

Another Story

The aftermath

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Intro

With a start John Shepard jerked away, instinctively inhaling, before the action made his troath flare and caused him to tremble with coughs. It was like he was trapped between suffocating and choking.

There was a hand on his shoulder, but he jerked away, the touch feeling like an explosion of heat to his sensitive skin. Instantly his mind supplied him with the endless amount of heat and the way he felt his skin burn and melt of his bone, as everything around him exploded and disappeared.

Caught in his memories, he jumped as something cold pressed against his neck and then everything seemed to fade and grow dark, even as he struggled.

The last thing he remembered was the face of a particular alliance soldier and spector, the desperate and loving expression in his face and eyes with his hand still stretched out towards him, even as Garrus, cussing and hissing softly himself, dragged the man inside the Normandy.

His only regret.

There were soft sounds around him. Soft, regular sounds. Slightly blurred, as if hearing them, whilst not fully hearing them. Slowly he became more aware, felt the soft pain, the burn all over his body.

But most of all he became aware of the soft, regular beeping, that sounded so awefully familiar. It took a few more moments for him to regain his mind enough to realize that the sounds were in perfect synch with the beating of his heart.

The realization hit him like a ton of bricks a moment later and he sharply inhaled, only to cough softly and wince at once. The movement had caused his chest to hurt, but he hadn't expected there to be... something down his troath.

A breathing hose, he realized as he carefully coaxed his tongue to move slightly against it. Gods, his mouth felt so dry, as if he'd been in the desert for a week without anything to drink – at least he assumed that that was how it would be.

As he regained more and more conciousness, he also became aware that he was strapped down. With the way his body ached seemingly everywhere, he doubted he'd be going anywhere far anyway. Also, it probably wasn't just dark, but there was actually a stripe of cloth over his eyes. And he was probably butt-naked in a clichée hospital gown underneath the blanket that covered him for the most part. A small part of him wondered about this, remembering all too well the sight Kaiden had made

when he'd recovered from the attack on Mars.

Well, he had started to appreciate the view once it was clear that the major would pull through and that without any real lasting damage. Given how bashed in his head had looked, he had had serious concerns. Not just about the injuries in general, but also if perhaps the implants for his biotics wouldn't cause complications.

He was left to ponder where he was, how he lived (again?) and what was going on for a few more seconds before he drifted off again, his body still needing recuperation time to regenerate what was damaged.

The third time he woke, he was aware of his surroundings almost immediately. Hushed voices were talking close by and just when he contemplated on how to gain their attention – or if he even wanted that, there were steps next to him.

„Dr. Chakwas said there is a good chance you'll wake up soon.“, a quiet, calm, male said. John instantly recognized it and wasn't surprised when the jump of his heart was accompanied with some beeping from the machine he must be connected to.

„Doctor?“, Kaiden called out. The voices stopped as another set of steps came closer. Most likely to examine his vitals. Unfortunately his body refused to move even as he tried to.

„His finger twitched!“

It did? The savior of the galaxy couldn't claim to have felt it himself. But then again it was hard to feel anything through the still constant pain he felt himself in.

„He might be reacting to your voice. Keep talking to him, but don't get your hopes up too much. It can still take a few weeks before he truly awakens.“

„Don't underestimate the Commander. He's always been one hell of a stubborn bastard.“ There was obvious fondness in Kaiden's voice this time and John would have smiled, if it didn't hurt so darn much.

„... My eyes must be playing tricks on me, that almost looked like he was trying to smirk.“ So Karin WAS present. The other voice definitely hadn't been hers, but also familiar. Yet, he couldn't quite place it.

A very light touch brushed along the right side of his face, then a thumb traced his cheekbone ever-so-slightly.

The hand dropped over to his shoulder, following down his arm, to carefully cover one of his hands, gently slipping the bigger one into his.

„I miss you.“, came the soft-spoken admission. „It's been so long. Well, according to the doctors it would be better if you didn't awaken yet... Your skin is still trying to repair itself for the most part... It even looks painful in some spots... A lot has happened since you defeated the reapers. The Citadell almost looks like before, you know? The council and others have already moved back in, despite ... well, everything.“

A thumb was brushing over his fingers now.

„Wrex had twins, you know? A boy and a girl. Morden and Mordin. Can't believe Bakara won that one. Well, I guess Wrex won as well, as the girl was named Mordin, just as he told you. I think both of us were thinking he was joking. But he was not.“ A soft chuckle.

„Ah... and it seems Liara managed to convince Jarvik to stay with her. They are learning a lot from each other, even though Jarvik would never admit it – you know how much of a troll he can be. Actually from what I hear, he's been a great help with rebuilding, thanks to his impressive biotics. Thought at first they were a few incidents

as he lacked the... ah... I believe Liara called it 'precision and finesse' for works needing accuracy. I guess slamming and smashing reapers didn't require that."

There was silence for while as Kaiden seemed to contemplate his next words.

„Haven't heard from Tali in a while, so I guess things are still going well with the Geth... Garrus also sent a message yesterday. Jane seems to have started going through rehabilitation... They are... They are unsure if she'll ever be able to walk on her own two feet, but hey, she's a Shepard, so she will most likely surprise them..."

The gnawing worry at the back of his mind, that he hadn't been able to place lifted a little, before new worry replaced it. So his sister was alive, but she obviously had gotten quite injured as well. Suddenly he remembered grabbing her and gathering in his arms, shielding her as good as he could from the worst. Not that he had thought either of them would make it, but he had held onto the hope that if there was even the slightest chance for her to live...

„They seem to be over the loss of the unborn baby... I guess the simple fact that it IS possible for them to have kids of their own if they choose so is also helping."

What the?!

John totally missed whatever else Kaiden was telling him as he tried to place the information. Jane, his cute little sister, had been PREGNANT when going into the final showdown? He wasn't certain who's head he wanted to bite off first, Garrus – best buddy or not – for touching his beloved sibling that way without even asking permission, or Jane's for going into battle like that.

But then again, from the sound of it, neither she nor Garrus had been aware of that fact, had they?

Just as he had sorted that memory out for now, he became aware that Kaiden had fallen silent again. The fact that the movement on his hand had stopped slightly concerned him as well.

A sigh broke the silence a moment later. „I guess... I guess that's it for now..."", the other male whispered quietly, almost ... broken?

His heart went out towards him and he wanted to reassure him, hold him – anything to take away the pain, but how could he?

He heard the chair – when had Kaiden sat down? - creak and felt the shift in position where their hands were still connected.

„I guess... I'll see you tomorrow again? It's already late and I don't want to be thrown out or written off-duty by Karin again. In fact, I don't think I ever want to be scolded like that again – especially not in front of a whole unit." A weak attempt at a joke.

The commander of the normandy didn't wanted for Kaiden to leave like this. To his ears, it definitely sounded like his partner was running himself dry again. Fleeing into work. A habit of both of theirs when things became too much.

His hand was lifted up slightly, then what he assumed to be lips were gently brushed over his sensitive skin, before it was placed back on top of the blankets and the hand was loosening its grip on his.

But not if John Shepard had a say in it. Focusing all his will power and strength onto his hand, he willed it to tighten the grip and cling onto the other.

He felt Kaiden slightly tug, before abruptly freezing.

„... Shepard?"

Oh geeze... He still had to make Kaiden stop calling his last name, when it was the two of them. But he was proud to manage a slight squeeze.

„Karin!“, the soldier called out a moment later. „I think he's awake!“

He heard him swallow, before placing his hand in both of his. „Give me another squeeze? Or maybe two, to signal that you are really awake? That this isn't just a coi-“ Major Alenko never got to finish those words as his hand was already squeezed once. Holding his breath he waited for the second one. And waited.

Dr. Chakwas stepped up to him, going over the vitals again, her omni-tool glowing and bleeping softly as she checked Shepard over.

The second squeeze was so light, he almost missed it, but then he gave a soft squeeze back. Nothing too much, as he couldn't know just how much touch was okay without hurting the other.

„Keep talking to him.“, Karin urged. „He's either awake or about to awake.“

And thus, upon doctor's order he kept on. He was rambling now and everyone listening could tell even without knowing him.

Shepard actually managed a tiny smile despite the pain the movement caused when Kaiden mentioned his hamster. Thought little rodent still lived.

In the following hours he also found out that Miranda had greatly contributed to both his and Jane's recovery by having made certain that Dr. Chakwas got all data she still had had on the Lazarus project, along with a report, that filled in the majority of missing data.

The hinted involvement of Aria and the Shadow Broker to aquire everything needed - especially in times like these – made him only a little bit queasy. He didn't knew the full content of what they had had to arrange, but remembering dropped comments on how much was spent on the reviving of him and Jane the first time around, he was well aware that those ressourses were most likely meant for the rebuilding projects.

A small voice in the back of his mind was trying to guilt-trip him about it, but another, much stronger one figured that it was only fair, given what he had had done – had to do – in order to save the galaxy. He certainly wouldn't be complaining about being able to live on and finally get to enjoy some quality time with his beloved – without the thread of ultimate destruction or enslavery by an ancient alien force hanging over their heads.

He even managed to answer a few questions of the doctor with giving 'hand signals' to Kaiden, before he lost the battle against the raising tide of sleep pulling him under.