

Mass Effect: The Final Error

(Chapters 51-53)

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Chapter 51: Into the Darkness

It was only due to the time required for the fleets to actually get into position for a mass Mass Relay transit that Alliana and Oriana had managed to make it back aboard the Phoenix and get into their ship into its transit lane. Speed was *everything* for this operation, but there was simply no way to avoid the short delay required in trying to move over 200 Dreadnaughts and thousands more ships through a Relay. In truth, it wasn't actually *possible* to move so many ships at once through a normal Relay. But, well, the Citadel Relay was over two and a half times the length and far more than that in mass compared to a regular Relay.

Even with that, they wouldn't actually be taking the entire force through in a single jump. Roughly 40% of all fleet elements would make the initial Relay transfer, followed by six smaller jumps of 10% of the fleet each in a rotating pattern. Even as massive as space was, the fact that Mass Relays had a drift factor meant that there was only so many ships you could shove through a Relay at once safely. In truth, they were exceeding that safety margin with the first transit, making it virtually certain at least a few ships would be lost to collisions. It had been decided, unfortunately, that there was no other choice. There *would* be a Reaper guardian Fleet on the other side of this jump, even if it wasn't likely to be huge. And they *had* to take it down before it could wake all of its fellows up from their hibernation.

In the end, despite all their careful planning, there was nearly a forty-five-minute lapse between the destruction of the AI Core and the initial transit. Even that had been extremely tight for them to make it, and the Phoenix had only just barely managed to slot into its own spot in the formation in time to make the synchronized jump. The length of that jump was *disconcerting* to those used to effectively-instant Relay travel. Yet, the distance to Dark Space beyond the edge of the galactic plane meant there was a noticeable lag of several long seconds in which they could see nothing but the corona of the Mass Effect Corridor they were traveling through. It was something that had previously only ever been captured by extreme high-speed imaging, so seeing it with nothing but the naked eye was...honestly a little intimidating.

Thankfully, despite the lag time, they came out of the transit with no more drift than usual, though that was *not* the case for everyone. Even the briefest of scans showed a grim reality that nearly a dozen ships had been lost to collisions, including a pair of dreadnaughts. Yet, as horrible as that was, it was the *rest* of what those scans showed that was both far more frightening and far more heartening. For there were Reapers here. Lots and lots and *lots* of Reapers. Thousands, tens of thousands! There were hundreds of stations as well, all in different sizes, styles and configurations. The product of hundreds of cycles as the infrastructure of this dark space anchorage built up.

Yet, for all the fright of the *sheer tonnage* of enemy ships here, *most of them weren't moving*. Just as expected, the *vast* majority of the ships present here were cold in space, dormant and drifting in a way that actually meant sensors were probably only picking up a fraction of them. While that added its

own bit of terror, the fact that it matched with what they were expecting was perfect. Unfortunately, that didn't mean their presence had gone unnoticed, or they didn't have anything to worry about. After all, while most of the ships here were dormant, the Guard Fleet was not...and it was bigger than they'd hoped. Nearly seven hundred active Reaper emissions were already turning on them, even as every Citadel Ship opened fire the instant each had a shot.

Thankfully, not all of those ships were Reaper Dreadnaughts. If they had been, the attacking force would very likely have been overmatched before their reinforcements began to arrive. As it was, there were barely a hundred Dreadnaughts in the Reaper Guard Fleet. More than they'd hoped for...but fewer than the hundred and twenty Dreadnaughts they'd brought through in the initial transit. They'd prioritized their Capital Ships, knowing they needed to hit the Guard fleet hard and fast, without screens if they had to. Nothing smaller than a Cruiser had come through the initial transit, with the Pheonix actually being on the smallish end of the heavy metal that had made the first breach.

Not that anyone had questioned their inclusion. Even ignoring who the ship belonged to, Oriana had built the Pheonix to punch well above its apparent weight class. Something which became *very* relevant mere moments into the scrambled battle. Joker, with his usual razer-edged skill, managed to line them up for a firing pass on a Reaper Dreadnaught. The Pheonix closed the range much closer than any regular cruiser would, fighting more like a frigate as a hidden aperture spiraled open on her underside. The ship's biggest secret, which had been used only once before now, opened fire in a blaze of focused Graser fire. The beam weapon, which shouldn't have been able to be mounted on anything smaller than one of the *New Eden* class Dreadnaughts, completely ignored the Reaper's kinetic barriers and ripped hell out of its flank. Those barriers failed as the gunner scythed the beam back and forth, hitting something critical...and two more cruisers pounded into the ship with more traditional weapons the moment the barriers were down. Then they were clear and looking for another target.

A smaller one this time.

The secret to that beam weapon being possible at all were a series of *incredibly* expensive capacitors that allowed them to build up the charge for the massively draining weapon over several minutes. They couldn't fire it rapid succession, but even that one now-dead-in-space Reaper Dreadnaught was a hell of a kill for a trio of cruisers. And they'd likely get to do it again at least a few more times before the Guard Fleet was done. They might end up melting parts of the system down in the process. But, if there was ever a time for that, it was most certainly now...

The battle had been brutal, but short. Only their first two waves of reinforcements had gotten through before they'd put down the Reaper Guard Fleet. A lot of ships had been sacrificed, sometimes intentionally by cruiser crews that knew this needed to happen *fast* and had outright rammed Reaper Dreadnaughts when their cruisers became too damaged to fight otherwise. Those sacrifices and losses, horrible as they were, had paid off. The assault fleet of Operation Lance had gotten control of the anchorage with barely a handful of the sleeping Reapers being awoken. The slaughter had begun immediately, even as waves of reinforcements had set up on the other Relay present here, connected back to Omega, to await the inevitable retaliation. That retaliation *had* come, despite everything Operation Barrier could do to slow it down on the Omega side. Thankfully, it had come in fits and starts

as the still off-balance Reapers went in half a dozen directions, still unable to react cohesively without the AI on the Citadel to direct them.

With every mine, defense platform, and deliberately placed debris field added to the incoming Relay zone, fewer of the Reapers could get through intact. And the teams destroying repair stations and slaughtering sleeping Reapers had been equipped with every horrifying weapon of mass destruction their respective nations had been able to come up with. Things that should never have seen the light of day were unleashed in that pitch-black and eerie space in the frantic attempt to make sure they killed as much of this logistics support base and its reserves as they could. There was no chance they could find *every* Reaper. Not with so many of them dormant, cold in space. But, then, they had a plan for that too. When the Reaper forces finally started concentrating, striking not just at the Omega Relay but sending forces against the Citadel too, they all knew it was time to retreat.

They didn't do so without a going away present.

Specifically, all the remaining anti-matter they'd been able to create.

All of it.

It wasn't much, probably not enough to *permanently* destroy the Relays here. But it could and did disable them as the remnants of the assault fleet, reduced to a third of its original size, fled back to the Citadel. The Reapers still active at the anchorage could repair those Relays, someday, using the corpses of their brothers and destroyed Citadel ships to do so. But it would be a *long, long time*. Centuries, at least. More than long enough to finish the fight with the Reapers still in the Milky Way galaxy proper and build up the forces to come back and finish the job.

The battle to save the Citadel afterward, with it being the focus of a huge chunk of the remaining Reaper forces as they'd tried to stop or reach the extra-galactic fight, had been yet another brutal slog. But it was one that they won, albeit in a battered, brutally wounded sort of fashion. Not even the Pheonix had been spared damages or casualties. Its beam weapon had melted down, half its crew were dead, and they were still fighting fires in some of its compartments when the last of the assaulting Reapers pulled back.

"We...won?"

There was an equal mix of awe and disbelief as Alliana whispered that onto the bridge, breaking the momentary silence as the last of the Reapers fled the system. Oriana smiled hugely.

"We did. There is still a lot to do. But they don't have the numbers now. We will lose worlds, the galaxy will burn. But, eventually, they will run out of ships to throw at us. They lost too many trying to save their logistics base and they no longer have the reserves. Add in the death of their Mast—"

Oriana Lawson did not have time to react as an Asari commando, carefully vetted and loyal right up until this exact moment, put an entire clip of assault rifle fire into her back. Brutal lances of pain were all she knew as her vision faded away, as she fell to the deck, she distantly heard a roar of anger and the sound of biotics ripping her attacker apart...

Chapter 52: Out of the Darkness

Oriana awoke with a harsh gasp, mind scrambled and scrambling to make sense of where she was. Her entire body was on fire with pain, even as she just barely made out a few scattered words from shadows hanging above it.

“TOO SOON...YOU....MORON...Ten...Rig...NOW I SAID...”

There was a new burning in her veins that her brain vaguely told her was an injection. Then there was nothing. But this time, she dreamed...

The second time she awoke, it happened far more slowly, without the adrenaline surge and panic that she vaguely remembered from the first time. The dreams, dreams of friends, of family, of enemies, of times both good and terrible, were slow to fade. A heavy emotional exhaustion kept her eyes closed even after her mind began to wake. But then, she felt a hand on hers. Reflexively, she grasped it, somehow already knowing who it belonged to. A smile tugged at her lips. It was a bit painful, but it felt good somehow nevertheless. It took a serious effort of will to force her eyes open, and she managed only a single hoarse word as they focused. A name.

“A-Alliana.”

A tension faded from her lover’s face, relief flooding her eyes, even as the redhead’s other hand reached up to caress Oriana’s cheek.

“Ori. You had us so worried. I’m glad you’re back.”

She could already feel sleep pulling her back under again, even as the equally relieved faces of Liara and her sister appeared behind Alliana.

“G’lad I’m bac’ t’.”

Any other words were lost, as sleep took her once again. This time, all of her dreams were good ones...

Oriana didn’t know how many times she woke for a few minutes at a time. Many faces appeared in the chair next to her hospital bed as she did. Alliana, Miranda, Liara, Kelly, Samara, Ashley, even Garrus and Tali together once. Slowly, the amount of time she was awake for each time lengthened. A few minutes, twenty, a half an hour. Finally, the day came that she was greeted by Miranda and Alliana together again, feeling much stronger than she had at any point yet. It was time, some part of her realized, to finally face the music. She’d been content, until now, not to ask what was going on. Nor what had happened. Though the latter, of course, she had a vague idea of. She’d always known the powers that be in the galaxy would never let her live once they were sure they didn’t need her again. She was too dangerous and she’d made fools out of too many of them.

Honestly. She was amazed she’d lived through whatever the attempt had been. She vaguely remembered gunfire from behind and pain, but no more than that. She wet her lips and mustered the two questions she knew she needed to ask.

“How long? And what happened?”

Alliana's face darkened, eyes sparking with rage. Thankfully, Miranda's iron control held. There was rage in her eyes too, but her tone was clear as she answered.

"Eleven months. You've been fading in and out for about three. It took me nine to repair all the damage, and I couldn't exactly use all original parts. We almost lost you."

Miranda's voice got a bit rough at the end, causing her to abruptly stop. Alliana, eyes still furious, took up answering the other question.

"One of the Asari Commandos was a sleeper agent. Completely unaware she'd been programmed to activate under specific conditions and with specific commands. She was activated to eliminate you once you were *no longer necessary*, and unloaded her entire assault rifle clip into your back. We tracked her back to a supposedly defunct STG program, but it's likely that it was actually a Council order."

Alliana took a deep breath, clearly fighting to keep calm about that, even if Oriana herself wasn't particularly surprised. She'd expected it, though hadn't thought they'd act *quite* that early. Miranda had gotten control of herself again and picked up the explanation.

"Thankfully, you were still in full armor from the earlier operation. Even if your biotic barrier was down, your armor was beyond bleeding edge and reduced the damage from instantly fatal to just *extremely* mortal. Equally thankfully, you insisted on everyone's armor having a medical stasis module. I assume because of what you said happened to Shepard the first time around. In this case, it save your life...but the galaxy doesn't actually know that."

Oriana straightened, barely wincing as the movement pulled at a few aching parts of her. Did that mean? Miranda smirked and nodded.

"We activated Project Blank. Your condition was bad enough that it was easy to fake your death. And the medical facilities here at Point Slate are some of the best in the galaxy. No one that hasn't visited you has any idea you're alive. Not even your adopted parents, I'm afraid, as the watch kept on them hasn't faded yet. I was never the public figure you were, so it was easy for me to vanish with you dead." Her sister gestured at Alliana. "And Shepard is on the outs with the powers that be after she went on a rampage and gutted every single person and facility that had ever been involved. Including some rather important people. They can't try to eliminate her, since she's too important as a figurehead, but they sidelined her and she slipped her watchers pretty easily."

Oriana grinned, reaching out to squeeze her lover's hand again. Still, there was one more important question to ask.

"And the Reapers?"

Alliana's rage visibly faded a bit between the hand squeeze and the new question. A certain satisfaction replaced much of the anger in her eyes.

"Beaten. Oh, there are still quite a few out there that the various Fleets are hunting down. And they are going to be a *nightmare* for centuries, possibly even for millenia. After all, any one of them could theoretically convert an entire species and launch them at the Citadel's throat. Even so, that sort of thing can be managed. The chances of them doing a full wipe of organic life again have been broken

as thoroughly as we could have hoped, though. The Cycles and Harvest are over. We won. *You won it for us.*"

Oriana shuddered with a wild mix of relief and disbelief. Her eyes closed and she began to cry, with too many emotions running through her to even be sure *why*. Alliana seemed to understand, shifting onto the bed and simply hugging her.

It was over. It was finally over. It would likely be a long time before she could fully accept that. And she wasn't at all sure who she'd see in the mirror when she finally did. But...it was the first step. A blank slate. She'd done what she set out to do. Now, all that was left was to pick up the pieces and find out how much of herself it had cost her...

Chapter 53: Into the Light

Oriana sipped her mojito even as she idly toyed with the remote control in her hand. Every once in a while she'd tap a command, triggering a burst of pleasure for one of the women playing volleyball on the beach. It certainly made the game more exciting for everyone...particularly given that only the winner's were going to get their chastity belts removed tonight. The rest would have to wait until she felt like it. She grinned at the thought. Her sex drive wasn't as *manic* as it had once been, her more settled body and mind not requiring the drug-like distraction she'd made sex into nearly as much any longer. That didn't mean it was any less fun to do things like this, when a group of her lovers and former lovers got together for a vacation from their various duties. It didn't happen often, but they all made the most of it every time it could be arranged.

She triggered Liara's vibrator this time, setting it to a firm pulse and smirking as the Asari nearly miss her defense when the sudden pleasure of the button vibe threw her off. Smirking, knowing it would be a desperate recovery for the current winners for a few minutes, she leaned back in her lounge and simply soaked in the glorious sunlight of her little paradise island on a nameless world far from the Relay network. Getting here took a full week of travel, even using the newest FTL designs from Oriana's own research projects. And those weren't available to anyone but her closest friends, so far. An inconvenient distance in some ways, but it offered a degree of protection that just wouldn't have been possible if she'd stayed in known space. Point Slate, out of which a few of the others operated, was thankfully also a bit closer, only around a three-day journey.

It had been five years since the Reaper War. Almost exactly fourteen since that fateful day she'd taken a desperate dive into the Project Parallax machine and arrived in the past. At the physical age of twenty-eight, she honestly looked more like twenty-two, a side effect of her forcefully mixed genes that she couldn't exactly complain about. Sure, it did mean she would probably outlive one of her wives, Alliana not being likely to live past 150 unless something drastic changed. But her other wife, Liara, would be in the same shoes with Oriana in the end. Assuming she didn't die of some sort of hybridization complication, Oriana's own expected lifespan was only about 450 years, after all. Liara could easily go on to live another 400 after that. Though, at least Oriana was likely to last into Liara's matron stage to leave her with a child or two, so she wouldn't be alone.

Frankly, as much as all of that should probably bother her, she'd honestly expected to die even if she succeeded in tilting the windmill that was the Reaper Cycle. As a result, the idea of even the century

or so of life she had left with Shepard was a glorious decadence that she wasn't going to worry so much about losing. The fact that all three of them, plus nearly all of their sometimes-lovers, had come through the Reaper War and its aftermath alive was several different miracles all in a neat little row. Not everyone had been nearly so lucky, of course, not even from her own immediate acquaintances.

Kaidan had died to a hit on the Phoenix in the last battles, along with a couple of the commandos that she'd grown to know well. Ani'lia and Fallion had died when the Reaper Remnant had hit a New Dawn R&D shipyard, which has stun a lot even if they'd parted ways as lovers years ago. Garrus had survived the Reaper War only to die in cleanup operations three years later, though she'd admittedly been only passingly close with the Spectre. He'd only ever visited with Tali, who thankfully hadn't shared his fate. Others had been killed, not been trusted with the secret of her survival, or else had simply grown apart. Such was the way of things.

Yet, as much melancholy as had come with those loses, great joy had been found as well. She, Liara, and Alliana had been married two years after the war ended in a very private event. Shepard and Liara were publicly known to be married back in civilized space, while Oriana's survival was still too risky a secret to out in that way. But that was fine. It just meant Shepard had to deal with the burdens of being married to an only heir to one of the Asari great families. While Oriana, on the other hand, got all the fun bits of regularly fucking them both senseless, cuddling whenever they were around, and didn't have to deal with any of the political bullshit anymore!

Honestly, that last part brought almost as much joy as her wives. Though only almost.

By the large, she was content. It had taken years and the combined efforts of several carefully vetted therapists to get to that place. The first year, in particular, had been rough as she was finally forced to face all the choices she'd made in the name of survival. But she had worked through her biggest issues, was still working on the rest, and was thoroughly enjoying the chance to invent and tinker on non-military projects. Originally just a means to an end, somewhere along the way she'd discovered that she genuinely loved engineering challenges. Creating things that were meant to build a better galaxy, instead of causing destruction, was a pleasant way to spend her time. Though she was greatly amused how her new pseudonym was slowly becoming more famous than 'Oriana Lawson' had ever been. The Council wasn't eager to associate her real name with history, whereas her Pandora Hopeswell identity was slowly becoming *the* name in fields like exploration, energy harvesting, and metamaterials.

As for the galaxy at large? Well, there was still quite a bit of chaos out there. For a few years yet, the ongoing hunt for Reaper Remnants and the need to rebuild would keep the galaxy busy. After that...a whole lot of genies had been uncorked from many different bottles out of desperation near the end. Add in all the military buildups, all the trauma everyone had been through, and the usual mixture of greed, ambition, and short-sightedness...and the galaxy was likely in for a rough ride over the next century or so. Still, it would survive. Which is a lot better than could be said of all their predecessors, now wasn't it?

Grinning as she tired of such deep thoughts, she picked up Ashely's newest Neuralux from the nearby table, running one hand down her nude body to prepare her pussy for the thick toy. She watched Ashley stiffen from where she'd been refereeing the volleyball match, the Spectre glancing warily back at Oriana as she felt that touch. With a cheeky wink, Oriana ran her tongue over the head of the toy,

causing the woman to fold over as the sensation translated. She wondered just what would happen to the game, now that she was distracting the one person responsible enough that she'd been put in charge of monitoring both side for dirty tricks and biotics? Well, it would certainly be entertaining to find out...

Blissfully, as she moaned along with Ashley as the toy slid home, she forgot all her thoughts about Reapers and the rest of the galaxy. She'd done her part already. The Reapers had made their Final Error and Oriana had helped the galaxy defeat them. Now, all that was left to do was enjoy her just rewards for saving the galaxy. It was a New Dawn, of a New Era, and it was someone else's turn to be the Hero. Oriana was happy to fade away and have some fun with her wives and their occasional lovers...

Besides. It's not like there was *another* galaxy to save. That would just be silly.

-The End-