

Chapter Seven: I Need You

Lynch didn't come out of the medical bay on the lower level until the ship was deep into space and close to the mass relay. When he did, his face bore grim news. "Christina's in a coma right now. I can't guarantee she'll live."

"Would she be able to recover?" Liara asked. The worry in her voice was obvious.

Lynch sighed, gathering his composure. His brows furrowing, he frowned slightly. "Not completely. I believe... I believe the analysis said if Christina survived, she would have brain damage from the gunshot wound."

"Goddess. I'm sorry." Liara stepped forward. "Whatever grievances and differences I have with her and Cerberus, I hope she can fully recover."

The Cerberus operative was silent for a moment, and he cracked a small smile. Another surprising moment of emotion from him, Ethan noticed. "... Thank you, Dr. T'Soni. I needed to hear that." He turned his attention to an intercom nearby. "Jennifer, how long until we arrive at the Minuteman station? If I recall, Miranda had Project Lazarus there."

"ETA six hours and three relay jumps to the Horsehead Nebula from the Crescent Nebula," Jennifer answered through the intercom.

Well, that'll take a while. "Why Lazarus?" Ethan asked.

"The name references a passage in Chapter 11 of the Gospel of John," Lynch answered. "Shepard's unique. It wasn't what she accomplished; it was about what she represented: a savior not only of humanity but of the galaxy."

"Yeah, I know. I read her dossier."

"Then we are in agreement," the agent said before stepping into the elevator. "I'll be on the bridge. You two should get some rest. You deserve it."

The elevator closed. As Liara and Ethan waited for their turn, fatigue finally caught up with him and met him with a strong sense of dizziness. He hadn't slept since they went out to Afterlife.

As they stepped inside the elevator when it opened, Ethan gazed at Liara. Despite her firmer stance, like a heavy weight had lifted off her shoulders, she still looked troubled. "It's about Omega, isn't it?" he asked.

Liara nodded as they left the elevator and took a right turn to the ship's quarters. "And many other things." It was almost like she scowled. "You didn't listen to Feron when he warned you about Tazzik."

Inside, there were 16 double beds, eight on each side. "I thought I had figured it out," he finally replied, sighing. "If we saw this coming, maybe it would've turned out better. But on the bright side, we rescued you."

"And retrieved Shepard's body," Liara replied. "I'm grateful for that and for helping us fight off the Blue Suns before we met Cerberus. But I won't let you forget your mistake."

With Liara's help, he took the battered chest plate, the helmet, and the gauntlets off. He loosened the bolts on his Pip-Boy and the glove so he could take the piece of the armor off his left arm. Sitting on the bed, he pulled the leg plates off and put his Pip-Boy and the glove back on. Meanwhile, the former archaeologist stacked his armor and weaponry nearby.

Ethan crashed into the bottom bed and turned to look at Liara. He breathed in, basking in the comfort of the soft pillow and soft mattress. "And now we're giving her body to Cerberus," he said.

The asari let out an angry sigh. "I don't think this is right. I don't know much about human traditions, but... maybe they should let the dead rest. Maybe we should hand her body over to the Alliance."

Ethan raised an eyebrow, lifting his head. "Why the sudden change of heart?"

Liara turned to Ethan, hesitant. "Shepard's gone and... and I think it's time for me to move on."

"Sure, but Cerberus got what they wanted. There's nothing we can do," Ethan replied.

Liara paused. She lowered her head and took a deep breath. "I..." she spoke. "I need a moment to myself and to clear my head."

"Go ahead," he said.

"Thank you." She turned around and went to the door but stopped.

"For what?"

"For saving my life. If you hadn't stopped that Collector, I don't think I would've made it."

Ethan smirked. "I'm pretty sure that's part of my job."

Liara said nothing as she left the room, the door closing behind her. Alone in the quarters, his Carnifex pistol holstered, and his knife sheathed. He always kept his weapons close to him, as he was used to the dangers of wandering the Mojave wasteland. As they said, old habits die hard.

He closed his eyes and drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

"Minuteman Station, are you there? Minuteman Station, this is the Cassino requesting permission to land. Do you copy?" Lynch spoke. Not long after they jumped from one relay to another, Jennifer created a connection from the bridge to a secret Cerberus base. She sat in the cockpit, waiting for an answer while Lynch stood by. She turned and gazed at the field agent and noticed that he seemed troubled like a dark cloud was hanging over him.

"Permission granted, Cassino. Welcome 'board," the receptionist on the line replied, a slight twang in her voice.

"We've retrieved the Commander's body and rescued Dr. Liara T'Soni, but we've taken some losses," Lynch said. "Alan Cain was KIA and Christina Rosaline was critically injured in the fight. We're unable to retrieve Alan's body, but Christina needs medical treatment ASAP."

"Noted. Dontcha worry, she'll be all right."

Lynch nodded, feeling relieved as the connection was closed. Not long after the frigate had landed in the hangar bay, he headed out from the bridge before Jennifer could show concern for him and Christina. He wanted to head out to the med bay and see Christina one more time. When he entered the elevator, he received a pinging noise from his omni-tool. Turning it on, he read over the message:

Hey, David. Just to let you know that Christina's already in the infirmary. She's in good hands now. Also, that asari left the ship with the body and is at the station at one of the labs.

—Jess

Lynch sighed as he put his omni-tool away. If only he didn't lose track of time... He shook that feeling off and exited the elevator, having pressed the console.

"Hey, wake up. We've arrived at Minuteman Station."

Ethan's eyes opened. He groaned and sat up, greeting the sight of Lynch. It looked like he cleaned off the purple blood like it never happened in the first place. "Where's Liara?"

"Dr. T'Soni's with Shepard at the station." Lynch turned to Ethan's weapons and armor, stacked by the bed. He grabbed the pieces of his armor and his Incisor sniper rifle. "Let me help you with this. It's the least I could do for now."

"Can I keep them?" Ethan smirked, pointing at the rest of his weapons and armor and his holstered Carnifex pistol.

"Except for the pistol, no," Lynch answered, blunt as usual. "They're Cerberus property."

After placing the weapons and armor back in the armory, Ethan and Lynch made their way off the ship and out of the hangar. It looked a lot like the North Portal, but with white, like the base back at Omega. They continued onto the hallway. Once again, Cerberus' insignia was plastered on the walls. Someone would think of the Illusive Man as having a huge ego.

"So where are we going?" Ethan asked.

"To the labs where the project will be carried out," the agent answered.

"Can you tell me more about Project Lazarus? How does the process work?"

"The project's what you expect: Resurrect the Commander, provide her with a crew and a ship, and task her on taking the Collectors out," Lynch answered again. "If I understand correctly, the process involves experimental technology and organic reconstruction. But we want to make sure she is the same person before she died, both in personality and in appearance."

"What about her body? Was it well-preserved in stasis?"

Lynch grinned. "Thankfully, yes. The gel layer in her armor had negated most of the impact."

"Okay, but wouldn't it be a better idea to test the project on animals *first*?" Ethan asked. "What about a backup or peer reviews? Anything like that?"

“We can do simulations instead of animal testing. But she’s the only test subject and the first human being to be brought back from the dead, so we have no idea if it will work. No doubt this is going to be time-consuming and expensive.”

“Of course,” Ethan responded.

He and Lynch took a quick turn to the right to Miranda and Liara looking through a window. From above, they watched men and women in white scrubs applying syringes to a charred-out corpse. Underneath the well-lit light, surrounded by orange monitors, autonomous arms from a machine applied tubes and needles to the body. The doctors seemed eager to carry out the project. From here, it was hard to determine Shepard’s gender, having been blown to hell and back. The two women turned, hearing them approach. Liara looked happy to see Ethan, with a soft smile on her lips.

“Hello, Lynch. I see you’ve brought him here,” said Miranda. “Good. Now we can get down to business.”

Lynch stepped forward. “Mind if I take my leave? I’ve heard Christina’s being taken to one of the med bays. I know I won’t be seeing her for a while, but I want to make sure she’s okay.”

“Of course,” Miranda answered, her voice showing a hint of sympathy to the agent.

Lynch nodded and turned his attention to Liara and Ethan. “It’s been a pleasure working with you. And you as well, Dr. T’Soni.” He offered a handshake to the asari. “I hope we can work together again one day.”

“I wish you luck,” Liara replied, shaking his hand.

With this, Lynch set out and walked away from the group, down the hallway, and took a left turn. Ethan wondered if he would ever see Lynch again, let alone his predicament. But he was certain the agent would recover and move on.

“So... what exactly *is* this ‘business’ you’re referring to?” Ethan asked, looking at Miranda.

“The means and the funds for the project to repair your... Transportalponder, should you accept the Illusive Man’s offer.” Miranda grimaced yet again in uttering the name of his teleportation device.

Ethan scoffed, remembering his earlier conversation with the Illusive Man “Right.” He gazed through the window. “So, what’ll happen next?”

Miranda shrugged and placed her arms in front of the window. “It’s up to you, but I’m confident you’ll make the right decision. I would also ask Liara that.” She tilted her head toward the asari.

Liara paused for a moment, considering her options. “I’ve put so much thought into getting Shepard back that I haven’t considered what I would do next. But that’s what I will do, Miranda. I’ve got another friend to help, but I’ve made a new enemy of the Shadow Broker.”

“I’m afraid we *all* have,” Miranda agreed, trailing off. “Whether you want revenge or to rescue the drell, I suggest you should become an information broker. That way, you can get back at the Shadow Broker at his own game and work your way to the top. Take out the competition. You’ll need every advantage you can get at the bastards.”

"I see. We'll leave you with your work." Liara gestured to Ethan. "Could we go somewhere private? I have something on my mind."

Ethan nodded. As he followed her, he dug out a small platinum chip, the number 38 engraved on it. He played around with it, moving it between his fingers and tossing it like a coin. He couldn't help but think about it. It was such a small thing, yet very dear to certain important people.

They made their way to a massive hallway with a window covering much of the wall to his right. He gazed at the void, far as his eyes could see.

Liara glanced at Ethan, frowning, as the door closed behind her. "What's up?" Ethan asked.

"What's that in your hand?"

He sighed as he pocketed the chip. "Something personal of mine," he answered hesitantly. "A platinum poker chip. I was supposed to deliver it to some rich guy so he could upgrade his army of robots."

"I imagine it must've led you to some eventful adventures," Liara remarked.

He let out a small smirk. "Yeah." He couldn't help but notice there was a sense of guilt coming from Liara. "What's wrong?"

Liara pulled him into a rather gentle hug. Ethan flinched. He blushed slightly, feeling a warm sensation in his chest. He had to admit, it was nice of Liara to hug him. It had been too long since he had one.

Both Ethan and Liara said nothing, even as they parted.

"Promise me..." A sullen Liara fell silent, her eyes welling with tears.

Ethan blinked, confused. "Promise you what?"

Liara struggled to find the words. "Feron, Alan, and Christina gave their lives so Shepard could have hers back. No matter what you decide, promise me you won't let anything jeopardize that," she finished. "Can you do that?"

He froze. He wasn't so sure what to make of this, let alone if he could follow that promise. But Miranda was right. He made new allies and enemies. He had to be cautious, something he should have heeded back in his world.

Even though Cerberus would bring Shepard back from the dead, blood would still be spilled, fighting would continue, and many lives would be lost. And it was all because, as an old storyteller once told him, war would never change.

And this was the start for him.