

Out of the Realm of Death

FORWARD:

So, God help me, I wrote a piece of fan fiction that has damn near turned into a novel in its own right. Why did I do it? Because like many people who had invested hours of play in the Mass Effect franchise I had become obsessed, and when the ending left me depressed and devastated I found that I needed to say farewell to the companions and the universe I had come to love in a way that didn't leave me both angry and broken-hearted.

If you enter into these games as an immersive piece of role-playing you end up becoming emotionally involved; in your character, in the relationships you form with the companions, in the story. You craft your Shepard and make him or her your own as well. If you're a crazy writer like me you imbue this character with a backstory, with experiences that predate the events of the game. You envision scenes and conversations that take place during the game, but don't appear in the game itself.

There is also the universe which was so fully realized that it began to feel like a character. Which meant that seeing destruction on the Citadel, or Thessia, or Earth affected you emotionally.

Because of this level of involvement and because you make ethical and romantic choices for your character you invest a part of yourself in a very different way from being a passive viewer of a movie or television show, or even a reader.

In those pursuits the writer sets the agenda. We always hope that our readers/viewers will identify with the protagonist and experience the adventure vicariously, but as a reader/viewer you know your input is limited. But not in gaming. There is a new dynamic that, if anything, requires even more careful plotting and god help the designers who fail to “stick the landing”. As BioWare and EA learned to their dismay.

During the intervening months after finishing Mass Effect 2 and waiting for the third game to arrive I pondered: How would my sparing the Rachni Queen back in game one affect the outcome? How would all those minerals I'd gathered in game two be utilized in the final battle? Which of the fascinating side missions would prove to be critical to the final outcome? Would it be scanning the Keepers for Chorbans in Mass Effect 1? The dying sun on Haestrom when you rescue Tali in Mass Effect 2?

In due course Mass Effect 3 arrived. I loaded the game, and prepared for a creative, satisfying ending because I'd seen BioWare deliver with the magnificent Dragon Age: Origins, and Mass Effect 1 and 2.

But alas the ending fell sadly short because critical rules for good story telling had been broken. You can find a number of posts in the blog section of this website detailing the problems with the game, but I'll try to summarize what has been an ongoing analysis here.

Before we get to the bad let me praise the good. The things the game did well.

The game play was very smooth and effective. The death of Thane -- deeply moving and so well done. The curing of the Genophage and Mordin's sacrifice — magnificent. Tali's joy at recovering her home world. The private moment on the Citadel with Garrus when you go shooting -- priceless. The exchange with Joker regarding Shepard's emotional state. Keeping Joker and Garrus as the touchstones throughout all three games. The male Shepard/Kaidan romance -- elegantly crafted, and the pacing was perfect. It is, in fact, the foundation for this story.

And the final farewells, "I'll meet you at the bar." Leaving Kaidan, sharing moments with Liara and Wrex, Tali and EDI.

But.... But..... None of it was enough to offset that horrible ending. So here's my analysis of why the wheels came off.

First rule -- deliver on your promise. Whether it's a book or a movie or a game we as writers/designers make a promise to our readers/viewers/players. Within a few pages or a few minutes we should have given our audience a sense of the journey we're going to take together. This was done perfectly in Dragon Age.

Within 20 minutes of play you know the problem is the archdemon, and you as one of the last Grey Wardens are going to have to face this monstrous threat. And indeed that is the final confrontation. Yes, you are offered alternatives -- noble self-sacrifice, the weasel -- allowing another to make the killing stroke, dark bargain that allows you to live and receive the accolades due a hero, but these are choices, and whichever ending you select there is a final scene that gives closure to the journey we took with our companions, and you have a sense that your actions effectively dealt with the problem.

Mass Effect 1 gave us the promise -- within 20 to 30 minutes of play you know the problem -- Reapers. So far so good. But Reapers are too big, too inchoate to grasp so the designers and the writers, ably led by Drew

Karpyshyn, wisely personified the villain in the person of Saren as a stand in for Sovereign.

This need for a personified villain becomes a bit shaky in Mass Effect 2. The Collectors were wonderfully creepy, but it wasn't until Harbinger started "assuming direct control", and trash talking Shepard that it became personal and powerful. Which meant that Harbinger needed to be the antagonist of the third and final game. The ultimate Reaper. The stand-in for all his kind. The path to victory lay through Harbinger.

Instead Harbinger is nowhere to be found in Mass Effect 3, and while he appears near the conclusion of the game he rarely speaks. He has no role. Instead we were suddenly confronted by the Catalyst who had never been even hinted at in the earlier games. Some will argue that Vendetta's reference to a "controlling influence" on Thessia counts as foreshadowing, but Thessia is the second to the last mission before the Cerberus base. All that remains before the climax on Earth is Horizon which is presented as more support for the horrors of The Illusive Man's pursuit of control. So as foreshadowing it's far too late to be effective. This kind of set up needed to occur way back in Mass Effect 1.

Which violates rule number 2. You don't get to ring in a new villain in the final pages of a book or minutes of a movie or a game. That's a party foul. Whatever is going to be critical in the end needs to be set up in the beginning. The solution to the problem must be suggested in the opening moves. The villain must be present. Otherwise it feels like a cheat. For Mass Effect to truly have been a brilliant game, possibly the most brilliant game ever designed, the Crucible and the Catalyst needed to be laid in early in Mass Effect 1.

There's a subsection to rule number 2. Your villains can't be stupid. Otherwise it cheapens your hero's victory. If you spend any time analyzing the final scene with the Catalyst you realize it makes no sense. Not just because of the circular logic about synthetics and organics living in peace and working together -- "Hello, have you noticed we're all working together? There's this mucking big Geth fleet fighting alongside all the organics to kick the Reapers asses." -- but because if the Citadel plus the Crucible equal big weapon that will kill you, and the controller of the Reapers knows that, and in fact he/it has constructed a little three color panel in anticipation of the day when someone would want to use the weapon -- why would you not have the Reapers go first to the Citadel and blast it into its component atoms?

Next: There was no option for a “happy ending”. I know that happy endings have fallen into disfavor, certainly among the literary set, but let me recommend them to any aspiring writers out there. I think humans are hardwired for happy endings. We tell stories of how brave heroes and heroines overcome obstacles as object lessons, and to bring us a respite from the trials and tribulations of real life.

True love does conquer all, David can defeat Goliath, etc. That doesn't mean there isn't a place for the bittersweet ending or even tragedy, but even in tragedy there is a kernel of hope. Consider Shakespeare's King Lear. It is a tragedy, but there is joy because Lear and Cordelia are reconciled at the end.

There is also the concept of a hero or heroine “earning” their happy ending. They have to have come through darkness and tribulation, and won the right to find peace. Shepard's experiences throughout all three games more than earned the character that happy ending. The fact you were bluntly informed that no matter what choice you selected you were going to die made it all seem as if it had been for naught.

Finally a creator needs to know on a thematic level what is this story about? Because of the change in the writing team I think the point of the journey was lost and hence the three horrifying final choices.

From the very first Shepard is presented as a person who is willing to accept diversity, to build consensus, to find strength in unity by crafting differing outlooks into a coherent whole. Javik states that the Protheans formed no alliances. They were conquerors and rulers. Their subject people could not become allies because that had never been the relationship. That disunity was presented as a reason for the Protheans ultimate defeat and destruction. He marvels at the alliance that Shepard and the crew of the Normandy has built. Therefore the success of Shepard's alliance should have done more than merely factor in the final victory. It should have been critical to that victory.

Two of the choices offered are antithetical to that theme. Especially synthesis which is clearly presented as the "best" ending, and which, frankly, I found to be the most horrifying of the three options and antithetical to Shepard's nature and every action leading up to the ending. A story which has praised diversity working in concert to then end with an act that forces unity on every living thing and at the choice of one fallible human? It felt more like rape than some kind of evolution.

Control felt equally as flawed. You had just spent an entire game with everyone telling The Illusive Man that his dream of controlling the Reapers

was madness, but somehow because it's Shepard it will be okay? You are pinning the survival of every living being on one fallible human. And both of these endings were exemplified by The Illusive Man and Saren — both villains. Then they show us David Anderson, the beloved commander and mentor, and tell us destroy isn't the best choice? Even with the poison pill -- that you will kill the Geth and EDI it still feels like the most honest choice and the one most true to Shepard's character.

The only other ending that felt in character for Shepard was the added "refuse". Which ends with the player realizing that the Reapers won and everyone you cared about has been reduced to Reaper goo. It felt less like an honest option and much more like the companies punishing the players for being upset. Telling your readers, viewers or players that they are stupid and punishing them for their reactions is probably not the best business model available.

So, back to this story. What I ended up writing is not a detailed retelling of the finale of the game. The fans who came up with the indoctrination theory have done that very well, and I recommend a Google search of those recut finales.

There is also the MEHEM ending which is also very well done.

Instead I chose to build on an event from game one that I think could have been used to greater effect, and made it the basis for the ultimate victory.

But the bulk of this story takes place after that victory.

This is a story of the aftermath. What happens after Shepard takes that shaky breath in the red ending. Initially my intention was to write a light, comedic romp about a wedding spinning out of control, but as I began to actually look at the events that Shepard had endured I realized that could not stand. So this became a meditation on the burden of fame, of survivor's guilt, of PTSD, and the redemptive power of love. It is romantic -- I've just been in that mood. It is also bittersweet because there needed to be a cost, and just as in Lord of the Rings it ends with farewells. I acknowledged the sadness that accompanies the breaking of a fellowship.

I have also chosen to ignore certain DLC's that have been created. They didn't fit into my vision of how events would have played out, and frankly they feel rather pointless since none of the DLC's affect the ending.

Obviously this is my Shepard. Everyone else has their Shepard as real and vital to them as my commander is to me, but I hope you will enjoy this novella.

I would like to give a shout out to my friend, Eric Kelley who is also Mass

Effect addict, and additionally a very fine writer. He channels Garrus better than anyone I know, and provided some of the bon mots as I brainstormed scenes .

I will be posting a section a week. Enjoy and take it in the spirit it is offered. As a testament to a fascinating universe and great characters.

One final caveat. This is a hard PG13 story. There is strong language, and mentions of sex. It is not intended for young readers.

OUT OF THE REALM OF DEATH

“The Keepers are almost impossible to scan... after centuries here we still don't know anything about them... if you continue gathering data for me, Commander, imagine what we might learn.” Chorban's silly long Salarian face as he begged for help. Something so innocent. Scan the Keepers. Make a few bucks.

In the midst of the Collector crises Chorban again. An email. *“The Keepers...They're supposed to react to... something, some signal or something....”*

Filing it under -- tell me something I don't already know. Ignoring it. Foolish and stupid on his part.

Anderson looking weary and battered *“They've moved the Citadel to Earth and every Reaper in Christendom is guarding it. And the arms are closed. We can't dock the Crucible until they're opened.”*

Hackett, despair pulling at the muscles of his face. *“They'll cut us to pieces long before we reach that point. One Reaper, Sovereign, tore hell out of the Citadel and the Alliance fleet.”*

EDI interrupting. *“Forgive me, Commander. It is impossible for me not to monitor everything that occurs on this ship. I am not, technically, eavesdropping.”*

“What is it, EDI?”

“Communication suggests that information might flow in both directions.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The link between the Keepers and the Reapers.”

“Yeah, so?”

“I believe there is a way to use Chorban’s research on the Keepers to send a signal to the Reapers rather than the other way. Much of my hardware and software is Reaper derived. If you get me to the Citadel I can send a signal that I am fairly confident will disrupt Reaper system for some brief period of time. It may be sufficient for delivery of the Crucible.”

London. The haunting cry of the sirens as the sky wept. That final briefing with his companions, old and new.

“Our only mission is to get EDI to the beam and onto the Citadel. It’d be good if some of us made it too. Someone to open the arms of the station while EDI links with the Keepers, but she is our priority.”

The AI her expression serene, but what else would you expect? There were limited emotions she could mimic. Or did she actually feel them? Joker's voice over the radio, on a private channel begging him to keep her safe.

Grim nods from the others. Liara her jaw tight trying to look tough, but only revealing how terribly frightened she was. Wrex gently touching Eve's shoulder.

Jack glaring at him, then turning back to brief her students, Tali giving a final check to her Omni-tool and fingering the rock he had given her on Rannoch. Samara, Grunt, Jacob, Miranda, Zaeed and James. Garrus, his hand heavy on Shepard's shoulder, *"Go out there and give them hell."*

Anderson, his captain, his mentor. A hard buffet on the back. *"Ready for this, Shepard?"*

"Yes, sir!"

And finally Kaidan. Standing with his biotic team. The brown eyes filled with worry. Stepping up to Kaidan and hearing himself say,

"I'm holding you and your team in reserve --"

Kaidan's response like summer lightning. *"Yeah, not happening!"*

"That's an order, Major."

Watching the worry turn to hurt and desperation. Turning away so he wouldn't embarrass himself. Wouldn't give voice to his emotions. Wouldn't find himself unable to leave. Kaidan grabbing him, one final embrace. And still he stayed silent unable to express all that he felt. Finally he grated out, *"You have your orders."*

Running, sweat bathing his sides, ears ringing from explosions, and the blare of Reapers. Soldiers and friends going down all around him. EDI sprinting at his side. That final blast from Harbinger. EDI's voice calling him back. *"Shepard! Get up! You can do it."* And somehow he had despite physical agony so soul searing he had longed for death.

EDI with her shoulder under his arm, supporting him, helping him as he limped toward the beam. Floating and then the horror of the Citadel. A mighty sepulcher. The bodies of men, women and children in tumbled heaps. Finding their way to a control room, and a Keeper still manning its station on a death ship. EDI and the Keeper wrapped in a strange embrace.

He and Anderson working the boards that controlled the station. Only to be confronted by The Illusive Man, physically no longer human. Somehow Shepard had touched the humanity within, but not before the Cerberus leader had forced him to harm Anderson.

Bleeding, staggering back to the controls to open the station's arms. EDI her eyes gone silver, flashing as she opened the link between herself and the Reapers..

The sound like a universe screaming as EDI backwashed a signal to the Reapers. For a few precious seconds their weapons died, and they tumbled randomly. The Alliance flotilla, the Crucible at its center racing toward them, docking. Shepard preparing to fire when the child appeared, and outlined his choices. The final lure. The offer of peace through synthesis.

EDI writhing as the Reapers sent back code designed to destroy her.

“Don't listen to him, Shepard! He is the Father of Lies.”

Realizing this was the enemy with a different face. Realizing this was peace not in unity with diversity, but in horrifying uniformity. Harbinger!

Slamming his hand onto the controls.

Explosions. EDI, voice synthesizer failing, stuttering, burring and buzzing.

“I will hold the beam open as long as I can, Shepard. Now go.”

The trickle of blood down his side. Pain that welled and receded with each beat of his heart, longing to sink down onto the floor and rest. Did he have the grit to fight for life one last time? Did he deserve to?

EDI seeming to sense his exhaustion, indecision and grief. *“Shepard, your death will restore not one life.”* He sank to his knees. *“Shepard! Death is not salvation. Live and remember. I beg you, go.”*

Staggering to his feet, hand pressed to his side, EDI’s final scream.

“GO!”

#

“I had to. I had to. I had to.”

The mumbled words yanked Major Kaiden Alenko from a sleep he hadn’t intended to take. The sudden move forcibly brought home the fact that his neck was a pillar of agony from sleeping in a chair at the side of Commander Noel Shepard’s hospital bed.

It had been months since Kaidan had dug his commander out of the rubble near where the glowing transport beam had once connected the besieged and dying Earth with the massive Citadel space station. No one had known what the Crucible would do, but when your only other option is death you take the risk. The Crucible had triggered, destroying the invading Reapers, damaging the mass effect relays that linked the galaxy together, and damaging the Citadel to the point it was in an ever decaying orbit. A new threat to a planet struggling to recover.

What exactly Shepard had done on the station was mystery. What had become of Admiral David Anderson, and EDI, and Cerberus's Illusive Man -- also mysteries.

And no answers because the man who had literally saved the galaxy had lain first in a natural coma, then in an induced coma as the doctors had grown skin to graft over the burns, and organs to replace rotting Cerberus implants. Three days ago the doctors had begun to bring him out of the coma, but he'd developed an infection, and now he lay in this fevered, nightmare-filled sleep. Neither Kaidan's touch or the quiet conversations he had held with Noel had any effect.

Kaidan came each day after finishing his duties to sit at Shepard's bedside, to comb the blond hair -- a genetic rarity among modern humans -- and to sweep depilatory across the gaunt cheeks. He knew Shepard hated being unkempt. The light caught in the grey that now flecked Shepard's hair. Even though Kaidan was older by three years, Shepard had always seemed the elder. Maybe it was the attitude. Noel tended to be serious to the point of sometimes seeming taciturn.

Kaidan knew he had a sunnier disposition. Now Shepard's appearance matched his demeanor.

“Joker, don’t hate me.” Tears seeped from beneath his eyelids, and ran across Shepard’s temples and into his sideburns.

The muttered words were the closest Noel had come to consciousness, and Kaidan leaned in close to the fever cracked lips struggling to hear. Shepard suddenly sat bolt upright, IV lines tearing from his arms, and cracked heads with Kaidan.

“EDI!” he shouted. The blue eyes were wide, terrified and haunted.

Kaidan grabbed his shoulders. “Shepard! Noel! You’re all right. Calm down.”

The soldier tried to hit him, but he was so weak it was a feather’s touch against Kaidan’s jaw. “Noel! It’s me. Kaidan.”

“Kaidan.” The tone was questioning as if he couldn’t fit meaning to the word. Shepard closed his eyes, opened them and for the first time seemed to actually see Kaidan. “You’re dead. I heard it whispered. Over and over. Harbinger told me. He killed you. You’re not real.”

Kaidan pressed his lips hard on Shepard’s. Pulled back. “Is that real enough for you?”

Shepard gazed up at him with a look of dawning wonder that gave way to joy.

Kaidan braced himself for a frenzied hug. Instead Shepard wearily laid his head on Kaidan's shoulder with the air of a child finding safe haven. Kaidan stroked his hair.

"It's all right. Every thing's all right now," he said gently.

"No, it's not. I killed them," Shepard whispered.

"Yes. Yes you did. Thank you. And as for Harbinger, he was the first of those fuckers to be cut to pieces and sent to the smelters."

Shepard clutched at Kaidan's arms. "No, not just the Reapers. I killed the Geth, and I let EDI hold the beam. I left her behind to die." The baritone voice was hoarse, the result of months of having a trach tube down his throat.

"Yes, a lot of Geth died, those that had any Reaper programming. It'll be significant, but it's by no means all of them, and the ones that remain are out at the relays working with the Rachni to get us linked back up with the rest of the galaxy."

"The relays can be fixed?"

"They can, but it's slow going, and we had to prioritize. Palavan and Rannoch were first so we could get food in here for the Turians and Quarians."

"EDI....?"

“There’s not much left of her,” Kaidan admitted uncomfortably. “Just bits and pieces of her program aboard the Normandy. Miranda is helping Joker try to recreate some of it.”

“Joker will never forgive me,” Shepard said bleakly. “I promised to take care of her.”

Dr. Chakwas burst into the room. “My patient finally wakes up, and you don’t tell me? I have to get this off the monitors? Out of the way, Major.”

Kaidan moved aside though Noel’s hands clung to him to the last moment. Chakwas ran her Omni-tool across Shepard’s body. “Congratulations, Shepard, amazingly you’re going to live. Now go the hell back to sleep!”

Kaidan eased him back down onto the pillow. His hand groped for Kaidan’s. “You’re here. I’m here,” he added faintly as he slipped back toward sleep. “I never expected that.”

#

“Who didn’t make it?” Shepard asked the next time he woke.

“There’s time enough for that later,” Kaidan said soothingly.

“Don’t handle me,” Shepard snapped with the rap of command that was so familiar to all his crew. “I want to know.”

Kaidan sat silent for a moment, hunched over in the chair, hands clasped between his knees. “Jacob.”

Shepard closed his eyes. “Damn it, he never got to see his kid.”

“Grunt. Crazy Krogan fucker literally climbed up the front of a Reaper, threw a bandoleer of grenades in that laser port, then shoved his rifle in and held down the trigger. Thing collapsed on him. And Samara.”

“That’s it?”

“Well, half the fleet.”

“My mother....?”

There was a funny expression on Kaidan’s face as he said, “She made it. She came by to see you when you were in the coma. Then she got ordered out to Thessia to help with reconstruction. I’m sure she’ll be back once she hears you’re awake. But of our people, yeah, amazingly, that was it. If you hadn’t taken out the Reapers it would have been all of us. Oh, and the Council and Hackett want a debrief as soon as you’re up to it. Chakwas and I are holding them at bay, but sooner or later it’s gotta happen.”

Shepard ran a hand through his hair. It was longer than regulation now, falling in soft curls to brush the nape of his neck. “Then I’ll need a barber.”

Kaidan twined a strand around his little finger. “That’s, too bad. I sort of liked it longer.”

“Yeah, well, Hackett won’t. Old man’s a stickler.” Shepard studied his hands, the skin pale and unblemished. The last time he’d gazed down at them they had been bruised, nicked with cuts, and stained with blood -- his and David Anderson’s. It begged the question, and he dreaded the answer. “How long was I under?”

“Not too bad this time. It’s November.”

“Should I ask what year?”

“Same year.”

“So, three months.”

“A little over.”

A wry smile twisted his lips. “Guess I shouldn’t complain. At least it wasn’t years this time.”

He fell silent, contemplating all that had happened. Dates had become irrelevant in those frantic days, weeks and months after the Reaper invasion. While the Alliance struggled to build the Crucible, and Shepard and his crew had searched for components, gathered assets, pleaded and cajoled traditional enemies to put aside their differences and come together on this massive

undertaking, while worlds burned and billions died. At some point Shepard had briefly reflected on a passing birthday -- how he was now thirty-four and not likely to ever see thirty-five.

Kaidan had that look, and Shepard could tell he wanted to ask something.

“Go, on, whatever it is just ask.”

“What happened up there, Noel? What did you do?”

The memories rushed back, a wave drowning him in despair. Torn with indecision. Gnawed by guilt. Desperate to live. Certain he didn't deserve to. Horror choked him, closing off his lungs. He dimly heard Kaidan calling for Chawkwass. There was the cold bite of a needle. Then the warm syrup rush of the sedative rushing through his veins. He willingly gave himself back to the veil of sleep.

#

Shepard woke when an orderly brought in the dinner tray, and found Kaidan still in the chair beside his bed.

“Don't you have some place better to be?” he complained.

“Nope.”

“Well, that's just sad.”

Kaidan used the control to raise the back of the bed until Shepard was sitting up. He pulled over the rolling table, and lifted the lid off the plate. “Mmmm, tofu with mushroom gravy, mashed potatoes. Something green. Might be peas but I couldn’t say for sure. I’d avoid those. And jello for dessert.” He gave Shepard a smile.

“Not really hungry.”

“Well, try. For me.” Shepard accepted the proffered fork, gave a resigned smile, and began to draw patterns in the potatoes, watching the gravy fill in the lines like brown rivers cutting through snow.

“You’re playing not eating.”

“You’re nagging.”

“Get used to it.”

The exchange made him feel oddly content. “I think I just might.” He lifted a forkful of potatoes to his mouth.

“Look, I’m sorry to do this, but there is a question that I have to ask,” Kaidan said after Shepard had choked down part of the grey colored tofu and most of the potatoes. “What happens next depends on your answer.”

“Uh oh. Okay, hit me,” but Kaidan’s expression was serious to the point of being grim and the food he’d eaten suddenly lay leaden in Shepard’s belly.

“So, this is serious?”

“Yeah.” Kaidan looked down for a long moment, then sucked in a breath and squared his shoulders. “Why did you order me to stay behind with my squad? You took everyone else on the run to the beam. Did you think I wasn’t good enough?”

“Of course not. You were at my side for every mission once you’d rejoined the Normandy. You know that.”

“But you didn’t take me on this one. The most important one. The one that mattered.” He looked away. “I almost hated you in that moment. It broke my heart.”

Shepard pushed away the table, leaned forward, and laid his hand on Kaidan’s cheek. Felt the rasp of dark stubble against his palm. “I wanted to keep you safe.” He forestalled the objection he saw rising to Kaidan’s lips. “Okay, yes, I know there was no place safe, but I knew the route to the beam was going to be pure hell. And if you had been with me I would have been thinking about you the entire time. Not focused on what I had to do.” He hesitated then asked, “How’s your heart doin’ now?”

“Getting stitched back together.” It was Kaidan’s turn to fall into a protracted silence. Finally he said, “Protection implies certain things.”

Kaidan paused and gave Shepard a pointed look.

Heat suffused Shepard’s face. They stared at each other for a long moment. Eventually Shepard spoke.

“So, you know how you kick off your boots and no matter where you do it they somehow always end up between the bed and the bathroom so I trip over them in the middle of the night?” Kaidan cocked his head, and gave Shepard a wary look. “And why do you own that many socks, and not sort and fold them? And seriously, you had pancakes and a chocolate malt for dinner one night?”

Kaidan’s expression oscillated between a grin and a frown. “Hey, I figured if the Reapers were going to kill me I didn’t have to worry about counting calories. But your point being....?”

Shepard twisted the blanket between his fingers, muttered, “I think I can get used to it all.”

Kaidan, with a satisfied expression, leaned back, folded his arms across his chest, and said, “That’s what I wanted to hear.”

#

“Hey. There you are,” Kaidan said, the affectionate tone creeping in despite his best efforts.

Shepard was out of his hospital bed, and gazing from of an upper story window at the devastation that was London. Today was the day he was scheduled to to be debriefed. Kaidan, reflecting back on what had happened when he'd asked about the events on the Citadel, very much feared that Shepard would never get through the grilling by the brass.

Pushing aside the worry he joined Shepard at the window. From this highest floor of St. Mary's hospital the hoards of people filling the rubble choked streets seemed ant-like. They were busy sorting through the wreckage -- Reaper and human alike. The activity was frenetic, chunks of buildings, burned out fliers and cars were being loaded onto flatbeds using biotic powers, and roughened hands. Acetylene torches carved the dead Reapers into manageable pieces and they too were loaded on trucks. Troops from the various races watched this process carefully, making certain that no Reaper technology was stolen away. Everything Reaper related was going into massive smelters. No one wanted any trace of the killer machines to remain. *No one sane anyway*, Kaidan reflected, thinking back on The Illusive Man and his obsession to control the monsters.

The wailing call of an ambulance penetrated even their top floor aerie. The workers emerged from a shattered building carrying a body wrapped in a sheet.

“It’s impressive they can still show reverence,” Shepard said.

Kaidan slipped an arm around Shepard’s waist. Even through the thick plush material of the robe he could feel Noel’s ribs, and his hip bone was like a blade against Kaidan’s palm.

“Why wouldn’t they?”

“The Reapers killed and rendered literally trillions of people. What’s one more dead body when the whole planet’s a charnel house?” Grief and bitterness edged each word.

Kaidan gestured at the salvage crews standing in head-bowed reverence as the body was loaded into an ambulance. “Most people will never know what happened to their families, friends,” he said softly. “If we can identify even a handful of the dead it’s a good thing. It offers peace to the survivors.” He paused and swallowed hard. “I’ll never know what happened to my dad, but if I could bring him home to rest I’d want to.”

Shepard glanced over at him, his expression contrite. "I'm sorry, that was thoughtless." Shepard leaned his head against Kaidan's shoulder. "Don't know why I'm so bleak."

"Cause you've been through hell?"

That small, crooked half-smile lifted one side of the mobile mouth, and Shepard glanced up at him from beneath lowered lashes. It was one of the many things about this man that Kaidan found endearing. He nervously fingered the box in his pocket.

"What? What's wrong? You have the oddest expression," Shepard said.

It startled the major from his reverie, and he blurted out, "Look, I don't exactly know...." His voice trailed away and Kaidan took the small box out of pocket. "I saw it in the marketplace that's sprung up in the bombed out buildings around Piccadilly. People sell or trade anything and everything, and it... well, it made me think of you."

He opened the box. There was a ring inside, a narrow platinum band set with a small oval blue stone that seemed to have a star in its heart when the light caught it.

Shepard accepted the box, but held it awkwardly. "Kaidan, look, it's beautiful, but I'm not a big jewelry guy," Shepard handed it back.

“It’s not... that kind of jewelry.”

Shepard took a half-step back, and sucked in a quick breath. “Are you... proposing to me?”

Kaidan barked out a sharp, uncomfortable laugh. “Well, if you have to ask, I guess I’m doing a pretty shitty job of it.” He pulled the ring out of the box and started to drop down on one knee.

“Don’t!” An admonishing finger was held up, and a very fierce, fake frown drew the blond brows tight together.

Kaidan straightened. “Then give me an answer or I’m going to embarrass the hell out of you.”

Shepard plucked the ring from between Kaidan’s fingers and slipped it on. Glanced at the door. “What do you say we sneak out of here and find a chaplain? Bound to be one around the hospital.”

“I love how you always take charge, but you’ve got the politicos and Hackett waiting. And no eloping, we’re going to do this up right. Also, we don’t have a marriage license.”

“Bet we wouldn’t need a license on Omega,” he muttered rebelliously.

“Bet the Old Man will send M.P.’s if we don’t show up. Shepard sighed. “Look, I got Chakwas to promise she’d come rescue you after an hour.” With another sigh Shepard started for the door.

#

It was clear Shepard’s little jaunt had exhausted his strength. By the time they reached the door to his hospital room he was leaning heavily on Kaidan’s arm.

The room seemed suddenly small with the three alien council members (a human councilor to replace the traitorous Udina had not yet been selected), Hackett, and his aide de camp; a young woman who looked both terrified and smug to find herself in such exalted company. The two Alliance officers saluted Hackett, and Kaidan noted that Noel’s hand was trembling.

Kaidan guided Shepard toward the bed, but Noel balked. “A chair, please.”

Kaidan gave the aide a preemptory nod. She frowned at being ordered by a mere major, but brought over a chair. Kaidan took up a position to the side and a bit behind Shepard with his hand resting lightly on the Commander’s shoulder. Kaidan found himself constantly looking down at the ring on Shepard’s left hand, and feeling absurdly pleased with himself.

Extra chairs were found and the brass got settled. Hackett took the lead.

“Thanks for talking with us, Commander.”

“Of course, sir.”

“We have a number of questions,” the Asari council member said. Her smooth blue face gave away little, but lines of tension marred the perfect skin around her eyes.

“Specifically about what you did that triggered the Crucible,” the Salarian added.

“On that subject,” the Turian councilor interrupted. “I am a bit curious as to how the Alliance came by this detailed insight into the Keepers and their programing. It is... was illegal to interfere with the Keepers in any way. How did this Chorban come by this information?”

Shepard cleared his throat. “I did it. I scanned the Keepers for him. Three... no, more like four years ago.”

“You realize that was against the law?” the Salarian councilor said.

“Seriously? You’re going to bust my balls for *that*?” Disbelief laced each word.

“I think we can let that go, don’t you, Councilor? Considering the outcome,” Hackett said dryly.

The flustered Salarian stammered out, “Yes... well... of course... very sorry.”

“When you scanned did you sense even then the momentous nature of what you were doing?” the Asari asked, and there was a note of awe in her voice.

That drew a sharp laugh from Shepard. “Oh, hell no. I suppose in a vague way I thought learning something about those critters wasn’t a bad idea. But mostly it’s because Chorban offered to pay me. I never dreamed it would be turn out to be so important.”

“Enough about this crap. I want to know what happened to David Anderson,” Hackett growled. “Right now he’s listed as MIA. I’d like to give his family some closure.”

“KIA,” Shepard said harshly.

Hackett paled, making the scar that cut across his face all the more livid. He bowed his head briefly. “I was afraid that was the case,” he said softly. “How?”

Kaidan, his hand on Shepard’s shoulder, felt him begin to shake. Seconds ticked by without Shepard answering. Finally he choked out, “I... I shot him,”

His voice broke on the final word. Kaidan drew back, shocked by what he'd just heard.

“Why, in God’s name?” the Turian councilor demanded.

“Had he turned? Become indoctrinated?” Hackett asked.

“No sir. It was the Illusive Man. His Reaper implants... He was monstrous, barely human any longer... he had control... over both of us... there were voices... like shadows... all around me.” The blue eyes were haunted.

“What about EDI? Could he control her too?” Kaidan asked even though he knew he was out of line.

“She had linked into a Keeper. I think it took every bit of her computing power to locate the Reaper code and follow it back. She was completely unaware of the humans. Of what was happening.” Shepard looked back at Hackett. “I’m... sorry, sir. I tried to resist. If I’d been stronger...” He pressed his fist hard against his mouth.

“It’s all right, son,” the old man said, his tone gruff.

“And what happened to the Cerberus criminal?” the Salarian asked, leaning forward intently.

Shepard drew in a shaking breath. “I convinced him to kill himself.”

“Why not kill him yourself? That’s more your style, isn’t it?” the Asari asked.

“I was... I am... so tired of... killing.” Tears began to spill down the thin cheeks. Shepard averted his face, and furiously swept them away with back of his hand.

Kaidan caught the shocked expression on Hackett’s face at this emotional display.

Shepard cleared his throat and faced them again. “And once he had been human, wanted what we wanted before they took his mind. I hoped he’d remember.... and in the end he did.”

The story came out. Haltingly and with many pauses for sips of water, or a cough to clear the throat, but really it was a cover, an attempt to hold back tears. Kaidan could tell that seeing this man who had been always so confident reduced to this had Hackett off balance.

Shepard described how he had opened the Citadel while EDI sent garbage code to the Reapers to disorient them for those few brief minutes, the appearance of the AI wearing the guise of a human child. Of the choices he’d been offered. Kaidan listened with growing horror that such a burden had been placed on a single man.

“Some would say the choice you made was vile, Commander,” the Asari said.

Shepard shivered, hung his head and didn't answer. He began to frenziedly clasp and unclasp his hands.

“And you risked every AI, and every biotic implant,” the Salarian said in his dry, precise way.

“Your... companion there.” The Turian councilor jerked his head toward Kaidan. “Without his implants would have been reduced to irrelevancy,” he concluded with a sniff.

That brought up Shepard's head, and some of the old fire was back in his eyes. “Oh, hardly that, Councilor. Power isn't the only measure of value.”

“And, it didn't happen, the thing lied to him,” Kaidan broke in.

“I think it was Harbinger,” Shepard said. “Projecting the holo. He knew my buttons. And he almost got me. He almost had me convinced to link with them.”

“So, why did you choose as you did, Commander?” Hackett asked.

“EDI helped, though she was dying. The Reapers were rewriting her code, but she was resisting. She called him the Father of Lies, and that helped me remember I was listening to the voice of my enemy. Which made me weigh

each offer with greater skepticism. Control? What if they broke free or if by joining with them I came to accept their philosophy? And that was what the Illusive Man wanted, and he was indoctrinated.

“Synthesis? That was the choice most likely to appeal to me. Hell, I’d just spent months striving for consensus, forging alliances.” Shepard shook his head. “But how could I make that choice for every living creature in the galaxy? And that was what Saren advocated, and he was indoctrinated.”

“When the AI talked of destroying the Reapers, all I could see was Captain... I mean, Admiral Anderson. I knew the Admiral would tell me to do my duty. I'm a soldier. My job was to stop the Reapers no matter the cost.” Shepard looked down at his clasped hands. “And justice demanded they die after what they’d done to the galaxy over so many millions of years. So many voices silenced because of the mad belief that we couldn’t co-exist.” Shepard paused and drew in a steadying breath. “And there was so much blood on my hands already after.... after....” He swallowed convulsively. “Bahak.”

His breath went ragged as he mentioned the action he had taken when, in order to delay the Reaper invasion, Shepard had sacrificed over three hundred thousand Batarian settlers. He struggled for control, but a few more tears traced down his cheeks. “If someone had to kill so many; better it be me. I

figured I was already damned.” The final words emerged as a whisper.

Kaidan again gripped his shoulder tightly.

Silence held them all for a few long heartbeats then the Asari said softly, “And I think, Commander, that you did not wish to die.”

Shepard reached up and gave Kaidan’s hand a feather’s touch. The light caught briefly in the star sapphire. Kaidan noticed Hackett’s brows draw together in a quick frown, followed by a thoughtful expression.

“How did you get off the Citadel?” the Salarian asked. “You were found in the rubble back on Earth.”

“EDI held open the beam. I owe her my life.” He bowed his head and fell silent for a few moments. “Were there any survivors on the Citadel?” Shepard finally asked. Tension had his voice rising.

Hackett shook his head. “Not so far.”

Shepard pressed a hand to his face. His voice was muffled as he said, “I convinced that comptroller on the Citadel to let more refugees dock. If I hadn’t... if they’d kept running... maybe.... I killed them too.”

Kaidan knelt in front of him, and gripped Shepard’s forearms so tightly that the younger man winced. “You could not know that the Reapers would take the Citadel. And you didn’t kill them. The Reapers did that.”

“The Major’s right, Commander,” Hackett snapped.

Shepard regained control, cleared his throat, and asked, “Have you found Anderson and EDI?”

“Commander, we’ve barely begun to penetrate the arms. We have no idea where you were.”

“You’ll try to find their bodies, won’t you? Bring them home.” He glanced at Kaidan. “I’ve been reminded how important that is.”

“Of course,” Hackett said. “They were heroes. They deserve a hero’s memorial.”

“A human and a synthetic. There’s symmetry there,” the Asari mused.

Doctor Chakwas bustled into the room. “My patient needs to rest.” Kaidan’s and her eyes met, and she gave him a tiny nod.

“So, if there isn’t anything else,” Kaidan said. He walked toward the politicians using his body to edge them toward the door.

Shepard didn’t notice. He was turned inward, looking at visions only he could see.

Hackett hung back until the door closed behind the councilors. “Shepard, when we do arrange the memorial service for Admiral Anderson. I’d like you

to be there.” The silent tears were back, coursing down the thin cheeks. “Are you going to be up to it?” Hackett asked in his blunt way.

“I hope so, sir. I want to be there,” Shepard said in a choked voice.

Hackett looked to the doctor. “You’ll let me know when he’s fit?” Kaidan had a feeling the admiral wasn’t referring just to Shepard’s physical well being.

“Yes, sir.”

Hackett and the aide left. Shepard stood. “Fit for a funeral,” he said faintly. “Wonder when it’ll be time for mine?” His eyes rolled back and he crumpled.

Kaidan leaped the intervening three feet to catch him before he hit the floor. He settled the commander back in bed, and Chakwas ran her omni-tool over him.

“Exhaustion. Nothing to worry about.”

“He fucking fainted,” Kaidan objected.

“What did you expect, Major? He’s only been up for a few days. At least a third of his body was made up of Reaper implants that turned to rotting sludge when he killed them. We replaced what we could with cloned tissue, but he’s never going to be strong. And we haven’t even started to talk about

the emotional toll of all he's been through. He saved us, but somebody's going to need to save him."

The words angered him. "First, he's going to be fine. He's Shepard. And second what about me?"

"You're a fine and worthy young man, Kaidan, but I don't think you're prepared for this."

"I am."

She frowned at him, and shook her head in that way older people did when contemplating the naiveté of the young. "You've known only a few Shepards. You know Shepard the Commander, and Shepard the Comrade-in-Arms, and Shepard the Lover. But what about the Shepard who wakes screaming every night? The Shepard who weeps without warning and for no apparent reason? The Shepard who has anxiety attacks so profound they leave him shaking? Are you prepared for all that?"

"Yes. For him... I'm ready for anything."

#

The next day in between his regular duties Kaidan wheedled a bottle of beer out of Wrex, then traded it to a sharp operator in procurement for

anything chocolate. Shepard had a weakness for chocolate. It turned out to be a small box of chocolate covered cherries.

That afternoon Kaidan was surprised when he got a message to report to Admiral Hackett aboard the Oriziba. After a crisp salute, Hackett motioned him into a chair. “Are you and Commander Shepard getting married, Major?”

“Uh, yes, sir.”

“Then I have a request to make of you.....”

After the meeting Kaidan wondered how in the hell he was going to present the admiral’s “request” (not that admiral’s ever made requests) to Shepard? A desire to avoid the conversation warred with his need to see Shepard. The latter won out.

The first thing he noticed when he entered the hospital room was that Shepard’s color was better.

“So, what are the dispatches from the outside world?” the commander asked as he irritably pummeled the pillow, and stuck it behind his back. “Was Hackett satisfied with the debrief?”

“I think so.” Kaidan considered. “He’s oddly mellow now. I guess victory has that effect. Oh, I got something for you.” He handed over the box of candy.

Shepard stared at the box for a moment. “We always had these at Christmas. Dad would order them months in advance to be sure they would catch up with whatever ship we were on in time for the holidays. These and pistachio nuts in the stocking. Huh, funny the things you remember.”

“Christmas, so your Christian?” Kaidan asked.

“Sort of half-assed Presbyterians. Went to services on the holidays. You?”

“Eastern Orthodox. Family was Ukrainian originally.”

Shepard looked away, his expression sober. “I confess, I don’t much believe any longer.”

“Why not?”

“What kind of god could allow something like the Reapers to exist, and kill so many billions... trillions over millions of years.” He shook his head.

“No, I don’t believe any more.”

“It’s actually deepened my faith,” Kaidan said.

“How, please?”

“Because against all odds people who had been bitter enemies for hundreds, some for thousands of years came together and helped each other. And because you were here, at the hinge point of history. That can’t be just random coincidence.”

Shepard gave him that crooked smile. “That’s rather sweet... even if I don’t agree.” Shepard took out a candy, carefully peeled away the foil wrapping and bit off half. The cherry liquor fillings ran over his fingers. “Shit.”

“Why don’t you eat the whole thing in one bite?” Kaidan asked.

“Lasts longer this way.” Shepard licked cordial filling off his fingers. He stayed silent for a few minutes, nervously spinning the ring. “Look, etiquette says I’m supposed to buy you one, but I don’t think they’re going to let me out for awhile, and I’m kinda broke. I poured everything into up-armorng the Normandy--”

“Check your account.”

“Huh?”

“Your bank balance.”

Shepard turned on his Omni tool, and sucked in a startled breath. “What the hell?”

“Every race voted to give you a stipend. Every month credits have been deposited in that account, and those payments are for life.”

“Jesus Christ, I’m... I’m rich.”

Kaidan started laughing. “Yeah. Why do you think I’m marrying you?”

“You are such an ass,” Shepard said fondly.

Kaidan laughed again, but it died quickly as he realized he couldn't postpone the discussion any longer. He began tracing the pattern on the thermal blanket. “Speaking of that, and um... Hackett,”

“Yeah? What about him?”

“He... um... he's got plans for us.”

“Oh?” The single word was flat, giving away nothing.

Kaidan sucked in a breath and just plunged in. “So, you know how we were planning to just wrangle up a chaplain and get hitched.”

“Yeah.” Monosyllabic, cautious.

“So, how would you feel about Westminster Abby for the ceremony?”

“Okay.” Caution sharpened into suspicion.

“With the Archbishop of Canterbury officiating.”

“Go on.” The tone was lower now, the warning implicit.

“With the King and Queen, and the Council, and the Primarch, and the Battlemaster, and the Quarian admirals and a whole lot of other dignitaries that I don't remember, attending. Oh, and our friends and family, of course.”

The arms got crossed, and Shepard leaned back in a posture that Kaidan knew all too well, and delivered *the look*. “Are we about to get to the part that I’m *really* not going to like?”

“Yeah.” Kaidan gritted his teeth. “Broadcast galaxy-wide by Diana Allers.”

“Oh, no! Hell no! Fuck no. Absolutely not.”

“I told him that would be your reaction,” Kaidan said.

#

Naturally it didn’t end there. The next day the Old Man himself came into his hospital room.

“Alenko delivered your message.”

“I trust he didn’t sugar coat it,” Shepard said not backing down from the admiral’s eagle stare.

“I gather not since it seemed to consist mainly of profanity and a lot of nos.” Hackett studied him for a long moment then added, “You’re being a selfish jackass.”

The words hit, hard as a blow. “Si...sir?”

“You heard me, Commander. The people of this planet, of a lot of planets, have been through hell, and they’re not through it yet. Why not give them

something to celebrate? Something to cheer about? Feel good about? You're a hero. They want to feel like they're part of you."

Anxiety began to coil in his chest. "Sir, I don't have enough of me for *me*. And how much more am I expected to give? I can't... I just...it's... when do I get a life of my own?" It was a cry of anguish.

"Never. You're a soldier. We have duty, not lives."

The room seemed suddenly very small, the walls closing in around him. "I'll quit, resign."

"Won't matter. You're bigger than yourself now, Shepard. You belong to everyone -- human and Asari, Krogan and Turian, Quarian and Geth, Solarian and Rachni, Elcor and Volus. All of them have a piece of you."

His chest closed down, and Shepard wheezed, struggling to pull air into a suddenly constricted chest as the anxiety overwhelmed him. Hackett kicked back the chair and came to his feet, alarmed. He moved to the door, yanked it open and yelled, "Medic!"

Chakwas rushed in, took one look, crossed to Shepard and gave him an injection. Shepard felt the sedative washing through him, easing the pressure in his chest.

“Good heavens, Stephen. Stop setting back my patient by weeks. What did you do?”

Hackett, looking contrite, explained and concluded. “Maybe I did come on a little strong.”

“You? Perish the thought,” Chakwas said acidly.

Hackett sat down again, and studied the back of his hands for a long moment. “Look, let me level with you, Commander. I gave you a bunch of pious bullshit a minute ago. Truth is people are getting restless. The first few months everybody was pulling together, happy to help, but now things are enough better that people have the luxury to bitch. We need to give them something else to think about other than the pace of rebuilding. We need to buy ourselves a little time.”

“When did you become a fucking politician?” Shepard asked acidly.

“When the Reapers took out Acturus Station killing the parliament and the Prime Minister,” Hackett snapped back. “Believe me, Shepard, I don’t want this fucking job, but for the time being I’m stuck with it. I know we need to set elections, return the Alliance to civilian control, but other things have taken priority, like medicine, food and shelter. Point being the natives are getting restless and I need something to distract them.”

“A politician and a cynic.”

“Watch your mouth, Commander. You’re still an officer under my command.”

Shepard pressed his lips together to hold back hot, angry words. After a moment he managed to grate out, “So, am I the bread or the circus?”

“Little of both.” Hackett’s glare faded and he suddenly looked old and very tired. “I need this, Shepard. Need it bad.”

Chakwas laid a hand over Shepard’s. “I know this must feel horribly intrusive, but allowing people to be part of this -- even vicariously -- well, it’s an affirmation that life goes on. That we can rebuild, and things will get back to normal.”

Shepard slid out of bed, and moved to the window. He stared down at the hard working humans. Noted all the aliens in the mix, there because of his actions, and all of them trying to help. Thought about Hackett trying to guide the recovery. How could he do less? He sighed, leaned his forehead against the cold glass and accepted his duty.

Hackett didn’t need to hear the words. His hand landed on Shepard’s shoulder, warm and heavy. “Good lad.”

#

The brass and politicians left him in peace for two more weeks while he regained some strength. Physically he was starting to recover, emotionally and psychologically he wasn't. At times grief, rage and terror fell on him like an avalanche of shadow followed by crushing guilt that he couldn't control. He tried, but couldn't push aside the anxiety, couldn't get back to normal.

What helped almost more than the docs and the meds, and drove back some of the despair were the visits from his friends and crew.

Garrus arrived first. The Turian paused, swept a gaze along the length of Shepard's body. "Yep, they were right. You look like shit. Which is good because if you were still as pretty as me I'd never be able to compete with that whole Hero of the Galaxy thing."

Shepard held up his left hand, displaying the ring. "I'm off the market. You can thank me later."

"So I heard. You better let me arrange the bachelor party."

"Wouldn't have it any other way."

Joker turned up while he and Garrus were reminiscing about missions past. Joker was on crutches, juggling a take-out container. He was smiling, but his eyes were shadowed with sorrow. Not everyone had found their love

waiting. Guilt tightened his chest, and Shepard's eyes burned with sudden tears.

“Hey, Commander. It's okay. I just broke one leg,” Joker said, misunderstanding and also rattled by the tears. “Had to make some fast maneuvers dodging Reapers before you did the whole big power burst thing.”

Shepard forced himself to meet the pilot's eyes. “Joker, I'm sorry. I should have... if there was some way... I would have... brought her back --”

“Hey, Commander, it's okay. EDI warned me you'd be beating yourself up over this.

“EDI warned you?” Garrus asked.

“Yeah, she left me a message. Actually a lot of messages. I keep finding them whenever I mess with the Normandy. Sort of like Easter eggs.”

“Joker, what are you saying?” Shepard asked faintly.

“EDI and I talked a lot after the plans were set. She knew there was a really good chance she wouldn't survive. She was going to link to the Reapers for crap sake. So she left me messages, and she split off a part of herself and put it in the extranet. It's out there running around, trying to figure out how to become sapient again. She told me it might take her awhile,

but she'd be trying to find her way back home. Oh, and she wanted me to ask you a question for her."

"Why am I not surprised," Shepard murmured.

"She wanted to know if you thought you would survive."

"Tell her no." And for an instant he was back on the Citadel. Surrounded by bodies.

Shepard started to shake. Garrus noticed and quickly covered for him, "What's in the bag, Joker?"

"A cheeseburger. Made with real meat." Joker dug it out, giving Shepard time to regain his composure. "Dr. Chakwas said you weren't eating enough. And boy, do I know from hospital food. Why would you want to eat it?"

Shepard unwrapped the sandwich. It was gigantic, almost too big to comfortably bite. He cautiously lifted the bun. "There's a fried egg on it." He investigated further. "And what looks like a *beet*."

"Yeah, and pineapple and bacon. Awesome, huh?"

"That's one way to put it," Shepard said faintly

"Go on. Dig in. Before it gets cold."

"As if that could make it any worse," Garrus said as he stood. "I'd hate to think a member of *any* species would actually eat something that revolting."

Garrus laid a hand on Shepard's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "You take care. We need you up and about."

"Workin' on it."

He did manage a few bites of the sandwich. And Garrus was right. It was revolting, but it made Joker happy.

One by one they came. Zaeed stopped by to swap war stories, found Shepard depressed and silent so he described his experiences in that final battle in excruciating detail, and with many demonstrations and a running, profanity laced commentary.

Liara came, tried to talk and ended up crying the entire time while Shepard patted her gently while also trying not to weep. When he finally lost control it shocked her enough that she stopped crying and began comforting him.

Jack told him to stop fucking off and get up off his dead ass. Tali brought more chocolate and Miranda brought him a book.

James showed up, proud in his N7 uniform. "So, I've been thinking about the bachelor party," he said.

"Garrus already has it covered, and does everyone know I'm getting married?" Shepard complained.

“You think the Major wouldn’t brag about something like that? Also, it’s all over the news.” A headache began to throb in Shepard’s temples. “But you can’t leave it to Garrus. He’s an old guy and he’s got a stick up his ass. I can throw you a *good* party.”

“You know Kaidan’s probably going to need a bachelor party too,” Shepard suggested, looking for a diplomatic solution.

“Hey, that’s true. Two bachelor parties. Best wedding ever! Oh, and my *abuela* sent me a supply of Hatch green chile I brought you some. It’ll cure whatever ails you.”

Wrex showed up with a six pack of Denorian beer. As the massive old Krogan hunched in a too-small chair, and sucked down beer Shepard studied his facial scars, and thought of Hackett. And as if his thoughts had been read Wrex said abruptly,

“Hackett says you’re in trouble.”

“I’m fine.” Shepard took a pull on the beer.

“Bull crap. You wanna talk?”

“You’re going to be my shrink?”

“Would you talk to a shrink?” Wrex asked.

“Probably not.”

Wrex drained his third beer and stood. “Don’t be a hero, Shepard.”

“I thought that was the role everyone’s assigned to me,” he said bitterly.

Wrex shrugged. “Either get help or accept that there’s always collateral damage.”

“Collateral damage is shooting a kid in a firefight, or calling down an air strike on a neighborhood. It’s not taking an action that killed three hundred thousand people.” Shepard looked away, and swallowed and swallowed and swallowed.

“Yeah, to save millions, maybe billions. You bought us time, Shepard. Time we needed. One of your Earth leaders did something similar. He was even an Englishman -- that Churchill guy. He didn’t warn this town, Coventry, about a German bombing raid because it would have given away the fact they’d broken the Nazi codes.”

“That’s what politicians do. It’s above my pay grade.”

“And curing the genophage wasn’t?”

“That was different. That was for *you*.”

“Well, thanks, but the Salarians probably don’t see it that way.”

Shepard shook his head. “But it didn’t stop with Bahak, Wrex. I was willing to destroy an entire race.... And I did kill a friend. Just one of many.”

“To stop the damn Reapers, Shepard. It’s what we do. We’re soldiers. We make tough decisions, and we kill things.”

“And I was a coward, Wrex,” Shepard said quietly.

“Really? Explain that to me ‘cause it sure sounds like bullshit.”

“If I’d been willing to sacrifice myself maybe nobody would have died. The Reapers offered me that chance.”

“We had their asses in a wringer. They knew that. The crucible was primed. Their only hope was to fuck with your head. Make you hesitate. Not pull the damn trigger. We were at war, Shepard. People were going to fucking die. And okay, you were selfish. Big fucking deal. Self-sacrifice is overrated, in my opinion anyway. Besides, don’t you think you’ve done enough of it?”

Garrus returned and delivered the same message, but far more bluntly.

“You’ve got PTSD.”

“Why, thank you. I would never have figured that out on my own.”

“You need to get help.”

“I’ve got medicine. I’ll be all right.”

“If this was happening to a soldier under your command, what would you do?” Garrus demanded. Shepard glared at him. “Yeah, you don’t like that question, do you?”

“I’ll be all right!”

“You’re a stubborn bastard, Shepard”

“Takes one to know one, Vakarian.”

#

The arrival of Sir Geoffrey Pendleton-Clark brought home to Shepard the awful reality of just what his agreement to a public wedding would actually entail. Pendleton-Clark was a spare featured, grey haired man with one of those achingly upper class British accents that could practically cut glass. He had been sent over by the palace and Alliance command.

“I planned the King’s wedding twenty-three years ago, and have been trusted with a number of equally significant events since. Rather than tax your strength and your patience, Commander, it was thought that I might do most of the initial planning, and bring you in only for the final decisions. If that meets with your approval....”

Kaidan and Shepard exchanged glances. Kaidan shrugged, leaving it to Shepard. “Well, okay, fine,” Shepard said,

“Though how I’m to arrange something appropriate in the time frame given by the admiral, I have no idea. I had a year to plan the royal wedding,” he complained.

“Well, then it’s a good thing we’re not royalty,” Shepard responded dryly.

“Ah, but you are the military equivalent, Commander.” And on that cheerful note he bustled out.

Then Shepard promptly forgot about Sir Geoffrey and his plans because the medicos decided to release him. Chakwas ran the Omni-tool across him, and read the results.

“Okay, you’re out of here, but I want to see you once a week to check for any rejection and make sure you’re taking your meds. In addition to the antibiotics I’ve given you prescriptions for both Xanax and valium. Use them when you need them. Don’t try to be a hero. And for God’s sake, drink a milkshake or ten. You’re far too thin, and you want to look good on your wedding day.”

“Would everyone stop going on about this wedding.”

“Not a chance. It’s the most exciting thing going,” the doctor said.

“Well, that’s pretty damn sad,” Shepard growled.

It felt good to put on clothes again even though they hung on his thin frame. He barely contained his impatience while he waited for Kaidan to collect him. To pass the time he checked the newsnets. He hadn’t looked at

the news since his recovery, and he discovered to his horror that the big story was his engagement and the upcoming wedding.

That had him frowning like an angry bear when Kaidan and the Alliance provided aircar arrived. It was piloted by a nervous young private whose Adam's apple seemed too large for his neck. He managed a salute and an incoherent squeak, and then said not a word during the short trip to Claridge's.

"What's up?" Kaidan asked in an undertone. "You've got *the face*, and you're terrifying the troops," he added with a nod toward the pilot.

"News is filled with stories about us."

"Yeah. So?"

"I hate it. Can't they just leave us alone until this damn dog and pony show?"

"You know the answer to that."

The car landed in front of the hotel, and Shepard took pity on the poor young pilot. He leaned forward, and held out his hand to the kid. "Thank you. What's your name, son?"

"Chang, sir. Winston Chang."

"Good to meet you, Chang."

“It’s an honor to be flying you, Commander.”

Claridge’s had been founded in 1812, and amazingly had survived with relatively minor damage. The owners had offered rooms to refugees and Alliance personnel, and Kaidan was bivouacked in a top floor suite. Shepard surveyed the rather grand space, so spacious after a lifetime spent on Alliance ships, and said,

“Shouldn’t there be more than just us in here?”

“Noel, when are you going to figure out that you’re... well, *you*.”

“It feels like we’re taking advantage. Getting special treatment.”

Kaidan took him by the shoulders, and forced Shepard around to face him.

“We are getting special treatment, and you deserve it. Okay? Now, let’s get you settled.”

“Before we do anything, let’s talk,” Shepard said, and led Kaidan over to a sofa. “We’re here for now. Until this damn wedding is over with, but where will we go? Where will we live? We’re both Specters. Are we expected to go back to work for the Council? And Specters don’t work together.” He clutched at Kaidan’s upper arm, felt his breath growing short as anxiety gripped him. “I can’t be separated from you.”

Kaidan patted his back soothingly. "I think you've earned the right to set your own rules with the Council. And I'm Alliance first, and Specter after, and the Alliance is posting me to Vancouver like I requested. Headquarters has to be rebuilt and that's not going to happen overnight. As to where we'll live, after the wedding and honeymoon --"

"We're having a honeymoon?"

"Damn right we are! Someplace warm with sand and beaches and a constant supply of drinks that come in coconuts with little umbrellas in them. Anyway, after that I thought we'd go to my uncle's place in B.C., at least for a little while. Housing is tough to come by right now. There's a big old farm house and a couple of small houses on the property. Plenty of room for us and my mom, and uncle Joe and his wife and kids and my cousins spouses and kids." Kaidan's expression darkened. "Those that survived. Two of them didn't make it."

"I'm sorry."

Kaidan shrugged, a gesture that fooled neither of them. "Fortunes of war. Anyway, I can commute into Vancouver for work. I do own property on the Sunshine Coast. We can build a house there if that's what we decide we want

to do. Point is, your job is to get well and not worry. It's my job to take care of us now."

Fatigue washed over him, and Shepard laid his head on Kaidan's shoulder. "I'm glad. I'm not sure I could do it anymore."

"So, what do you want to do right now? Rest? Get something to eat?"

"I've been stuck with sponge baths courtesy of nurses for weeks. I'd like a shower."

"Easily done. Come on."

Standing almost defeated him. Kaidan got a hand under Shepard's arm, and helped him to his feet. They walked to the door of the bathroom, and Shepard froze, staring at the enormous sunken tile bathtub.

"Good God, it's the size of my cabin on the Normandy."

"Well, not quite," Kaidan said. He moved toward the glassed in shower with a built-in-bench, and more shower heads than could easily be counted that occupied the wall opposite the tub.

Shepard had been born on a ship, raised on ships and stations, and served on ships. Short, three minute showers had been the norm his entire life. He'd never seen anything like this sybaritic tub much less experienced a soak in a large body of hot water. Except that one time on shore leave on Berkenstien

when he and a few crewmates had ended up at a “spa”. And that body of hot water hadn’t been designed for washing. He had met a young actor on that shore leave and they’d spent a pleasant sex filled weekend. He could only assume that Brent was dead like everyone else on Berkenstien. He pushed away the thought.

“Could I take a bath instead?”

“Sure.”

He studied the steps leading down into the tub, and cast Kaidan a sideways glance. “I’ll probably need help getting in and out.”

“I can do that.”

“You’ll get wet.”

“I’m counting on it.”

#

Kaidan realized after a few days that he’d been cocky when he’d answered Dr. Chakwas. He actually wasn’t prepared. Shepard couldn’t abide the dark so they kept a light on in the bathroom. Which was fine except there were frequent power outages and Noel’s stress levels mounted with each passing minute of darkness. The hospital had backup generators so they had never faced this before. Kaidan tried to buy a LED lantern at the ad hoc

marketplace, but they'd all been bought up by hospitals and the military.

There was a candle maker so Kaidan, and brought home a supply along with a handful of lighters and boxes of matches.

When Noel did sleep nightmares had him screaming, crying out the names of the dead, muttering orders, thrashing and fighting with unseen foes until he jerked himself and Kaidan awake. They were both hollow-eyed from lack of sleep, and Kaidan's migraines were hitting almost every day.

Often when Kaidan returned home from his duties he would find Noel huddled in a corner of the couch quietly weeping, an empty whisky bottle on the coffee table. Or this time, finding Noel standing in the shower, water beating on his shoulders while he wept. Shepard came into his arms naked, shaking and dripping. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry. I didn't know there were this many tears in a person."

That's when Kaidan realized that ignoring the grief and the drinking, talking of anything but Shepard's emotional state wasn't working. He had to face it, *they* had to face it.

Kaidan got Shepard dry and dressed, wrapped in a comforter, and settled on the couch. "Okay, talk to me."

"How was your day?" Shepard asked.

“No! Talk. To. Me. We’ve both been trying to pretend that things would just return to normal. That you would be fine. But they haven’t and you’re not. We’ve been relying on medication, but you’re drinking too much for me to feel comfortable letting that continue. So talk, damn it.”

Shepard pulled his hands free from Kaidan’s. Turned them. Inspected them. It was a long time before he spoke. “I can’t stop thinking about every failure. If I’d been more persuasive with the council right at the beginning we would have been better prepared. I think about Ash, and Thane, and Mordin, and that young lieutenant on Thessia who flew straight at a Reaper so we could get into the temple. If I’d stopped Kai Leng....” He made a helpless, frustrated gesture. “So much would have been different. Anderson would be alive, and Jacob and Grunt and Samara.” He rubbed his forehead. “I failed so many people. So many worlds.”

“Yeah. A lot of people died. More than we can comprehend. Billions. What does that actually mean? You were one man. Who did the best he could. And guess what? It was pretty damn good. How many more planets would be burning now except for you? And we’d be talking trillions, not billions dead if you’d failed.

“Oh, but Kaidan, I made such awful choices.” He paused, shook his head. “How can that not show? It should be etched on my face. People should look at me and be repulsed. People should know what I am.”

“They do,” Kaidan said. Shepard looked devastated. “You’re the man who saved them.”

They regarded each other for a long moment. Kaidan gently touched the scar at the corner of Shepard’s left eye, the scar that would now never heal because the Reaper implants were gone. He thought of the other scars that marred that once perfect body.

“We’ll get through this.” He took Shepard’s chin between thumb and forefinger and gave him a gentle kiss on the lips. “But please, love, think about seeing someone with the training to help you.” With a forced lightness Kaidan added, “Hey, a fish and chip vendor opened up in Leister Square. How great is that? Shows things are starting to get back to normal. I brought some home for dinner.”

“Great. I’ll get plates.”

Kaidan knew the conversations weren’t over, but at least they had now begun. He just wished there was a professional in the mix. He understood

why Hackett had recruited Wrex and Garrus -- soldiers from warrior cultures -- to try and help, but he didn't think that was what Noel needed right now.

#

Shepard began to venture out for short walks even though the raw English winter had begun in earnest. He was recognized where ever he went so he purchased a knee length coat with a hood that hid his face.

The residents and store owners in the neighborhood respected his need for anonymity and privacy. Since he'd emerged from his seclusion journalists had begun to sniff around, and his in-box was crammed with requests for interviews. He deleted them all without answering.

One day Shepard watched from across the street as Mr. Patil drove away one persistent reporter with thrusts of his broom.

“Go away! Get out of here! Nothing for you here! Leave the poor man in peace!”

After the reporter retreated, uttering curses and shaking his fist at the outraged restaurateur, Shepard crossed the street.

“Thanks.”

“Vultures. They are just vultures,” the rotund little man muttered. “Once they know you are out and about they will hound you, Commander. You should have security.”

Shepard shook his head. “That’s for people like --”

“You,” Mr. Patil interrupted.

As Shepard walked away he muttered to himself, “I’m Commander Shepard, and nobody’s ever going to let me forget it.”

#

“You can leave on your socks,” Chakwas said as she tossed a paper hospital gown at Shepard. “Everything else off, and get up on the table. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Shepard hated it all. The crinkle of paper against his bare ass as he sat down on the examination table. The cold draft through the open back of gown. The smells of sickness and corruption imperfectly disguised with the biting scent of alcohol.

There was a discreet tap on the door. “You decent?” Chakwas called

“No. I’m wearing paper that barely covers me, I’m cold and I’m pissed.”

“Excellent,” she said as she sailed into the room. A firm hand in the middle of his chest pushed until he was supine on the table. She began

prodding, palpating and thumping. Much of it hurt. Especially when she reached the seeping wound on his side.

She made a *tisking* doctor noise. “This isn’t healing as well as I’d like. I’m going to start you on a new round of antibiotics. And make sure you change the bandage at least once a day, and preferably twice. Now, any issues you want to discuss? Questions? Complaints?”

Her tone was gruff but teasing. Shepard had meant to respond in kind, but instead he found himself asking, “Am I ever going to be well again?”

Chakwas opened her mouth, then thought better of whatever it was she had been going to say. She pierced him with a level gaze. “Do you want the truth or do you want fairy tales?”

“You know me better than that.”

“Okay. Then no. You are never going to be well again. You took your body to the thin edge of death. You endured physical torment and mental trauma. Your health is irrevocably shattered. Your life will be shortened. I can’t say by how much. My guess is you won’t make it much past eighty. But you could prove me wrong. God knows you’ve done it before. Going forward you need to accept your limitations. Take your medicine. Start eating. And live passionately, embracing each fleeting moment. That answer the question?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh don’t call me that. I start looking for my mother when people call me ma’am.”

#

Embassies were once again open in the few intact buildings, and all of the races decided Shepard had to receive that planet’s highest military honor. This latest was at the Turian embassy. Chang brought the air car around in a swooping circle joining the line of other cars dropping off guests. Across the street a fairly substantial crowd of citizens watched and waved.

“Lot of camera bots down there, Commander. More than usual,” Chang said.

Kaidan looked out and noted the crowd of reporters roiling near the entrance to the embassy. Turian guards tried to keep them back, but it was clear they were going to have to pass through a gauntlet of the fourth estate.

Shepard reached back for the hood of his coat. Kaidan helped him get it arranged to completely shadow his face. Chang brought them down with a gentle bump, the door lifted. Kaidan stepped out, and reached back to help Shepard step out. The reporters and their bots, lights glaring off the snow covered sidewalk, pushed in close jockeying for position.

“How are you feeling, Commander?”

“All ready for the wedding?”

“Lose the hood! Let us get a picture!”

“What are you hiding?”

“Is it true you’re using Red Sand as a mood settler?”

Kaidan, still gripping Shepard’s hand, stiff armed his way through the shouting, gesturing mob. Behind him he heard Shepard give a cry of distress. Kaidan whirled to see a reporter from the Galaxy Net Daily struggling with Noel. The man succeeded in yanking back the hood revealing Shepard’s face.

"Get the picture! Get the picture!" the reporter was yelling at his camera bot.

Noel looked panicked and distraught, not at all the image of Commander Shepard that had been presented to the world. Cameras strobed, the reporters closed in ringing them like feeding sharks. It was a barrage of sound as they shouted questions. Noel couldn’t have answered even if he’d wanted to; the overlapping words made it unintelligible.

Shepard’s eyes widened, the pupil dilating as panic took hold. He buried his face in his hands, shoulders shaking. The reporters pressed in even closer. Kaidan lost it. With an inarticulate roar, he summoned his biotics, and sent

the press tumbling like wind blown flotsam. He turned his attention to the camera bots and used his biotics to smash them together. He then flung them onto the pavement. Bits of bot went bouncing in all directions.

#

“Mother fucker!” the Galaxy Net reporter shouted at Kaidan. “You’re gonna pay for that. We’re totally going to take you down!”

The threat penetrated pulling Shepard out of the black place where he’d gone. Rage, white hot, coursed through his veins. His fist connected nicely with the man’s jaw, but months of debilitating illness, and the lack of body armor made it a pretty weak blow. The reporter staggered and yelped, grabbing at his jaw, but Shepard had a feeling it had hurt his knuckles worse than it had hurt the vulture.

“Hit ‘em again, Commander!” yelled a decidedly Cockney voice from across the street.

Shepard caught a glimpse of a fist coming at him from the left, and managed to jerk aside so it grazed his shoulder instead. Kaidan plowed into Shepard’s assailant with a body blow that sent the man flying.

After that it became a confusing scrum of punches and kicks with Turian guards trying to restore order. Shepard got tackled and went down. A hand grabbed his wrist and Garrus yanked him to his feet.

“You had to wait for *our* party to start a brawl?” the Turian said. “I’d expect this at a Krogan affair.”

“I love you too,” Shepard panted.

“Get behind me,” Garrus ordered as he took out an attacker with a sharp backhand.

“I can --”

“No, you can’t.”

Kaidan waded over to them, and they formed a barricade between Shepard and the fight until the police joined the Turian guards and order was restored.

Garrus, Kaidan and Shepard looked at the broken bots, a sleeve torn out of a coat, a couple of shoes lying discarded on the sidewalk, the wounded getting patched up by medics. Kaidan had a beaut of a shiner forming. Kaidan and Garrus shared a look, and burst out laughing. Shepard managed a chuckle, but the wound in his side was hurting and reaction was setting in. Depression and exhaustion washed over him. He’d blown it. Lost control. Shown the world he was a fraud.

“Well, I’m glad you find it amusing, Vakarian!”

“Commander! Major! What the hell?”

Primarch Victus and Admiral Hackett stood in the front doors of the embassy glaring down at them.

"Get your asses in here!" Hackett ordered with a tone that promised there would be more conversation later.

Shepard squared his shoulders, and managed to get through the ceremony.

#

The following day found them aboard the Oriziba. They stood at attention while the admiral paced in front of them.

“Outrageous! What the hell were you thinking Alenko?” Hackett barked.

“I was thinking some asshole failed to show proper respect to the man who saved the galaxy, sir, and worse he assaulted my fiancé, sir. I think that justified my actions, sir.”

“Enough with the sirs” Hackett slumped and his tone softened. “And I don’t blame you, either of you, for looking out for each other, but they’re really going to have a field day with this. They’re not happy because you’ve refused all interview requests. They’ll really be after you now. So be careful going forward. Don’t give them any more ammunition.”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir,” Shepard said. “It was my fault. Maybe I’m not ready for this much prime time.”

“Maybe not, Commander, but you’ve got to suck it up and get through this. You can’t hide in your room, or beneath a hood. Especially not on your wedding day. People from all over are coming. They’ll be lining the streets. It’s going to be an open car from Claridges to Westminster. You need to be seen and I expect you to be smiling and waving.”

Shepard ran agitated hands through his hair. “Like a performing monkey.”

“Just exactly like a damn performing monkey. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes, sir!” they said in chorus.

#

After his public melt down and the fight more stories began to appear in the press, and they were becoming less complimentary. Several newsfaxs sniffed about the cost of the wedding, the fact the Alliance was footing the bill. The less savory outlets ran stories about Shepard’s mental state with unnamed sources at the hospital and the hotel implying he was under close psychiatric care because of psychotic episodes.

One dredged up a companion from Kaidan's red sand days. The man described in salacious detail drugged out orgies, and Kaidan's violent tendencies.

Shepard had to physically hold his fiancé back from locating the source, and giving in to those violent tendencies.

"You know none of that happened, right?" Kaidan pleaded. "Red Sand makes you lazy and stupid. You sit around in your p.j's feeling like you're a god."

"I know. It's okay."

Shepard received a private message from Diane Allers.

You're making a mistake not giving interviews, she wrote. Journalists are like jackals, if you don't give us meat we'll make it up.

He sent back a terse one word reply. *Noted.*

By the time the final medal ceremony had concluded Shepard felt like a tin pot dictator with his jacket weighed down by clanking metal. And he didn't dare leave any of them off for fear of inciting a diplomatic incident.

"At least the Vorcha don't have an embassy," he said wearily to Kaidan as he unpinned the medals, and deposited them in a box as they got ready for

bed. “I hope I don’t have to wear all of these at the wedding. I’m not sure I could make it to the altar.”

“I have no idea, but I’m sure Sir Geoffrey will,” Kaidan replied. The lights flickered, and then went out. “Ah shit, not again.” Kaidan groped his way to the dresser, and located the matches and candle.

Shepard pulled extra blankets out of the closet. As he pushed aside Kaidan’s day uniform something registered. The holster slots were all empty. When they’d first come to Claridges Kaidan had his pistol. Now he didn’t. Shepard whirled and stared at Kaidan.

Kaidan, shielding the candle’s flame with his hand reacted to Shepard’s expression. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Where is your pistol?” The play of emotions across his fiancé’s face told Shepard everything.

Kaidan tried to cover, invent an excuse. “There’s so many kids around. Don’t want --”

“Bullshit!”

It had gone downhill from there.

#

Usually Kaidan joined friends and colleagues for lunch. He knew he had a gregarious personality, and was less private than his soon-to-be-husband, but the past few days had been hard. Shepard tried to pretend the negative press didn't bother him, but Kaidan knew better, and what happened outside the Turian embassy had brought the demons to the fore. Shepard's nights and therefore Kaidan's were again torn by nightmares, and panic attacks, and Kaidan's head felt like a steel spike was being driven through his skull. And of course there had been that awful moment about the gun. Except for Horizon it was the worst fight they'd ever had.

Kaidan dodged the crowd of chatting officers, and slipped out of Alliance headquarters. Because it matched his sober mood Kaidan chose to walk to the shattered ruins of St. Paul's Cathedral. No repairs had begun on the venerable old building --- people couldn't decide whether to leave it as a symbol of all that had been lost, or rebuild and make it a symbol of hope.

There hadn't been a fresh snow in several days so what lay on streets and over the ruins had turned a dirty grey. A few equally dirty grey pigeons were strutting about the plaza in front of the shattered church. Kaidan found an intact bench and sat down, hands clasped between his knees. A few hopeful pigeons advanced on him with a waddling run.

Kaidan bowed his head and went back to chasing his circular thoughts about Shepard. He feared he would never forget the hurt and anger on Noel's face.

"You son-of-a-bitch, you think I'd use it."

"Yeah, I do! I'm trying to protect you!"

"I don't need your protection! Everything I've done was so I could live. I wouldn't do that. I'm not that weak!"

But Kaidan had heard the doubt which frightened him so much that he'd lashed back --

"Maybe not, but you're so God damn guilt ridden you'd do it to punish yourself not caring what it did to me!"

A handful of crumbs pattered onto the pavement and snow breaking into his bleak thoughts. The pigeons, billing and cooing rushed to peck at them. An older man in a frayed overcoat sat down at the other end of the bench. He held a paper cone filled with breadcrumbs. His hair was thick and grey, and his lined face had a gentle dignity. He nodded to Kaidan who nodded back.

They both watched the pigeons writhing around the old man's feet. Then the man said, "A good place to come for contemplation."

“Yeah, guess it is.” The old man offered the cone. Kaidan fished out a handful of crumbs and tossed them to the birds.

The man nodded at the pigeons. “I think they’re wiser than us. They don’t see the destruction all around them. They see the bread crumbs, and know the spring is coming.”

Kaidan shifted to look at the man, suspicion washing over him. “Who are you? What do you want? Are you a journalist?”

The man held out a hand. “Dr. Philip Mendelberg.”

“Doctor?”

“Of psychiatry.” Kaidan started to speak, but Mendelberg interrupted.

“And I know who you are, Major Alenko. I’ve been waiting for the opportunity to talk to you.”

“What do you want?” Kaidan’s tone was threatening.

“To help, if I can. I saw what happened at the Turian embassy.”

“He’ll be fine.”

“You’re a very poor liar, Major.”

“And why should I trust someone who just waltzes up and offers to help. If you’re really a doctor why aren’t you working at a hospital or somewhere?”

“I am. At the children’s ward, and I work with the veterans hospitals as well.” He turned on his omni-tool and beamed over his card to Kaidan. “You can check me out, and my credentials.”

“And you’re just offering to help us? Gratis?”

“Oh, you can pay me if you want, but I would do it for nothing. You see, I owe the Commander a debt.”

“You and everybody else in the galaxy.”

“Oh, not for the Reapers, though that weighs in the balance too. My daughter was on Elysium. A school trip when the Baterians attacked. A certain young soldier held off the slavers until reinforcements arrived. She never forgot him and what he did. Neither will I.”

“You’re daughter....?”

“I lost her and her family to the Reapers. This is something she would want me to do. Bring the Commander to me, Major.” He handed Kaidan a piece of paper with an address written on it. “My home, we’ll be quite private there.”

Kaidan watched the bent figure stroll away with an honor guard of pigeons following after him.

#

“Thank you, Major, but I think it best if you left us,” Mendelberg said politely but firmly after Kaidan delivered Shepard to the unassuming house on the outskirts of London. “There’s a decent enough pub on High Street. They might even have beer.”

While the shrink was dismissing Kaidan, Shepard took the opportunity to look around. The room was cluttered with too much furniture, lots of bookcases, and an impressive number of old style paper books. It smelled of pipe tobacco, leather and dog. The dog was not in evidence. The bookcases beckoned, and Shepard crossed the room to inspect the titles -- Sense and Sensibility, Magister Ludi, Great Expectations, Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy, The Grapes of Wrath as well as Asari and Turian novels.

“You can come back in an hour,” Mendelberg concluded Shepard looked back in time to see the door shut on Kaidan’s concerned expression. The doctor turned from the door and met Shepard’s withering gaze.

“You like books?”

“Yeah,” he grunted, refusing to offer more.

“Why?”

“I like to read.”

“Why?”

Becoming annoyed with the questions Shepard said more than he intended. “Because it’s hard to keep friends when you’re a Spacer brat. Everybody’s getting transferred all the time. Books don’t leave.”

“Very true.” Then the doctor quickly added. “How did he...” A head jerk toward the door and the departed Kaidan, “...convince you to come?” Mendelberg asked.

It wasn’t what Shepard expected, and it rocked him a bit. He decided to be equally direct. “He said I was throwing away our chance at happiness. ”

“And you’re afraid you’ll lose him.”

“Damn straight.”

“But that’s what you’re trying to do, and if you don’t succeed you’ll end up leaving him, either upright or in a box,” Mendelberg said as he walked to a chair and sat down.

“If he’s told you I’m suicidal let me assure you he’s full of crap because I’m not.”

“Not yet.” Mendelberg threw another question. “Do you think you deserve happiness?”

Shepard leaned back against a bookcase, and folded his arms across his chest. “You don’t waste any time, do you?”

“We don’t have the luxury. I work with soldiers like you all the time. If we don’t get to you quickly you manage to push everyone away, and then you end up in the bottom of a bottle, or in a Red Sand dream, and then finally you die -- either by your own hand or in an engineered fight.”

“Really? There are soldiers like me? How many of your other patients have caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands? Or was willing to destroy an entire race to win a war?”

Mendelberg looked up at Shepard from beneath his bushy eyebrows.

“Now you’re just bragging.”

Shepard felt his mouth drop open. “*Excuse me?*” To hear his agony dismissed so casually knocked him off balance, but then something about the situation and his reaction to it struck him as humorous. He choked back a laugh.

“That’s better,” Mendelberg said. “Why don’t you sit down? Make yourself comfortable.”

“No couch?” Shepard asked as he dropped into a battered armchair.

“They tend not to make people comfortable. And to answer your question --”

“Didn’t know I asked one.”

“Oh, you did. You want to know how I could make light of your suffering. I’m not denigrating your pain. I’m just pointing out that what you described is just a matter of scale. My other patients may not have racked up your kill numbers, but those deaths at their hands affect them just as profoundly. What did you want to be when you grew up?”

Shepard was getting whiplash trying to follow the twists and leaps of the old man’s questions. “Uh... a soldier.”

“Really? At four years old you knew that? Didn’t want to be a cowboy or a fireman or a doctor or a pirate or a concert pianist?”

“My parents were Alliance.”

“Wasn’t the question.”

“I don’t know. It was all so long ago,” Shepard said wearily. He rubbed at his forehead.

“My daughter told me about how you told stories to the children between the waves of attacks.”

“What?”

“On Elysium.”

“Your daughter was there?”

“Yes. Rebecca. She was fifteen.”

A memory surfaced of a round cheeked girl with tumbling black curls, and an oddly adult attitude. “I remember her. Sensible kid. Helped out with the younger ones.”

“So, the stories. Why did you do it?”

Shepard shrugged. “If they were calm it made things easier.”

“She says you never forgot where you left off. Just picked it right up, and continued with the adventures of a star roving teddy bear.”

Shepard felt embarrassed by the reminder. “They were really little,” he said defensively.

“Not criticizing the subject matter. Complimenting the insight.”

“They needed distraction. Their parents and teachers couldn’t hide their fear. I just did what needed to be done.”

“Rather like you’ve done the past few years, no?”

“I guess.”

“How do you fill your days?”

Shepard shrugged again, shook his head. “I still sleep a lot. I read. I’ve started to take some walks, I wait for Kaidan to come home. We get some dinner, watch a vid. When the power goes out we read aloud to each other.”

“How charmingly old fashioned. Sex?”

He felt himself blush. “Happening.”

“Enjoying it?”

Now he knew he was scarlet. “What do you think?”

“If that’s a yes then my recommendation is that you do it more often.

Anything that lifts your mood is good. What medications are you on?”

Shepard told him. “I want you to stop taking the valium and the Xanax, and cut back on the drinking.”

“How do you know I’m drinking?”

“Please, this isn’t my first rodeo. By dulling the pain with drugs or booze, you’re just postponing the reckoning. Sooner or later it must be faced. Oh, and take up a hobby --”

“I don’t have a lot of stamina.”

“I’m not suggesting you start running marathons. Do something creative, learn to draw, play an instrument, cultivate orchids, something that creates rather than destroys.” They both reacted to the knock on the door.

Mendelberg checked the time. “Well, time flies, doesn’t it? One last question before I let the Major rescue you. Give me one word to describe your mother.”

“Tough,” Shepard said without even thinking.

“Good, I’ll see you on Wednesday. Same time.”

“So, how was it” Kaidan asked as they walked to the flyer.

“Different,” Shepard said thoughtfully.

“Will you... keep seeing him?”

“Yeah, I think I will.”

#

Shepard pondered Mendelberg’s order that he find a hobby. He knew he couldn’t make a circle with a compass so drawing didn’t interest him.

Learning to read music and play an instrument seemed beyond his mental capabilities right now.

He was still worrying with it while he set the small table and waited for Kaidan to come home. For most of their stay at Clariges the couple had eaten in the community dining room at the hotel, but the stares, and the people coming up to them had made that an uncomfortable experience for Shepard. Most of the interactions were people expressing their gratitude, burdensome enough, but sometimes there were confrontations with a grieving spouse, parent, child who blamed him for not coming in time to save the person they had lost. Add to that reporters snooping around so the couple had fallen back on almost exclusively eating take out.

Which wasn't the healthiest choice, and even though he was a biotic the diet was having a deleterious effect on Kaidan's waistline. Shepard knew that soldiers pulled out of combat tended to gain weight. It took five to seven thousand calories a day to keep a soldier fighting. Not so much when you were fighting a desk.

"Do something that creates rather than destroys." Mendelberg's words came back to him.

Shepard looked over at the small kitchen that came with the suite, and an idea formed. After dinner while Kaidan was pouring himself a nightcap Shepard perused cookbooks on his Omni-Tool.

"What are you doing?" Kaidan asked as he settled on the couch with Shepard and gave him a kiss. His mouth tasted of Irish Mist, hot and sweet.

Shepard settled into the curve of Kaidan's arm. "I'm going to learn how to cook. I mean, how hard can it be?"

"Okay."

"Mendelberg's suggestion. Told me to get a hobby." Shepard stood up, and stared down at Kaidan.

"What?" the major said, made nervous by the intense scrutiny.

“He had another recommendation too.” Shepard took the glass out of Kaidan’s hand, grabbed him by the belt, and pulled him to his feet. He started leading him to the bedroom.

“What....?”

“Doctor’s orders.”

“I *like* this doctor,” Kaidan said as he kicked the bedroom door shut behind them.

#

“Let’s talk about your mother,” Mendelberg said at their next session.

“Oh let’s not. Let me tell you about my cake. It didn’t rise. Sort of a giant chocolate hockey puck... made out of depleted uranium. I took it down to the hotel kitchen and they salvaged it by turning it into a trifle. I had never heard of a trifle before. A trifle is what you do to salvage a baking disaster and it involves booze. Lots and lots of booze. I’ve discovered that booze can fix almost anything.”

“Except when it doesn’t,” Mendelberg said, his tone acerbic. “How did that work out for you when you kept waking up on the floor during your time with Cereberus?”

“How do you know about that?”

“I talked to your friends, and have you finished prattling now?”

“I don’t prattle --”

Mendelberg interrupted. “Would you prefer babble? Chatter? Yammer? Twitter? Blather? --”

“Yeah, I don’t do any of those, Mr. Thesaurus.” Shepard tried The Look. Unimpressed, Mendelberg serenely poured milk into his tea.

“Yes, you do. When a frown or a gun won’t suffice, you... talk. You’re pretty good at it until you get nervous or feel uncomfortable and then you... prattle. So, about your mother?” He cocked an inquiring eyebrow at Shepard. It looked like a very curious caterpillar was trying to climb into his hair line.

“Why did you enlist? Why not attend one of the elite military academies?”

“I had shitty grades, and --” Shepard broke off suddenly.

“And what? What were you just looking at. *There. Right there.*” The doctor pointed at a space in the air about a foot from Shepard’s nose.

Shepard's chest felt tight, and the words seemed to be crawling up his throat, wanting to be uttered while he was desperately trying to hold them back. They burst free. “I didn’t really want to join.” He waited for guilt to strike. Instead he felt suddenly lighter.

“Good. Thank you.”

“If I’d gone to the academy, well, that was it. I was in for life, or at least until I retired. Or got retired with prejudice.”

“As in died.”

“Yeah. Point being the enlisted guys only commit to a four year tour.”

“But you re-upped.”

“Yeah, because Elysium happened, and then I was picked for Officer Candidate training, and....” He shrugged.

“And then you became a Spectre, and Sarin happened, and Cereberus happened and the Collectors happened, and finally the Reapers.”

“Yeah.”

“And what would you have done if you had left at the end of four years?”

“Shit, I don’t know. The only skill I’ve got is killing people,” Shepard said wearily.

“Did your mother understand that enlisting was an act of rebellion?”

Mendelberg asked.

“Oh hell no. She thought I was displaying grit. Learning how to soldier the hard way, serving with grunts, so I’d know how to lead them when I did become an officer.”

“Seemed to work.”

“Yeah, but it didn’t start... it wasn’t meant to.... Arrrh,” He threw his arms up in frustration. “I joined the way I did because I was too scared of her not to join, and too mad at her to do exactly what she wanted. How fucked up is that?”

“About average. You just had the added burden of a dead hero father, and a larger than life mother. Overall you handled it pretty well.”

Shepard stood and paced. Mendelberg’s aged Basset Hound, Proust, stood with a grunt, and fell into step with Shepard. The old dog wheezed, shuffled and groaned with each step, and his tail thumped a slow tattoo against Shepard’s leg.

“You can resign,” Mendelberg suggested.

Shepard shook his head. “I’m Commander Shepard and --”

Mendelberg stood, and gripped his shoulders. “And. You. Can. Do. Anything. You. Want.”

“Yeah, but if I’m not Commander Shepard... I think I’ll cease to exist.”

“We’ve got to work on that.”

#

Supplies were limited, meat was especially hard to come by, and fresh vegetables appeared and disappeared like the legendary Holy Grail, but the

Reapers hadn't managed to kill the oceans. Seafood was plentiful. Shepard started out simple -- poached sole, halibut vera cruz. For side dishes macaroni and cheese, potatoes au gratin, and whatever greens he could find. He also looked for recipes that wouldn't be ruined by the frequent power outages.

He shared his culinary adventures with Kaidan. "I learned how to separate an egg today."

"How many did you break?" the soldier teased as he opened a beer. "I remember the omelets."

"Not one. And as for the omelets... it took me awhile to figure out how to fold them, okay? They still tasted good even if they were just scrambled eggs with crap in them."

Kaidan was laughing at Shepard's outage. "Okay, peace. Yes, they did... taste good, but why are you separating eggs? Meringue?"

"Huh? No, I'm thinking about trying a soufflé. And how do you know about meringue?"

"I watched my mom cook while I was growing up. Even helped a little, and of course they pushed us to learn at Jump Zero."

"Oh, right, house... kitchen, real family and a biotic." Shepard shook his head.

“We just ate in mess halls.” He gave Kaidan a quick smile. “Food came off a chow line.”

“Didn’t you ever pull KP duty?” Kaidan asked.

“No, my screw ups were always so spectacular they always landed me on latrine duty.” He gave a short laugh. “Gunny Ellison got so mad he once made me clean the men’s john with a toothbrush -- my toothbrush.”

“Okay, I don’t think I’m hungry anymore.” Kaidan took a sip of his beer. “So what kind of soufflé are you going to tackle? Cheese?”

“No, no dessert soufflé -- chocolate.”

“I should have known.”

Swinging his legs onto the couch Shepard laid his head in Kaidan’s lap and gave a sigh of contentment. The major’s fingers played through his hair. Noel closed his eyes, enjoying the moment.

“You know I’m getting a complex,” Kaidan said.

Shepard opened his eyes. “What?”

“I have now had seven of your former crew come and threaten with me with severe bodily harm.”

“What the hell?”

“It started with Garrus, but it’s always the same message.” A smile was hovering at the corner of his fiancé’s mouth.

“Okay?” Shepard made it a question.

“If you don’t make him happy I’m going to come beat the living shit out of you.”

“Who --”

Kaidan ticked them off on his fingers. “Garrus, Wrex, Zaeed, Vega, Jack, Javik. And Joker. Of course he said he’d use his crutches so he wouldn’t break an arm.”

He felt himself getting angry. “They’ve got no --”

“Relax, it’s okay. I thought you’d find it funny, and it’d make you feel good. They care about you.” The quicksilver grin flickered on Kaidan’s lips. “And I told them if I fell down on the job you’d deliver the beating yourself. They all agreed as how that was probably true.”

Kaidan’s hair was soft against his fingertips as Shepard reached up, and brushed back a lock of black hair. “I’d never harm a hair on your head.”

“Bullshit,” was the response.

#

A few days later Shepard was reading -- since circumstances had landed him in Britain he was on an English novelist kick, and was following the trials, tribulations and heartbreak of the Forsythe Saga. He had just about decided that Soames Forsyth's obsession with Irene had exhausted him and it was time for either a long soak in very hot water or a nap when there was a knock on the door of the suite. Surprised, he moved to the door and, cautious now because of the lurking reporters, he checked the security camera. It was Joker. And he looked distressed.

"What's wrong?" Shepard asked as soon as he opened the door.

"Commander, you don't even know why I'm here," Joker complained.

Shepard led him to the couch. "Joker, you have the worst poker face in the galaxy. So, what's up?"

"They've taken the Normandy away from you!" Joker burst out, anguish ringing on the words. He got his voice back under control and continued.

"Captain Julia Orman," he spoke the name in a mocking sing song. "Came aboard yesterday. This was the first chance I had to get away. I didn't want to radio. I bet she's listening in," he added darkly.

Shepard sat with it for a few moments, thought back over his conversations with Mendelberg, and realized he was okay. He said as much.

“Yeah, well maybe *you’re* okay with it, but *I’m* sure as hell not, and Ken and Abby down in engineering, they’re pissed, and Traynor. We’ve been talking and we’re gonna --”

“Do your duty,” Shepard said, his tone sharp and stern, and crackling with command.

“But... but, the Normandy. She’s *yours*, Commander.”

“No, she’s an Alliance frigate. The best one in the fleet, but that’s what she is.”

“And you’re Alliance too.”

“For the time being.”

“You’re not coming back to us?” Joker’s voice was trembling.

“Jeff,” Shepard said, using the man’s real name. “I’m tired. And I sort of want to see what the world looks like when I’m not viewing it from behind the barrel of a gun.”

Joker gave a strangled cry that was half sob, half curse. He turned away, and buried his face against the back of the couch. The thin shoulders shook. Shepard let his hand fall to the pilot’s shoulder, and kept it there until the emotional storm had passed.

He went and got tissues from the bathroom. Joker moped his eyes. “Yeah, wow, well now I feel like a real dork.”

Shepard turned the subject knowing that a young man’s dignity was a fragile thing. “Hey, I’m learning how to cook. I made some pretty damn fine cookies. Want to try ‘em.”

“I’m not ten,” Joker muttered rebelliously. Then undercut the statement by asking, “What kind are they?”

“You know me. What do you think they are?”

Joker stacked cookies on a plate while Shepard brewed coffee. “Do me a favor,” he said to Joker. “I ran some numbers about using the Normandy to help deal with the Citadel. If we use three tugs and the Normandy I think we can boost it into a higher orbit.” He went and got his datapad, and handed it to Joker. “Give these to Captain Orman with my compliments, and tell her congratulations.”

#

“It’s time for us to go straight at this,” Mendelberg said at their next session.

“At what?”

“At the PTSD. At what triggers it. Is it sound? Sight? What set you off that night at the Turian embassy?”

Anxiety coiled in his chest. Shepard shook his head. “I don’t want to think about it.”

“Avoidance. That’s classic.”

Rage exploded in his chest. “You’re goddam right I want to avoid it! I’m sick of it! Of all of it! The memories, the nightmares, the people fawning, you picking and poking at me!”

The tone that would have had his crew quivering left the old man unmoved. He continued preparing a cup of tea, and handed it to Shepard. Noel almost refused, but it was a childish and churlish action and he knew it. He accepted the delicate bone china, and the cup rattled against the saucer. He set it down on the cluttered coffee table to avoid the “*tell*”.

“Come on, Noel, you can do it.”

His lips felt stiff. They resisted forming the words. “People closing in on me. Touching me.” His breath grew short and he realized he was panting.

“Why? What memory does that bring back?”

“Husks.” He couldn’t form words. Mendelberg stayed quiet, serenely sipping his tea. The silence stretched on. Became unbearable. “We got a

distress call. Some planet in the ass end of nowhere. Answered. All the workers had been indoctrinated, spiked and transformed. There were so many of them. Close to a hundred. Closing in. Battering at me. Couldn't bring my gun to bear. I would have died except for Zaeed. He pulled me out." Shepard hung his head. "Once they had been human. I see them and... and I think..."

"That once *you* had been human."

The truth of it was a thunderclap, a blow to the chest. "The Reapers twisted everything they touched. I'm one of the things they touched," he whispered.

Sorrow, guilt and self-loathing lanced through him. Arms folded over his gut he hunched, fighting off emotions that manifested as physical agony. A hand rested on the back of his bent neck a warm, reassuring human contact in the chaos of emotions that left him lost and isolated. Shepard reached out blindly and clutched Mendelberg's shoulder.

"But the Reapers died. And you didn't. You were never one of theirs," the old man said softly. Mendelberg stepped away. "New assignment. I want you to go with Kaidan to places where crowds form. The marketplace, the movies. I don't want you to go alone, and you don't have to stay past the time

you trigger. Keep track of how long before it triggers. I think you'll see that time increasing.

#

The chance to go into a crowd arrived sooner than Shepard liked. Hackett decided to proceed with Anderson's memorial despite not having located the body.

The admiral was to present the formal eulogy, but Noel had agreed to also present one. He spent hours writing, deleting and writing again. To say Anderson had been a father figure sounded trite and cliched as hell -- even if it was true. That he had been brave? Self-evident. Kaidan offered to discuss it with him, even read some of the drafts, but Shepard felt it was his alone to wrestle with. Eventually he had something he thought he could live with. Mostly because the day had arrived, and there was no more time to revise or delete or start over.

He woke early and slipped out of bed without disturbing Kaidan. He made tea, settled on the couch, and tried to subdue the nervous butterflies that had invaded his gut. Kaidan, naked and yawning, padded out an hour later, and went groping for coffee.

“What time did you get up?”

“Around five.”

“You should have woken me.”

“You were sleeping so good,” Shepard said with a smile. “Didn’t have the heart.”

“I believe we’ve had this discussion before.” Kaidan settled on the couch next to him and blew across his coffee, took a sip, then laid his hand over Shepard’s.

“You ready for this?”

“Oh, hell no, but it’s what I’ve gotta do. For him. If I get through it without embarrassing myself it’s going to be entirely due to Mendelberg.” Shepard fell silent and ran his fingers through the mat of dark hair that had begun to grow on Kaidan’s chest. He gave Kaidan a sideways glance.

“You’re not using depilatories any more.”

For the shield technology to work effectively the armor needed to fit directly against the skin. Any break in the contact reduced the efficacy so most men in the Alliance used depilatories to remove all body hair. Gunny Ellison’s name for Alliance grunts had been “hairless rats”.

“Don’t have to worry about a tight fit for the armor any longer. I’m a desk jockey now.”

“Good. Keep it that way,” Shepard said.

“Which part? The desk jockey or the hair?”

“Both.” Shepard fell silent.

“We better shower and get dressed,” Kaidan nudged.

#

Their flight took them high enough to see the jumble of bricks and beams that were all that remained of St. Paul’s Cathedral.

“The Nazis couldn’t bring it down or Belter Separatists, but the damn Reapers were just too much. I’m so glad those bastards are dead,” Kaidan said as he frowned out the window.

They flew past the the damaged Parliament buildings. Ahead on the left was the Abbey, wearing a coat of snow ethereal and beautiful. There were a lot of cabs, ground cars, and even people on foot arriving. The private set them down in an open space, and they joined the throngs moving toward the entrance. Shepard ducked his head, uncomfortable at the stares and whispers and wished he had worn his coat and hood. Parents pointed him out to their children.

“There he is. Commander Shepard. He saved the Earth. Don’t ever forget you saw him today.”

He paused at the top step and looked up at the archway, the great door. *I'm going to get married in this building*, he thought. They entered. Most of the pews were already filled. The whispers flew like wheeling birds into the ribbed vaulting high overhead. Pillars marched down each side, fluted and carved. Only a few stained glass windows remained, and they threw rainbows on the stone floor. The rest, blown out by the Reapers, had been replaced with just plain glass. Light reflected off the pipes of the vast organ. There were red carpeted steps leading up to the altar.

This is insane. I'm a soldier. I'm supposed to get drunk on shore leave, and get hitched in a quickie wedding chapel on Omega, with an Elcor Elvis impersonator officiating.

Then he felt guilty. He should be thinking only of Anderson, not his situation. He pulled his focus back to the here and now. Alliance banners flanked the altar. On a small table just in front of the altar was a folded Alliance flag with a cap like the one Anderson always wore, resting on top. The archbishop of Canterbury, in his robes and mitre, stood at the top of the stairs. Hackett was seated in a chair to the Archbishop's left. There was an empty chair next to Hackett. Kaidan guided Shepard to it.

“Where are you sitting,” Shepard whispered feeling the anxiety coiling in his chest.

Kaidan pointed. “Front row. Right there. Right in front of you. Look at me, and don’t worry about anybody else. Just talk to me. You’ll be fine.”

Shepard gave a tense nod. Kaidan left him.

To the Archbishop’s right were the political figures. The King and Queen of England, The Council, Primarch Victus, the Salarian Dalatrass, several Asari Matriarchs, the Quarian admirals including Tali, who gave him a tiny wave. Anchoring the last chair was Wrex. Despite the scars the old Krogan seemed noble and dignified. At least he did until he gave Shepard a thumb’s up, and called out in that gruff voice.

“Hey, Shepard, hope they send us off with this much pomp and pageantry when we croak.” There were a few chuckles, mostly from the soldiers in the crowd. Shepard raised a hand in acknowledgment.

He picked up the program from the chair and sat down. Ran his eyes down the service. Opening hymn, A Mighty Fortress. Lord’s Prayer. (Apparently Anderson had been a Christian.) Eulogies, ending prayer, another hymn.

Shepard looked out across the crowded nave. Spotted Kahlee Sander, wan but dry eyed, in the third pew back. The service began. He had a hard time singing past the lump in his throat.

Hackett delivered a stirring eulogy. Detailing Admiral David Anderson's accomplishments, his leadership during the resistance, his bravery.

Then it was his turn. Shepard stood and walked to the podium. He could feel his knees trembling, and his gut felt hollow. It was one thing to address his crew before a mission. This faceless crowd was terrifying. He looked at Kaidan who smiled and nodded encouragingly.

Shepard opened the datapad to his speech. Stared at it. Shut it off. Gripping the edges of the podium he took a deep, shaking breath. "I lost my father when I was ten," he began. "Just one of those frontier skirmishes where two ships from different races meet, and decide a confrontation is better than a conversation. I grieved for him but I didn't really realize how much I'd missed a father's presence until Captain Anderson picked me for the Normandy. I'd heard of him, everyone in the Alliance military knew his record."

"He was my commanding officer, and I learned about leadership from his example. He taught me more about strategy and tactics than any course at the

academy. He saw my weaknesses and he addressed them by kicking my ass when I needed it, and giving me advice when I asked for it, and believing in me when no one else did. He was my friend and mentor.”

“Because he believed in me I became a Spectre, and I couldn’t have stopped Saren and Sovereign without that status. The Alliance could have gone after me when I worked with Cerberus, but Anderson had faith that I knew what I was doing, and he protected me. And finally he spoke on my behalf and saved me from a summary court martial and possibly execution. I owe him more than I can express.”

And repaid him by killing him. The thought was insidious and came on unbidden. Shepard pushed away the guilt and memories, continued.

“But I’m not unique in this experience. How many of us were trained by this man? Served with him? Learned from him? And he believed in all of them too. At the end Anderson and I talked a lot about the things that mattered to us. One thing that really mattered to him was Kahlee Sanders.” He shifted his gaze from Kaidan to the slim, blond woman. “I know he wanted to come back, and have a life with you, Kahlee.” She gulped, and pressed a handkerchief to her lips.

“In his final moments we talked about continuity, about children.” It was starting to hurt to talk past the expanding lump in his throat, but there was nothing for it. He pushed on. “He’ll never have children now, but then I realized that’s not exactly true. He has sons and daughters scattered all across the galaxy, applying the skills he taught us, and living up to the ethics he instilled in us. The best way we can honor his memory and his service and sacrifice is to try to emulate David Anderson, and pass those lessons on to our children. That way David Anderson will never be forgotten.”

Shepard turned, braced and saluted the lonely cap and flag. He blinked hard to clear the moisture from his eyes and returned to his chair. The final prayer was uttered, the final hymn sung. People began moving toward the doors. Hackett shook Shepard’s hand.

“Nicely done, Commander. Sometimes we forget that a man’s more than just a collection of tasks performed. It’s the impact he has on the lives of the people around him.”

“Thank you, sir. I know it’s a horrible cliché about how someone is like a father to you, but for me, he really was.”

“It was fine, Commander,” but there was an odd expression on Hackett’s scared face, and he abruptly moved away to talk to the politicians.

Shepard's former crew mates came up. Liara took Shepard's hand. "I'm glad the next thing we'll do in this building will be a celebration of life," she said in her soft, sweet voice.

"Oh, God, don't remind me."

"Isn't it supposed to be the groom that gets all twitchy and has cold feet?" Vega asked.

Kaidan walked up, and slapped him on the back of the head. "Technically we're both grooms, idiot."

"Yeah, but... shutting up now."

"Good move, Lieutenant," Garrus drawled.

#

Shepard decided to hold a small dinner party. He invited Mendelberg who turned him down saying, "I'm your therapist, not your friend. It's my job to make you uncomfortable."

Sadly Wrex had returned to Tuchanka though he'd promised to return with Eve for the wedding. Shepard couldn't really cook for Tali or Garrus, so, he went with old friends, most of them humans. He started by inviting Miranda who said yes, and Zaeed, who surprisingly asked if he could bring a plus one which even more

surprising turned out to be Jack. That was problematic because Jack and Miranda mixed about as well as nitroglycerine and dynamite, but Shepard had already invited Miranda so he just had to hope for no explosions over the soup. He added Traynor and Liara -- that should be a safe pairing. He then realized he now had an uneven number so Shepard invited Major William Coats.

“Are you match making?” Kaidan teased when he arrived at the suite with the promised bottles of wine.

“I wouldn’t have the nerve where Miranda is concerned, but damn they would make a stunning couple, wouldn’t they?” They set the table. They had a rhythm. Shepard setting out plates and folding napkins while Kaidan followed along with the flatware. “What I really can’t figure out is Jack and Zaeed. Is he playing father-figure?”

“Or father-figure with benefits?” Kaidan suggested. “Which is more than a little creepy.”

“I don’t know. Jack’s been wounded in ways we’ll never understand. Maybe an older man could make her feel safe without making her pull back, and go into all the bullshit macho posturing that she does when it’s a young man.”

“Sounds like you had some experience with that,” Kaidan said.

“She tried to have sex with me which would have put me safely in the no different than any other man category. I didn’t play.”

“Why not? It’s not like you had command issues to worry about. You were more like pirates at that point.”

“First, Jack is crazy in ways that make me look sane. Second, I’m not attracted to women. And finally, I kept thinking about you.”

“Even after how I treated you on Horizon?”

“Yeah. I fell hard. I kept sending signals during that shake down cruise, and even after I was given the Normandy, but I seem as bad at that as I am at dancing.”

“I received them loud and clear, but I was just a lieutenant, and we were Alliance, and you were the hero of Elysium. I didn’t want to get hung out to dry if I had misread the situation,” Kaidan said.

“You were pretty forceful about what you wanted once you rejoined the Normandy, after Mars and Udina, and everything” Shepard said.

“Yeah, well, nearly dying focuses the mind amazingly --

“Tell me about it.” Shepard inspected a non-existent spot on a fork before setting it in place. “Are you sure about all this? You like women --”

Kaidan slipped an arm around his waist. “Yeah, but there’s another L word that applies when it’s you.” He shot Shepard that quicksilver grin. “And being bi has real advantages, I’ve always had twice the chance of getting laid. Note, I put that in the past tense.”

There was a knock, and they broke apart. People arrived shaking snow off their coats. It was strange to see Zaeed out of armor, and wearing a suit. The cold weather had Jack wearing long sleeves, and Miranda wore a dress. Shepard realized that only Coats, Kaidan and Traynor wore uniforms, and he suddenly felt disoriented because he wasn’t wearing one.

Kaidan mixed cocktails. Shepard held himself to a glass of white wine. Talking with Mendelberg had made him realize just how much he had been anesthetizing himself with alcohol over the past two years.

At first everyone was making awkward conversation, but then the appetizers — bite sized pieces of puff pastry filled with cheese, tomato pesto and spinach — came out of the oven and were passed around. Eating seemed to help break the ice.

Coats talked about the days he’d spent holed up in the tower clock that housed Big Ben. Zaeed talked about the early days founding the Blue Suns. Jack bragged on her biotic kids, while Kaidan bragged about his biotic unit.

Miranda talked about her sister Oriana who was planning on opening a fashion house on Thessia. That got Liara's attention and they were soon deep in conversation about the advantages of taffeta over silk. Traynor kept trying to make herself useful which meant she just got under Shepard's feet as he put the final touches on dinner.

He had made butternut squash soup with brown butter, sage, nutmeg and crème fraîche. The main course was salmon en crouete with side dishes of brussels sprouts in chestnut sauce, and Delmonico potatoes. For dessert, a chocolate soufflé. Thanks to Mr. Patil he'd been able to score the vegetables, and overall he was pleased with how it came out. He briefly wondered if he was just showing off, or if it was his desperate need to do anything he did better than good? Or maybe he was trying to prove to himself and everyone else that he could still function. Even if it was just in the kitchen.

"You'll make somebody a good little wife," Jack snarked as she helped herself to a third serving of soufflé.

Miranda stiffened and began to bridle, but Shepard pointedly laid the hand with his engagement ring over Kaidan's and said mildly, "That's the plan."

At the end of the evening Coats offered to escort Miranda back to her apartment which had Kaidan raising his eyebrows at Shepard.

Jack punched Shepard on the upper arm. “Glad to see you took my advice, and got the fuck out of bed,” she said. “And this was nice, but seriously, you gotta find more to do than play Little Sammy Homemaker.”

“Stop fratching at him,” Zaeed said as he helped her into her jacket.

“What the fuck does that mean? I don’t know what that word means.”

“Picking and fussing. The man’s earned the right to do whatever the hell he wants. Including nothing.”

They left and Shepard collapsed onto the sofa. Kaidan poured himself a brandy. He gestured with the bottle, “Nightcap?”

“Oh hell, why not?” Shepard rolled the brandy snifter between his palms. “I think that went off pretty well.”

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes listening to the snow peck at the windows. Shepard took a sip of brandy, let it play across his tongue and burn its way down into his belly. “Does it bother you that I’m just....” He made a gesture with his glass at the as yet uncleared table and the pots piled in the kitchen sink.

“Not if you keep feeding me like this.”

Shepard slapped Kaidan on the gut, drained his glass, and headed toward the bedroom. “I’ll clean up in the morning.” He looked back over his

shoulder, and gave Kaidan a smile. “Right now I think you need to work off a few calories.”

#

There was a preemptory knock at the door of the suite as Shepard finished loading the dishwasher. Only cops and Alliance soldiers tended to hammer a door that hard. Shepard was expecting the uniform, just not who was wearing it.

“Well, I’m glad you’re alive, but I have to say, you have lousy taste in men,” she said.

Shepard stared down at his mother. Hannah Shepard’s uniform was perfectly creased, and her short cropped brown hair slicked back in a nonsense style.

“Why, hello to you too, mother. Nice of you to stop by.”

“Are you going to invite me in.” Shepard stepped back with a “be my guest” gesture.

She marched through the door in that dogged style she had, and settled herself on the sofa. “Oh, I checked in on you.”

“I know. Kaidan told me.”

“Then I got sent off to Thessia, and now I’ve been ordered back to be a prop in a public relations stunt.”

“Generally referred to as a wedding. And trust me, this wasn’t my idea. Blame Hackett.”

“Oh, I do, and Stephen knows how I feel about this.” His mother pressed her lips together as if trying to hold back more words, but it didn’t work, and she blurted out, “I checked out this Alenko. Very checkered past, Noel. Murdered his biotic instructor leading to the closure of BAaT.”

“He didn’t mean to, and he was defending another student --”

“Dropped out, used Red Sand, had more than a few run in with law enforcement.”

“Drunk and disorderly, a few brawls. Nothing serious. He was a kid, mom. Then he joined the Alliance and straightened out.”

“People who have a taste for low company... well, they never lose it.”

“You need to back off because I’m starting to get really pissed.”

She reached out and clasped his hand between hers. “This isn’t what I’d hoped for for you. Making the wrong choice in a marriage... well, it can wreck the rest of your life.”

“The only reason I’m still alive is because of him, and I couldn’t live now without him. This may not be what you want, but it’s what I want, and I think that’s the only metric that matters.”

“He’s an L2 biotic. Those implants have led to psychotic breaks.”

“Kaidan gets migraines. That’s it.”

“His father was a non-com. You’re an officer’s son.”

“Oh Jesus Christ, mom! Snobbery because his dad was an NCO? Seriously? I hate this bullshit.” Shepard held onto his fast vanishing patience. “And if dad were still here I think the only thing he would have asked me is if I love him. And I do.”

For an instant a look of intense pain and anger flashed across her face. “It takes more than love to build a marriage, and I don’t like you making a decision this big when you’re this fra --” She broke off and amended it to say, “Coming off this kind of trauma.”

“You know, the only decision of mine you ever whole heartedly supported was when I enlisted. Everything else you’ve either second guessed or undermined. Now, I know Hackett wants the wedding to be this picture perfect event, all happy families and rainbows and fucking bunnies, but if

you're going to be a grudging participant, well, you can just go back to your ship and get the hell back to Thessia because I don't want you here!"

Hannah nodded. "That's better. Steven said you were subdued to the point of seeming like you're in a stupor. Glad to see something can still get a rise out of you." Her expression softened. "I just worry. You've been through... a lot. I don't want you to get hurt."

That touched him enough that he hugged her. "I won't. He's... well, he's great. You'll get to know him and you'll see. And mom, he means everything to me. You know what I mean?"

"Once I did."

#

"Will you and the Major be writing your own vows?" Sir Geoffrey asked.

Shepard stared at him in horror. "Oh, shit no."

"Do you have a particular wedding ceremony that you like?" Shepard shook his head. "Might I recommend the Anglican sacrament of marriage? The Archbishop will be familiar with it, and it is quite lovely. My wife and I chose it when we wed though we went back to the older version."

Sir Geoffrey used his Omni tool and the text appeared on Shepard's. He skimmed down it, and felt his color rising when he hit --

WITH this Ring I thee wed, with my Body I thee worship, and with all my worldly Goods I thee endow.

“Huh, didn’t know old timey wedding vows could be racy.”

The lines beside Sir Geoffrey’s mouth deepened. Shepard couldn’t quite decide if it was the man’s version of a smile or he was offended. “Startling isn’t it? Our old timey ancestors knew about sex.” Shepard coughed, and looked away. Sir Geoffrey continued. “Now your mother will be seated on the right, Major Alenko’s mother on the left. Unless you think they should be seated together?” Sir Geoffrey raised his eyebrows inquiringly. Shepard just shrugged helplessly.

“Well, we’ll table that for the moment. I’ve penciled in six groomsmen... attendants,” he continued, “but obviously left the names blank. I would encourage you to keep it at six. More will just end up looking like a muddle. Now, will they wait at the altar, or do you want them to walk with you? Do you and Major Alenko plan to enter together? Once you reach the altar the archbishop....” Shepard clutched at the massive wedding planner book as if it were a life raft while Sir Geoffrey droned on his voice fading to an irritating buzz in the face of Shepard’s growing anxiety.

He looked down at the open page of the book which had several sketches of an improbably tall, rather willowy blond man (that didn't look anything like him) dressed in black formal wear, a dress uniform, and a white and silver outfit that looked like it had escaped from an operetta. He assumed he was supposed to pick one of them. He really wished Kaidan were here. Actually he really wished he could just bolt. That tacky wedding chapel on Omega was looking more and more attractive.

Sir Geoffrey's voice came back into focus. "...I held off selecting the music for the actual ceremony until I had a chance to find out about your preferences." He raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"Uh, something sort of military?"

"No hymns then?"

"Um, I don't think so. And nothing sappy, you know?"

For the first time since they'd met Sir Geoffrey showed a flash of humor. A corner of his mouth quirked up. "No Sunrise Sunset? You'll Never Walk Alone?" Shepard folded his arms, and stared at Sir Geoffrey who then added a short, dry chuckle.

"Moving to the reception... the king has offered the palace -- a singular honor, but one which is merited in this situation. Of course you and Major

Alenko will lead off the first dance, and then you will shift to dance with your respective mothers-in-law. And since you wish to avoid sappy might I suggest a Strauss waltz?"

"Dance?" Shepard croaked.

"Well, yes."

Anxiety blossomed into full blown panic. "Uh, Sir Geoffrey, could we resume later... tomorrow. I'm feeling --"

#

".... Sick," Shepard said.

Garrus set aside the calibration tools he had been using to repair the big guns before they were reloaded on Turian warships, and sat down on a crate. They were in a partially bombed out warehouse near the Thames, and the other Turian soldiers peered curiously at Shepard, clearly impressed to have the man who had defeated the Reapers in their midst.

Shepard paced, knotting and unknotting his fingers. "I can't dance. You all say so, and you're all right, and that's when I'm just dancing without, you know, really dancing. At Eternity it doesn't matter because everybody's three sheets to the wind... no one would notice if you did fall down..." He realized he was prattling as Mendelberg would say, but he couldn't shut off the flow

of nervous words. “And at Purgatory no one was watching. Everyone was just in their own space, and I could just hide up against a wall or something, but this reception thing, and there will be cameras... And even if I manage not to fall down I’ll probably cripple Kaidan --”

“Are we approaching a point? Because I have calibrations....”

“Forget the damn calibrations! Okay.” Shepard took a breath. “You’ve always been suave, so I figured if anyone knew how to dance it would be you, and... and... well, can you teach me before I make an utter ass of myself in front of millions of people?”

“Oh, it’s probably going to be billions,” Garrus said cheerfully. Shepard blanched, and gave a low moan. Garrus looked contrite. “Sorry, didn’t mean to add to the anxiety. But yes, I can teach you. I’ve been known to cut quite a dashing figure on the dance floor, and I can probably make even you look good, Shepard.”

“Thanks, I think.”

“So, who’s going to lead?” the Turian asked.

“Oh, Kaidan. Absolutely Kaidan. My leading days are definitely over.”

“Not sure the galaxy is ready to accept that,” Garrus said.

“The galaxy can bite me,” Shepard snapped.

“And you are going to need to learn how to lead because you have to dance with the mothers, and all the other ladies are going to line up for a turn so resign yourself to that. Next issue, we’ll need some room,” Garrus said.

“We’ve got a suite. We can push back the furniture.”

“Not enough. If this reception is in a ballroom you’ve got to learn how to cover ground. Why not here?” He indicated the wide expanse of the warehouse. Plenty of room here.”

Shepard nodded. “Sure. But keep this quiet, okay?”

“I need a partner so I can demonstrate, and eventually you and Kaidan are going to have to practice together.”

“Oh shit. Why does everything have to be so complicated?”

“You should have eloped,” Garrus said dryly.

“I fucking *tried*. Nobody would let me.”

#

“Any reason why I’m having to drag words out of you today?”

Mendelberg asked.

“My mother arrived. And I’m tired. Been having trouble sleeping again.”

“Why?”

Shepard stared down at his clasped hands. It wasn't a memory he particularly wanted to revisit. Problem was he couldn't stop thinking about it. "There was a Batarian panhandling near Claridge's. I gave him... well... a lot. But he recognized me...." Shepard fell silent.

"Go on."

The silence stretched between them. Mendelberg continued to wait. His uncanny ability to remain still and silent once again broke down Shepard's resistance, and the Commander found himself saying in a low voice. "He spit on me."

"Which started you thinking about Bahak again?"

Shepard looked away. "Yeah." Proust wandered up, and laid his head on Shepard's knee. The old dog's jowls dripped slobber onto his pants. Shepard stroked the animal's head, and gazed down into the sympathetic brown canine eyes. "I wish... sometimes the guilt is... just... Why did it have to be me?"

"So, who would you rather have carrying it?"

"Excuse me?"

“The burden of this decision, the weight of guilt. Which one of your people would you like to lay it off on? Kaidan? Garrus? Vega? Liara? Tali? Joker? I’m sure Kaidan would happily have spared you this --”

“No! I wouldn’t want anyone else to feel what I’m feeling.” Mendelberg raised an eyebrow at him. Shepard exhaled and leaned back in his chair.

“Aaah, so because this fell on me someone else was spared this.”

“Whether it was one of your own people, or some unknown Alliance officer it’s the gift you gave them.” Shepard nodded slowly. “What are you thinking?”

“That this makes me feel less like a victim and more in control.... I think I’ll be able to sleep tonight.”

“Good.”

#

Tali and Garrus were waiting in the warehouse. "I'm assuming human music," Garrus said, getting right to the point. "You mentioned a waltz?"

“That’s what Sir Geoffrey said,” Shepard answered.

“Okay. I went with Strauss. He was your waltz king, after all.”

“Yeah, okay. Sir Geoffrey mentioned him.”

“Roses from the South,” Garrus called to Tali. She touched her Omni-tool and music filled the warehouse. “Just stand here for a minute, close your eyes, and listen. Now just sway in time to the music.” Shepard was pretty sure he looked like a broken marionette. “Open your eyes,” the Turian ordered.

“I take it that wasn’t what you wanted?”

Garrus threw Tali an agonized look. She giggled. “Not exactly. Look, Shepard, if you can walk you can dance. Dancing is just walking in time to music. This a waltz so it’s in three quarter time -- and *one*, two, three, *one*, two, three.”

“Why are you stressing one?”

“Because it’s the downbeat.... and you have no idea what I’m talking about,” Garrus said. Shepard shook his head.

“Never studied music?” Head shake. “Learned to play an instrument?”

Another negative.

“I like to listen to music,” Shepard offered.

“Well, that’s something. Okay, take my hands and let’s try walking in time to the music.”

Shepard, rigidly upright, lurched along. Every time he trod on Garrus's feet he lost his balance. The music was punctuated with ouches, apologies, curses, more apologies, and Tali's giggles.

Shepard dropped Garrus hands, and paced away. "Hopeless. It's hopeless. I'm hopeless."

Garrus limped to a crate, sat down, and used a medigel. He gave Tali a desperate look.

"Maybe if we tried together, Shepard," Tali said.

It went even worse with Tali because Shepard was so worried about stepping on the diminutive Quarian that he ended up shuffling, terrified to pick up his feet.

"Maybe it would help if you watched Garrus and me," Tali suggested.

Shepard slumped onto a crate. "Sure."

Tali started the music again and flowed into Garrus's arms. The grace with which they negotiated the space, and the intricate footwork had Shepard thinking it was just a bridge too far. He could never learn in time. The couple danced longer than was probably strictly necessary, and when they stepped apart, Shepard applauded.

"You make a really elegant couple," he said.

Garrus stared at him. “There must be something that will have resonance for you. We’re both snipers... let’s try this -- dancing is like sniping.”

Tali cocked her helmeted head at Garrus and Shepard frowned. “How please?” he said.

“Well, you know... you wait for the right moment to make your move, you take a breath, hold it, and then *blam*. It’s just that the moments happen at ever beat of the music. So... in essence, I guess you’re not waiting... for much....” He waved his hands over his head as if erasing not only the words, but the very thought. “Okay, forget all that. Dancing is nothing at all like sniping. It’s like a.... a... minefield....”

Shepard crossed his arms and gave Garrus that look.”

“Okay, fine. It’s not like a minefield. It’s like....” Shepard could almost see the idea beginning to form in the Turian’s head. “It’s like moving from cover to cover.”

Shepard dropped his arms and perked up a bit. “Go on.”

“Yes! Pretend the enemy is behind me, and I’m your cover. You’re the Cerberus Guardian, and I’m your shield. The enemy fires at you at every beat of the music, but you always keep moving, turning, keeping me between you and the

bullets. Got it?” He took Shepard’s hands. “The first step takes us on a quarter turn, the second another quarter. Now backup half a step, then repeat.”

Shepard closed his eyes, concentrating on each carefully executed step. After a few moments the music started. They circled the warehouse hand-in-hand, and Shepard followed Garrus’s lead without any ouches, curses or apologies.

The music ended, Shepard opened his eyes, and Garrus dropped the human’s hands and glared. “After two hours, more than a few mashed toes and a medigel you *finally* get dancing as it relates to a firefight?” Talis was giggling uncontrollably.

Shepard shrugged. “Gotta stick with what the student knows, right? Well, thanks --”

“Oh, no, no, no. That was just baby steps. Get your ass over here. Now, put your right hand in my left hand. And your left hand on my right shoulder.”

Garrus slipped his right hand around Shepard’s waist, and rested it on the human’s back between his shoulder blades. Shepard stiffened.

“Relax, Shepard, your virtue is safe with me.” Shepard felt himself coloring up, and cursed his fair complexion. “Now we do it again.”

#

Things were reaching a frenzied pace. More and more stories appeared in the press about the wedding.

Sir Geoffrey showed up demanding answers. Shepard and Kaidan decided they would both wear dress uniforms, music was selected for the ceremony. Most of it martial. The jeweler who had sold Kaidan the ring was brought in to design the wedding bands. Shepard didn't want to give up the star sapphire so it was incorporated into his wedding band.

“Who will hold the rings for you?” Sir Geoffrey asked.

“Garrus,” Shepard said promptly.

“Joker,” Kaidan said equally quickly.

“Joker?” Shepard repeated. “Are you sure he won't replace the ring with a Batarian slave collar or something?”

“He'll behave. And we worked really closely when I was first assigned to the Normandy.”

“Cake?” Sir Geoffrey demanded.

“Chocolate with fondant icing,” Shepard said.

“Champagne? Kaidan asked.

“Of course,” Sir Geoffrey replied.

“Gifts?”

“None,” both men said in unison.

“People will want to make some gesture,” the attache objected.

“Then tell them to make donations to the refugees and to the rebuilding effort,” Shepard said.

#

“Let’s take a walk,” Mendelberg said when Shepard arrived for his next session. “Old dog could use a ramble. Both old dogs,” he added with a smile.

Shepard waited while the old man got his hat and coat, and a cone filled with bread crumbs and they headed out with Proust waddling along behind them. Their path took them toward a green break cut through by an ice-rimmed stream. There were swans and ducks at the water’s edge.

Occasionally the old dog became fascinated by some scent in the bushes, and fell behind. They always knew when Proust was running to join them because he was accompanied by farts. Shepard suspected the flatulence was what propelled the elderly canine.

“We haven’t talked much about your father,” Mendelberg said as the snow squeaked and scrunched beneath their boots. Shepard remained silent. “Tell me about him.”

“He was... fun.”

Mendelberg reached out, and pulled back the hood on the coat. “I want to see your face.”

Shepard jerked his head toward the lurking reporters and camera bots on the edge of the park. “What about them?”

“You’re more than a public figure, Noel. You’re a legend. Legends don’t have normal lives.”

“That’s supposed to make me feel better?” Shepard asked.

“No, my job is to make you strong enough to bear it.” Mendleberg turned toward the gaggle of press, smiled and waved.

Shepard remembered Hackett’s directive about the wedding. “*You’re going to be smiling and waving.*” Sucking in a deep breath Shepard turned, smiled and waved. There was a reaction from the press, but they wisely didn’t approach.

“So, your dad. He was fun,” Mendelberg nudged.

“Yeah.”

“What does that mean?”

“When he came home from a mission he always had a present for me. Never anything big, but always something special and unique.”

“Such as?”

“A nautilus shell from Thessia. They glow in the dark, and an intricate bookmark carved by Drell artists. Little things.”

“Where are they now?”

“Gone. With the first Normandy.”

“He was an intelligence officer, yes?”

“Yeah. It was perfect for him. Women loved him and men liked him. Oh, I wouldn't have put it that way at ten, I just knew when he was around people seemed happy.”

“And your mother? Was she happy when he was around.”

Shepard had to think about that. “Huh, you know, I don't think she was.”

The swans and the ducks seemed to recognize the doctor. They waddled forward with much honking and quacking. Mendelberg tossed bread crumbs as he asked, “He was held up to you as a role model?”

“Oh yeah. Living up to the legend of Devlin Shepard....” Shepard's voice trailed away.

“I’d say you’ve succeeded,” Mendelberg said. Shepard remained silent.

The doctor pushed. “Don’t you?”

“I wonder if he’d be proud of me,” Shepard finally said.

“Ask him.”

“Yeah, right. You do know that the dead rarely speak.”

“Oh, I think they talk to us all the time. Or at least that’s how we perceive it. We wonder if we did enough? Did the right things? Said what needed to be said?”

“You’re thinking about your daughter,” Shepard said.

“Yes.”

The words burst out. “Sometimes I just want to ask him have I done enough? Can I rest now?”

Mendelberg laid a hand briefly on his shoulder. “You need to get the answer. That’s your assignment for next time. Have the conversation.”

#

An ad hoc playground had sprung up near the Thames. Shepard walked there frequently and watched the children playing, supervised by orphanage personal, and some parents. Their high pitched shrieks echoed off the damaged buildings, and sang in the clouds as they frolicked in the snow.

There was one little girl with long curling black hair that reminded him of Kaidan.

He heard Anderson's voice, warm and proud. "*You did good, son. You did good.*"

The child ran up to him, and stared curiously up at him. "Do you want to make a snow angel with me?" she piped.

"I don't know how to do that," Shepard said. "Would you show me?"

She smile and nodded. He almost grabbed her when she fell backwards into the snow, then realized she meant to do that. She moved her arms and legs until the pattern in the snow did resemble a figure with wings.

"See? It's fun. Now you do it."

He hesitated, looked around, then fell back into the cold and soft embrace of the snow. He found himself laughing as he formed the angel. *It's been a long time since I laughed like that*, he realized. The little girl joined him making another angel. They stood, and she looked up at him. Snow clung to her curls.

"You're Commander Shepard. Thank you." She stood on tiptoes, he leaned down, and she kissed him on the cheek. Shepard's heart felt squeezed. He watched as she ran away and rejoined her friends.

Anderson's voice again filled his memory.

"I think you'd make a great dad."

I'm a soldier, not really fit for doing anything else. I'm not sure I'd be much good at it.

"But I really think I might like to try," he said softly.

#

"Hey, there you are," Kaidan said when he came home that night and found Shepard standing at the window gazing out into the dark. "What's wrong? Are you in pain?" His tone was sharp now and concerned.

"No, just thoughtful." Kaidan led him away from the window to the couch.

"Talk to me. What's up?"

"Did you ever think about... children?"

Kaidan gave a short laugh. "I never thought I'd find anybody. Kids were a way distant thought. You?"

"Same."

"So?" Kaidan nudged.

"I think, someday, I want kids."

"Okay."

“That’s it?”

Kaidan shrugged. “I like kids.”

“So, how do we do it? I mean, when we’re ready?” Shepard asked.

“Adopt?”

“Find a willing surrogate, and take turns donating sperm?” Kaidan said with a smile. “There’s also Salarian technology; they might be able to blend our DNA.”

“Sort of like Henry Lawson did with Miranda and Oriana?” Shepard said.

“Well, he isn’t exactly the model I’d use,” Kaidan said. “After what that bastard did on Horizon --”

“And I sure wouldn’t want to bring it up to Miranda right now,” Shepard said. “She’s got... issues where kids are concerned.”

Kaidan, frowning thoughtfully asked, “How many would you want?”

“Oh, I don’t know. A couple. Boy and a girl?”

#

The dance lessons continued becoming more refined, but one afternoon Garrus stepped back and shook his head.

“What? I did that perfectly,” Shepard said.

“Yeah, but you’re not feeling it. Dancing is about falling in love for the first time, or falling in love all over again. You need to look in your partner’s eyes, and lean back. You know how I keep nagging you to give weight? Well, a flowing dance won’t happen until you do that. It means you have to believe your partner will be there for you. Never let you fall. It’s an act of faith.”

Tears suddenly filled his eyes. Angry and embarrassed, Shepard turned away, wiping furiously at the moisture. “Goddam it. Sorry, so damn overly emotional all the time....”

Tali moved to his side, and hugged him hard. “We understand,” she said softly. “You were there for us. Now let us be there for you, and know we are never judging.”

Garrus joined them. Laid a hand briefly on Shepard’s shoulder. Shepard took a deep breath. “Okay, so how do we get me over this last hurdle?”

“Only one way. Kaidan, get your ass in here,” Garrus yelled.

“No,” Shepard said as his fiancé walked into the warehouse. He backed away, trying to fend off Kaidan.

“We’re going to have to do it at the reception and then we’ll be on camera,” Kaidan said. “It’s probably better if that’s not the first time we’ve

actually danced together. Wouldn't you agree, Commander? You're always stressing preparation."

He was grinning, and Shepard didn't know whether to slug him or kiss him. He surrendered. It felt different when it was Kaidan's hand resting against the small of his back. Shepard kept his focus on the cleft in Kaidan's chin.

"You know," the major said softly. "It's customary to look in your partner's eyes when you dance."

Shepard's gaze met Kaidan's and suddenly he understood dancing.

#

Shepard told Mendelberg his thoughts about children, pacing the room while he talked. "I mean, not right away. Kaidan and I need to get sorted out and accustomed to this whole marriage thing, but a little girl with his eyes... I think I'd like that." He turned to face the doctor. "Do you think I'm crazy? Disregard that... I know I'm crazy but --"

Mendelberg stood. "Congratulations, Noel."

"What?"

"You don't have to come back and see me again." For an instant Shepard felt like the floor disappeared from beneath his feet. Mendelberg correctly

interpreted his expression. “Oh, you can call if you need me, but I don’t think you will.”

“What did I do?”

“”Made a plan for the future. You’re going to be fine, son.” He laid a hand briefly on Shepard’s shoulder. “It’s been an honour and a privilege.”

“Thank you, sir. Um... I’d like it if you came to the wedding.”

#

Kaidan’s mother, Amelia, arrived from Canada. She was small, and fine boned and reminded Shepard of a gazelle. Her dark eyes were shadowed with grief. She was so nervous around him that she seemed utterly tongue tied. Which helped him get over his nervousness as he struggled to put her at ease.

My mother is going to eat her alive, Shepard thought.

In an effort to keep Hannah on her best behavior they opted for the first family meeting to be at a restaurant on the theory that Admiral Shepard wouldn’t say something blunt and tactless in public.

Hannah was waiting when the trio entered. Shepard gave her a pleading look, as he introduced Amelia. The much smaller woman looked up at Hannah, smiled and said,

“So, what have our boys gotten us roped into?”

Hannah, startled, laughed. “A three ring circus is what it feels like.” She then paused and added, “Noel told me about your husband. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.” Amelia looked at her son, and at Shepard. “There is so much sorrow, I’m glad we have something joyful to celebrate. So tell me, how did you combine ship board service and a family?”

“It wasn’t easy, but when there’s a crew it’s not that hard to find a baby sitter. Somebody was always off duty, and willing to chase after a rug rat.”

“Not a model child?” Amelia asked.

“Oh, God no. There was the time when we put into dock on Illium, and he decided he was going to run away. Have you ever chased a toddler wearing nothing but a diaper through a market place filled with elegant and disapproving Asari?”

Shepard felt the flush rising into his cheeks. Kaidan gave him a mischievous smile, but it quickly slipped when his mother said,

“Oh, I can top that. There was one time Kai decided to help out during the apple harvest. He decided his biotics were just the thing. Poor tree looked like it’d been through a hurricane, and all the apples were reduced to apple sauce. Fortunately he didn’t have the power to hit the whole orchard, just one tree.”

“And it’s so damn hard to punish them when they were just trying to help. One time Noel, oh, he was about nine, decided to help by doing laundry. Except he mistook bleach for detergent.”

Amelia’s face was a study in horror. “Oh, no, your uniforms?”

“Tie dyed, and Admiral Fujasaki was arriving for an inspection that day.”

“Well, there was one time when Kai decided to give the dog a bath....”

Shepard had anticipated an evening of sheer agony. It proved to be just that, but not for the reasons he’d feared. The two women got on famously as they swapped humiliating stories about their sons.

As they were rising to leave Amelia described the gown she was going to wear, and Shepard was stunned when his mother suddenly said,

“To hell with the uniform. I’m going to wear a dress too. Prove to some of those guys I actually have legs.”

#

Shepard sat with a stylus and a datapad and tried to figure out the wedding party. Joker and Garrus were in as attendants. They were holding the rings. But he wanted Liara and Tali and Zaeed, and Chakwas, and Miranda and Jack and Vega, and Kasumi. And Wrex had to be there. Wrex, like Garrus, had

been there from the very beginning. Javik. The last Prothean needed to be included.

Kaidan came home, shrugged out of his coat, and cocked an eye at Shepard. “You’re frowning. What’s up?”

“You know I don’t really care about making Sir Geoffrey happy, but I’m trying to figure out the wedding party.”

Kaidan sat on the arm of the chair. “Who do you have so far?”

Shepard ticked them off. “But then what about Cortez? He flew us through hell more times than I like to remember. And we would never have found the Illusive Man if it hadn’t been for Traynor. Will they be offended if they’re not included? And what about Engineer Adams, and Ken and Gabby? And your students? Is there someone or several some ones that you’d like to have stand up with you?” His voice trailed away.

“Wow, that is a lot of people. Look, here’s my suggestion for what it’s worth. Let’s just ask the original companions. We’ve already got Garrus and Joker. Have Wrex, Liara, Tali and Chakwas stand up with us. Everybody else is, of course invited. They’ll be in the church, and at the reception, but those guys were the core. The people who were there from the beginning.” Kaidan

fell silent for a moment. “And the way I wasn’t there for you when you went after the Collectors makes me feel like I shouldn’t be included either.”

“Stupid.” Shepard made the word into a caress. “We’re way past Horizon, and you’re the one who said to forget and forgive.” He tapped the stylus against his lower lip, and nodded. “This makes sense, and nobody gets their feelings hurt. Or at least I hope not.”

“And we make Sir Geoffrey happy,” Kaidan said standing up. “What’s for dinner.”

“Sole with beurre blanc sauce, new potatoes and spinach.” The soldier made a face. “Hey, I’m trying. I’ve used every sauce I can think of and that I can get the ingredients for.”

“I’m just so sick of fish. Would it be awful of us to ask for steak at the reception dinner?” Kaidan said rather wistfully.

“My poor carnivore,” Shepard said, his voice catching on a laugh. “I don’t know. We’re getting hammered in the press over the cost of this thing. But damn, a piece of rare roast beef would taste good. I’ll bring it up to Sir Geoffrey.”

Sir Geoffrey was delighted that they’d listened and kept the wedding party small, and since they seemed to be basking (at least for the moment) in his

approval Shepard brought up the entree issue. The elderly Brit stroked his chin thoughtfully, and nodded.

“I think we just might be able to accommodate you. We will of course have a fish entree and a vegetarian choice as well as appropriate cuisine for the Turian and Quarian guests. They’ve managed to restore relay service to Eden Prime, and it’s an agricultural world that was only lightly hit by the Reapers. We can get beef.”

“Kaidan will be very happy,” Shepard said.

#

The rest of Kaidan’s family arrived. Uncle Joe Alenko who owned the B.C. orchard, his wife Veronique, and three remaining sons, Joe Jr., Ivan and Christopher. Ivan and Christopher were married. Their wives were Raya and Selene, and between them they had five kids, three girls and two boys ranging in age from two to ten years. Peter’s widow Betina and her new born daughter, Trina had also come. As Veronique had said quietly to Noel and Hannah, “we don’t like to leave her alone.” The final son, Gregory hadn’t been married at the time of his death.

Shepard despaired of ever keeping them all straight. The kids were just whirling bundles of energy except for the baby who was a cooing, gurgling,

smiling bundle of protoplasm in Bettina's arms. The baby's happiness was in stark contrast to her mother's bleak despair.

Shepard found himself exchanging a glance with his mother. For most of his life he had been an only child raised by a widowed mother. Now he had gained a family. Oh, God, had he gained a family. A lot of family.

Joe was a burly man in his early sixties, and gave Shepard some idea of how Kaidan would look when he was older. Grey streaked black hair, but where Kaidan had his mother's tawny brown eyes, Joe's were an intense grey. Veronique was a wide hipped woman with a comforting smile, and a pert French accent. The boys, were tall and broad and dark haired. The family resemblance was apparent between all the Alenko men.

"How did you avoid getting creamed by the Reapers?" Hannah asked as they gathered for a family dinner at the suite.

One of the boys pulled one of the girl's hair, and the fight was on. Their high pitched voices were like dolphin's whistles.

"Livestock," said Joe loudly over the piercing cries of the children.

"I thought you owned an orchard," Hannah said.

"Thomas David Alenko! You leave Sheila alone!" Raya snapped.

"She started it!"

“I don’t care. You stop it right now!”

The fighting continued. Ivan came half out of chair like a broaching whale. "Don't make me come over there!"

The ruckus subsided. Shepard delivered a huge pan of lasagna to the table.

Kaidan followed with a bowl of salad.

“We’ve always kept a few horses for the kids and grandkids to ride, a couple of dairy cows for milk. We discovered that the big squids disregarded us if we were tucked in among the animals.”

Plates were filled and passed. The kid’s were distracted by food, and gathered in a clump on the floor.

Joe went on. “Their scanners detected any kind of tech -- shuttles, fliers, tanks, but the Reapers and their spawn read a man on horseback as an animal. So we brought in and trained horses for the resistance. It’s how we moved people without them being detected. Have quite a herd now.”

“That’s great,” Kaidan said. He turned to Shepard with a smile. “We can go riding together. I can show you the countryside. It’s beautiful.”

“Uh...okay,” Shepard said, and wondered how he was going to get out of that?

The largest animal he'd ever spent any length of time with was Mendelberg's old dog.

As Shepard listened to the conversations weave around him he realized the only topic they had in common aside from him and Kaidan was the war against the Reapers. Which meant there was a lot of talk about battles. Betina shared Shepard's discomfort. Kaidan looked over at him, and took hold of his hand beneath the table. Gave it a firm squeeze.

"Hey, Aunt Veronique, did you bring your guitar?" Kaidan asked during a lull in the talk of war.

"I did."

"Maybe you'll play for us later? Veronique was a music student before Uncle Joe turned her into a farmer," Kaidan explained to Shepard and Hannah. Shepard threw Kaidan a grateful glance as the topic switched to music.

Dinner ended. Veronique played. The younger kids wound down and fell asleep on various pieces of furniture, and even on the rug. But the music had not brought comfort to Betina, and her daughter seemed to sense her mother's grief. She lost her smile, and began to cry, an inconsolable sound that pierced Shepard's heart.

It was clear from Betina's expression that it was all just too much. Veronique started to react, but Kaidan held out his hands to his cousin's widow. "Let me take her."

Betina handed over her daughter, muttered an incoherent apology and darted out of the room. Kaidan's hands cupped the baby around her torso, and he bounced her on his knee, gazing down into her poppy-red face. He made faces, and the little girl's sobs subsided, and the smile started to return. Shepard, serving dessert and coffee, looked at Kaidan, so at ease with an infant in his arms, and gave a mental head shake.

Once everyone was served Amelia said softly, "There is one last task we have before we can give ourselves over to joy. We need a memorial service for your father," she said to Kaidan.

His jawed worked for a moment, but his voice was level when he said, "Yeah, that can't wait."

Later that night as Shepard slid into bed next to Kaidan the older man said, "So, still think you want kids after an evening with my cousins rug rats?"

"It was a little overwhelming, but there were five of them."

"You're talking about twins. Two sets of diapers, two midnight feedings --"

“You’re not planning on helping?” Shepard asked.

“Hey, I have to get my rest. I’ll be going to work every morning,” Kaidan teased.

“Asshole,” Shepard said fondly.

#

They found an Eastern Orthodox church operating out of a warehouse, and arranged for a service. It was small, just the family because Ani Alenko had been years out of the service, and any friends and acquaintances were back in Vancouver. Joe talked of his brother, sharing childhood stories, and ended by saying,

“The proudest and happiest day of his life was the day you were born,” Joe said as he looked at Kaidan. He then stepped aside for his nephew.

Kaidan spoke about his father’s unfailing support, when his biotic abilities began to manifest. How Ani had kept quiet when Kaidan had dropped out and lost his way.

“He tracked me down right at the beginning, and told me he’d be there whenever I was ready to talk. Then he left me alone. When I was finally ready to rejoin life he was waiting for me. He never judged, or laid into me over the stupid things I’d done. He gave me advice only when I was ready to

listen. I wish he was here now, but I know he's watching and nodding and saying, "You made it, kid, and you're okay. Well, if I am it's due to him. I love you, dad, and I'll miss you."

"You were very composed during that," Shepard said when they were back at the hotel.

"I've had months to come to terms with it," Kaidan said. "And he was never one for looking back at stuff you can't change. I've got a lot to look forward to. He wouldn't have wanted me to not savor and enjoy every moment of this."

"I wish I could have met him."

"You would have liked him."

"But would he have liked me?"

"He would have thought you were too serious, and he'd probably have been after you let loose a bit," Kaidan said with a smile.

"Well, you'll just have to stand in for him," Shepard replied.

"I wonder what your dad would have thought of me," Kaidan said.

"I wonder what he would have thought of *me*," Shepard replied.

#

A few days later Kasumi arrived bearing a box tied with a silver ribbon.

“Hey, Shep, you look good. The way everyone was talking I expected a corpse.”

“Came close. And what the hell is that?” Shepard asked.

“Wedding present from the Rachni Queen.”

“Didn’t you tell her? No presents.”

“Yeah, and she’s the Rachni Queen. I’m not telling a giant spider that could pinch my head off that she can’t give a gift to the guy who spared her life. So suck it up, and accept it gracefully.”

Shepard grumbled, but accepted the box. It weighed almost nothing. He cocked an eyebrow at Kasumi. “You’ll see, she said cryptically.

He untied the ribbon and lifted off the top. Inside was what looking like a cloud shot through with glittering ice crystals. He looked closer and amended that. It was the most delicate lace he’d ever seen, and the lace was beaded with tiny diamonds.

“Good God.”

“Yeah, Spider lace, spun by the queen herself.”

“What am I supposed to do with this?”

“I’d suggest wearing it like a sash. It will look great tied around that narrow waist of yours. But I’d advise you to have it somewhere on your person during the ceremony. Trust me, Queenie is going to be watching.”

Shepard had a disorienting image of the giant insectile creature sitting with other Rachni watching his wedding while nibbling on snacks and drinking champagne, and giving each other high fives with their claws and pincers.

He unfolded the swath of lace the diamonds flashing and glittering in the light.

“If I ever have a daughter....”

“What?” Kasumi asked.

“I think this would make a beautiful wedding veil.”

“An heirloom of your house,” Kasumi said softly. She then gave that impish grin. “I promise I won’t steal it. Oh, and thanks for including me in the invitation.”

“Of course, Kasumi. You were there for me.”

She stood, and gave a small laugh. “I’m almost a little suspicious. Usually when you invite me to something it’s a suicide mission, or a hopeless fight against insurmountable odds, with no possibility of success. What’s really

going on with this wedding? I'll be looking over my shoulder the entire time."

"Maybe you should attend cloaked," Shepard suggested dryly.

"Might not be a bad idea. Don't want to disrupt the festivities by getting arrested."

"Oh, God, what have you stolen now?"

#

Kaidan called from work. "Hey, a couple of my students want to take me out for a drink. I don't really want to go, but they enlisted Joker -- one of the guys, Bardalucci, is on the Normandy now -- and Joker leaned on me. Says they have something special planned though he doesn't know what it is. Do you mind? I won't be late."

"No, go, have fun. Hackett and my mom have been after me to have dinner at the Admiral's table. I'll make them happy and go."

"Oooh, dinner with the big brass. Bet I have more fun," Kaidan said.

"I'd say it's a lead pipe cinch you'll have more fun."

When Shepard returned to the hotel at ten o'clock Kaidan still wasn't back. He made a cup of tea and thought about waiting up, but the formal dinner had left him enervated. Mostly because the attendees had questions.

About his time with Cerberus, the assault on the Collector Base. Why he mutinied and stole the Normandy to go after Saren? Why he chose to save the Council at a cost of so many human lives? Why he'd destroyed the relay that killed so many Batarians?

Talking about those events had set off an anxiety attack, and sent him into the men's room to shiver and hide. He'd considered calling Mendelberg, but it passed off, and he was able to rejoin the party with his equanimity restored. He finished his tea, and decided to hit the rack. He woke a few hours later, and knew with certainty that he was still alone in the bed. He checked the time. *3:11 a.m.*

Tension coiled in his chest. He got up, and called Kaidan. It went immediately to voice mail.

"Hey. I'm worried. It's really late. Are you okay? Call me. No, better yet, come home."

Shepard returned to the bedroom, dressed, and started pacing.

#

Kaidan woke. His mouth tasted like a Vorcha nest, and his temples throbbed in time to his heartbeat. He became aware of a pair of soft rounded

buttocks pressed against his belly. A pair of breasts were pressed against his back, and long hair snaked across his arm, and caught in his lips.

“Wha...” he groaned. He opened his eyes to face a bright glare.

The buttocks began to move, grinding against his already painfully erect dick, and he realized his balls ached. A body pressed against the length of his back, and someone began kissing his shoulder and the nape of his neck. With growing panic Kaidan fought to sit up, his hand sinking into the material of a mattress. Clinging arms wrapped around his neck, waist and shoulders. A blue glow shimmered around his body as he instinctively put up a shield.

“Good enough. We got what we need,” came a male voice. It sounded vaguely familiar.

The eye stabbing light went out, and Kaidan was able to see the camera bot, and the face of the man standing next to it. It was the reporter who had pulled back Shepard’s hood, and whom Shepard had hit. Kaidan looked left, then right. He was sandwiched between a naked woman on one side and a naked Asari on the other.

And he was naked. And rampantly at attention even though he felt anything but amorous.

The human and the Asari rolled away from him, rose and started to dress. Within moments the reporter, the camera and the hookers were gone. Kaidan sat up, made it to his feet and was overcome by nausea. He emptied the contents of his stomach onto the floor of the dingy apartment. Gagging from the smell of stale beer, whiskey and chili he staggered into the bathroom and rinsed his mouth. Back into the bedroom. He located his clothes, and dressed with fingers that felt too large to manage the clasps and zipper. He groped and realized his omni tool was gone and with it his credit deck and identification. He weaved drunkenly toward the door, and headed down the stairs. He fell halfway down, landing painfully on his shoulder.

Into the street. The ice on the sidewalks made his already precarious navigation all the more difficult. Flashing lights stabbed at his eyes and made his horrible headache unbearable.

“Here now, what’s this soldier?” came a voice from behind the lights.

Why was it, Kaidan wondered, that cops the galaxy over all sounded exactly the same?

#

Sometime after four a.m. there was a knock at the door of suite. Shepard lunged to answer. Kaidan was there, being supported by a young female bobby.

“I found him wandering in the street, sir, and I recognized him,” she said somewhat breathlessly. “I think he’s been drugged.”

“Noel, I’m so, so sorry,” Kaidan said, his expression and voice equally agonized.

“I’ll take him from here, officer. And thank you for bringing him home.”

“My pleasure, sir.” She gave a little half-salute, spun on her heel and marched away.

Shepard got his shoulder under Kaidan’s arm and helped him to the couch.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered again.

“What happened?” Shepard demanded.

Kaidan gnawed at his lower lip. “Somebody must have slipped something in my drink, and now I don’t know where Joker’s is, and I’m afraid he’s in trouble, and I... and I... oh, god. I’ve done something awful, and it’s going to embarrass and humiliate you.”

“Major! Slow down. Start at the beginning, and tell me what you’ve done,” Shepard ordered.

Kaidan drew in a shuddering breath. “I think I had sex with a couple of people, and I’m afraid it may already be all over the newsnets.” He buried his face in his hands. “It was that reporter. The one you hit.” The words were muffled. “I betrayed you.”

Shepard barely heard the final words. He took Kaidan by the shoulders. “It doesn’t sound like this was a choice you made. So relax.” He stood up and walked away.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting us some help.” He called Diane Allers, and woke her. He had a brief glimpse of Traynor before Allers face filled the screen.

The reporter clawed back her hair, but her eyes were very alert for a woman who’d just been awakened. “Commander, what’s up?”

“You were right, Allers, I should have done interviews. So I’m eating crow, and asking for help.”

“What’s happened?”

“It sounds like Kaidan got Mickey finned, and was filmed in a... ah, compromising situation. I haven’t turned on the news vids yet --”

“Don’t. You might blow a gasket. Let me check it out, and figure out what to do. How’s Kaidan?”

Shepard glanced over at his fiancé who had slumped back against the sofa. He had a hand pressed against his eyes. Clearly a migraine was tormenting him. “Pretty shattered and pretty woozy.”

“Well get him ship shape as quickly as you can. I’ll get back to you. Oh, and verify if he was drugged.”

“Right.”

“Oh, and Shepard...”

“What?”

“I get the exclusive, right?”

“Jesus, Diana.”

“Hey, I’m still a reporter.”

Shepard hung up, called Chakwas and outlined the situation. The doctor responded with a terse “I’m on my way.”

Shepard helped Kaidan into the bedroom, undressed him and got him into bed. Noel dimmed the lights, dipped a wash cloth in cold water and laid it over his fiancé’s eyes. Kaidan gripped his hand briefly.

“I love you.”

“It’s mutual,” Shepard replied.

Chakwas arrived and drew blood. Promised an answer within the hour. Next Shepard called the new head of C-Sec, outlined the situation, and requested a search for Joker. His final call was to Traynor.

“Oh, Commander,” she breathed in a tone of despair.

“Yeah, I gather it’s bad. I haven’t turned on the news.”

“Don’t. What do you need, sir?”

“You’re my research monkey, Samantha, Find out everything you can about an officer named Bardalucci.”

“How soon do you need this?”

“Yesterday. I’m going to be questioning him in a few hours.”

Finally he put in a call to Captain Orman. Orman sounded wary when she answered. He didn’t bother with pleasantries. “I need to come aboard and question one of your officers.”

“This is awkward Shepard.”

“Yeah, for me too.”

“Your boyfriend gets himself in trouble, and suddenly you want to give one of mine the third degree?”

“Julia, let’s not play this game. Major Alenko was assaulted. I want to know why. Don’t make me involve Hackett.”

“You’d call down the big guns, huh?”

“Never doubt it. I protect my own.”

“And I guess you pretty much get whatever you want now. So, fine.”

“Yeah, not apologizing for it. Have a shuttle waiting at headquarters.”

A final check on Kaidan showed him snoring sonorously. Shepard left.

There was a crowd of reporters and cameras outside Claridges.

“Any comment, Commander?”

“Is the wedding off?”

“How does this make you feel?”

Shepard shouted for a taxi, and while it swooped toward them he turned to the shouting, gesturing mob. “Isn’t a better question how *you’re* feeling?”

They subsided, muttering and exchanging questioning glances. “Is this really all you amount to? Smut and innuendo? One of your own is tarnishing all of your reputations. This isn’t news, it’s character assassination.”

#

There was an ache in the pit of his stomach as he walked through the bridge of the Normandy. The crew saluted, but Orman was the focus. *This isn’t your ship any longer*, he reminded himself, and found it hurt more than he’d anticipated.

Bardalucci turned out to be far younger than Shepard expected. The biotic eyed him warily when Shepard walked into the conference room. Shepard threw a datapad down on the table. “So, you sold out a fellow officer, your teacher for sixty thousand credits. Congratulations, we’ve established not only what you are but your price, and it’s pretty goddam cheap.”

The man flushed, and the biotic glow started to flicker around his body. ‘You don’t understand what it’s like for ordinary people. What we’re going through.’

“You’re sittin’ on a ship with three hots and a cot, lieutenant. Billions of people on hundreds of planets are hungry and looking for shelter. Don’t look to me for pity. Now I want to know who approached you -- though I think I know. I want to know why you did it. What did Major Alenko ever do to you that you’d betray him like this?”

“It’s my sister and mother, sir. They’re on Omega and....” Bardalucci talked and what Shepard learned sent him raging back down to Earth in search of Zaeed.

#

“Your Blue Suns are shaking down people on Omega,” Shepard said without preamble once he located Zaeed at a refugee hostel in Brixton.

“Not my bloody Blue Suns. Haven’t been mine for twenty years.”

“So, take them back. They’re holding refugees hostage on Omega until their families pay a fee to get them off that damn rock.”

“How much are they getting?” Zaeed asked with interest.

“Thirty thousand credits a head.”

“Paltry,” said the mercenary.

“Oh for God’s sake. Don’t make me regret not leaving you under that beam on Zorya.”

“Hey, old habits.”

“Yeah, well, cultivate some new ones. So, what are you going to do about this?”

“I was thinking about retiring, Shepard.”

“You’d be bored in a week. And fighting with your neighbors the week after that.”

“Probably true.” Then Zaeed surprised him by adding, quietly, “I was sort of hoping to die in bed.”

Doubt shook him, but Shepard knew he needed the old mercenary to pull this off. “A worthy goal. One that I share. So, be the boss. Send the young bucks out to lead the missions.”

“Eventually one of those bucks will want to test his antlers against mine.”

“Do this for me, Zaeed. And if you find you really do want out I promise I’ll use all my influence and my Spectre status to help you disappear, and find that retirement.”

Zaeed gripped his forearm. “All right. One last fight together, eh? Just one problem -- I don’t have a ship.”

“I can probably get one. Or some. You’re still looking doubtful.”

“Don’t we have a couple of bachelor parties to attend?” Zaeed asked.

“They’d probably be more fun on Omega,” Shepard said with a calculating smile. “Relay to Omega is up and running.”

Zaeed nodded his approval. “So, when do we go?”

“Let me round up the ships, and I have to give an interview first.”

#

There was nothing ad hoc about Allers set-up for the interview. It was meant to look casual, but the amount of effort that went into creating that impression was anything but. A tea set was laid out on the coffee table, a few half nibbled sandwiches and cookies as if Allers, Shepard and Kaidan had just been caught in the middle of a friendly conversation.

Wardrobe was extensively discussed. Allers wanted Shepard in blue jeans, a turtle neck nordic style sweater in shades of cream and blue but he vetoed the suggestion and insisted on his uniform. He had no idea what Allers intended to ask, but he knew what he intended to do. He and Kaidan had discussed it and were in agreement.

Lights were set, make-up applied, and then the camera was on. Allers went straight at it, bracing them bluntly about Kaidan.

“So, how did Major Alenko end up in bed with a couple of hookers?” She turned to Shepard. “And how are you ever going to forgive him?”

Shepard glanced over at his fiancé. Kaidan had a look reminiscent of rabbits and cobras, but he rallied. “I was drugged.” He handed over the toxicology report. “A Salarian drug similar to rohypnol or ketamine.” He flushed, but finished the recitation. “And Viagra.”

Shepard stepped in. “As for the rest of your question. There’s nothing to forgive. And really none of this crap matters. Yeah, I probably shouldn’t have taken a swing at a that journalist, and he shouldn’t have set up Kaidan, but all of this is trumped because of what we discovered. There are refugees being held hostage on Omega, and isn’t that a bigger and far more important story than us?”

Allers lost her professional cool. “Jesus! Really?”

“Yes, really. And we’re going to deal with it.”

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s a promise.”

“So, I guess you don’t want to tell our viewers about how you met, and what it was like serving together, and how you feel about each --”

Shepard looked sideways at Kaidan, and wasn’t disappointed. The biotic stepped in with a smile and said cheerfully,

“Nope. That’s private.”

Allers looked frustrated, amused and resigned all at the same time. She shook her head, and said, “Okay, fine. Be that way, but answer one question for me. The wedding?”

“What about it?” Shepard asked.

“On or off?”

“On,” they said in chorus.

#

Hackett gave Shepard a three ship squadron with the Normandy as his flag ship for the assault on Omega and the Blue Suns. Kaidan wasn’t sure that was

such a good idea, but majors didn't argue with admirals so he kept his mouth shut.

Zaheed came aboard. Chakwas left her work at the hospital to come along. She said she didn't trust any other medic to keep an eye on Shepard. Garrus was happy to join in as was Jack. James, Joker and Traynor were still assigned to the Normandy. Only Tali, Liara and Miranda were missing when they all mustered at the Normandy airlock.

Jack looked around. "So I'm the only girl? What's with that shit?"

"What am I?" Chakwas asked.

"Old," Jack replied.

Shepard stepped in to prevent all out war. "Tali's concerned with the resettlement of Rannoch, and Liara and Javik are hard at work on their book, and Miranda is --"

"An ex-Cerberus cheerleader and I'm betting neither title cuts much mustard with the Alliance," Jack said. "In fact, I'm surprised to see you, Shepard. I thought you weren't gonna practice war no more." As was so often the case with Jack the tone was mocking. "Just be sure you're up for this. I don't want to be carrying you."

Kaidan watched Shepard tense. “Stow it, Jack,” he growled, and Zaeed laid a hand on her shoulder. It was more warning than caress.

They stepped onto the bridge to find Orman waiting for them. She remained in command but as Shepard’s flag captain. “I’ve vacated the captain’s cabin for you, and Major Alenko,” she said.

Shepard ducked his head. “Not necessary, we’ll be perfectly comfortable in starboard observation.”

“It’s already done,” Orman said flatly.

Kaidan and Shepard took the elevator up to the crow’s nest.

“How does it feel?” Kaidan asked.

“Weird. Uncomfortable.”

They entered the cabin. Shepard checked just over the threshold and looked around. Kaidan followed his gaze to the bookshelf and its empty space. The hamster was gone though the fish remained. “I’ll find out what happened to him,” he said.

“Stupid to be worried about a damn rodent.”

Kaidan slipped an arm around Shepard’s waist. “You don’t have to do this. There’s still time to return to Earth.”

“No. I’m not sending you on a mission alone. And I didn’t go through hell just to let things just go back the way they were.”

“The mercs fought with us against the Reapers,” Kaidan pointed out as he began to unpack.

“Yeah, but that didn’t earn them the right to go back to preying on people. Especially now. There’s been too much suffering. They don’t get to add to it.”

After they got settled they joined the crew for supper. Joker was hanging about in the hallway, leaning heavily on his crutches.

“Major Alenko... Kaidan... sir, could I talk with you?”

Shepard gave him a nod and went around the corner into the mess area.

“What’s up, Joker.”

“I gotta... I mean. I’m sorry. I talked you into going out with those guys and they fucked you over. If you don’t want me to hold the ring I’d totally understand. I mean I don’t deserve --”

“Joker. Shut up. First, I’d say they fucked us both over. Second, of course I want you to be my best man. Don’t worry about it, Joker, it wasn’t your fault.”

“Does the Commander....?”

“He doesn’t blame you either. Now come and eat dinner.”

There were a lot of new faces, officers Orman had brought over from her last posting. Which was probably smart, Kaidan reflected. The ship needed to stop being Commander Shepard's Normandy. At first the young crew members were shy and silent, but as they listened to Joker, Jack, Garrus and Vega giving Kaidan and Shepard crap they began to relax.

They asked questions -- about Tuchanka and Thessia and Saren. Kaidan, his leg pressed against Shepard's felt the subtle trembling beginning. Kaidan stood up.

"Well, big day ahead. We should all get some rest. People murmured goodnights, and drifted away. Kaidan took Shepard back to the cabin, and put away all the data pads.

"This one's a piece of cake," he said. "Now come to bed."

As Kaidan feared it was not a good night. The nightmares had returned.

#

The next morning he helped Shepard into his armor before donning his own. Shepard seemed in a funk, his focus turned inward. He suddenly reacted when Kaidan started hooking up his greaves.

"This isn't my armor."

“No, it’s a light weight. You can’t wear what you did before. It’s too heavy.”

He got the look, but noted that his fiancé didn’t argue. Kaidan didn’t bother suggesting breakfast. He knew Shepard could never eat before a mission, and it was worse now. That had never been a problem for Kaidan. He ate and even slipped a few energy bars into a pocket. They headed down to the shuttle bay and armory. Zaeed, Garrus, Vega and Jack were already suited and ready.

Shepard keyed up the Black Widow sniper rifle. “Uh, Commander,” Vega began. Kaidan made a sharp gesture, waving him down.

Kaidan watched as Shepard hefted the rifle, his features tensing with effort.

That’s when he said, “You can’t carry it. Well, you might be able to carry it, but you’ll never stand up to the recoil when you fire it.”

Shepard glared at him. “I’m a sniper. This is my preferred weapon.”

Oddly enough it was Zaeed who displayed sensitivity and chivvied the others away so Kaidan and Shepard could have it out in private.

“Yeah, and you don’t have the strength to use it now. Pick a lighter one. And frankly you shouldn’t be leading this mission anyway. You should stay back and coordinate the assault.”

“I’m not letting you go alone.”

“I won’t be alone. There’s a squad of marines plus Garrus, Jack, James and Zaeed.”

Shepard’s breaths were becoming quick and shallow. “No,” he said with a vehement head shake.

Kaidan gripped his shoulder. “All right. But pick a weapon you can actually handle. Otherwise you’re dead weight that we’re having to protect.”

That penetrated. Shepard gave him that crooked smile. “Sorry. I’m not usually stupid.” With a grunt of effort he returned the Black Widow to its container, and selected a small submachine gun. He gave Kaidan another sideways glance.

“Garrus is a sniper and probably doesn’t need my help.”

“All sorted?” Zaeed said as they joined them at the side of the shuttle.

Shepard nodded. Steve Cortez was at the controls. Shepard went forward and laid a hand on the pilot’s shoulder.

‘Glad you’re taking us in, Steve,’ he said.

The pilot gazed up at Shepard with adoration, and Kaidan reminded himself not to be jealous. He took a seat, and regretted not using the depilatory as the armor tugged painfully at his chest and groin hair.

“There are a couple of maintenance airlocks that will give us access to the rock,” Cortez said. “Nichols is going to fly the marines to the one on the port side. We’ll be starboard.”

“And we’ll all meet in the middle,” said Garrus, “And head upstairs.”

#

Shepard watched as Kaidan applied his Omni-Tool and got them through the secured airlock. He was starting to smell his own sweat inside the confines of the helmet and the armor felt like it added a pound with each passing minute. He turned the Locust submachine gun in his hands. It felt flimsy. He sighted, trying to get used to the short barrel. He wondered if he’d actually be able to hit anything? Maybe Kaidan and Jack were right. Maybe he was just dead weight.

The commander of the marines radioed tersely, “We’re in.” Then Shepard heard gun fire erupting, the shouts of people in combat.

They exchanged glances. “Well, they know we’re here now,” Zaeed said in his laconic way.

They headed for a door. Shepard's heads up display indicated there were seventeen warm, breathing bodies on the other side. That wouldn't last for long. The team took up positions to either side of the door. Kaidan keyed the lock, and rolled aside as the door slid open and gunfire erupted. A spray of bullets impacted harmlessly on the wall opposite the door.

“Go, go, go!” Kaidan yelled, and he tucked and rolled into the room.

The others followed, laying down suppressing fire. Shepard counted slowly to three, then he nipped around the side of the door, and dove for cover behind a large crate. The display now showed eleven warm, breathing bodies. Radar indicated a couple of enemies trying to flank them on the left. Shepard moved between crates, and waited for them to cross his position. They did, and he opened fire. He was expecting the barrel to climb more than it did so he over-corrected, and ended up having the bullets chew at their shins. He quickly adjusted up to their torsos. They returned fire, and bullets spanged against his armor. Shields flaring he ducked back, and boosted himself up onto the crate. They heard him, and were bringing their guns to bear when he dropped a grenade between them.

From his vantage point he could see the ebb and flow of the fight. It also left him exposed. Bullets chattered at his heels as he leaped down.

“They’re setting up a turret on the far side,” he panted to Garrus and Kaidan when he rejoined them. They radioed the information to Jack, James and Zaeed.

“Watch him for me,” Kaidan said to Garrus who nodded.

Shepard felt a flare of annoyance, but before he could react Kaidan had rushed away. He and Jack joined forces, and their biotics sent crates flying the length of the room to slam into the engineers trying to set up the turret. Vega was a machine, mowing through the defenders with his shotgun. Garrus swarmed up onto a crate and from there swung onto a catwalk that ran around the perimeter of the warehouse. Shepard heard the dragon roar of the Black Widow firing.

A grenade detonated near him, blowing a crate to pieces and sending the contents flying in all directions. Between the shrapnel and the flying cans of vegetables his radar was momentarily overwhelmed. Shepard sensed more than saw the enemy coming up behind him. He whirled, and tried to bring the gun to bear, but the man was on him.

Shepard braced for the hit, but it was no use. Even with the augments in his armor he didn’t have the strength to hold him off. He went down, the back of his head cracking hard against the floor of the warehouse. The helmet took

most of the hit, but for an instant everything went black. When he managed to focus again he and the Blue Suns mercenary were faceplate to faceplate. Shepard saw the man's face go slack with amazement, and the stab from the omni-blade never came.

"Shit," the man breathed, "Shepard." Then Shepard heard a roar of rage, and Kaidan came barreling into the equation.

Kaidan's armored foot took the man square in the chest, and sent him pinwheeling away. With one hand Kaidan pulled Shepard to his feet while with the other he held down the trigger of his assault rifle, and stitched a line of bullets up the length of the man's body.

"I'm okay," Shepard gasped. "Just bruised." There was one final hectic chatter of rifle fire then the room went silent.

"It's a long way to the top levels," Zaeed grunted.

Shepard turned to Garrus. "Know any shortcuts? You were Archangel and this was your stomping ground."

"There are access tunnels, but they're not idiots. They'll have them mined and guarded, and we'll have less room to maneuver in those spaces," Garrus replied.

"So, we do it the hard way," James said, and he didn't seem upset at the

prospect.

Shepard remembered the Blue Sun's expression when he'd realized who he was fighting. "Maybe not. I'm Commander Shepard and...." His voice trailed away.

"And what?" Jack demanded.

Kaidan argued against it. James kept laughing and calling him Loco. Jack shrugged and said "Be a shame if pretty boy here had to arrange for a funeral instead of a wedding." That had Kaidan redoubling his efforts to dissuade him.

Shepard said quietly, "Truthfully, love, I don't think I've got the stamina to fight my way to the top."

"Then go back to the Normandy!" Kaidan snapped. "We'll --"

"No," Zaeed interrupted. "I think he's onto something. Mercenary armies are like wolf packs. The big wolf always wins. There's no bigger wolf in the galaxy than that one," he said pointed at Shepard. "Let him try."

#

On the next level, after the inevitable hail of bullets, James tied a white cloth on the end of the barrel of Shepard's gun. Shepard thrust the white cloth around the edge of the door.

"What?" yelled a woman, her voice shrill with tension.

"I want a parlay."

"Ready to give up," called another voice from inside the room.

"Trying to stop the killing," Shepard called back. "Look, do you know who you're fighting?"

"Doesn't matter, this place is ours." The woman again.

"And we're not disputing that. What isn't yours are the refugees. Look, you're going to lose this fight. Do you know who you're up against?"

"Bunch of Alliance pussies," called a cocky, youthful voice.

"Some of us are Alliance yes, but I'm Commander Shepard. You really want to fight me and mine? You fought with us against the Reapers, and now your boss is making money off the bodies of desperate refugees. You really want to be a part of that? The galaxy viewed you as heroes. What would they think of you now? Zaeed is here. Come to take back the Suns. He's an honorable man. And a greedy one. You'll all make money. Just not this way. And haven't we all had enough of fighting? Isn't it time to build?"

There was murmuring from inside the room. "They're not going to go for it," Jack said. Shepard cut her off with a slashing gesture.

"How do we know you're really Shepard?" the young voice called.

“I’ll come in. Without my helmet. I think my face is pretty well known.”

Kaidan grabbed him by the arm. “You can’t.” His tone was urgent. “All it would take is one sniper and a head shot. I won’t let you.”

“How many more people will die if I don’t?”

“I only care about you.”

Shepard pulled him into a brief hug. “I’ll be all right.”

He removed his helmet, tucked it under his arm, and stepped into the room. He couldn’t help it, he scanned the room looking for that sniper. But he spotted no one, and the bullet he was braced against never arrived. Instead mercenaries stood up from behind crates where they’d been crouching, and advanced on him. Their awe fell on him like blows.

“Wow, you *are* Shepard,” said one.

“Why are you here?” said another.

“Your boss has the wrong priorities. I’d like to think you don’t share them,” Shepard answered.

“It was easy money,” the youngest mercenary said.

“How many of you lost people to the Reapers?” A lot of uncomfortable glances were exchanged. “Plenty, right? Well, there are mothers and fathers, children, husbands and wives, siblings desperate to hold their loved ones

again. How would you feel if you had to pay to hold that person you lost?”

No one answered. Armored feet scuffed on the metal floor, more glances were exchanged.

“Why don’t we let Zaeed and Vido hash this out between them? You stop shooting at my marines, and we’ll stop shooting at you.” Shepard didn’t mean to, but he found himself adding rather plaintively, “And I’m getting married in four days. I’d really like to not do this the hard way.”

From the corner of his eyes Shepard caught Jack rolling her eyes, and Zaeed chuckling. The eye rolling got worse when one of the women asked,

“What are you wearing?”

“My dress uniform.”

There was a brief huddle and a whispered conversation followed by a radio message. Moments later the commander of the Alliance Marines reported that all resistance had ended. Both groups joined up and rode the elevators up to the more populated areas of Omega. The fighting was over. All that remained was Vido.

#

Shepard was shocked by the conditions on the housing levels. People were sleeping in hallways, cooking over camp stoves, lining up to fill bottles with

drinking water. The smell of human waste and unwashed bodies hung in the air, a miasma too strong for the atmosphere scrubbers to remove.

Zaeed's jaw worked, and he muttered, "Damn fool. It was always about the bottom line with Vido. He'd pinch a credit three times before letting it go. You treat people like this, and sooner or later they rise up against you. Beat you to death with a communication console. Because they're always going to be more of them than there are of you, and you can't kill them all before they get you."

Vido had taken over Aria T'lok's quarters in Afterlife. The pounding music was a physical wave against Shepard's chest as they walked down the long hall to the final entrance. Inside there was only one dancer on the platform, and he was Drell. *No Asari maidens, they had all become warriors*, Shepard thought.

Up the stairs to the aerie where Aria had held court. Shepard stared at the couch where he'd met the crime boss of Omega. She had ended up on the Citadel after being kicked off Omega by Cerberus. Which meant she was dead. She never would return to retake Omega. He shook off the memories. There were a couple of confused guards, but no Vido. The mercenaries who'd escorted Shepard's group exchanged glances.

“Private quarters?” Garrus suggested.

“I’ll show you,” said the young kid who seemed to have lost all resentment of Shepard and gone at light speed to adoration.

They moved on to the palatial living quarters. Fine art adorned the walls, a vaporizer occasionally breathed perfume into the air. The bed was a magnificent affair with a canopy and a mattress that would have done for a performance of the Princess and the Pea. No Vido.

Shepard started to turn away, but Zaeed paused, an arrested expression on his face. He held up a hand. The all froze. Zaeed moved to a section of wall, and touched a panel. The closet door slid open. Vido was there, huddled among a bewildering array of suits, coats, slacks and shirts.

Zaeed gave a roar of fury, grabbed the man by the scruff of the neck, and pulled him out of the closet. The expressions on the faces of the Blue Suns who’d accompanied them ranged from discomfort to outright contempt for their erstwhile boss.

The man’s dark eyes darted from face to face until they fixed on Shepard’s. “Shepard, right. I remember you from Zorya. I was an asset during the war. I could be useful to you now.”

“I’m not here for you. I’m here for the hostages,” Shepard replied.

“Yeah. Okay. Fine. You can have them. It was a bad call.”

“Bad call,” Zaeed repeated, contempt dripped off the words. He raised his pistol.

“Are you just going to let him kill me?” Vido squealed. He flopped like a fish in Zaeed’s grasp.

The man’s sweat was rank and sour in Shepard’s nostrils. It was the stench of fear. Shepard gestured at the crescent scar that marred the old mercenary’s face.

“You had your men hold him down while you shot him in the face.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“I remember it like it was yesterday,” Zaeed grated.

“Please, don’t let him kill me,” Vido begged while gazing desperately up at Shepard.

Sickened by the whole thing Shepard stared down at the floor. He finally looked up. “Zaeed,” he implored.

“I know what you want me to do, Shepard. What *you* would do,” Zaeed said. “*But I’m not that man.*”

He brought up his pistol and shot Vido between the eyes. The back of his skull blew out and bits of brain and skull pattered wetly against the closet

wall. Shepard jerked back, and swallowed hard several times. Kaidan put a hand on his shoulder, and squeezed.

The old mercenary scanned the silent crowd. “Anybody have any problems with the new management?” There were hurried head shakes, and people stepped forward to shake Zaeed’s hand.

Garrus stepped to Shepard’s side. “You fought a lot harder to keep me from taking the shot. From killing Sidonis,” he said quietly.

“You’re a good man. I knew what it would do to you if you killed for mere vengeance.”

“Ah,” Garrus said, and he looked at Zaeed.

“And not everybody should be as morally comprised as me,” Shepard added softly.

Zaeed turned to face them, his artificial eye glinting. “I believe it’s time for a party.”

#

Afterlife was hopping. Filled with Blue Suns come to toast their new commander. Joker, Chakwas, Steve, Adams the engineer, and the two young techs, Ken and Abby had come over from the Normandy. The Drell had been joined on the platform by a pair of human joy girls all gyrating and grinding.

Shepard stopped just inside, and looked around. Kaidan knew that look. He waited for Shepard to say what was on his mind.

“I can’t do this,” his fiancé said. “We can’t do this.”

“Why the hell not?” Jack demanded.

“There are hundreds of people hungry and desperate. We’ve got to get them processed. Get word to their relatives. Arrange for ships to get them off this rock, get them food and housing in the meantime.” Shepard turned and faced his friends. “We couldn’t enjoy ourselves knowing what’s happening here.”

Jack looked mulish, and muttered, “Try me.”

Joker drooped. Zaeed’s expression was quizzical. Ken, Abby and Steve were deep in hero worship. Garrus was nodding.

“Okay, people, let’s get to it,” Shepard ordered. It was a command. The Normandy crew knew it. They turned and headed back toward the doors.

Zaeed’s cold gaze raked across the assembled Blue Suns. “You heard the man,” he barked. They joined the general exodus.

Shepard started to follow, but Kaidan caught him around the waist, and pulled him close. “You gotta stop being so damn inspirational. I’m about to

have to fight off half the people in this room,” Kaiden whispered. Shepard gave him the sideways smile, and ducked his head.

They started for the doors only to be stopped by a man. Kaidan recognized him. It was Fist, the one time crime boss of the Citadel. The man Shepard had ruined and sent into exile. Kaidan interposed himself between Fist and Shepard.

“You can call off your guard dog,” Fist said. “I just came over to thank you. I owe you one,” was the surprising salutation.

Shepard eyed Fist, "Yeah, how do you figure?"

"If you hadn't busted up my operation I'd have still been on the Citadel when the Reapers arrived. Word is everybody on the Citadel got croaked, so thanks."

"You're still a scumbag, Fist, but you're welcome."

#

Kaidan stayed at Shepard's side as refugees were queued, tagged, assigned apartments. Food was distributed. Dr. Chakwas organized the dispirited medical staff on the asteroid, and they began to treat the sick. Joker and Traynor were busy sending messages to the refugees friends and families.

Kaidan kept a careful eye on his fiancé. It was true that Shepard was stronger, his health better, but he was never going to be robust, and he'd been through a firefight. At some point he was going to hit the wall. So Kaidan was ready when after hours of work Shepard went ghost white, swayed and nearly fell. Kaidan caught Shepard and kept him upright.

“And now you're going back to the Normandy, eat something, and then go to sleep.”

“I'm not sure Traynor --”

“You have good people. Zaeed has the Suns well in hand. They can all handle things without your direct input.”

“But --”

“Keep arguing and I'll call Dr. Chakwas,” Kaidan threatened. Shepard surrendered.

They passed James on their way to the docking bay. “Hey, Commander, not exactly the bachelor party I had in mind,” he called as they passed.

Shepard, leaning heavily on Kaidan's arm, gave Vega a wan smile. “On the other hand we'll remember this one. Not sure that would have been the case if we'd had a traditional celebration.”

“Ah, come on, don’t you love kneeling in the bathroom hugging the porcelain throne after a really great shore leave?”

“Not so much, no.”

“At some point I’m gonna get you drunk, Loco and help you relax.”

“Sometime.”

They boarded the Normandy, made their way to the Captain’s cabin, and Kaidan helped Shepard undress and climb into bed. Kaidan went down to the mess and returned with a dinner tray.

Shepard sipped the soup, then said, “You’re not....?”

“I’ll go back on the rock and check on the arrangements. Then we’ve got to go. We could duck the bachelor party, but I think we’d better show up for our wedding.”

“We could have a quickie wedding here,” Shepard murmured rather wistfully.

“Tempting, but no. Hackett would have our hides. You done?” Shepard nodded. Kaidan took the tray, and he paused in the doorway. “Oh, I found out about the hamster. Orman took him home to her daughter. She says if you want him back --”

“Oh, no, no, no. Let the little girl keep him.”

#

Shepard wondered if Zaeed would stay on Omega, but he chose to ride back to Earth aboard the Normandy.

“I think any challengers know I’d gut ‘em,” the old mercenary said.

Shepard remembered Vido’s brains on the walls, and knew what the old man was saying wasn’t hyperbole.

As they left the ship Shepard made a point of thanking Orman for the ride to Omega and the loan of the troops. She gave him a sour look.

“And now you’re removing half my officers.”

Shepard glanced around at Joker, Traynor, James, Cortez, Adams, Ken and Abby and realized it was sort of true. He wasn’t sure what to say. Kaidan stepped in smooth as satin.

“We’d love to have you at the wedding, Captain.”

The sour expression vanished, and the woman gave the first real smile Shepard had seen. “I’d like that. Thank you, Major.”

They left the ship and Shepard muttered out of the side of his mouth. “Do we?”

“Do we what?”

“Actually want her there?”

“No, but it’s the politic thing to do.”

“You’re a nice person,” Shepard said and gave Kaidan a quick buffet on the shoulder.

After reporting to Hackett they returned to Claridges to find the family waiting. They filled them in about the events on Omega. The tailor arrived for the final fitting of their dress uniforms. Shepard had gained weight and Kaidan had lost some which made the tailor grumble, and their mother’s happy.

Sir Geoffery arrived for the final briefing. “Tomorrow afternoon is tea at the Palace. It’s an opportunity for the King and Queen to meet you prior to the ceremony. I’ll come in the morning to coach you in the appropriate protocol. That evening there is a commemorative concert at Royal Albert Hall for the fallen. The following afternoon will be the run through at the Abby at four p.m. That night is the rehearsal dinner hosted at the Banqueting House at Whitehall. The King and Queen will not be present for that, just your friends and family. Next day the ceremony is set for 3:00 p.m so Hackett and the aircar will arrive at the hotel to pick you up at 2:00 p.m. sharp. Reception at the palace with a formal banquet.”

He paused to open a briefcase and remove a package wrapped in material like brown felt.

“I’ve taken the liberty,” Sir Geoffery said with a dry cough. He unrolled the material on the table to reveal a bewildering array of silverware. “A plate, please.”

Shepard got one. The older man then laid out the silverware to either side and above the plate. One by one he pointed at the utensils to the right of the plate.

“Soup spoon, fish knife, service knife.” He pointed to the left side. “Fish fork, dinner fork, salad fork. Above the plate, strawberry fork, dessert spoon and cake fork. On the bread plate a butter knife, obviously.”

“What happens if we forget and eat salad with the dinner fork?” Kaidan quipped.

“Garrus will sneer,” Shepard responded.

“Is that all? I mean he sneers at me all the time... or maybe that’s just that Turian face.”

“You were expecting a dungeon in the Tower?” Shepard asked.

“If you two are quite finished,” Sir Geoffrey huffed.

“Sorry,” Shepard said. “I think we’re a little punchy.”

“I just want to make certain there are no untoward surprises in the next two days,” Sir Geoffrey said.

“I think we’ve got all the surprises beaten into submission,” Shepard said.

#

The tea had actually been pleasant. Kaidan and Shepard had been presented. Bowed to the requisite depth, and followed their bows with salutes. They had ended up talking mostly with the royal couple’s twin sons who were still wearing their Alliance uniforms. Shepard had a feeling it was going to be a long time before anyone mustered out.

Shepard concluded that his scones were better, but he did like the ginger biscuits and thin sliced ham, and thought he’d like to try making them when he finally got a chance to cook again.

That night they decided on formal wear rather than uniforms for the concert. Kaidan surveyed himself in the full length mirror.

“I look pretty damn good.”

“Yes, you do,” Shepard said, and rubbed his cheek briefly on Kaidan’s shoulder.

“You’re far better looking than I am.”

Kaidan remained silent, but a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “Maybe a little disagreement would have been nice,” Shepard complained, enjoying the game. Kaidan burst out laughing, and shoved him toward the door of the suite.

They had a box just to the left of the royal box. The hall still showed scars from the battle, and many of the windows were boarded shut, but its acoustics were still intact. Before the concert the conductor asked that all the veterans stand and be acknowledged. It was damn near everyone in the hall, and to Shepard’s deep discomfort they all turned and saluted him before sitting back down.

The music began. He’d never attended a live concert before. He didn’t realize that sound could be a physical weight against the chest and at times he felt like he could grasp it in his hands. The mournful cadences of Brahms’s fourth symphony made him think of Thane and Mordin. He suspected they would have enjoyed the evening.

The box accommodated six so in addition to their mothers they added Hackett and his wife. Various dignitaries filled most of the other boxes. One box near the stage remained empty.

The lights came up for intermission, and Shepard idly noticed that the empty box was now occupied. There was a man with greying brown hair, dressed in an expensive suit seated there. He was flanked by an Asari and a human woman. Their breasts and arms were draped with jewels. There was something achingly familiar about him, and Shepard frowned when the man raised a hand and gave him a small salute.

Next to him his mother went rigid, and Hackett said explosively, “Son-of-a-bitch!”

His mother jumped up. “We have to go. Now!”

And in that moment the niggling sense of familiarity became sick certainty.

“That’s my father, isn’t it?” Shepard asked.

#

Hackett rushed them out of the box and into the hall. Kaidan looked at Noel who was white-faced with shock. Then an angry flush rose in his cheeks. Shepard rounded on Hannah.

“You told me he was dead! You lied to me!”

Hackett intervened. “No, son, she’d didn’t. We thought he was. When the Reliant got hit many of the bodies were burned beyond recognition. He had

placed his id on one of the corpses. There was no reason to do DNA tests. It was nine years before we realized the mistake.”

“By then you had enlisted,” Hannah said. “Embarked on your life and career. Made peace with his death. There didn’t seem to be any reason to upset you at that point.”

“Well, I’m sure as fuck upset now!”

Hannah turned to Hackett. “What the hell do we do? The press is going to get wind of this.”

“He is a deserter. We can arrest him. Get him out of public view.” Hackett suggested.

Shepard threw his arms in the air. “Oh for fuck’s sake, as if this hasn’t already been enough of a circus.”

Kaidan decided to try and lighten the mood. “Hey, at least he looks prosperous. Usually when a black sheep relative shows up they’re broke and asking for a loan.”

The sally drew a flicker of a smile from Shepard, but the moment of levity was quickly gone. “What can you tell me... sir,” he demanded of Hackett.

“He’s mostly been in Batarian space. He set up an weapons R&D company. Branched out into pharmaceuticals. Made a fortune. I figured the Reapers would have gotten him since they broke through there first.”

“We couldn’t get that lucky,” Hannah said bitterly. “He’s got more lives than a damn cat.”

Shepard had withdrawn and stood pulling at his lower lip and staring at the floor. He suddenly turned back to them. “Please, admiral, don’t do anything until I’ve had a chance to talk to him.”

“You are not going to talk to him,” Hannah said.

“Yes, mother. I am.”

#

Devlin Shepard wasn’t hard to track down. He and his entourage were staying aboard an expensive pinnacle that had landed in Kensington Gardens. Kensington Palace was in ruins, a burned out shell, and what had been expansive beds of flowers were churned mud from tank treads and deep indentations pocked the ground where Reapers had trod.

Hackett accompanied them. Wisely, Hannah elected not to go. As they stepped out of the shuttle Shepard glanced at the lines of the elegant racing

pinnacle, then at the ironically still standing Peter Pan statue. His expression turned sour.

“Well, that’s fucking appropriate,” he muttered.

They walked to the pinnacle and the airlock cycled open. A Batarain in uniform raked them with his four eyes, then nodded, and waved them in. A young woman in a rather revealing gown led them to the personal quarters of the small spaceship.

The doors she pushed open were real wood, and area that was revealed had all the subtlety of a room at Versailles palace. A gilt and crystal chandelier hung from a copper plated ceiling, a plush oriental rug cushioned each step. There was gilt furniture upholstered in shades of gold and white, and an antique buffet stocked with bottles of alcohol, and crystal tumblers.

Devlin Shepard sat on the sofa. The human woman from the concert was buffing his nails. The Asari was preparing a highball at the buffet.

Shepard paused on the threshold, and looked around. He couldn’t control the sneer. “Okay, you’re rich, I get that, but could you at least display a modicum of taste?”

“No word of greeting for your dad? Just a criticism of my decor? Hello to you too, son.”

Devlin had a clear baritone voice and Kaidan reflected that if he heard the voices over a radio he wasn't sure he'd be able to tell them apart. He decided to stake out his territory and make his presence known.

"Sort of looks like the lair of a James Bond villain," he offered to Shepard.

"Ah, the boyfriend," Devlin said as he waved away his manicurist and stood. He walked over, and looked Shepard up and down. "I didn't think you'd get this tall."

"You could have stuck around and watched me grow." Shepard then added in tones that showed how much the wound still hurt. "I was ten for Christ's sake. I grieved for you! Tell me why. Why you abandoned us?"

The older man gave an uncomfortable shrug. Paced a bit. "You know Hannah, can you imagine what it was like to be married to her?"

"Probably not as tough as being her kid."

"Touché."

"If you were that unhappy you could have divorced her. At least I would have had you in my life."

"It seemed kinder this way," Devlin said.

"Oh, don't feed me bullshit and tell me it's caviar," Shepard said through gritted teeth.

“Okay, you want it straight? Well, here it is. I didn’t want any of it.”

“Any of what?”

“All of it. The Alliance. The marriage. Her. You.” Shepard flinched.

“Sorry, son, but you asked for it. I was stupid and immature. We got married too young. You came along too soon. I saw a way out that didn’t require me facing up to her, or seeing your big baby blue’s filling up with tears.”

Shepard made an inarticulate sound, and stalked away.

“Anyone want a drink?” Develin asked as if this was merely a social call.

Kaidan didn’t know whether to admire the chutzpah or deck the man.

Hackett intervened before Kaidan made up his mind. “You’re a deserter, Shepard and you’re under arrest.”

“Good luck with that. I’ve been declared legally dead. While you try to resurrect me I’ll bury you in lawyers, and fly away before you ever get a court ruling.”

The insouciance was breathtaking, and it even succeeded in silencing Hackett.

Kaidan decided to ask the question squatting in the room like an oversized Krogan. “So, why the hell are you here? Now?”

“Wanted to see my son get married.” He gave Kaidan a long thoughtful look, then glanced at Noel.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Okay, fine.” He paused then added, “So, what do you say? Do I get to be part of this? Propose a toast? Sit with the family? Give you away?”

“You already did that.”

“You’re angry. I get that. I probably deserve it. But I’m here now. Ready to be here for you.”

“Really? Where were you when they locked me up and threw away the key? Did you sit at my bedside like mom and Kaidan while I was in a coma? No, you waited until all the tough calls were over. I think the person who would barge back into my life at this moment is a narcissistic asshole.”

“Guilty as charged. But I’m still your father.”

“No, sir. You’re the guy who gave me half my DNA. If I had a father it was David Anderson. And no, you can’t come to the wedding.”

Devlin sat down on the sofa, and stretched his arms along the back. He seemed unfazed by the pronouncement. “You know I’m one hell of a romantic figure. The press will be all over me. I think I’ll be giving a lot of interviews.”

“Oh, please do. If you could pull the attention off us, I’d be very grateful,” Shepard said.

That seemed to get under the older man’s skin. He frowned at his son.

“You make it sound like I’m some kind of sideshow.”

“Oh, no, sir, you’re the whole damn carnival. What you’re forgetting is that circumstances have guaranteed that I’m the ringmaster. If you want to survive with your reputation intact I suggest you lift this ship and get the hell off Earth before I decide you need to fulfill your obligation to the Alliance. And don’t even think of making trouble for me or mom or Kaidan. I’m still a Spectre.”

“Jesus Christ, you’re as much of a ball buster as she was.”

“She raised me. Why are you surprised?”

Shepard whirled and walked out. Hackett followed. Kaidan started in their wake, but Devlin Shepard had lost his cocky attitude. He looked utterly devastated. Kaidan felt a flare of pity for the older man.

Kaidan stepped to Devlin’s side. “Look, your timing sucked, but I don’t think this is over.”

Devlin leaned forward, clasped his hands between his knees, and stared at the floor. “After the Skyllian Blitz I followed his exploits. That a kid of mine

would be the first human Spectre. Then I heard he'd gone down with the Normandy, and I realized I'd lost my chance. Next thing I hear he's back. But I couldn't approach him. The Batarians would have had my hide. It was my kid who'd killed so many of them. I barely survived the connection. Then the Reapers, and for a time everyone thought Noel had died. I'd lost my chance a second time. I didn't want to miss it again."

"There's always been this sense of sadness and loneliness about him," Kaidan said. "Let him get used to the idea that there can be people in his life who won't abandon him or be taken from him. If you give him space, let me talk to him, come back after all this craziness is over there might be a chance for you two to reconcile."

"You'd do that for me?"

"I'm not doing it for you."

#

Kaidan had told him that he needed to go up to the Orziba to see his mother, and added that Shepard needed to go alone since this was a family matter, and Kaidan wasn't officially part of the family yet.

He and Hannah sat in a port observation room watching the Earth turn serenely beneath them. Occasionally bits of Allied ships or chunks of Reaper

would float past. Shepard shuddered as a tentacle tumbled past the port. Hannah got up, and with an aggressive stab closed the shutters over the viewport.

“Did you see him?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“And.”

“He’s not coming to the wedding.”

“Thank you.”

Shepard gave her a wry smile. “The irony in all this is that in some ways he really did make me the man I am. He was held up as a role model, a hero. I had to live up to his memory.”

“I really didn’t know he’d survived, Noel. Not at first. Please believe me.”

“I do.” He paused then glanced back at her from beneath his lashes. “Was any of it true?”

“He was a hell of a soldier,” Hannah said.

“And how was he as a husband?”

“Terrible.”

“Affairs?”

She nodded. “Oh yeah.” She paused. “How was he as a father?”

“Terrific. Bigger than life. He was the fun parent.”

Hannah looked hurt, and Shepard quickly reached out and took her hand. Gripped it hard. “I came up here to say... I’m sorry.”

His mother looked startled. “For what?”

“I resented you. Hated that you were so hard on me. Now I understand why. You were afraid I’d take after him.”

“You had a whimsical streak in you.” She touched the frown lines between his brows. “But I think I overdid grinding it out of you. You ended up too serious.”

“That’s what Kaidan says.”

“He’s a wise man.”

“So, you like him now?”

“I love him. Because he’s made you happy. And now I’ll have two sons.”

#

“We should get some sleep,” Kaidan said softly as he and Shepard sat on the sofa in their suite.

Shepard had been obsessively polishing his boots, buffing them to a mirror-like gloss. He set aside the buffing cloth and boot, and checked the time. Shuddered at how late... or how early it was.

“I know. I don’t know if I did the right thing. Rejecting him that way. I feel like my whole world has tilted. I was trying to live up to that? God, I even did Mendelberg’s exercise. Asked for my father’s approval so I could lay it all to rest. Only to find out my hero dad was a fake. So what does that make me?”

“Commander Shepard. The man who beat Sovereign, destroyed the Collectors and defeated the Reapers.”

“But my family life --”

“Is a disaster. So what? How does that make you any different than almost every other human who’s ever lived? People are complicated and emotions are messy.”

He laid a hand against Kaidan’s cheek, felt the rasp of beard against his palm. “How did you get so wise?”

“I’m not sure I am, but thank you all the same. And if I have a bit of wisdom it’s because I have a great family.”

“What if I can’t do this, Kaidan? I haven’t got a template for what a real family looks like. What if I mess everything up?” Shepard asked.

“Oh, we probably will. Several times as the years go by. But we’ll fix it. Because that’s what we do.” Kaidan stood, and pulled Shepard to his feet. “And now we’re going the fuck to bed. We’re getting married today.

#

Tali finished wrapping the spider silk around his waist and tied it off so the sash hung down his thigh on the left side. Shepard felt like the air was refusing to enter his lungs. Maybe he was light headed from lack of sleep? Or maybe just sheer terror.

He scanned the room which was very crowded with the Normandy companions, their plus ones, and both mothers. Hannah wore a chic knee length dress of a rich honey gold. Amelia wore a beautiful long gown of peacock blue/green.

There had been a few stories about the return of Devlin Shepard, but mercifully what dominated was news about the wedding, and the Omega refugees. The sound of a razor died, and Kaidan came out of the bathroom. He indicated his smooth chin with no hint of five o’clock shadow.

“Think it’ll last through the ceremony?”

His mother brushed non-existent link from his shoulder. “Probably not. You’re just like your father. I’ll tuck your razor in my purse. You can touch up before the reception.”

Shepard looked at the luggage packed and waiting by the door. The bulk of their possessions were being sent ahead to Canada. Only two bags would go with them to Lizard Island. Despite the crowd the suite had an empty, abandoned feeling. It made Shepard both anxious and melancholy. He had found peace in this place. Now the world was uncertain again.

He found Liara at his shoulder. He looked down to see that she held an intricate pin of lattice crystal in which were nestled brilliant blue stones.

“You have an Earth tradition at weddings about something old and something new, something borrowed and something blue. The Rachni queen gave you something new. I’ll cover the rest. This pin has been in my family for thousands of years. I loan it to you for the day.” And she pinned it to the careful knot that Tali had tied.

“Thank you.”

“Well, as long as we are giving gifts,” Wrex growled. He stepped up to the two men. “A little something to gut your enemies.” He held out two daggers.

They looked very organic, and each one topped with a faceted topaz.

“Thresher Maw claw daggers,” the old Krogan said with satisfaction.

“What? You think we’re going to have to fight off the archbishop?”

Kaidan joked, his voice was a little tight and higher pitched than usual.

“At a Krogan wedding you wouldn’t even question the necessity,” Wrex said.

“My consort exaggerates,” Eve said placidly. Then after a pause she added, “But only a little.”

They unbuttoned their dress uniform coats, and Wrex clipped the daggers to the waistbands of their trousers. Shepard could feel the claw pressing against his thigh. He laid a hand on the scarred battlemaster’s shoulder.

“Thank you, Wrex.”

Tali presented Kaidan with a Quarian designed Omni-Tool.

Garrus stepped forward. “It’s going to be cold in that open car.” He opened a case and shook out a cloak. The outer fabric was a deep blue and it was lined with a soft silver tipped fur. “One of the few critters on Palaven that doesn’t have a carapace,” he said as Shepard ran a hand through the feather soft fur.

“Only the fucking Turians would still wear cloaks,” Shepard said with fond exasperation.

“Only the fucking Turians can pull it off. You’ll look stupid, but at least you’ll be warm,” Garrus shot back.

“Kaidan doesn’t get one?”

“Kaidan doesn’t need one,” Dr. Chakwas said. “I talked it over with Garrus. I’m not going to have you getting sick on your wedding day.”

That reminder of his shattered health wasn’t particularly welcome, but Shepard took it with good grace. “Thank you all, so much.” There was a knock on the door. Shepard jumped. “It can’t be time already.”

Dr. Chakwas opened the door. Jack blew in. For Jack she was dressed very conservatively in a black slacks, high heels and a blouse that covered most of her tats. She was carrying a cascading bouquet of lilies and gardenias. The lush perfume of the gardenias wove through the room.

“Look, I know I’m not one of the original fab five, but I needed to get this to you before the fucking ceremony. Since you’re clearly the bride, Shepard. I figured you needed a fucking bouquet.”

Liara began to bridle. Even gentle Tali’s hands closed into fists. Shepard looked at the young woman, and saw past the defiant expression, the tattoos,

and the bravado. Saw the desperate pride and hope deep in her eyes. He looked at the waterfall of flowers that spilled from her hand.

“Did you make that for me, Jack?” he asked.

“What if I did?”

“Where’d you get the flowers?”

“This crazy old bitch with a green house. She should have been growing lettuce or something useful, instead she’s got flowers. Said people need flowers too. Like I said, crazy.”

Shepard reached out and took the bouquet. Inspected it. “You’ve got hidden talents, Jack. It’s beautiful, but I don’t know if even my dignity could pull that off.

But I’ll go this far.” He plucked a couple of gardenias from the bouquet and slipped one through a button hole on his jacket, and the other through Kaidan’s.

He handed the bouquet to his mother, then took Jack by the shoulders. “I do appreciate the thought and the effort.”

“Yeah. Whatever.” Jack jerked free from his grip and charged back out of the suite.

Shepard eyed the bouquet thoughtfully, and a slow smile started. “Hey, listen up, people.” They looked at him. Shepard walked to his mother and took back the bouquet. “I’m going to resurrect an old tradition at the reception.” He tossed it lightly up and down. “When I fling this sucker, make sure Jack catches it, okay? I don’t care if you have to bounce it like a volleyball. Just make sure it lands in her hands.” There was a ripple of laughter through the room and eager nods. Hannah shook her head at him, and took back the flowers.

Shepard glanced at his omni tool. Almost two o’clock. He sucked in a few deep breaths. His mother stepped to his side. She leaned in close and whispered,

“Thank you. For not letting him come. That would have been... humiliating.”

“He needed to understand. Just showing up wasn’t enough. You were there. He wasn’t.” She gave his shoulder a squeeze and stepped away.

Another knock. This time it was Hackett. Garrus lifted the cloak off Shepard’s arm, and swept it around him.

“I won’t have your back any longer, Shepard,” he said softly as he hooked the clasp. He glanced over at Kaidan. “But I leave you in good hands. Here

now. What's all this?" He ran his thumb beneath Shepard's eyes. "You're leaking."

"We'll never all be together again," Shepard whispered past the ache in his throat.

"Probably not.... The miracle is that we're here at all."

Shepard nodded, and briefly gripped Garrus's shoulder. The Turian gave him an encouraging slap on the back.

Shepard composed himself enough to salute the admiral. Then Hackett was herding them down to the lobby, through the gauntlet of press and into the waiting cars.

#

The streets were jammed. People cheering. Waving. Shepard smiled and waved, and waved and waved as they moved through the streets. Most of the route had been cleared of debris, but in the distance he saw the partially rendered body of a Reaper.

A voice, insidious and unforgettable, coiled and whispered through his mind.

“Shepard, submit now. You cannot escape your destiny. Shepard, you will know pain. I sense your weakness. Face your annihilation. Shepard, I always survive.”

He shuddered. Kaidan wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

“Cold?”

“Just... just remembering.”

“Don’t look back.”

#

Garrus -- “I didn’t think anybody was decent. They were all criminals or about to be criminals. Shepard made me believe there were decent people in the galaxy....”

Tali -- “I didn’t believe that we would ever recover our home world. Shepard made me believe we could....”

Wrex -- “I thought the Krogan were finished, a dead end culturally as well as genetically. Shepard made me believe we had a chance....”

Javik “I didn’t think anything could defeat the Reapers. Shepard made me believe....”

He was dancing, and somehow the cake had vanished, and Hackett was calling for an investigation, and then he was holding flowers, and he threw them... or maybe it was a grenade?

“Oh fuck you, Shepard!” Jack’s voice, shrill like breaking ice.

“Hey, you going to sleep all day?” Kaidan’s voice cut through the swirling dreams.

Shepard jerked awake. His hand sank into the mattress. He studied the rich wood walls that surrounded him. Outside waves shushed and murmured, and a warm breeze sighed through the trees and lifted the gauzy curtains over the sliding door. Kaidan wore only a pair of shorts. Perspiration beaded and glistened in the dark chest hair. He smelled of sweat and Kaidan.

Shepard wrapped his arms around his husband and hugged him tight.

“What time is it? You should have woken me up.”

“Not a chance. You were exhausted by the time we got here, but if you hurry we can still get lunch --

“Lunch?”

“Like I said, you were exhausted. I want to take you exploring. This place is amazing.”

They showered together, dressed, and hurried down the winding pathways toward the main building of the Lizard Island resort. Monitor lizards watched them pass with flat, suspicious eyes, and flicks of their long, sinuous tongues.

Meals were served on a sweeping open veranda overlooking the water. Only a few tables were still occupied. A pert young waitress offered him a menu. A sudden worry shook him.

“You’re not shipping in food --”

“Oh no, sir,” the waitress said, her Australian accent adding a burr and lilt to the words. “Everything is raised here.” She gestured at the glistening, dancing water. “And we fish. In fact we ship food out to various refugee camps.”

“I can’t make up my mind,” Kaidan complained.

“You can have everything,” the waitress said.

“That sounds good,” Kaidan said, and handed back his menu.

“I don’t remember much after we boarded the shuttle,” Shepard confessed.

“You wouldn’t. You fell dead asleep.”

“I don’t remember getting to the cabin.”

“You were practically sleep walking..”

“Did we?”

“Nope.”

“Shall we?”

“After we eat. I’ve been for a run and I’m starving.”

#

Much later Kaidan rolled away, and checked his Omni-Tool. “Just about time for dinner.”

“Are we just going to eat and have sex?” Shepard asked.

“I find nothing objectionable in this plan,” Kaidan said with a smile. “Do you?”

“It seems sort of self-indulgent.”

“A -- We’re on our honeymoon. We’re allowed. B -- after what we’ve been through the past few years... we’re allowed.”

“Valid points.” Shepard slipped out of bed and went into the bathroom to clean up.

This time they arrived at the peak hour, and almost every table was filled. Shepard tensed, bracing himself for the looks, and the thank yous and the requests for autographs, but no one disturbed them. Looking at their fellow diners he recognized an award winning actress, and a pop music star.

“Ah,” he said quietly to Kaidan. “They’re used to celebrity here.”

“Yep. That’s why I picked it.”

After dinner they wandered down to the beach, and settled in chaise lounges. A waiter slipped up to them, and asked if they wanted anything. Kaidan went with brandy, Shepard asked for port. The moonlight tipped the waves with silver phosphorus. They held hands, drank in silence and listened to the boom and hiss of the sea.

#

Messages arrived from the companions after they’d been on Lizard Island for three days. Liara sent a nicely gossipy missive.

Your mother gave me a ride back to Thessia. Javik came along though I rarely see him, the historians have him locked away. I hope you are finally able to relax. The ceremony really was beautiful. Oh, and Jack cried when you and Kaidan exchanged rings. I could see her from where I was standing. Can you believe it? And while she acted all upset over the bouquet I noticed she didn’t put it down once after you two left the reception. She’s gone back to the Grissom Academy and Zaeed returned to Omega. Looks like the May/December romance is over. I hope she finds happiness. I miss you, but I’m sure life will bring us together again at some point. May it just be in peace. Take care and give Kaidan a kiss for me.

He got a message from Tali and one from Garrus. They said functionally the same thing.

Garrus has asked me to go back to Palavan with him, but I can't. My heart is on Rannoch. What should I do? I'm so unhappy.

Tali has asked me to live on Rannoch, but my family is on Palavan, and my father says I have a duty. Wasn't everything supposed to be perfect after we beat the Reapers? Life's a bitch, ain't it?

He sent the same message to both of them. *Don't be stupid. The people we love are ultimately the only thing that matters.*

#

And then it was time to leave and rejoin the world. Cortez arrived with a shuttle, and within seconds they were in low Earth orbit, and heading north.

"Time for real life," Shepard whispered to Kaidan. "I confess I'm dreading it."

"It'll be okay," Kaidan answered.

The shuttle dropped through the clouds toward the outline of the west coast of Canada outlined with lights. They passed over the ruins of Vancouver. Cranes loomed and arc lights threw the charred and destroyed buildings into sharp relief. Cutting torches flared in the darkness rendering

Reapers. Shepard stared at the view screen. The tendons in his neck tensed, and Kaidan felt the subtle trembling.

He pulled Shepard's head down onto his shoulder, forcing him to look away. He made the decision that his husband would not visit Vancouver until the last monster had been rendered and removed.

Seconds later they were past the devastated city and in the darkened countryside. Far fewer lights pierced the night. Cortez aimed the shuttle at a handful of lit buildings. As they came in low for a landing they could see the winter bare orchards. The limbs of the trees reached skyward like supplicants at a temple altar.

Shepard studied the large three story house, the four smaller, single story houses that dotted the property, and the barn with its prancing horse weather vane turning slowly in the wind.

The shuttle's engines died to a low mutter, and the door cycled open. Kaidan jumped down. Shepard handed him the suitcases, then followed. He paused just outside the shuttle and looked at the three smaller houses.

"Is one of those going to be ours?"

"Yep," Kaidan said. "I even had them put in a bathtub." Then with a suitcase in each hand he led them toward the front door of the big house.

#

Joe must have heard the shuttle because he threw open the carved wooden door as they mounted the final step. Warm air embraced Shepard along with the sharp scent of pine and dusky smell of wood smoke. At one end of the room a fire danced and crackled in a large stone hearth.

Joe grabbed the suitcases out of Kaidan's hands, and turned away as he called out, "They're here."

Kaidan stepped inside. Uncertainty held Shepard frozen on the stoop. Once he took that step he sensed his life would change irrevocably. Kaidan turned back, and held out his hand.

"Come on. You're home."

Gathering his courage, Shepard stepped across the threshold.