after Shepard while I was in the hospital. You had his back."

"Anytime. And that goes for both of you."

---

"Padok. Good to see you."

"Mordin Solus. It's been a long time," Padok Wiks greeted the projection of his colleague on the QEC.

"Heard Reapers hit several scientific facilities on Sur'kesh."

"Yes, they seemed to concentrate on our research and development centres, they sent their husks after other facilities in what looked like a pressure tactic."

"Have hypothesis. Reapers attempting to force uplifts."

"Force uplifts? Why would the Reapers have wanted that? If we'd accelerated our uplift programs, we'd have had a larger force to combat them."

"Yes but then Reapers harvest them. Reaper strength increase with Yahg, varren... problematic."

"None of that really matters anymore since the Reapers were destroyed."

"True. But provides new opportunity to steer Salarians in better direction. Seen result of Krogan uplift. In danger of repeating past mistakes."

"What are you suggesting, Mordin?" Wiks folded his arms.

"Destroy biological warfare data. Would look like damage from Reaper attack. Then work on new scientific direction instead."

"If the Dalatrass found out..."

"Yes, yes. Marooned on Tuchanka, meat strapped to back. Worth the risk, Padok."

"Mordin, I swear if this goes wrong, you are going down with me."

"Should something go wrong, will gladly take full responsibility. Say I sent a VI through the QEC. Will give my life for my people."

---

"What?" Kaidan asked after clearing away a tray of real food he was able to bring in with Spectre authority. Shepard was getting stronger but wasn't on his feet yet.

"I was just thinking about what you said to James," Shepard replied.

"What about it?" He sat down beside him.

"Well, there are things I never told you."

"Uh-oh."

"No. It's nothing bad. Just..."

"You know you can tell me anything, Shepard."

"When I was fighting the Collectors I kept a picture of you in my cabin."

"A picture of me?"

"Yeah. I knew you needed space to process everything after Horizon but I needed to feel that a part of you was there, so I'd feel like you were helping me make the right decisions. I stared at that picture for so long before hitting the Collector base."

"Well...when you were on your mission, I contacted Councillor Anderson everyday to get updates on you. He was always so happy to tell me about intel you were passing on to the Alliance and all the lives you were saving out there."

"So I guess in a way, you really were there all along."

---

Dalatrass Linron, leader of the Salarian Union, was a domineering woman whose very presence demanded respect, her very entrance into a room became grand. The cutthroat nature of Salarian politics forced intimidation to be standard practice, the inability to command fear would inevitably lead to a coup. Linron was accompanied by two STG soldiers, Colonel Vaykom and Lieutenant Tolan.



"Dalatrass," Wiks stood to attention and spoke respectfully.

"Operative Wiks. I've come to assess the situation," Linron was all about business first, in her eyes Wiks was not worthy of pleasantries.

"I'm afraid I have bad news, the Reaper attack compromised the majority of the facility."

"Are you saying all our data is gone?" Linron did not need to raise her voice to be imposing, Vaykom and Tolan remained silent.

"Not all of it, most was salvaged but we lost biological warfare and uplift research data. I believe however that this may be beneficial."

"How is the loss of critical data ever beneficial?"

"We've seen negative consequences to uplifts."

"If you're about to suggest a moral opposition to our uplift programs..."

Wiks panicked slightly, however due to the nervous nature expected of any Salarian before their Dalatrass, it went unnoticed, "no, our projections indicated the Reapers would force us to use the varren, the Yahg and any other species we were studying against them as a ploy to harvest them and bolster their forces. This is the first time our uplift programs have presented a direct tactical risk. If we adapted our research methods to more passive observations, we could get the same data whilst remaining at a safe distance."

"You make a logical argument. We could covertly study species in greater detail, guide them and then determine whether they are ready for uplifting. The last thing any of us want to see is a repeat of the Krogan Rebellions," it wasn't perfect but it was a step in the right direction, "in the meantime we have a loyal Spectre on Tuchanka ready to present our 'evidence' on the lack of viability with the genophage cure. Operative Solus' deception was flawless."

---

The main door of the shuttle opened after landing on Tuchanka, a triumphantly smug Urdnot Wreav looked out to his world, toppled Reaper corpses decorated the Horizon, but the faces of his fellow Krogan were filled with sorrow. Urdnot Grunt stood beside Wreav, despite the scene presented to them, Grunt's sense of victory was not diminished. Wreav leapt from the shuttle to demand an update from Urdnot Dagg.

"How was the genophage not cured? I knew it was wrong to trust a Salarian!" Wreav yelled.

"Wreav sit down," Grunt growled.

"Don't tell me what to do," even for a Krogan there was an exceptional level of rage in Wreav's voice.

"Gentleman," the Spectre stepped forward.

"Another Salarian!"

"Jondum Bau, Special Tactics and Recon. I've analysed the current atmospheric data on Tuchanka as well as personally going through every salvageable piece of debris from the Shroud. I believe I've figured out what went wrong with the genophage cure."

"Well..."

"It seems the genetic samples were to blame. The sample from the female subject does indeed show immunity to the genophage. However the sample from the male subject was not... potent. Therefore the dispersed mutagen ceased to be viable."

"That 'male subject' was me!"

"So it's your fault we're stuck with the genophage," Grunt stood.

"How dare you. This Salarian is lying!"

"He's a Spectre, Wreav. Like Shepard. He risked his life for the Krogan."

"Shepard...how do we know he didn't sabotage the cure? He only cared about saving his own world."

"With you leading the Krogan, even I would sabotage a genophage cure."

"Watch your tongue tank-bred."

"Wreav...you're too stupid to live."

---

"Hey, Commander," Joker smiled.

"Joker," Shepard was happy to see his old friend, a female mech walked in behind Joker.

"Hello, Shepard," the mech smiled and spoke in a friendly voice he knew, her eyes shone blue and behind the mouth a blue light flashed, moving sideways in a familiar fashion.

"Edi..." Shepard wanted to smile but instead his face drooped.

"Is there something wrong with my platform?" Edi asked.

"No, it's just...I thought you died. Because of me."

"I don't understand, Shepard."

"Before activating the Crucible I met the Catalyst, the intelligence the Leviathan created. It told me if I chose to destroy the Reapers I would destroy all synthetics, you, the Geth, even I would die. But it gave me other choices; the energy of the Crucible could be used to control the Reapers like the Illusive Man wanted or the option to merge organic and synthetic life to end conflict and create a new DNA across the galaxy, I found those ideas to be... abominations. It told me both of those choices would have killed me and I didn't want to lose everything I had. I took a gamble and risked your life. I'm sorry."

"Shepard, I would risk non-functionality for you. And I too would've done whatever it took to destroy the Reapers. Even if I had died, I would have found peace knowing Jeff would be safe and I would live on in his memory," she tried to console him.

"Fortunately she was quick and clever and managed to lobotomise herself," Joker explained in his typical light-hearted way.

---

Even for Krogan their fight was brutal, but only one was left standing in the end. The victor tossed the defeated corpse down to rot at the mercy of the hot Tuchanka sun. Grunt paid no respects to Wreav, leaving his body where it fell, instead turning his attention to the state of the Kogan. The clans were dividing and dissolving, Urdnot seemed the only relatively full clan and the majority of those remaining on Tuchanka. He knew he would have to rally his own clan at the very least but it seemed clear to Grunt that he would witness the end of his people, an assumption made even more disturbing as a band of Krogan transports headed towards the Ninmah Cluster.

## Build

"This everything you need?" Kaidan asked.

"Glue, brushes, Alliance colours. Yep," Shepard answered.

"I'll try not to get caught. Pretty sure this is misuse of the fabricator."

"What's the point in having power if you can't use it once in a while?" Shepard joked.

There was a knock and a friendly, familiar voice that drew Shepard's attention, "is this a bad time?"

"Admiral?" Kaidan stood to attention in front of the unknown woman.

"No need for formalities, Kaidan. After all, we're practically family," she hugged the confused man.

"Kaidan, this is my mother, Hannah Shepard," Shepard informed him.

Kaidan relaxed, "wow. It's so great to finally meet you. I've heard a lot about you."

"You too, Kaidan. Shepard's been gushing about you for years," Hannah smiled.

"Gushing? And you call him 'Shepard' too?"

"He's always preferred to go by his surname. All those times playing soldier and then joining up at eighteen. He gets so much from his father."

"That's the first time you've mentioned him as far as I can remember," Shepard interrupted.

"You've never really asked."

"I thought it would upset you."

"Well I've nearly lost my only child far too many times to put my feelings first."

"I don't want you to think that..."

"It's okay. Your father never liked being called by his first name; I can't remember ever calling him by it. He was an Alliance man, passionate from a very young age just like you. Your middle name...I wanted to make sure a part of him would always be with you."

"Really?"

"Everyone shortened it. You know you're the spitting image of him. I never really fell in love until I met Van. Guess the apple didn't fall from the tree. That's how I knew you were special,

Kaidan. Shepard had boyfriends but moving between ships they were all short-term. He never spoke of them the same way he did about you."

"I never really fell in love until I met Shepard either," Kaidan spoke up.

"Which is why you're perfect for each other. It made me so happy he found someone and I knew you two would work out, as far back as when you were on the old Normandy. I just knew. Still making your model ships?"

"Yes but I'm not doing them alone anymore," Shepard replied.

"I was just about to go out and get supplies. Can I get you anything, Admiral?" Kaidan asked.

"No thank you, Kaidan. And please call me Hannah."

"Hey, Kaidan..." Shepard had noticed Kaidan's gun was still lying beside the bed, he picked it up to give to Kaidan but as he did, he was paralysed. It was the feel of the gun in his hand alone that seemed to bring everything to the surface. Singlehandedly holding off an army of Batarians on Elysium, losing three friends on Virmire, the suicide mission against the Collectors, the Reaper War. Every creature, every mercenary, every bullet and every explosion flooded back, the mere memory hit Shepard with enough force that he dropped the gun.

"Shepard!" Kaidan hurried over to Shepard who was shaking and breathing heavily.

"I'll get a doctor," Hannah hurried out.

"What happened?" Shepard didn't answer him, in fact he didn't even look him in the eye. Kaidan saw fear in him, and shame, "I'm here, Shepard. I want to be your strength. Your soft place to land. Talk to me. Please."

"I can't do this anymore, Kaidan," Shepard was still trembling.

"Do what?"

"This. This life. I don't want to be a soldier anymore. I can't," tears filled Shepard's eyes, Kaidan couldn't think of the right words so simply held Shepard in his arms. It was all he could do to make him feel protected.

---

"So we are agreed, the Admiralty Board will be reorganised into the ruling committee. Once our society is up and running we will step down allowing new members to be voted in. Members will take the name 'vas Rannoch' whereas each city will take the name of the ship the materials were derived from, preserving the culture our people have forged over the past three centuries. In time new cities will be named after ancient cities and colonies," Shala'Raen vas Rannoch summarised.

"I have a suggestion for the name of our capital," the newly-renamed Tali'Zorah vas Rannoch stood.

"Please."

"Reegar."

"I think that's a great idea, Tali," Zaal'Koris vas Rannoch agreed.

"What about the Geth?" Han'Gerrel vas Rannoch asked.

"We have begun work on our new hub, the dissemination of Legion's personality allowed us to maintain individuality when the Old Machine upgrades were destroyed however we are again a networked intelligence. In organic terms we share a collective unconscious. We wish to name the construct Legion, it was an avatar of our people and made everything we have today possible," the Geth prime unit Liaison explained, it had greeted Raan on Rannoch after the Reaper was killed and had co-ordinated the Geth forces on Earth, it was the representative of the Geth people and shared equal status within the Quarian committee.

"If your people need any assistance we will be happy to send you a team of engineers," Daro'Xen vas Rannoch offered, after working directly with the Geth and even having her life saved by them, her opinion had drastically changed.

"Your offer is appreciated, Daro'Xen. However we have chosen to build the structure in the harshest parts of Rannoch's desert, it seemed the most logical choice given the vast space and barren nature of the land."

"If that is everything, this meeting is adjourned," Raan concluded.

---

Garrus had remained outside the meeting room; he had the authority to enter however the decontamination process caused him discomfort.

"Garrus."

"Tali?" It was the first time he'd seen her face. She smiled at him, "you're even more beautiful than I imagined," he ran his hand down the cybernetic detailing on her forehead; there was the faint shimmer of binary code in the sunlight. Her skin was starting to show subtle signs of pastel lilac pigments, it was slightly darker around her reflective white eyes which seemed to make them glow.

"The Geth therapy is proving even more effective than we first predicted, we're even starting to return to our natural skin tone. I can have my mask off for a few hours each day and with their enhanced filtration systems, almost every room on the planet is now a clean room. Xen predicts we'll be completely suit-free by the end of the decade."

"Really? That's amazing."

"It kind of feels like we're losing a piece of our cultural heritage though."

"Well maybe you should suggest a holiday, celebrate the day you retook Rannoch and honour the Migrant ancestors who hoped to see their homeworld some day."

"Mr Vakarian you're a genius," Tali hugged him; though Garrus hugged her back she could tell he was distracted. "What's wrong?"

"I received a message today from one of the medical camps on Earth."

"Earth?"

"Primarch Victus didn't make it."

"I'm so sorry, Garrus. I know he was a friend."

"Palaven Command has already selected the new Primarch."

"Who is it?"

"Me...I'm Primarch of Palaven."

"Congratulations."

"I...wow, it's just not sunk in yet."

"Primarch Vakarian. Guess we're both rebuilding our worlds."

"The Primarch and the Admiral? Could be the next Fleet and Flotilla."

"I think they're more likely to make a vid about Shepard and Kaidan first."

"The Soldier and the Sentinel?"

"Sounds like a hit."

"As long as no-one expects me to watch it. I really should contact Palaven and set up communications with our fleets and bases," it pained Garrus to cut their time short. "Besides I'll probably just be a distraction from your work," he joked.

"Only from the neck down," Tali smiled, Garrus' face lit up seeing Tali really smile. "I promised Veetor I'd go see him, he's taking Kal's death pretty hard."

"Losing the person you love...I can't imagine what I'd have done if I'd lost you; to Saren, the Collectors or the Reapers."

"We were lucky. We can't take a single day for granted."

---

"Just give it to me straight, Doc," Shepard was dreading Chakwas' assessment.

"I'm afraid this appears to be PTSD, Commander," Chakwas said softly.

"After everything, why now?"

"To answer that we'd have to look at this from a psychological perspective. How is your mental state different now?"

"I guess, it's over. Life as a soldier everything was just everyday life but now..." he looked up at a worried Kaidan, "now I see myself with a future, I have someone to live for, you've lost me too many times, Kaidan. I can't risk hurting you like that again."

"It was never your fault," Kaidan lowered himself and gently hugged Shepard, kissing him on the forehead.

Shepard held up the model gunship and admired its sheen in the room's light. Kaidan cleared up, but couldn't help smiling at Shepard.

He carefully slotted himself onto Shepard's bed, "do you need anything?"

"No," Shepard smiled before cuddling up to him, "just this."



# Walk

His legs were strong but his balance was askew, he was managing to walk forward but veered to the sides on occasion. Chakwas and Michel stood either side but Shepard refused to let them help and Kaidan was not far behind him. He needed to this for himself, though he made sure they all knew he was grateful and not just being stubborn for the sake of it.

After several steps, Shepard lost his balance and fell forward, luckily caught by Kaidan's biotic stasis field, "damn!" Shepard gave a defeated sigh.

"You're doing great," Kaidan smiled sympathetically.

"He's right, Commander," Michel agreed.

"You're making remarkable progress," Chakwas added.

"Kaidan..." Shepard sighed.

"I'm not going anywhere," Kaidan helped him stand up straight again.

"I don't want you to see me so weak."

"You want to know what I see? I see someone strong and confident. Someone I admire, respect and enjoy being with...someone handsome. Always thought that was a tall order but I've never had to look far. Shepard."

"I will do this!" he said with renewed determination.

"Your resolve is almost Prothean, Commander."

"Javik."

"I'm sorry I could not visit sooner," the Prothean shook his hand.

"I think you've earned a short break," Chakwas began to leave Shepard's room.

"It's good to see you again, Javik," Michel smiled.

"Likewise, Doctor," Javik nodded as she left, "Commander, I have located the Cronian Nebula, I wanted to come by before I left."

"You are sure about this?" Shepard asked, he knew this was what Javik wanted but retained a small hope he could convince his friend to live.

"I told you it's..."

"How it should be."

"I have helped Liara with her book, after defeating the Reapers my mission is over. I have fulfilled my duty to my people, what is left for me to do? Live among the Hanar as their king? No, I must rejoin my people. The future belongs to you."

"Rejoin your...wait, what?" Kaidan realised what Javik was saying, Shepard gently stroked his arm.

"In my cycle, the joining of two legendary heroes would have been honoured across the entire Empire. Should you two wish to have a formal ceremony; the ghosts of every soul that has ever lived will attend to celebrate you."

"It's been an honour, Javik," Shepard shook his hand.

"The honour was mine...Shepard."

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"Commander, I hear their minting a new medal especially for you," Hackett said.

"I was..." Shepard started.

"Don't tell me you were just doing your job. You saved the Galaxy from the Reapers after Sovereign, the Alpha Relay and the Crucible. You took down the Collectors without a single casualty. Hell you were considered a war hero after Elysium, but with every mission you've accomplished on your service record..."

"When you put it that way," he reluctantly agreed.

"I'm afraid I have to give you some bad news. A former associate of yours, Kelly Chambers committed suicide in her cell shortly after we took down the Illusive Man's base."

"She was loyal to Cerberus to the end. I knew she was spying on me for the Illusive Man, she attempted to ingratiate herself but I restricted my conversations with her to ship and crew status reports."

"Everyone flirts with you," Kaidan sighed.

"But how many succeeded?"

"I'm still sorry to have to tell you," Hackett added.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news of my own. I'm uh, I'm leaving the Alliance, Admiral. Doctor Chakwas believes I have PTSD," it wasn't easy for him to say.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Shepard."

"Everything you said about me and here I am now on the same level as a Cat6 discharge."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you, Shepard. I don't see a dishonourable discharge, all I see is an honoured veteran taking a much deserved retirement."



# Embrace

"Shepard, your progress has been exceptional. I'm ready to release you, I think you'll do well recuperating at home now," Chakwas smiled.

"I guess I have been taking up a lot of your space for a while now," Shepard smiled.

"There is one thing. Remember our agreement? We'd share a bottle of Serrice ice brandy every year and it's my turn to buy."

"Doctor, I..." Shepard paused for a moment, "I think that's a great idea."

"Please, Alenko, join us," Chakwas offered, knowing Shepard would want him to stay but be too polite to invite someone in on their tradition.

"I'll get the glasses," Kaidan smiled.

They drank slowly, Chakwas regaled them with anecdotes of Joker insisting on calling Jack 'ma'am' but she also had sombre moments, she recalled how she spent a great deal of time with Adams after the Collector abductions. Then she told stories of what she was doing on the Citadel during the war.

As their evening drew to a close, something dawned on Chakwas, "Ah, Shepard...you know, I just realised...you've never called me by my first name."

"Well, neither have you," Shepard replied.

"And I never will. You are Commander Shepard, hero of the Citadel, conqueror of the Collectors, saviour of the galaxy! Using your first name just disrespects everyone you've fought for, alive or gone."

"That makes no sense," he chuckled slightly.

"Especially since he's not a commander anymore," Kaidan added.

"Consider it a lady's prerogative then," Chakwas insisted. "Come let's have a toast!"

"To a woman I'm happy to call my friend! I've been lucky to know you, Karin," Shepard made a point of using her name, "and to the man I love, I can't imagine life without you, Kaidan."

"And to you, dear friends. It's been my great honour to be part of your journey...Commander Shepard," she equally made a point of calling him by his former rank.

"To life, friends and love," Kaidan toasted.

"And good fortune to us all!"

"Kaidan...there's one last thing I need to do," Shepard realised.

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The Normandy was placed in Vancouver, the same city Shepard was going to settle down in, he explored the ship, lingering in the cabin.

Liara's time capsule was on his desk, he played a segment "Earth's most famous officer was born and raised in space. Shepard could handle any weapon in the galaxy. The Alliance never saw a deadlier soldier. He was a soldier and a leader - one who made peace where he could," he remembered the day she recorded it and hearing her say it was a powerful experience for him.

"Are you ready?" Kaidan wrapped his arm around Shepard's shoulder.

"Yeah..." Shepard sighed; while there were so many good times he could remember fondly on this ship, there was a sour hint of pain underneath.

They headed down the corridor to the memorial wall, Liara had left a message that she had visited recently to fix Javik's name on it. But there was one name that Shepard felt was missing. David Anderson. Without him, none of what Shepard accomplished would've been possible. He felt the galaxy needed to remember him as much as any other member of the Normandy crew. He took the time to study the wall; he remembered each name, the names on the dog tags he recovered on Alchera, Ashley Williams, Charles Pressley, Legion, Richard Jenkins, Steve Cortez, Thane Krios, Urdnot Wrex and now Javik. As with the names of the Alliance cruisers lost saving the Destiny Ascension, he would never forget. Anderson's plaque was placed in the centre of the wall; Shepard stood back and held Kaidan for physical and emotional support. He was ready to go home.

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There was a crate outside of the house; Shepard read the note, "from Urdnot Grunt...Krogan clan chief?"

"Political shake-ups on Tuchanka?" Kaidan wondered.

"Must be," Shepard agreed opening the crate, when he did, he grinned, "Urz!" Shepard hugged the affectionate varren.

"Fish, a hamster and a varren in the same house."

"I promise this will be the last pet."

"Okay. But he's not sleeping on our bed."

Shepard tapped Urz encouraging him to run to the garden and turned his attention back to Kaidan, "being here with you, it means everything to me," he held him close.

"There's something I've been wanting to ask you for a while. I've just not known how."

"Oh?"

Kaidan gently released himself from Shepard and got down on one knee, "John Vanderloo Shepard. Will you marry me?" He took out a box and opened it; inside was the victory ring Edi had given Shepard.

"Yes I will," Shepard helped Kaidan up and back into their embrace, "I'd like to spend my life with you."

"I'm the luckiest man alive."

"No. You're the second luckiest," Shepard kissed him, it was tender yet passionate, it felt as if they were only people in the galaxy.

Kaidan rested his forehead against Shepard's and looked into his eyes, "I love you. Until the end of time."

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