**PER ASPERA: Home**

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**PER ASPERA: Home**

by [Indiannahjones](http://example.com)

Summary

Sequel to Unprepared, set three years after the end. Having retired from the Alliance, Shepard is doing all she can to care for her turian-human child, but with the galaxy still in shambles after the end of the Reaper War, she is finding it far more difficult than she ever imagined.

[R&R welcome and appreciated!]
"Mama, wake up. I had a bad dream."

Shepard groaned, squeezing her eyes shut for a moment, before opening them, blinking a few times, trying to adjust them to the darkness of her room. David peered over the edge of her bed at her, his mouth twitching anxiously, blue eyes eager, his hands resting hopefully on the mattress as he waited for an invitation to join her in the bed. Lifting the edge of her covers up, Shepard yawned, indicating with her free hand for him to climb up next to her, and she watched with quiet, bated anticipation as he pulled himself up with effort over the edge of the bed before snuggling in next to her, tucking his warm little body in close to hers. Despite her son getting slightly stronger every day, he still needed a bit of help sometimes, but it seemed this morning was not one of those instances. Letting the covers fall back down again, Shepard tuck them securely around his form before reaching across him to her nightstand and turning on the little silver air filter, listening to the familiar whir and hum as she pulled her son in closer towards her, making sure he was safe and secure.

"You know what your father once told me about bad dreams," Shepard murmured, nestling her nose and mouth into the soft, downy hair on top of his head. She leaned down, kissing his cheekbone gently, before lifting her chin to rest it on top of his head again, letting out a soft, tired sigh as she did so. "He said we worry enough as it is while we're awake," she told him. "So having bad dreams is just a waste of good sleep."

"This one was about monsters," David answered, screwing up his face as he pulled her arm more closely around him, his tiny fingers barely managing to wrap all the way around her wrist. The shape of his mouth caused him to lisp faintly through his soft English accent, and her lips curled up gently in adoration as he went on. "They were very big," he told her. "And I was very small. And they wanted to eat me. But I couldn't call you to hear me."

"That is a bad dream," Shepard agreed, closing her eyes and letting out a soft sigh, half-asleep. "But you don't have to worry about that happening. No matter what monsters there are, I'll be sure to rescue you."

"Even a great big monster with two heads?" David asked, turning his head to look back at her, intent. "These were very big, and they each had two heads. They were very scary."

"Even if it's a great big monster with three heads," Shepard assured him, kissing his nose, causing him to wrinkle it up in response before turning back around again with a noise of protest. "Nothing scares your mama. Now go back to sleep." Snuggling in closer to him, she curled her knees around his form, creating a secure cocoon around him as he yawned again, drifting slowly off back to sleep. "I'll be right here, David," she told him, gently. "Nothing can get you as long as I'm here." "Not even monsters?" David asked, sleepily.

"Not even monsters," Shepard returned.

It was several hours later before Shepard woke up again, now fully rested and ready to work, only to find David still fast asleep in the bed beside her. Frowning a bit, she reached down gently with two fingers, checking the side of his neck for a pulse. Then, satisfied that her son was still breathing, she slid carefully out from under the covers, pulling on her socks and picking up her boots before starting quietly for the door of her cabin. She made as little noise as possible as she let the door close behind her, hoping that if she managed not to disturb her son, he might continue sleeping for another few
hours yet. Even though he was no longer an infant, sleeping through the night was still a rarity for David, as between the breathing problems and persistent bad dreams, it was a miracle if he managed to sleep for more than a few hours at a time. Waiting at the door for a moment, Shepard listened for the sound of David's voice, but then, hearing nothing, she turned towards the elevator, pressing the button going down and beginning to pull on her boots as she headed towards the lower floors of the Normandy.

The Normandy SR-2 had been gifted to Shepard shortly after her retirement from the Alliance, though not without any small amount of conflict on the matter. Admirals Hackett and Anderson had both put forth recommendations for the Normandy to be retired from service after Shepard was no longer in command of her, and the Alliance had agreed to the suggestion on the terms that the Normandy be either preserved for use in an Alliance museum or destroyed for its parts. The parts, they said, were to be used in the building of other warships, as materials for ship-building had grown painfully scarce after the War, but after a hard-fought, long-winded argument, Anderson finally managed to convince them that the Normandy was not actually Alliance property, but rather a replica of the original Normandy, created by Cerberus and commandeered by Shepard. It was only then that the Alliance officials finally agreed that Shepard would be able to keep the ship, provided it be stripped of all outward appearance of affiliation with the Alliance.

The ship looked oddly bare for a while without the familiar Alliance symbols adorning it, but it had been allowed to maintain its handsome blue and white colours, making it seem not quite so plain as it steered smoothly through open space, searching assiduously for its next source of reliable income. It also helped that blue just happened to be David's favourite colour, making him think that the ship had been painted specifically to please him, a fact which Shepard had not bothered to correct him on, and did not plan to anytime soon. Making her way around the starmap in the middle of the navigation floor, Shepard headed towards the cockpit, making sure not to startle Joker as she came up to stand behind the pilot's chair, leaning her elbows amicably on the edge of the headrest. "All alone up here?" she asked, good-naturedly, causing Joker to glance back towards her at the question. For a moment, he seemed surprised to see her, but then, with a light chuckle, he turned around to his computer spread again, returning to the task at hand, undeterred.

"Only momentarily," Joker answered, his second hand moving to shift the fuel gage meter more easily into view, showing that their current fuel stores sat at around half a tank. "My co-pilot will be back any second, I think. She's just off powdering her nose, or whatever it is she does when I'm not looking."

"Oiling her joints," Shepard joked, glancing over her shoulder to check if EDI were coming up on the two of them, before turning her attention back towards the navigation screen and watching as Joker directed the components around with almost astonishing ease. Tapping a small box in a corner of his holo-screen, he expanded it enough for her to see the display, a small digital map of a far-off star system with a long string of tiny numbers tucked into a corner of the frame. "Is that how much time is left until we reach our destination?" Shepard asked, pointing to the string of numbers, careful not to touch the monitor.

"Yeah," Joker agreed, letting out a soft, tired sigh as he tapped the map again, causing it to collapse back to a corner of the navigation screen. "It counts down by milliseconds, which is about as painstaking as it sounds when you've got trips lasting for days… or, god forbid, weeks. Apparently the Alliance didn't think to program the timer to take trips only using intermittent FTL travel into consideration." Dragging another small gage into view, Joker tapped it twice, expanding it, before pointing to it, frowning now. The digital gage showed that their FTL core was running critically low, the alarm symbol in the corner of the screen having been set to silent, presumably so it would not keep going off every time it hit a low spike. Shepard let out a short, soft huff, crossing one foot over the other as she chewed her lower lip, considering their predicament. "I've been forced to only use
"The FTL in spurts," Joker explained, tapping the gage again to collapse it. "If I use it for too long, the system goes critical, and the entire ship will go into power save mode. It's gonna take us forever to get places unless we can stop by one of those fuel stations and pick up more Eezo for the FTL core. And you can just forget about travel outside this cluster."

"You know we can't afford that right now," Shepard sighed, shaking her head, straightening from Joker's chair as she ran a discouraged hand back through her overgrown bangs. "You can't just buy Eezo anymore, you have to… jump through hoops, fill out paperwork, and even then it's…" Letting out another frustrated huff, she crossed her arms, frowning again as she stared at the flashing digital gage, as if challenging it to give her an answer to an impossible dilemma. "We'll just have to make do with what we've got," she finally said, turning her gaze to the floor of the bridge. "Maybe later, when we've got more money… after this mission. After we do this mission, then maybe we'll have more credits to spare."

"Yeah," Joker agreed, offhandedly, dragging his navigation control back to the forefront of his monitor. "Though, y'know, it's kind of nuts that the price of everything is still so high. The Reaper invasion was… over three years ago, damn." Letting out a horse-like huff of breath, he shook his head, turning his attention towards a digital wheel in the corner of his screen, which he reached up, turning to one side, before returning his attention to the navigation control. "You'd think they'd start to come back down by now."

"Recovery takes time," Shepard reminded him, propping her hands wearily on her hips as she turned her attention up towards the expanse of space visible through the broad, panoramic windows of the cockpit. "Rome wasn't built in a day. Neither was Illium. The Reapers destroyed damn near everything. It's not going to be easy to recover from that."

"But still, over three years?" Joker returned, turning around in his chair to glance back towards her, sceptical. "Even after the Reaper invasion, that's still a lot of time. You'd think they would have gotten something done."

"Well, they fixed the mass relays," Shepard offered, shrugging her shoulders, helpfully. "Isn't that something?"

At this, Joker scoffed, turning back around in his chair again. "Sure," he answered, darkly, returning both hands to the navigation console, starting to steer once more. "If you can call them fixed. With the waiting lists on some of them, they might as well have just stayed broken." Shepard frowned a bit at this remark, allowing the conversation to lapse into momentary silence as she lifted her attention from the back of Joker's head to the observational window, her fingers curling thoughtfully into the headrest of his seat as she stared out into the sea of stars. Despite the cynical nature of his observation, she had to admit that Joker was almost right. Since the final days of the War, the galactic relays had become choked with interstellar traffic, with everyone trying to get home or fly supplies to planets in need of relief, and it had eventually gotten so bad that the Council had instated a queue system that only allowed a certain number of ships with preapproved clearance to pass through each relay in set time periods. This newly instated system meant that ships without prioritized clearance, like the Normandy, often had to wait anywhere from hours to days to be able to use the relays to reach their destinations.

Letting out a short, sharp exhale of breath, Joker shook his head again, causing Shepard to look down at him once more as he typed something into the navigation console with one hand, barely needing to pay attention to know what he was doing. "It kinda sucks that you don't work for the Alliance anymore," he told her, almost as an afterthought, causing her to falter, taken aback. "I bet they'd be more than happy to pay for this stuff if you asked."
"I can't be dependent on the Alliance anymore, Joker," Shepard answered, letting out a soft sigh as her hand curled into a half-aware, anxious fist against the headrest of his chair. "You know that. I can't risk putting them through a conduct investigation on my behalf after everything they've done for me." Frowning deeper, she looked up again, staring out into the expanse of space as she tapped her fist thoughtfully against the material of his chair. "If anyone found out the Alliance was still supporting me, knowing I was pregnant during the last few months of the Reaper War, they'd be caught up in punitive red tape for years," she added. "I couldn't do that to them."

"What about the Corsair program?" Joker suggested, looking up towards the observational window as well. "Wasn't Jacob a Corsair? You could ask him about that, maybe."

Shepard shook her head, shifting her weight as she unclenched her hand, before crossing her arms over her chest again, watching the starscape streaking by outside the panoramic windows. "I already looked into it," she answered, honestly. "The Alliance eliminated the Corsair program after the end of the War. Not enough funds to support independent mercenary endeavours." Shrugging then, she turned her attention downward towards the floor of the bridge, giving a soft sniff as she dug her toes into the metal flooring. "Plus, they didn't have as much use for that type of work after the War," she added, frankly. "Now most of their extra funding and efforts are going towards relief programs."

"You could always just say you didn't know you were pregnant at the time," Joker suggested, clearly facetious.

At this, Shepard looked up again, letting out a short, sharp, incredulous laugh. "I think it's a little late for that," she returned, moving her hands to prop on her hips again.

Joker shrugged, still smirking, before letting out another soft breath and returning his full attention to the navigation controls. "True, I guess," he answered, fairly. "But, hey, I mean, you're still a Spectre. That's something, at least."

"That's true," Shepard agreed, giving an absentminded nod in return.

Another pause fell over the conversation, this one a bit more optimistic than the last. Then, after a moment, Joker suddenly twisted around in his chair to face Shepard again, raising his brows and knocking the bill of his cap away from his face a bit as he took a sharp, eager breath. "You could always take the Khar'shan job, you know," he told her, as if he had been waiting this whole time for an opportunity to bring it up. "Then we'd have plenty of credits to go around. We wouldn't have to keep living job to job like we're doing now. We could apply for some Eezo to refill the FTL core, buy some new armour, maybe get some repairs done—"

"I'm not taking the Khar'shan job," Shepard told him, sharply, cutting him off short.

Joker frowned at the quick retort, momentarily thwarted, before letting out another sigh and holding up his hands in surrender. "Fine, fine," he told her, shaking his head as he turned back around towards his navigation console again. "I'm just saying, you're turning it down pretty quickly when you don't even know anything about it. For all you know, it could be fun!"

"The chances of a job based in batarian space being fun are exceptionally slim, Jeff," EDI informed him, taking them both by surprise as she moved up from behind them to reclaim her position in the co-pilot chair.

Glancing over towards her, Joker let out a defeated, good-natured huff of breath, before returning his attention to his navigation screen once more. "Spoilsport," he muttered, quietly, but even so he could not keep a fond grin from spreading across his features as he reached up to tug his hat a bit further down over his eyes.
Shepard smiled at the show of affection, still not quite over her satisfaction at being back with a handful of her original crew. Then, patting the headrest of the pilot's chair, she began to move out of the cockpit, pointing towards EDI as she began to walk away backwards, still facing the two of them. "EDI, get started on the Eezo forms," she instructed. "Don't submit them until we have the funds to cover the processing and handling fees as well as the element cost. We should have just enough to cover all the expenses after I get through with this job. And Joker…" She paused, pointing at him, trying to suppress a pang of guilt as he stared at her, waiting eagerly for instructions. "Keep doing what you're doing," she told him, shortly. "Push the FTL core as close as you can. Hopefully, if we play our cards right, we can make it to our destination and a fuelling station right after before it lets out completely."

"Aye-aye, Commander," Joker conceded, offering a cheeky little salute in her direction before turning back to his seat at the controls.

Nodding again, satisfied, Shepard turned away from the two co-pilots, finished with her checkup on the status of the cockpit, before starting to make her way back towards the navigation deck. She had barely made it to the end of the walkway before she found herself suddenly approached by a frazzled-looking Samantha Traynor, who pressed a hand to her chest, trying hard to catch her breath, before flapping a reassuring hand in Shepard's direction and swallowing hard, regaining some semblance of her composure. "Commander," Traynor addressed her, breathlessly, causing Shepard to frown a bit at her yeoman's seeming sense of urgency. Straightening her posture, Traynor began to offer Shepard a quick salute, before abruptly remembering that they were no longer Alliance and letting her hand drop swiftly back to her side again, clearing her throat gently to cover her faux pas. "Commander, I found David wandering the ship unattended," she informed Shepard, frankly, looking concerned as she returned to the issue at hand. "I had hoped you might know something about that. Do we need to upgrade the Normandy's safety measures?"

"No," Shepard answered, quickly, shaking her head as she tucked her hands patiently behind her back. "No, no need for that. He just had a bad dream, and he… he was in my cabin. I didn't lock the door, so I guess he got out." Glancing over Traynor's shoulder towards the navigation deck, she frowned as she looked over the limited crew manning the computer stations around the starmap, barely one attendant to every six computers. "Safety aboard the Normandy is fine, as far as I know," she added, letting out a soft, put-upon sigh. "And we can't really afford any upgrades right now either way. We'll just have to make do with what we've got."

"Understandable," Traynor returned, agreeably, offering a short, concise bob of her head, causing Shepard to look over towards her again, attentive. Traynor fidgeted under Shepard's gaze, her hands shifting anxiously at her sides as if unsure what to do with them when she was not holding a datapad or inputting figures into her work station at the starmap. "Either way, that's been taken care of now," she added, returning quickly to the subject at hand. "I've gone ahead and put him in his playroom. I hope you don't mind. I figured it was the safest place for him to be under current circumstances."

"I didn't think you'd want him wandering the ship unattended," she added, twisting her lips thoughtfully to one side. "Especially after what happened last time."

Shepard frowned, stiffening slightly at the vague mention of the previous fiasco, before clearing her throat in return and offering a short, approving nod. "Right," she answered, just as cagily, not wanting to talk about it any more than necessary. "Good call, Traynor."

"Thank you, ma'am," Traynor answered, quietly, a small, satisfied smile curving across her lips.

Shepard returned the smile, glad to be finished with the conversation, though her smile was a bit wearier than the one she had received. Then, waving a hand, she indicated for Traynor to follow.
behind her as she made her way out onto the navigation deck, starting to head around the starmap towards the elevator at the far end of the floor. "I'm about to be heading out on a mission shortly, FTL drive permitting," she informed Traynor, causing the young yeoman to nod firmly in understanding, taking strict mental notes. "I guess you can start David on his lesson for the day. If I'm not back before he finishes, go ahead and put him down for a nap. I don't know how much sleep he got, but I figure he can always use more." Reaching the elevator, Shepard stopped, turning around to face Traynor again, causing her to stop short as well as she found her pathway suddenly interrupted. "I appreciate you following me when I retired from the Alliance, Traynor," Shepard told her, sincerely, reaching out a hand to gently clasp her arm. "Not many people were willing to do that."

"A few people were," Traynor returned, offering an embarrassed little smile and shrug of one shoulder. "I'm not the only one."

"Hm," Shepard answered, patting her arm, before letting her hand fall back to her side again, tiredly. "Very nearly. You, Joker, EDI, Karin…" She paused, making a face, her gaze drifting upward as she lifted a hand, counting her returning crew on her fingers. "Gabby, Kenneth… Gardner… and Cortez," she finished, taking stock of the full count on her hands before letting them drop back to her sides again. "That's about it. Everyone else went their separate ways after the War."

Traynor frowned a bit at the low crew count, tilting her head thoughtfully to one side. "The Alliance just wasn't the same without you, Commander," she told her, sincerely. "At least for me."

"You probably would have been paid better had you stayed," Shepard reminded her, honestly, tucking her hands into the pockets of her hoodie.

Traynor shrugged, her mouth twisting idly to one side, chewing distractedly at the inside of her cheek, before she shook her head again, more firmly this time. "Money isn't everything," she answered, frankly. "I enjoy working with you, Commander." Pausing then, she considered Shepard, before adding, a bit more intuitively, "And besides, where else can I get room and board for spending all my time with the person I admire the most and her adorable son?"

Shepard faltered for a moment at this addendum, taken aback, unsure if Traynor were being facetious or not. Then, allowing herself to smile, she gave a soft, amicable little laugh, reaching out to pat the young woman on the arm again before tucking her hand back into the pocket of her hoodie. "Flattery will get you everywhere, Traynor," she told her, good-naturedly. "You know that."

"I know," Traynor answered, offering the Commander a cheeky little smile of her own.

The Kodiak whined as its thrusters rotated downward, lowering it gently towards the ground for landing, kicking up rocks and dust as it settled down with a slight rattle against the planet's surface. Shepard's hand clenched tighter around the overhead handlebar as she waited for the door to open to let her out, her free hand tapping anxiously against her thigh as she glanced over towards the landscape screen, making sure no one had heard the shuttle and was coming to see what the racket was about. She had asked Cortez to drop her off a fair ways from the shipping yard where her upcoming assignment waited, not wanting to draw too much attention to herself before she even had a chance to go in, but she still could not help but feel antsy at the amount of noise the outdated model made every time it came in for landing. Turning her attention back to Cortez, she offered him a wary, rigid half-smile, before turning her attention back to the shuttle door as it finally lifted with an audible hiss, drawing her Marauder quickly from its maglock and gripping it tightly as she jumped down onto the rocky ground. She knew full well that this was just another routine assignment, just like every other mercenary undertaking she had gone on in the past three years, but it still made her nervous every time she went in to do these jobs, knowing full well that the Normandy's entire
financial situation depended on her successful completion of the mission.

Terra Nova had grown economically unstable after the War, with a majority of its population leaving not soon after the first attacks on Earth to seek shelter in other systems, leaving the planet an open target for drug runners and other criminal activities. With this increase in drug activity, Terra Nova had quickly become the most common selling ground for a new batarian synthetic designer drug called TMX, said to be compatible with every species' physiology and even more effective than red sand in delivering a biotic-stimulated rush of adrenaline. It was an untested drug, illegal even by drug trade standards, said to have an even greater chance of paranoia, hallucinations, terror, and even death as a side effect than any other drug on the market. It had become increasingly popular in underground nightclubs following the end of the War, with young people feeling almost invincible since surviving the Reaper attacks, meaning that the sales of it were on the rise, making it difficult to track down and stop every shipment. As a result, smaller shipments and sales of the product that could not be prioritized by law enforcement had been farmed out to mercenary workers like Shepard, who were given limited civilian authority to bring in sellers and buyers to be punished by the actual law.

Despite retaining her rank and title as a Spectre, Shepard still had to work with the local authorities on cases like these, a fact which made her miss her sense of freedom and authority more than anything else. However, she could not argue with the paycheck bounty hunting brought in, no matter how meagre it happened to be – the money from these jobs bought quarian formula for her son, food for her crew, and paid for their fuel to get to the next job. Crouching low at the edge of a large warehouse, Shepard hugged her Marauder close to her chest, trying hard to keep her breathing nearly silent as she crawled in a crouch from one end of the line of crates she hid behind to the other, barely daring to peer around the corner to see what was going on in the assembly. The meeting was much larger than the message she had received had made it out to be – while her constabulary contractor had estimated the dealer and the buyer might turn up with one or two bodyguards each, he had done nothing to warn her about the ring of watchdogs they had brought with them, bringing the number in attendance closer to ten or fifteen. It was difficult to tell exactly how many thugs prowled the warehouse, as they all wore similar dark garb, and the fact that they kept moving made it hard to know who had been in one place and was now in another.

Activating her omni-tool, Shepard made a quick, discreet scan of the group in the middle of the warehouse, running each face through a database of wanted criminals, and was satisfied when the two in the middle came up as the individuals she had been sent to track down. Closing out her omni-tool again, she peered around the corner of the crates, watching as the human buyer attempted to barter with the batarian seller, but it was clear from the seller's face, as well as the faces of the batarians standing around him, that he would not be having it today. "It's not negotiable, Rosell," the batarian seller answered, shaking his head, firmly. "I've been informed we can't go any lower than what I already told you. If I try to undercut the higher-ups, it'll be my head on a pike."

"That's a bit extreme, don't you think, Gorm?" the human buyer, Rosell, answered, doing his best to sound amiable, despite his obvious mounting frustration at the stubbornness of the price. "I'm sure they won't kill you for going a little lower. Come on. We can help each other out."

"You know the last guy who had my job?" Gorm insisted, taking a step forward, causing the two goons flanking Rosell to stiffen, their hands inching towards their guns. "He went a little lower on the price than the higher-ups said, and you know what happened to him? He disappeared. Nobody ever heard from him again." Giving a derisive snort, he took a step back away from Rosell again, causing the guard dogs on either side of him to relax a bit, if only barely. "They say they cut him up and fed him to the boss' pet," Gorm added, giving a jerk of his chin in his associate's direction. "I don't know how much truth there is to that, but I don't want to find out for myself. You pay what I told you, or you get out. That's the deal."
Shepard frowned at the gruesome story, ducking behind her line of crates and glancing down at her weapon again, making sure she had remembered to put in a fresh heat sink before heading down. She found it hard to believe that someone would have an employee cut into pieces and fed to what she assumed was a varren, even for something like price skimming, but she pushed this thought aside as she peered out from behind the crates again, continuing to listen, waiting for an opportunity to strike. As it was, there were still too many guard dogs hanging around near where she crouched, making it difficult for her to get a clear shot at either of the main thugs without being noticed, or getting shot, herself, in the process. Rosell seemed just as mortified by the tale of brutal consequence as she was, and he made a face, crossing his arms, before frowning and taking a deep, thoughtful breath in. "Fine," he finally conceded, holding out a hand for Gorm to shake. "You got a deal. You drive a hard bargain, Gorm."

Gorm smirked at the confirmation, shaking the hand offered him, before letting out a short, self-satisfied grunt and retrieving his hand again, crossing his arms over his chest. "Just doing my job, Rosell," he answered. "No hard feelings." Rosell huffed at this, noncommittal, before starting to reach for the pouch on his belt, pulling something out of it and starting to hand it over to Gorm. Gorm watched intently as Rosell prepared to pay, indicating for his two bodyguards to bring the product forward before holding out his own hand to take whatever it was Rosell had.

"Hey!" a deep voice suddenly shouted from behind Shepard, causing her to turn quickly, feeling her stomach drop out at the sound. A batarian thug stood a few feet behind her, his Carnifex raised, ready to fire, the red lights blinking along the side as he trained her in his sights. "What are you doing here?" the thug insisted. "You're not supposed to be here! Are you with the cops?!"

"The cops!" another thug shouted, hearing him, causing every head in the vicinity to turn. "Run! It's the feds! Every man for himself!"

No sooner had this shout filled the warehouse when panic broke loose, the sounds of shouting overwhelming as every present being scattered for safety, knocking over shipment crates in their haste to escape the proverbial authorities. The thug with his weapon trained on Shepard fired, his shot making a loud, ringing ping as it ricocheted off the crate nearest Shepard's head, and she took the lucky opportunity to spring to her feet, rushing him before he could aim again and knocking him to the ground. Bringing her gun up, she cracked him across the face, smashing the butt of her gun into his skull until she was sure he was out cold. Then, jumping to her feet again, she leapt over the top of the line of low crates, firing her weapon at a few remaining guard dogs who had opened fire at the first sign of movement. One went down almost immediately, a spray of blood bursting from a wound in his neck, but the other took two shots to take down, both in the chest, before he finally fell. Rosell was already sprinting for the door by the time she found him, and she quickly took aim, spraying a round of bullets at his feet, until he suddenly stumbled and fell, letting out a shout of pain and grabbing for his wounded leg as his credit chit went skittering across the warehouse floor.

Now all that was left to take care of was Gorm, who she easily found trying to collect up his cargo before starting to make a run for safety. Catching up to him quickly on foot, she tackled him, taking him down to the floor, before yanking him over and kneeling on top of him, pinning him to the floor with her knee as she pressed her arm into his throat, choking him. "Who's supplying the product?" she insisted, her face barely inches from his as she shouted. Gorm gurgled, baring his teeth, his black eyes lit up with rage as he thrashed, refusing to answer her question, before he suddenly started to reach his hand down towards weapon at his belt, straining to reach it. Realizing what he was trying to do, Shepard ripped the Carnifex from his belt, throwing it away across the floor before striking him with the butt of her Marauder, opening a bloody cut across his cheek and forcing him to pay attention. "Don't get cute with me," she growled, pressing harder with her arm against his throat. "I don't have patience for you today. Who's supplying the product you're selling?"
"I don't have to tell you anything," Gorm answered, giving another thrash, this one notably weaker than the last. "You're just a mercenary. You have no authority here!"

Shepard could feel her face burning at this, and for an instant she considered correcting him, telling him that she was a Spectre, more qualified to deal with scum like him than any authority he had ever met before. Then, thinking better of it, she instead lifted her Marauder again, striking him across the face with it once more, causing him to give a shout of pain as his nose gave a sharp crack, spraying bright red blood across the butt of her gun as she pressed her arm more firmly into his throat. "Who's supplying the product, Gorm?" she demanded, barely letting up even as he gave another sputtering choke, blood from his nose starting to drip into his open mouth as he struggled to breathe against her weight.

"I don't… know…!" Gorm insisted, taking a deep, ragged breath, before coughing up a bit of blood that had started to pool in the back of his throat. "It gets dropped off… at a local drop point… we never see the suppliers… we just get instructions… on the sales…! I swear, that's all I know…!"

"Who handles the money?" Shepard insisted, shoving her gun more forcibly against the side of his head, causing him to give a shrill, gurgling keening noise as he tried to lean away from it. "Do you keep it? Does it go in your personal account? Or does it get transferred somewhere else?"

"I don't know!" Gorm answered, louder this time, turning his black eyes back onto her, desperately. "I don't know anything… I swear!" Letting out another cough, more desperate this time, he writhed in her grip, taking in another, sharper breath, and she let up a bit, not wanting him to suffocate to death before he finished telling her all he knew. "We only get paid a f… fraction of the sale cost," he insisted, exhaling sharply to clear his nose of blood, causing more of it to spray onto her gauntlet. "Why would I tell you any of this… if I were afraid of my profit being taken away…? We get next to nothing… compared to the amount the drug sells for…!"

"Then who does get the money?" Shepard asked, sharply, giving another pressing thrust with her knee into his stomach, causing him to grunt in pain at the motion.

"The money… the money is transferred to a dummy account," Gorm panted, giving another bloody cough. "And then… it gets drained from there and sent all over the place… I-it's impossible to trace, I have no idea where it ends up, but…!" Shaking his head, he coughed again, louder this time, spraying bright red blood onto his lower lip as he did so. "Please, you have to believe me," he begged. "I don't know anything. I'm just a pusher, a-a-a fall guy. The money… it's being used for something else. I don't know what. I'm just doing my job – please…!"

Shepard scowled, gripping her gun, staring at him for a moment as she thought, her arm still pressed against his throat, her knee still digging into the soft flesh of his stomach. Then, letting up on her arm, she let him take a deep breath in, finally able to breathe for the first time. Glancing over towards Rosell, she watched as his legs began to slide away past the doors of the warehouse, a wide swath of crimson following behind him from where he had dragged himself across the floor after being shot. Letting out a shout of frustration, Shepard gripped her Marauder, giving Gorm a good crack across the face, knocking him out cold, before getting to her feet and running in the direction of the human buyer, who was now trying to struggle to his feet and running in the direction of the warehouse. "Officer Garner, this is Shepard," she panted into her in-ear comm. "I've got the two suspects pinned, ready for arrest. I just need backup to come collect them." Coming up to stand behind Rosell, she trained her weapon on him, taking a few steps forward towards him until her gun was pressed into his back. "Weapon on the ground, asshole," she instructed. "Hands where I can see them."

Rosell paused a moment at the instruction, seeming to be weighing his odds. Then, before she could stop him, he reached for the gun at his belt, drawing it, only to have it knocked from his hands by her
Shepard frowned, unsure how to respond, before glancing up to check on how close the police hovercars were. Seeing the flashing lights settling down barely a few yards away, she finally allowed her weapon to drop, taking a step back as two armed asari officers ran up to them, grabbing up Rosell under the arms and dragging him painfully onto his feet. "I used to be," she told him, frankly, stashing her gun at her belt again. Then, turning to one of the asari officers, she pressed the blood-stained chit into her hand, before pointing back in towards the warehouse interior. "There's another one still inside, officer," she informed them. "Gorm. He's the seller." Having said this, she let out a tired breath, taking a step back as she turned her attention to Rosell again, watching as he was dragged away, unable to help but notice the disappointment in his pockmarked face at what she had become.
Shepard's undersuit was growing sweaty against her skin as she exited the elevator to the engineering deck, but she hardly even paid it any mind as she turned down the hall, making her way towards the nursery, eager to see her son. What had once been Javik's private quarters had been remodelled since the Prothean's leave from the Normandy, and had instead been converted into a playroom wing, complete with padded flooring and walls and an oxygen filtration system that kept fresh, clean air circulating through the room at all times. The door to the playroom was unlocked as Shepard approached, the holo-lock shining bright green across its face, and she could not help but feel a bit disconcerted as she crossed the weight sensor to peer into the room, checking for some sign of David or Traynor, only to find none there. David's mobile of the Sol system still hung over his learning corner, his colouring book still open on the floor, but neither David nor his teacher were anywhere to be found, and so, frowning a bit, Shepard turned to leave the room again, returning to the elevator and selecting the next floor up to see if perhaps they had taken a break for lunch.

Shepard clenched and unclenched her armoured hand as she waited for the elevator to go up one floor, hoping that her yeoman and son were simply eating, and that there had not been some horrible medical emergency while she had been away. However, when she finally arrived on the third-floor crew deck, she found the mess hall to be nearly empty, save for Gardner still working idly at his kitchen station, peeling what looked to be a potato. Gardner looked up as he heard Shepard approaching, the falls of her armour boots heavy against the metal flooring, but gave her only a quick once-over before letting out a short, unsurprised grunt of greeting. "You okay there, Commander?" he asked, intuitive, peeling a sliver of potato skin onto the preparation counter. "You look a bit… frazzled."

"Looking for David," Shepard answered, shortly, coming to stand beside the counter as well. "Did you see him or Traynor come through here? Maybe?"

Pausing momentarily in his peeling, Garner thought for a moment, his thumb trailing along the edge of his peeling knife as he considered her question. Then, letting out another short, contemplative grunt, he shook his head, returning his attention to his potato, before letting out a short, sharp huff of breath. "Can't say I've seen them recently," he answered, honestly. "Least, not since they came through to drop this off for sanitization." Setting the potato down then, he reached to the far edge of the preparation station, picking up a translucent pacifier and sliding it across the counter, setting it down within easy reach. "Said they dropped it on the floor or something," he added, picking up the potato again. "Couldn't let the little tyke put it back in his mouth. Germs. Last I heard they were headed up to the navigation deck to look at the starmap." Peeling another sliver of skin from the potato, he gave a light sniff, shrugging one shoulder. "Would've thought they'd be back by now," he added. "Pacifier's clean."

"Thanks, Gardner," Shepard told him, appreciatively, reaching out to pat him on the arm. Then, picking up the pacifier, she turned it over distractedly between her fingers, before turning to head back towards the central elevator and pressing the button to take her up to the second-floor navigation deck.

The navigation deck was almost as quiet as the crew deck when she arrived, the gentle beeping of the starmap computer stations broken only by the whispers of Traynor and David at the head of the map display, looking out over the holographic spread of the Milky Way galaxy. David's stuffed elcor plush dangled absently from his hand as he looked out over the starmap in wonder, the stitched button hinging of the toy's front legs starting to come loose from overuse and play. Shepard had made the elcor herself while David had still been a tiny infant, and while she had never been
particularly artistic, it had been a calming mechanism, something to keep her hands busy during the first few weeks he had spent in the Bubble, unable to be taken out and held for more than a few minutes at a time while his immune system developed into infancy. The elcor plush was lumpy and lopsided, its stuffing hugged and washed into disrepair, with mismatched button eyes, the result of David chewing one of them off when he had begun teething, only to have it replaced by a larger, differently-shaped button, one that did not look quite right. David did not seem to mind the crudeness of the toy, however, and had instead proudly named it Nexus, declaring it a Spectre and keeping it with him wherever he went.

Now, neither David nor Traynor seemed to notice as Shepard came to stand behind them at the stairs, trying to listen in on what Traynor was saying as she pointed to the bright spot of the Exodus cluster. "This is where we are right now," Traynor told David. "But as soon as your mummie gets back, we'll be going to that system – over there." Having said this, she took David's free hand, steering his pointed finger in the direction of the Serpent Nebula. "It's very far away, you see?" she added, cheerfully, letting go of his hand to point to the system, herself. "So we need her help to get there."

David frowned a bit as he looked between the two systems, trying to figure out how such an excursion was possible, before turning around to look at Traynor directly, his brow furrowed in deep concentration. "That doesn't seem very far," he told her, sceptically. "It's just right there."

Traynor laughed at this observation, pulling David in for a warm, fond hug. Then, taking his little hand in hers, she turned away from the starmap, starting to lead him down the stairs, only to be surprised to see Shepard standing at the foot of them, waiting for them to notice her. Shepard watched with doting amusement as Traynor led David down the stairs of the starmap station towards his mother, his socked feet barely audible against the floor as he held onto her hand tightly with one of his, obediently. "Commander, the payment from your last job has been received and processed," Traynor reported, coming to stand in front of Shepard, her hand tightening reassuringly around David's much smaller one as he came to stand beside her. "The forms for the Eezo have been submitted and are going through as we speak."

"Excellent," Shepard returned, quickly, offering her an attentive nod of thanks. "And how much funding do we have left over after the Eezo costs?"

"Just enough to afford our budgeted food and formula, Commander," Traynor answered, glancing down towards David to make sure he was not putting his stuffed elcor anywhere near his mouth. "I've got the calculations drawn up, if you'd like to take a look. I've budgeted our next projected trip as well, based previous missions, and I've also put in a clearance request for the Exodus relay. We should be able to pass through in a few hours' time."

"Perfect," Shepard commended, enthusiastically. "You're the best, Traynor. That should give us just enough time to hit the local fuel depot and make it back in time for our relay." Then, turning her attention to David instead, she stooped down to his level, picking him up under the arms and lifting him up to rest against her hip. He was quick to let go of Traynor's hand at his mother's provocation, instead using his arms to wrap possessively around her neck, causing the bulk of the elcor plush to bump against the side of her helmet as he snuggled in to her armoured side. Shepard did not even seem to notice as she looked up towards Traynor again, adjusting her son more comfortably against her hip before depositing the pacifier into Traynor's now-empty hand. "Hold onto that," she told her, forwardly. "He might need it later. In the meantime, I'm going to go get changed and feed him. Inform me if anything urgent comes up."

"Will do, Commander," Traynor agreed, starting to salute again, before remembering she was not supposed to and nodding instead, balling her hand into a fist and tucking it behind her back.
Nodding in return to Traynor's gesture, Shepard turned away from the yeoman, instead starting to make her way towards the central Normandy elevator. David smiled as he peered into his mirrored reflection in the visor of her helmet, pressing a curious finger against the plexiglass, before taking it away again and letting out a soft, conspiratorial giggle at the imprint of his fingertip against the shiny surface. "You are a suit," he announced, proudly, kicking his chubby legs as she carried him into the elevator, leaning down to press the button to take them up to the captain's cabin. "Your head is a helmet. But it comes off. And then your head is a head." The elevator gave a faint rattle, causing him to look up suddenly, seeming entirely unperturbed by the noise as he listened to the elevator humming gently, making its way towards the top of the ship. Then, finally arriving on the cabin floor, the doors of the elevator opened with a soft *hiss*, allowing Shepard to exit the lift towards the captain's quarters, making her way past the weight-sensitive doors to the far end of the room.

Setting David down at the foot of the bed, she watched as he slid himself off again, leaving his elcor plush behind, his little socked feet making muffled padding noises as he made his way over to the fish tank to check on the fish. Pressing his hands against the glass, he watched the fish swim lazily around in the illuminated water, holding his breath and puffing out his cheeks to imitate one of their funny faces. "Don't keep your face like that for too long," Shepard warned, opening up her armour cabinet and taking a look inside. "You don't want it to get stuck that way." Then, unlatching her helmet from the back of her neck protector, she let out a heavy sigh, shaking out her shaggy, matted hair, before setting the helmet aside on the bed and starting to unlatch her shoulder-guards, preparing to remove them as well.

Letting the air out of his cheeks, David turned away from the tank again, making his way back over towards the bed to watch in silent fascination as she began to remove her armour. It was a process he had seen a dozen times before, but one he never seemed to grow tired of, and as she removed her shoulder-guards, setting them down on the bed next to her helmet, she watched as he looked between the guards and her shoulders, trying to reason that they had once been one. The first time David had seen her in her armour, he had thought that the suit had replaced his mother, either by eating her or simply supplanting her, as she was no longer around when the armour was. He seemed incapable of equating that the armour was something that could be put on and taken off, and could not figure out why the armour sounded like his mother, but not exactly. He had also started to cry bitterly when she had taken off her helmet, thinking that the scary armour person was taking its head off, but had since thankfully gotten much better at realizing that when one head came off, another replaced it, and no harmed seemed to be done in the process. Chakwas had explained this inability to conceptualize the armour and Shepard as one in the same as a form of object permanence, something he would eventually grow out of the longer she allowed him to witness the concept that the armour was actually just his mother, and vice-versa.

Now, he seemed fascinated by the process, his cat-like lips pursing in a small, taut pout as his dark brows furrowed in concentration. Shepard figured he was probably trying to figure out how the individual pieces fit together, but she also knew that his brain worked in such a way that whenever each piece came off, it became something else entirely – no longer one part of a whole, but merely an isolated, castaway part with no association. Chakwas had called it dyspraxia, manifesting in the inability to recognize sequential objects or ideas being successive parts of a whole concept, and had recommended this stripping-down ritual as an exercise in brain development, one specifically geared towards David's particular learning needs. Shepard had figured it was harmless enough for him to see her in her undersuit when he was still so young, as there was nothing inherently sexual about a garment meant simply for protection, especially one that looked, functionally, like a diving suit. Even so, she knew that she would likely have to start phasing him out of such practices as he got a bit older, closer to age five or so.

David blinked as he watched Shepard pull off her foream-guards, setting them aside on the bed next to her helmet and shoulder-guards, and she could not help but wonder what was going on in his head.
as he watched her remove her suit and set it aside on the bed in pieces, his little face screwing up in intense concentration. He stared at the pieces another moment longer, seeming to be considering them, before finally reaching over and picking up the helmet, turning it to one side, admiring the way the light reflected in the visor. "I like your suit," he told her, looking up at her again, rolling her helmet thoughtfully between his tiny, clawed hands. "Will I get a suit someday? When I'm big and grown, like you?"

Turning to look down at him at the question, Shepard paused in removing her upper-arm guards, instead reaching over to take hold of the helmet and setting it aside on the bed once more. "How do you know you'll even want one when you're older?" she asked, returning to removing the guards on her arms and setting them aside on the bed as well. She had no issue with David handling her gear, but she did not want him trying to put her helmet on and getting his sensitive ears or fragile downy hair caught in the tight crevices. "For all you know, you might want to be a scientist when you're older. Like Doctor T'Soni. Or maybe you'll want to be a doctor, like Doctor Chakwas."

"Why are they both called Doctor?" David asked, pulling himself strenuously up onto the mattress to sit on the edge of the bed, letting his legs dangle over the side as he watched his mother continue pulling off her mission gear. "Is there only so many names? Why not Scientist? Scientist T'Soni."

"Youuu are too smart for your own good, Mister," Shepard teased him, turning around to tickle her son under the arms. David shrieked with laughter, rolling onto his back to ward her off, flailing his chubby arms and legs in the air as she lifted his shirt to press a raspberry against his exposed stomach. Then, just as quickly as the fun had started, it ended, as David began to suddenly cough, his blue eyes growing wide as his hand reached to his chest, gripping his shirt, his mouth hanging open as he gasped for air. Thinking quickly, Shepard picked him up, turning him over onto his front and starting to rub soft, soothing circles into his back, waiting for him to slowly stop wheezing as he fought to catch his breath. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the heavy breathing began to desist, and Shepard let out a sigh of relief, tucking her frazzled bangs behind her ears as she sat down on the bed beside her son, letting her head drop tiredly into her free hand as her other continued to rub his back, reassuringly. David coughed, quietly, pushing himself up onto his hands and knees, before looking over towards his mother, guiltily, and starting to crawl the short distance across the bed until he sat beside her, lifting her arm to let him snuggle in underneath.

"I'm sorry, Mama," David pleaded, looking up at her, pulling her arm back in around his little form. "It was a accident. I won't do it again. I promise."

"David," Shepard frowned, looking down towards her boy. Pulling him up into her lap, she pressed a gentle kiss to the top of his head, wrapping her arms around his form as she rested her chin in his hair, letting out another soft, weary sigh as she stared at her open gear closet. "You know this isn't your fault," she told him, seriously. "It never has been. Please stop apologizing for it. You make me feel, it... it makes me feel like..." She paused again, closing her eyes, letting out another soft, weary huff of breath, trying to construct her sentence before letting it leave her lips. Chakwas had warned her that she had to learn how to form sentences that laid no blame for any actions done, or else David would find some way to make everything she said his fault. "You have nothing to be sorry for," she finally told him, quietly, pressing another gentle kiss to his head before letting her chin settle back down amid his dark, fluffy down once more. "Things like these... they happen. Without reason. There is no one to blame. It's just... life. Life happens. Nobody can control it. And that is nobody's fault. Least of all yours."

"But it's my body," David argued, making a face as he turned to look up towards his mother again, confused. "Isn't it my fault?"

Shepard sighed again, twisting her fingers around each other as she thought, before finally shaking
her head and sliding her hands under her son's arms, lifting him off her lap and onto the bed beside her again. "We'll talk about this some more later, okay?" she told him, standing up from the bed again. "In the meantime, aren't you hungry? Let's get this armour off and get you something to eat, how's that sound?"

David faltered at the suggestion, seeming for a moment torn between guilt and hunger, before finally allowing a warm, eager little smile to brighten his face and sliding himself to the edge of the bed again, letting his legs dangle over the side as he watched her finish removing her armour. With her armour off and safely stored in its appropriate drawers and displays, Shepard next made her way to the bathroom of her cabin to take off her undersuit, emerging a few minutes later dressed in her casual pants and white undershirt. Pulling her hair into a haphazard ponytail, she grabbed her hoodie off the back of her desk chair, pulling the jacket on over her shoulders and zipping it up half-attentively before moving to scoop up her son from where he stood staring in fascination up at her model ship display. David had always been captivated by her collection, from the time he could look up and see it, but had never been allowed to touch it for fear he might break something irreplaceable. With the War over and businesses thrown into chaos, production of collector's items like model ships had been cut abruptly short, leaving Shepard with nothing but memories and an assortment of mint-condition ships, some still in their boxes, that she had been told was now worth a small fortune. She figured if it really came down to it, she could sell the ships to keep afloat, but she did not want to think about that possibility, as the ships were all she had left to remind her of the good times she had had serving with the Alliance.

Chakwas was already in the mess hall by the time Shepard arrived, and she looked up in interest as the Commander entered, crossing to the cabinets and pulling out a sealed glass vial of what looked to be watery, greyish milk. Setting the formula down on the preparation counter, she set David down on the counter beside it, turning back to the steam-washer and pulling out a silver, cylindrical thermos. Then, prying open the lid of the vial, she poured the liquid inside the thermos, screwing the rubber-ringed lid on as tightly as she could before giving it a good, evening shake. David watched in anticipation as his formula was being made, before holding his hands out eagerly for the thermos as Shepard picked him up from the counter again. Making her way to the mess hall table, Shepard sat down across from Chakwas, stretching her legs out in front of her as she let out a long, tired sigh, before looking over towards the doctor and offering her a thin, wan smile. "I think I'm gonna need a hot pad," she told her. "Bruised my ribcage something fierce tackling this batarian trader today. Not that he wasn't asking for it, but… banged my side up pretty good."

"Are you certain you didn't break anything?" Chakwas asked, warily, looking up from her plate again.

Shepard shrugged, reaching across the table to pick a piece of fruit off of Chakwas' plate, before bringing it back to her own mouth, ignoring the playfully scolding look she was getting from the doctor at the motion. "Only a few of their noses," she answered, cheekily, talking around her bite of fruit. "Nothing a police physician can't fix."

"You're being awfully flippant about this," Chakwas told her, distractedly pushing a few pieces of fruit around on her plate with her fork. Then, looking up at Shepard again, she set her fork down, frowning a bit. "You really should be more careful, Shepard," she scolded, gently, giving a soft sigh. "You could seriously hurt yourself on one of those missions. You don't always have to be so rough, you know."

Shepard frowned at this, taken aback, finishing her bite and swallowing. "I'm only as rough as I have to be," she answered, frankly, shaking her head. "It's no different than when we were in the Alliance. I just do what I need to do to get the job done."
"The only difference being that you've got a bit more to think about now than you had then," Chakwas reminded her, nodding her head indicatively towards David, causing Shepard to look down at her boy in turn. "Other than that, I agree completely. You've done nothing but good work, Shepard, but I only wish you would be more careful. You're all he's got in this world, after all. Where would he be without you?" Shepard faltered, realizing she was right, before reaching down to shift her son more comfortably in her lap, giving him a light, reassuring bounce of her knee as he continued to drink from his bottle, listening intently to the conversation. His bright blue eyes moved between each woman as he drank, waiting for one of them to speak up next, and Chakwas sighed again as she observed him, leaning an elbow on the table and resting her chin on top of her hand as she watched him suckle down on his formula. "You know… he can't grow and develop in a healthy manner without some sort of solid food," she suddenly told Shepard, letting out a soft, worried exhale. "He's three years old, you know. It's about time you started training him to eat something other than quarian formula."

Shepard sighed at this suggestion, petting back David's shaggy bangs, before shaking her head and looking up again, allowing him to continue drinking his formula. "You know I can't do that," she said, frowning. "David… he's not like other children. He's got that cyclic… vomiting… thing, he does, that's brought on by stress, and an anxiety disorder that causes him to stress about everything. All I'm concerned about right now is getting him something that goes down easy and isn't unpleasant coming back up." Turning her attention back to David, she watched as he sucked down on his bottle, his blue eyes watching her, observant, seeming to be taking in more than she thought he could understand. "When he's a little bit older, maybe we can see about medication," she added, tilting the bottle upward a little, causing him to give a short snuffle through his nose, trying to catch up with the stream. "But I just… I can't take that risk right now. He has a hard enough time processing the weekly vitamins you give him, and those are as basic as you can get."

Chakwas frowned at this argument, her thin brow furrowing into a hard, worried line, before folding her hands anxiously in her lap, watching the toddler suckle down on his bottle of formula. "I know your intentions are good, Shepard," she finally said, causing Shepard to look up at her again, a faint frown creasing her brow at the tentative lead-in. "But if he keeps eating nothing but that… he's never going to be able to stomach other foods when he gets older. His body and digestive system are going to get accustomed to a standard of gentle filtration that nothing else can compete with, and he won't be able to process anything else later on in life." Looking up at Shepard then, Chakwas took in a deep, thoughtful breath, twisting her hands subconsciously together in front of her as she prepared to go on. "How would it be to be twenty years old and still drinking nothing but quarian-filtrated nutrient formula?" she asked, knowingly, causing Shepard's frown to deepen at the thought. "At this rate, he'll never grow up healthy and strong, no matter how much formula you feed him. There simply aren't enough calories in formula to keep up with a growing boy. He'll be emaciated all throughout childhood, and likely on a nutrient drip before the age of twenty."

"And what am I supposed to do, Karin?" Shepard asked, frustrated, though she could not help a bit of concern from showing through at the bleak prognosis. "Shovel solid food down his throat and wait until something sticks? The last time I tried to give him something solid, he threw it up and then cried for an hour because it hurt so badly. I don't know how to help him keep it down, and I don't want to subject him to that again."

"He'll be fine for now," she said, shaking her head, before petting his downy bangs back from his face. "We'll figure something out a little later on, but… not now. There's too many things changing right now as it is. I don't want to overwhelm him."

"I'm not sure he's the one worried about being overwhelmed," Chakwas answered, knowingly,
causing Shepard to look up again in surprise. Shrugging her shoulders, Chakwas pushed herself up from her seat, letting out a soft grunt of effort as she straightened to her full, slender posture, before turning to look back at Shepard again, folding her hands thoughtfully in front of her as she did so. "I'm only saying what I can observe," she told her, frankly, her tone medical and impassive, though Shepard could not help but note a faint hint of acuity. "So I may be incorrect… but is he really the one worried about him growing up and things changing, or are you?" Pausing another moment, she let the telling question sink in, before turning her attention down from Shepard, taking in another thin, thoughtful breath as she began to distractedly fix the cuff of her medbay uniform. "Think about it, Shepard," she told her, intentionally not looking up at her as she spoke. "Don't let your distaste for change blind you to what you need to do. Things change. Children grow up. It's all a part of life. Sometimes it can be harder than other times, but…"

Finished fiddling with her cuff, Chakwas looked up towards Shepard again, her kindly blue eyes notably knowing as she let her hands fold pensively in front of her again, raising her thin, pencilled brows. "Don't pretend you don't need help when you do," she told her, candidly. "Your child's well-being is more important than your pride." Having said this, she glanced towards David, who stared back at her, silently curious, continuing to suckle on his bottle as he watched her, waiting for her to say something he could understand. She paused, considering him, before offering him a fond smile and turning her attention back to Shepard with a soft, tired hum of an exhale. "Well, I should be returning to my duties," she told her, starting to turn in the direction of her office again. "I'll be in the medbay if you need me for anything. You're welcome to finish that fruit if you want it. Oh, and Shepard—" Turning around again, she raised a hand, causing Shepard to look up at her, attentive, pausing in pulling the plate of sliced fruit across the table towards her. "Don't mistake my advice for criticism," Chakwas told her, honestly. "I think you're a wonderful mother, for what it's worth."

Shepard faltered, surprised by her words, before a small, crooked, appreciative half-smile began to creep across her face in response. "Thanks, Karin," she told her, quietly. "That… means a lot, coming from you."

"It's what I'm here for," Chakwas assured her, offering a motherly smile in return. "And don't forget to put that dish in the sink when you're done. I don't want Gardner coming after me again like last time."

"Yes, ma'am," Shepard chuckled, still smiling, before turning her attention to her food once more. Taking a bite of strawberry, she looked down towards David, who was watching her with interest as she chewed, his sucking slowing as he reached the end of his formula. "Everybody's always bossing me around," Shepard teased, finishing her bite and swallowing, before setting down her fork again to pet back his downy hair from his face. "Thank goodness I've got you to listen to me. Otherwise I don't know what I'd do." Leaning down to him then, she pressed a soft kiss against his forehead, causing him to huff with warm laughter, the edges of his eyes pinching in a fond, appreciative smile. "Don't grow up too fast, okay?" she told him, quietly, bouncing him gently against her knee. "And don't get too much taller. The last thing I need is one more person telling me what to do."

The vidcomm display flashed yellow as it waited for the signal to Palaven to connect, the three white dots in the middle of the screen repeating their pattern over and over as Shepard waited for Garrus to pick up. Leaning back in her comfortable desk chair, she drummed her fingers impatiently against the armrest, her gaze straying ever so often to the arrangement of ships above her desk, lingering on the turian frigate, before returning to rest on the vidcomm display. Finally, the signal gave a hiccupping beep, and a moment later the screen flickered to a well-lit room, with Garrus sitting expectantly in front of his desk, his elbows rigid with excitement against the arms of his chair as he smiled warmly out at her from the other end of the connection. "Glad I caught the call in time," he told her, giving a soft, relieved little huff of a laugh. "Almost missed it. Had an incident at work today that caused me
to run a little late." Raising his hands then, he shook his head, stopping her before she could worry about him. "Nothing to fret over," he assured her, quickly. "Just a small electricity issue in the mine. The main lighting generator blew a fuse or something. The miners got to go home early, but we stayed behind until the place was safe to work in again."

"Since when does a Reaper advisor work anywhere near a mine?" Shepard asked, raising a brow, inquisitive.

Garrus shrugged, shaking his head again, before dropping his hands back to his chair and letting out his breath in a soft, sharp exhale. "It seems my job as 'Reaper Advisor' has grown to include everything connected to the rebuild after the War," he explained, seeming less than certain of the details, himself. "Victus has been slowly putting together an entire economic council, so I'm not alone, thankfully, but… since I'm the highest ranking of them, they always expect me to be the one to actually go out and ensure the problems are fixed. Authority gets results, I guess. It's not a bad job, just… intense." Pausing then, he leaned back in his chair, offering her a faint, apologetic smirk. "That's why they pay me the big bucks, I guess," he joked, weakly. "But – I haven't even asked you how you're doing. How have you been getting along since the last time we spoke, Shepard? Okay, I hope?"

Shepard exhaled at the question, crossing her arms thoughtfully over her chest, before giving a short, dismissive shrug of one shoulder. "Tired," she answered, honestly. "Which is pretty much to be expected, I guess."

"Tired?" Garrus repeated, leaning forward a bit in his chair towards her. "Hm. Why don't you take some time off, if you're tired? Come swing by Palaven. See how things are doing around here."

At this, Shepard snorted, softly, shaking her head as she slid a bit lower in her chair, letting her legs stretch out comfortably in front of her. "I don't have the time or resources to take time off," she told him, frankly. "I'm stretched thin enough as it is with my schedule. I can barely find time to sleep around here, let alone… leisure time."

Garrus grunted at this bleak dismissal, his plated brow furrowing into a worried frown. "Aren't you still a Spectre?" he asked, curiously. "Last I checked, Spectres could do whatever they wanted. Make their own schedules. Pretty sure they even got paid by the Council for doing it."

"The Council doesn't pay me anymore," Shepard answered, truthfully, shaking her head. "I'm just your average mercenary these days. I try to do good work when I can, but… mostly it's just somebody giving me a job to do and me doing it." Pausing then, she considered a moment, chewing on the inside of her lip as she thought. "I mean – I'm still technically on the Council's payroll," she amended, looking up again before Garrus could question her. "But the Spectre program has been basically inactive for a while. Every so often they'll throw a bone my way, but it's usually something small, just to make sure I'm still around."

"Well, I could always tell the Council there's been trouble on Palaven," Garrus offered, a small, telling, puckish smile starting to creep across his eager face. "Maybe you could come investigate. Figure out who's… been being bad around here."

"Crime is no joke, citizen," Shepard returned, smirking, barely able to keep from laughing at the blatancy of his invitation. "The Council isn't likely to fall for something so obvious anyway. Maybe if you told them you found leftover Reapertech they'd be more likely to send someone to investigate."

"Ah, yes," Garrus agreed, his playful smile widening, before holding up both hands to make sarcastic, one-fingered air quotes. "Reapertech." Then, letting his hands fall back to his desk, he let
out a soft, warm chuckle, turning his gaze downward for a moment before looking back up at her again, affectionately. "I really do miss you a lot, you know," he told her, letting out a soft, honest sigh. "It's been too long since I've gotten to see you. Or talk to you, or… touch you. Anywhere."

"We'll get to see each other again soon enough," Shepard assured him, leaning forward towards him across the desk. "And… maybe we can even do some touching while we're at it. If you play your cards right, that is."

"Mm, well," Garrus answered, his smile widening again, giving another deep, shameless chuckle. "You just tell me what cards to play and I'll see what I can do. Maybe we can start with… a bit of strip poker, then move on to a… two card split… play a bit on the rail, and then… maybe, if you're up for it, I'll beat your pair with my straight. All culminating in an… utterly satisfying royal flush. If we're lucky."

Shepard faltered, unsure how to respond, her incredulous smile twisting into a look of amused disbelief as she let the string of innuendos sink in for a moment longer. "Wow," she finally said. "That was… really bad. Amazingly, though, you actually had me going right up until the royal flush."

"Ah," Garrus answered, leaning back in his seat again with a long, entertained exhale. "Damn. Have to work on my human gambling expressions. Unfortunately, I don't think turian card terms would have quite the same effect."

"You never know," Shepard returned, honestly, giving another short, fond chuckle as she stared at him. "Anything has to be better than a royal flush."

"That one was pretty bad, wasn't it?" Garrus asked, smirking again, turning his blue gaze downward, sheepishly. "Would have been better if I'd used that term for your parts. There just wasn't any other term coming to mind that seemed really fitting for an orgas—" Just then, he stopped short, looking up at something over her shoulder, and Shepard turned, glancing back as well, trying to see what he was looking at. The door of her cabin had slid open while they had been talking, seemingly of its own accord, but as Shepard looked down, she noticed that David had already crossed the room to her from the door, his socked feet silent against the floor, making his presence nearly imperceptible. He now stood beside her chair at her desk, smiling up at her expectantly as he pressed both hands against her thigh, before pulling eagerly on her pants leg, lifting his arms up to signify for her to lift him up into her lap.

"Talk to Daddy," David insisted, breathlessly, shifting anxiously from one foot to the other, staring imploringly up at her with eager, bright blue eyes. "Done with my lesson – want to see Daddy! Let me talk to Daddy, please!"

"Okay, okay," Shepard laughed, leaning down to pick him up under the arms and heaving him easily up into her lap. Letting him get settled with his stubby legs sprawled open across her thighs, she reached across her desk to pick up a coiled clip and wire from within a sterile glass container, turning the little microphone attached to the clip and wire on and waiting for the activation light to appear before gingerly starting to hook the device into David's ear. Making sure the translator was attached properly and not too tight against edge of his ear-spine, Shepard turned her attention back to Garrus again, distractedly petting David's dark flyaway hair down and grooming him a bit as Garrus smiled out at his little boy from the holoscreen. In return, David gave a gleeful laugh, pressing his hands on either side of the holo-keypad as he leaned in eagerly forward towards the vidscreen, beaming.

"Daddy!" David smiled, starting to pant excitedly as he watched Garrus waving back at him from the other side of the vidscreen.
"Hey, little man," Garrus returned, giving a soft, adoring chuckle at his son's enthusiasm. "Long time no see. How have you been holding up?"

"Why don't you tell Daddy what you've been learning?" Shepard suggested, quickly turning the subject away from David's health. She did not want to lie to Garrus, but she also did not want to upset David unreasonably by bringing up his medical issues when he was trying to have a pleasant conversation. Pressing a soft, quick kiss to the top of David's head, she smiled down at him before pointing towards the picture of Garrus on the screen once more. "Tell him what Miss Traynor has been teaching you," she told him. "Tell him what you've been learning about in your lessons these past few weeks."

David paused at this, thinking a moment, his gleeful expression fading faintly in concentration as he tried hard to remember his lessons through his exhilaration. Then, turning his blue gaze back to Garrus again, the bright smile returned to his face as he took another few sharp, excited breaths in. "Daddy, I'm learning the Sol planets," he informed his father, proudly, puffing up his small chest as he beamed through the vid receiver. "Miss Traynor is teaching me. Want to hear some planets?"

"He can only name a couple," Shepard added, explaining quietly over David's head. "He has a hard time memorizing things, but... he's working on it. He's getting better. If he keeps this up, soon he might even be able to name them all."

"That's great, David," Garrus returned, addressing his son, his upbeat tone sounding suddenly somewhat forced, and Shepard could not help but frown a bit at the faintly icy edge his voice had taken on, despite his attempt to sound genial and supportive. "And what have you learned about the Trebia System? Can you name any of the planets from the Apien Crest?"

"That was going to be next week's lesson," Shepard cut in, quickly, causing David to look up at her, his brow furrowed in innocent confusion. "This week he was learning about the Sol System. We figured it was probably the easiest one to learn about. One sun, one planet supporting life."

Garrus looked up at her at this, unable to keep a sharp look of scepticism from fleeting across his face before he quickly cleared it again, trying to stay congenial. "Only one planet capable of supporting life?" he asked, his interest clearly forced. "So you weren't going to teach him about Lunar Base or the Mars Archives? Or was that next week's lesson, too?"

"Okay, David," Shepard sighed, sliding her hands under her son's arms again. "I think you've talked to Daddy long enough for today. Time for you to go." Picking David up off her lap, she settled him back on his feet on the floor, gently detaching the translator from his ear before turning him towards the door of the cabin and giving him a light pat on the back, indicating for him to run along. David frowned at the sudden dismissal, looking confused as he glanced back towards her and the vidscreen, lingering in place, as if unsure if she were being serious.

"But I didn't get to tell him the planets," David contended, barely above a hoarse whisper.

Letting out a short, soft sigh at the sadness in his voice, Shepard leaned down to her son, putting a reassuring hand on his shoulder and pointing towards the door of the cabin again. "Why don't you head down to Mister Gardner and see if he'll make you a snack?" she suggested, trying hard to sound as patient as possible, knowing full well that Garrus was still watching them. "I'm sure he's got something yummy for you. Why don't you go down and ask him?" David hesitated again, fidgeting uncertainly with his hands, his blue gaze flicking back to the vidscreen, where Garrus waited impatiently, staring out at the two of them with a fixed, stern expression, nonplussed with the display. Then, turning his attention to Shepard again, David nodded, understanding, before starting to head slowly for the door of the cabin, shuffling his little feet as he went. As soon as the cabin door closed behind him, Shepard let out another sigh, louder this time, before turning back around to face Garrus.
again, no longer hiding her aggravation. Garrus met her stare with an equally irritated look, his arms crossed firmly across his broad chest as he let out a soft, unimpressed huff of contempt.

"The Sol System?" Garrus asked, sharply. "Really?"

"It was an easy system, Garrus," Shepard argued, letting out another sharp huff of breath, running a hand back through her bangs as she leaned on her elbows on the desk towards the vidscreen. "Don't start a fight over this. You know he has learning problems, we just wanted to make it as easy as possible for him."

Garrus shook his head at this argument, leaning back in his chair as he did so, letting out another soft scoff of disapproval. "I don't think that's really the case," he told her, frankly. "He's already speaking Sol-English, and now you're teaching him about your planetary system. You're trying to turn him into a human. He's not. He's more turian than human. You know that, Shepard."

Shepard frowned at the accusation, her hands clenching subconsciously into fists as she stared at him through the vidscreen monitor. "By whose arbitrary standards?" she insisted, vexed. "Last time I checked he was half and half, and inherently mammalian by scientific criterions." Leaning back in her chair as well, she bit her lip, drumming her fingers against the stiff material of the armrest as she took a few deep breaths, calming herself. These arguments always seemed to start so easily, over even the smallest of things, but she was determined not to let this one become something disproportionate to the issue at hand. "Besides, teaching him Sol-English doesn't mean anything," she added, quickly, matter-of-factly. "It's just more convenient. Admit that's true."

"Says who?" Garrus insisted, uncrossing his arms, letting them return to the armrests at his sides.

Shepard shrugged, rocking back in the chair a bit as she crossed her legs at the ankles in front of her. "Everyone on my ship speaks Sol-languages," she explained, reasonably, tapping her thumb absentmindedly against the line of her armrest. "His teacher speaks Sol-English. He actually talks like her, to be honest. He doesn't even sound like me at all. But you don't see me having an issue with the fact that our son has a British accent."

Garrus frowned, his plated brow furrowing at the mention of a dialect accent. "I have no idea what that means," he admitted, frankly. "It all translates the same way to me. But the fact that he doesn't even sound like his mother doesn't make me any happier about the situation."

"It's just a different way of speaking," Shepard explained, holding up her hands, dismissively. "It doesn't make any difference. We know all the same words and things. He's just..." Pausing again, she let out another short, frustrated sigh, shifting in her chair to try to get more comfortable, to little avail. "He's too young to wear a translator most of the time, Garrus," she told him, candidly. "The clip hurts his ear. You know his ears are sensitive. He can barely stand to wear one when he's talking to you."

"That doesn't make any sense," Garrus argued, letting out a short, exasperated huff of breath. "Everyone else on your ship wears translators. It wouldn't make any difference if he spoke in a Palev dialect, they'd still be able to understand him."

"But he wouldn't be able to understand them," Shepard returned, leaning forward in her chair again, frustrated. "Anyway, you wear a translator, Garrus. Why does it matter to you what language he speaks?"

"That's not the point," Garrus argued back, his voice a bit sharper now, clearly annoyed. "It's the principle of the thing, Shepard. He's my son, too. I just wish you would act like it sometimes." Letting out another sharp huff, he raised a hand, pointing in the direction of the cabin door, where
their son had just disappeared from. "You won't let him dress in traditional turian garb," he told her, frankly. "And, y'know, I haven't said anything about that. But this is something else, Shepard. Would it kill you to let him learn a bit of my language?"

"He can barely keep up with Sol-English as it is, Garrus," Shepard answered, letting out a frazzled sigh as she leaned back in her chair again, holding out a frustrated, indicative hand. "And – where am I supposed to get traditional turian garb? Everything David wears is donated. I'd love to give him some turian clothes to wear – as it is, I have to cut the little slits out of all his pants so his spurs can go through. But…" Trailing off again, she pressed her hands to her face, letting them rest there for a moment before pushing them back through her hair with another, deeper, sadder sigh. "I don't have any money for clothes," she told him, honestly, letting her hands drop back to her lap again. "I don't have any money for anything but the bare essentials. I'm doing the best I can for him, Garrus, but it's just… so…" She stopped, staring out at him, all the fight of before seeming to leave her all at once as she heaved a soft, heavy, defeated exhale. "It's hard," she told him, quietly. "All of this, it's just… so hard."

Garrus frowned, his plated brow furrowing softly as his mandibles gave a few faint, thoughtful tics against the sides of his chin. "If you brought him to Palaven like I keep asking you to, I could take care of him just fine," he finally told her, speaking quieter now, his tone more sympathetic. "I keep telling you that. My family is well-off thanks to the silver trade, we could provide for him just as well as you can."

At this offer, Shepard looked up again, running her hands back over her hair, pushing her shaggy bangs out of her eyes before letting them fall back down again, overwhelmed. Then, taking a deep breath in, she shook her head, leaning back in her chair again and folding her arms across her chest. "David wouldn't do well on Palaven," she told him, bluntly. "We've been over this before."

"You don't know that for certain," Garrus argued, holding out a challenging hand. "Did you even ask him what he wanted, or do you just think you know?"

Shepard scoffed, looking away from the screen, digging the heel of her boot into the floor of her cabin as her brow furrowed into a hard, trapped line. "Palaven wouldn't be good for him," she said, inflexibly, refusing to meet his gaze. "He's too sensitive. Your air is… it's not the same as the air he's used to breathing, and your culture is…” Shaking her head again, she looked back at him again, letting out a short, sharp huff of breath through her nose. "It's too rough," she told him. "He'd be miserable. He'd only get hurt on Palaven, or worse."

Garrus paused, lifting his head, his mandibles tapping knowingly against the sides of his chin as he leaned back in his chair again, staring down at her across the ridged slope of his nose. "You're doing that thing again," he finally told her, causing her to look up in surprise, unable to keep a frown from her face.

"What thing?" Shepard asked, defensively.

"That thing you do," Garrus answered, frankly. "That thing where you think you know what's best for other people without asking them about it first."

Shepard huffed at this accusation, looking away again, flustered, before turning her attention back to him, her brow furrowing in indignant frustration. "David is three, Garrus," she told him, candidly. "It's not the same thing. I do know what's best for him. And if you were actually here helping instead of there, telling me what I'm doing wrong, maybe you would, too." Pursing her lips, she paused a moment, letting her statement sink in, noting the way Garrus was trying hard not to visibly bristle on the other end of the vidcomm. Then, letting out a sigh, she leaned back in her chair again, sinking down into it as she stared across the connection at the father of her child. "It's not easy, Garrus," she
told him, honestly. "It's never been easy. But I'm doing the best I can for him."

"I never said you weren't," Garrus answered, truthfully, letting out another soft sigh of his own. "I'm just afraid you might be trying to take on more than you can handle, is all. I'm worried about you. Both of you."

Shepard frowned at the implication, taken aback, trying hard not to look as affronted as she felt. She was sure Garrus meant well by his statement, but she still could not help but feel that he was judging her on grounds he did not entirely understand. "Do you even know all the disorders your son has, Garrus?" she asked him, matter-of-factly, barely moving from her slouch as she spoke. "Because I don't, and I've been caring for him nonstop for three years. Some of his ailments aren't even human. I don't mind, I'd do anything to keep David healthy and safe, but his medical bills are at least three times what I make in retirement benefits." Pausing then, she considered a minute, her brow furrowing a bit in deliberation as her gaze trailed to one side of the vidscreen, thoughtfully. "Or, they were," she added, candidly. "Before Karin came back and started helping me out… but, even so, three years later, we still don't know everything that's wrong with him." Turning her attention back to Garrus again, she shifted a bit in her chair, chewing anxiously on her lower lip as she spoke. "I appreciate everything you've done for him, Shepard," she told him, truthfully. "But at least I'm trying, Garrus. Every credit I make goes towards his well-being. I wouldn't have it any other way."

Garrus paused, letting her words sink in for a moment, his mandibles giving soft, meditative dips and tics against his tapered chin as he thought. Then, letting out a soft, relenting grunt, he nodded, turning his gaze away from the vidscreen, before letting out a soft sigh, his broad shoulders falling a bit as the will to fight began to leave him. "I do miss you, Shepard," he told her, speaking quieter now, no longer in the mood to argue. "I just wish you would let me help."

"The Normandy is always open, Garrus," Shepard offered, opening her hands towards him, palms up, invitingly. "You're welcome to come back if you want."

Garrus frowned a bit at the invitation, his mandibles giving another few quick, wary twitches as he considered how to respond. "I'll keep that in mind," he finally said. "As soon as I'm no longer needed here, I'll do whatever I can to get back to the Normandy. And to you. Both of you." Taking another deep breath in, he paused, draping his elbow over the armrest of his chair as he watched Shepard intently through the vidscreen. "I do miss you, Shepard," he told her, truthfully. "I hate that we fight."

Shepard nodded in agreement, her lips drawing into a thin, conceding line. "Me too," she answered, solemnly. "But I guess it's a normal part of parenthood."

At this observation, Garrus snorted, half-amused, his mandibles giving another few quick, thoughtful flares as he looked down towards his hand on the desk. "Hm," he agreed, absentmindedly. "Yeah. Parenthood. I guess so. You never really do get over the revelation of it. Especially considering..." Pausing then, he looked up at her again, his avian eyes watchful as his mandibles gave another few, preoccupied tics against his chin. "Well," he said, cutting himself short. "Let's just say it was a wild ride. One I'm not sure I'd want to take again. At least, not the same way we did last time."

"Maybe with less Reapers next time," Shepard suggested, offering him a warm, facetious smirk in return. Then, tucking her arms absentmindedly over her ribcage, she took a deep breath, holding it, before letting it out in a soft, wistful hum of a sigh. "I remember the first time you saw him," she suddenly told him, causing him to look up in surprise. "David. You remember that? The first time you realized he really was your son. You cried like a baby."

"Hah," Garrus chuckled, shortly, his wry smile widening at the resilient memory, absentmindedly rocking his chair as he thought. "Yeah, well. I was only crying because I thought you were trying to
pass off somebody else's ugly kid on me. You would cry too if someone tried to do that to you."

At this remark, Shepard laughed out loud, leaning forward towards the vidscreen again before shaking her head at him, playfully scolding. "You're awful," she told him, amused.

"I know," Garrus answered, fairly, giving another laugh of his own and holding up his hands apologetically towards her. "I'm sorry. He's a beautiful boy. We did a good job." Then, letting his hands drop back to the desk again, he took a deep, proud breath in, smiling out at her from the vidscreen as he settled comfortably back in his chair once more.

Shepard considered his words, nodding her head in agreement, before letting out a soft sigh, the amusement of before starting to slowly leave her as the finality of their situation began to sink in once more. "We did, didn't we?" she returned, satisfied. Then, taking in another deep, thoughtful breath, she leaned back in her chair again, glancing over her shoulder towards the door of her cabin before returning her attention to him, a bit more solemn than before. "I should go," she told him, seeming reluctant to even say the words. "I need to check up on David, and... I've got a lot of other duties to attend to. But..." Trailing off, she hesitated, staring at him across the vidcomm connection, one hand curling into a subconscious fist at her side as she wet her lips, taking a deep breath in. "We should do this again sometime," she told him, letting out a soft breath of a laugh and forcing a pained, optimistic smile to her face.

Garrus paused, his own expression difficult to read, before finally offering her a smile in return, his gesture just as forced as hers, despite his best efforts to look sincere. "Definitely," he agreed, faking enthusiasm, just as reluctant to end the conversation as she was. "And... I'll try to work on my innuendos for next time."

"You better," Shepard teased, leaning in a bit towards the vidcomm again. "Though I have to warn you, I'm not so easily wooed anymore. You're gonna have to do better than a couple of card tricks. I've already got a full house."

Garrus faltered at this turn of phrase, seeming taken aback for a moment, before a wide, crooked smile began to creep across his features. "Ouch," he told her, letting out a breathy laugh. "Damn. That was good." Then, dropping his gaze again, he shook his head, still chuckling faintly, before looking up at her again and taking a deep breath in. "I'll... talk to you later, Shepard," he told her, quietly.

"Yeah," Shepard agreed, nodding. "You too, Garrus. Take care." Then, leaning forward, she pressed a soft kiss to the vidscreen, before leaning back again, smiling sadly, and pressing the button on the side of the monitor, severing the connection and sending the screen to black.
The docking queue at the Citadel was almost to the Normandy's number by the time Shepard made her way up to her cabin, leading David by the hand as she prepared to get ready to go ashore. Her efforts to spend more time with him had been going moderately well, though she knew an inevitable part of her downtime still had to be dedicated to ensuring the Normandy's operations ran as smoothly as possible. Perfect timing was of the essence, as every minute inadvertently wasted was another credit she was not earning towards the ship's financial survival, which meant a good deal of her time was spent waiting for e-mails to arrive, or for spots to open up on relay scheduling logs. Letting go of David's hand, Shepard sat down on the edge of her bed, pulling on her socks, and then her boots, one after the other, fitting her feet snugly into the bottoms before yanking the laces tightly upward and starting to tie them together. David watched in fascination as she tied the two strings into a bow, his head tilting faintly to one side, but he quickly frowned, frustrated, as the sequence became too difficult to follow. Then, standing instead from his spot on the floor, he padded over to the end of the bed, picking up his mother's hoodie from where it had been laid out and sliding it on over his head. Turning around to face her again, he held up his arms in proud satisfaction, showing her what he had done.

"I'm you!" he announced, beaming widely, causing Shepard to have to cover her mouth to stifle a fond laugh at the sight of him. Her hoodie was so large on him that it seemed to nearly swallow him, his chubby knees and socked feet the only thing easily visible beneath the billowing black material. The sleeves were so long that they flopped over his tiny hands, even after he tried to push them up, and the hood covered his face entirely, causing his mother to have to push it back so he could see where he was going. Now able to see in front of him, David next ran over to the cabin fish-tank, pressing his sweater-clad hands to the glass and peering in at the fish inside as he reached for the feeding button. Moving over to where he stood, Shepard picked him up under the arms, lifting him up until he could reach the button and allowing him to press it, watching in gleeful fascination as the food flakes drifted lazily down from the top of the tank. Then, turning to look at his mother again, his bright expression suddenly began to fade, and he paused, playing thoughtfully with the material of her hoodie, before taking a deep breath in, suddenly serious.

"Mama," he said, his hoarse voice solemn, speaking slowly as he considered what he wanted to ask. "Are the fish in the tank because they want to be? Or because someone is making them be there?"

Shepard faltered at the weighty question, frowning a bit in return as she thought, before looking back at the tank, herself, and considering the fish swimming around inside. "Well, baby, the fish are here on the ship because I wanted them here," she finally answered, giving a soft nod of frank confirmation. "Because they make me happy. But they're in the tank because they have to be. Fish can't live without the water, you see? If they get taken out of the water for too long, they die." Going quiet again, she watched as David reached forward with one hand, pressing his palm to the cool, sleek glass, seeming lost in thought as he stared at the fish, trying to process what she had told him. She was not entirely sure he was familiar with the concept of death just yet, but she figured he had to understand the idea of something that could not be lived without, or something that prevented people from hurting in ways they otherwise might.

"But are they happy in the water?" David finally asked, looking up towards his mother again, his blue eyes wide as he watched her closely, waiting for an answer to his telling question. "It seems so small in there. In the tank. They must want to get out and see more."

Shepard gave a soft sigh at the continued questions, cursing herself for her poor conversational skills, before offering David a small, understanding half-smile and shifting him more comfortably against
David frowned at this explanation, seeming disappointed and unsatisfied, before finally retrieving his hand from the glass and pulling it in towards his chest. "Not being able to breathe is bad," he told Shepard, matter-of-factly. "I'm glad I can breathe good most of the time. I would not like to be stuck in a tank." Then, turning away from the tank, he nestled his head into her shoulder, wrapping his arms around her neck and his legs around her waist. Shepard gave another soft sigh as she turned away from the fish tank again, moving back over towards the bed and setting him gently down on the bedspread. No sooner had she set him down on the bed when he instantly buried under the covers, poking his head up above the sheets to pull her jacket hood up over his head, giggling as it covered his entire face, hiding everything but his chin from view. Shepard gave a soft, fond laugh at the sight before turning away towards the cabinet again, pulling the bottom drawer open and fishing out his exo-suit from inside.

The suit had been custom-made for David, the design close enough to that of quarian attire that he could easily pass for a child of their species when out in public, but comfortable and roomy enough that it could double for pyjamas, if ever the need arose. The hood of the suit had been designed much like a female quarian's hood, billowy and patterned, meant to cover his ears and spines and keep him comfortable when going incognito. Most people in places like the Citadel were not particularly well-informed about the customs of quarians, and many that were simply did not care enough to point out the discrepancy, and so Shepard had thus far run into blessedly little trouble regarding her son wearing what would generally be a cultural coming-of-age suit. Those who had tried to come close enough to inspect the unusual quarian child had been turned away quickly by his mother, telling them that he was shy and did not like to be crowded, and so David had been able to keep his cover for quite some time without anyone being the wiser or making a fuss about it.

Giving the tiny suit a shake, Shepard bunched it up, holding it down at foot level so David could easily step into the foot holes. "Get in, big guy," she told him, faking brightness. "Time to take off the hoodie and suit up. We're going to the Citadel for an off-ship adventure."

"No," David answered, firmly, before sliding down further into the bed, pulling the covers up over his face and hiding himself from view. A moment later, he peeked out from under the sheet again, his eyes barely visible over the top of the covers, seeing if she had given up with the suit, but, realizing she was still there waiting for him, he huffed, frustrated, before pulling the covers back up again, hiding under the sheet for good. "No," he repeated, indignantly. "Not going. No suit." Letting out a soft, accustomed sigh, Shepard set the suit down at the end of the bed, sitting down on the bed, herself and reaching up to pull the covers back down again. David lay on his back under the covers, his expression twisted in a stubborn scowl, his feet tucked in pigeon-toed to each other as he stared at Shepard, frustrated. "Don't like the suit," he told her, frankly, lifting his arms to cover his head, only seeming to be half paying attention to what he was doing. "Everybody looks at me."

Shepard frowned, concerned for a moment, before forcing a small, reassuring smile to her face instead, reaching forward to pet back his downy hair from his eyes. "They all think you're a little quarian, that's all," she explained, gently, causing him to give another soft huff of disapproval, not believing her. "Like Miss Tali. They just don't see a lot of little quarians, so they think your suit is interesting."

"They all stare at me," David repeated, seeming more distressed than frustrated this time. "Don't like the suit. Don't want to wear it."

"Well, you can't go out without it, baby," Shepard told him, apologetically. "You'll get sick, and then..."
you'll be *really* miserable. You don't want to get sick, do you?"

David paused, considering this alternative, before slowly starting to lower his hands away from his head again, letting them come to rest on his stomach as he stared up at the plexiglass ceiling panel above the bed. "No," he finally answered, quietly. "Sick is bad. Don't like being sick."

"Can you put on the suit, then?" Shepard asked, reaching over to pick up the suit again and holding it out for him to slip into. David looked up at the suit again, frowning, before letting out a short, soft, relinquishing sigh and pushing himself up from the mattress, pulling the hoodie up over his head and making his way over to where his mother sat. Using her shoulder for support, he stepped into the suit she held, then, with both legs securely in the foot-holes of the suit, Shepard quickly pulled it up his little body, giving it a quick tug for good, snug measure, before turning him around to zip the suit up the back, locking the buckles for extra security. Pulling his little backpack up from under the bed, she unzipped the main compartment, pulling out his hood, before attaching it to the back of the suit with two buttons. Then, turning him around again, she checked his suit, making sure his spines had gotten through the backs of the legs and that his fingers were in the right glove-holes, before reaching down to pull his boots out from under the bed as well. David's toes wriggled in his Alliance insignia-pattern socks as he waited for her to pull on his boots, watching with fascination as she tied the laces into bows, not quite sure how she was doing it. Then, finished with his boots, she slid off the bed again, grabbing his elcor toy off her nightstand, before scampering over to the far end of the room and pointing to the cabin door, ready to go.

"Time to go," David announced. "Adventure!"

"No, no," Shepard laughed, pushing herself up from the bed, picking up his little backpack and carrying it with her over to her desk. "Not just yet, little man. You know we're forgetting something. Something important."

David frowned at this frank reminder, clearly hoping he would get away with not doing whatever it was, before pouting and tucking his arms across his chest, his elcor propped awkwardly under his armpit as he pursed his lips in indignation. "No," he insisted, matter-of-factly. "Nothing left. Time to go. Let's go."

Letting out another soft, tired laugh, Shepard crossed over to where he stood, bending down and picking him up under the arms before setting him down instead on her desk. Sitting down in her chair, she reached over, picking up the mask sitting at the end of the desk, before turning her attention back to David, who watched her warily as she began to ready the exo-mask for wear. Shepard frowned as she gave the mask a shake, attempting to coax the head-strap out, before giving another light, frustrated sigh and looking up at her son again. David watched her with apprehension, his face twisted in an easily readable expression of dread, and Shepard could not help but feel a pang of guilt at the sight of it. "I'm sorry, David," she apologized, gently, giving the mask another light shake. "I know you hate this, but you have to wear it, baby. You can't go out without your mask. You'll get sick." Then, reaching inside the cup of the helmet, she picked out the strap with her fingernail, letting out a short huff of relief when it finally dropped, before unbuckling the strap and holding it out towards David, preparing to fix the breathing-mask onto his little face.

David instantly squirmed away from the approaching mask, letting out a short, sharp noise of protest and reaching up to shove it away from his face, but Shepard gently pushed his hands back down again before pressing the eviro-mask against his face, allowing the rubber suction edges to form an airtight seal on his skin. Feeding the straps around the back of his head, she secured the buckle into place, pulling the band snugly around his head and making sure not to snag any of his delicate downy hair or fragile spines in the process. Then, finished putting on the mask, she picked up the tiny breathing hoses, screwing them tightly into the ports at the base of the mask before turning
David around on the table and screwing the other ends of the hoses into his portable oxygen tank. Tucking the oxygen tank into his backpack, she slid the straps up onto his shoulders, zipping the little backpack up and raising his hood up over his head. Smoothing the hood with her hands to make sure it lay flat, she turned her son around on the desk again, finished, before picking him up under the arms and hoisting him onto her waiting hip.

"Ready to go, big man?" Shepard asked, picking up his waiting bottle of formula and stuffing it into a compartment of her utility belt. Then, reaching over again, she swatted gently at his wandering hands, stopping him from trying to remove his enviro-mask once more, before turning towards the door of her cabin and heading for the central elevator.

The Citadel had changed dramatically since the last time it had been an economic hub of any kind – the initial sanitation effort after the War had taken the designated cleanup crew months to finish, even with the help of the Keepers, with every inch of the Citadel having to be scrubbed and often replaced to remove the stains and stench of blood and death. Even now, three years after the War, the Citadel still retained a faint gruesome, mysterious lingering smell, which no one seemed to be able to get rid of, no matter how hard they tried. Some suspected this smell was psychosomatic, rather than an actual viable smell, but the Citadel overseers had taken several steps in an attempt to counter it, nonetheless. Synthetic floral and citrus scents had begun being pumped through the ventilation system, making every area smell like a freshly-cleaned hovercar, and strong-smelling flowers had been planted in every courtyard in an attempt to cover the lingering aroma. A memorial garden had been set up in the middle of the Presidium, with more strong-smelling flowers available for purchase in remembrance of fallen comrades and family members, and those who visited often left the names of loved ones lost in the War written along the perimeter of the garden. C-Sec had tried to control this vandalism at first, but they had eventually become overwhelmed by the sheer number of miscreants and amount of upkeep, and had gradually given up on trying to stop it from happening, simply allowing it to become one more attraction to draw business to the Citadel.

Business on the Citadel after the War was slow, at best, as many businesses had not survived the loss of income, and on the reopening of the Citadel it had taken barely months before most of the smaller companies and stores had been forced out of business. The holo-advertisement columns that had once promoted hovercars and productions of elcor Hamlet now advertised for much more basic requirements, such as food suppliers, security systems, and mercenary groups looking for low-cost recruits. Only the most essential businesses still retained any sort of functionality, while the spaces once occupied by the smaller businesses had been torn down to build makeshift housing instead for those left without homes after the end of the War. These houses, though relatively inexpensive in the way of rent, were barely fit to be called apartments, and the people who lived there were often forced to house with perfect strangers, sometimes triple- or quadruple-bunking to ensure everyone who needed housing was provided for.

All remaining stores in the Citadel Shopping Complex had been forced to relocate, consolidating onto one single floor of the Citadel, and were now pushed so closely together that it was often difficult to tell where one businessfront ended and another began. In order to differentiate their stores from one another, several business owners had taken to putting up large, gaudy signs in their shop windows, hoping to draw attention to themselves and their products, but the neon signs and brightly-coloured advertisements for slashed prices had only served to make the Complex more confusing. The trend had quickly spread between the shops, making it even more difficult to tell which stores were having what sales and for what products, with the only store easily distinguishable from the rest being the Sirta Foundation. Sirta had somehow managed to retain its soundbyte of Shepard’s endorsement through the chaos, and now played it on a continual loop to get customers to pay attention to their store – however, the havoc wreaked on the Citadel had caused the file to corrupt, making it now sound warped and eerie as Shepard made her way into the storefront, setting David
down on the counter and waiting for someone to attend to her.

It took a moment for the attendant to emerge from the back room, carrying a large box of medi-gel capsules, which she set down on the far end of the counter before coming over to see what she could do for her newest customer. She wore what looked to be a surgical mask over her nose and mouth, something Shepard had grown used to the sight of while visiting the Citadel over the past few years – the masks were simplistic, designed to fit the head of any species with a viable nose and mouth, and could be either used as-is or infused with scents bought separately from the manufacturer. The masks, she had come to learn, were just one more effort to help citizens of the Citadel to escape the smells, either those left behind by the War or those being forced through the ventilation. Citizens with sensitive allergies could use the generic unscented masks to avoid breathing in the scent of the flowers, while others could infuse their own masks with even stronger artificial scents, if they so chose. Along with the rise of mask usage on the Citadel, a recent trend had arisen as well, with inhalant drugs being infused into the material, allowing people to get their fix while going about their daily lives, with no one around them having to be the wiser.

Louros smoothed her hands absentmindedly down the front of her dress as she moved over to where Shepard and David waited, picking up a datapad from behind the counter and setting it down on the tabletop in front of her. "You're Commander Shepard, right?" she asked, looking up at Shepard for confirmation. As she asked, the warped advertisement played over the intercom again, causing her to glance up in faint interest before turning her attention to Shepard again. "You're here for the quarian formula?" she asked, a bit impatiently. Shepard nodded, reaching over to gently push David's hand away from his mask, before turning her attention back to Louros and watching as she double-tapped the corresponding order on her datapad, checking it off. "It's a pretty big shipment," Louros told her, turning her dark gaze up towards her again. "If you're heading out on the Homeworld Transport, it's gonna have to be stored in the undercarriage. You can't bring something that size aboard. No room for carry-on cargo."

"I came on my own ship," Shepard told her, pushing David's hand distractedly away from his face again.

Louros' mood seemed to instantly lighten at this, and she raised her tattooed brows, attentive, before stashing her datapad under the counter again. "Oh," she said, brightly. "Excellent. Well, in that case, my boys can go ahead and load it up for you. Only if you want, though. I know some people don't like strangers on their ships—"

"It's fine," Shepard told her, her brow furrowing a bit as the mangled advertisement played over the intercom again. She did not like to be curt with servicepeople, especially ones who were just trying to be helpful, but she still felt that the sooner she could get away from the sound of her own voice distorted beyond recognition, the better. She had no idea how Louros dealt with working there day after day, with that advertisement playing on a loop with every arrival – if she had to spend more than ten minutes listening to it at any time, she would have gone insane.

Louros nodded in agreement, understanding, seeming entirely unfazed by the short answer, before indicating towards the kiosk console, pressing a button to bring up the summary of Shepard's order. "I just need you to confirm your purchase here," she told her. "Just scan your omni-tool to transfer funds and you'll be good to go. We'll take your order to your ship while you shop, so it'll be there when you're ready to leave. And, Commander Shepard…" At this, Shepard faltered, halfway through confirming her purchase, looking up at the sound of her name only to see Louros smiling expectantly at her from behind the counter. "Big fan," Louros told her, amicably.

"…Thanks," Shepard answered, awkwardly, unsure what else there was to say.
With the quarian formula for David now safely loaded onto the Normandy, Shepard found herself with ample free time left to explore the Citadel, with several hours still to wait until their relay booking came up. While she had been truthfully looking forward to a bit of quiet downtime aboard the Normandy, David's comment about the fish being trapped in the tank still hung over her like a dark cloud, and she found herself unable to shake the feeling that she had somehow simply become complacent with the idea of sitting still. The Citadel air hung thick with artificial fragrances as she made her way down to the Presidium, taking her time to look around to see what else had changed since her last visit, if anything. One of the newest developments on the Citadel was an enormous electronic holo-board, set up in the large, open niche where the Financial District's information kiosk had once stood, and though Shepard had seen this board time and again, the noise coming from that direction today was enough to draw her interest. She figured if people were making that much of a fuss, there had to be at least one good listing today, and so, hoisting David more securely on her hip, she turned in the direction of the Financial District, making her way across the bridge towards the source of the commotion at the holo-board.

The board had been programmed to update automatically every time a new job from anywhere in the galaxy was cleared with the Citadel employment offices, but the best-paying jobs often went within seconds, making it difficult for those searching for work to keep track of every new update. The Avina VI hub had been judiciously moved to the back railing of the clearing, keeping it from being trampled by eager, crowding feet, as the work advertisement board operated around the clock, meaning that the clearing was never empty. Anyone actively in search of a job could request a program for their omni-tool that would automatically update them whenever a new job that matched their specifications appeared for claiming on the board, but due to mercenary groups having hacked and played the system when it had first been put into effect, physical identification was now required to be provided to the Citadel employment offices before the job could be afforded to anyone who put in a request. This usually meant that anyone not actually standing at the board would likely lose out on work to those who had no problem with fighting their way to the front to claim the jobs automatically.

Shepard stood back from the worst of the crowd, holding David protectively against her shoulder, hoping to keep him from getting bumped by the surging throng as she scanned the holo-board for any viable work. Most of the jobs that kept popping up were construction work with long, thankless hours, and she frowned, taking another step back, before letting out a hard, defeated huff of breath. It was never easy coming to the Citadel with David, as the crowd at the holo-board was often rough, far too rough for her to risk cutting in headfirst to try to reach the desk with her fragile son in tow. She had never managed to come on a slow day, and had to wonder if they even existed as she started to turn away from the holo-board, thwarted, realizing she would not be getting any work that day. Just then, a gentle hand came to rest on her shoulder, causing her to nearly jump in surprise at having been touched, before she spun around quickly, clutching David protectively to her chest. Her expression was clearly guarded as she faced the person who had been trying to get her attention, and in return, the asari took a step back, retrieving her hand warily, as if afraid it might get bitten off if she kept it there any longer.

"Hey," the asari addressed her, still a bit cautious. "Aren't you Commander Shepard?"

Shepard faltered at the recognition, considering for a moment telling the asari she had the wrong person, but then, realizing she would likely not get away with it, she frowned deeper, shifting her son against her hip as she waited for the onslaught of uncomfortable questions. The asari's expression cleared a bit at the tentative confirmation, a small, encouraged smile beginning to creep across her face as she took a step closer, causing Shepard to give her another quick, wary once-over, trying to determine if she were a threat or not. "Commander, it's me," the asari told her, her hopeful smile widening a bit more as she indicated towards herself, expectantly. "Ereba. From Memories of Illium? Nos Astra Sporting Goods? Don't you remember me, Commander?"
"Ereba?" Shepard repeated, surprised, shifting David more comfortably against her hip as she thought. The name was painfully familiar, but for some reason she could not quite place where she had heard it before. Frowning again, she shook her head, turning her attention back to the asari. "Sorry," she answered, honestly. "It's ringing a bell, but... I don't remember."

"You helped me get together with my husband, Charr," Ereba reminded her, helpfully. "The 'blue rose of Illium', remember? You brought his last message back to me from Utukku. I still can't thank you enough for that."

"Ereba!" Shepard exclaimed, her expression instantly clearing as the memory of the asari with the poet krogan husband hit her like a lead beam. "Of course, Ereba! How are you doing?"

Ereba shrugged, her gaze dropping to the floor as she crossed her arms thoughtfully over her chest. "As well as I can be, I guess," she answered, fairly. "Can't really complain. My daughter is well, and I've got sturdy work, which isn't always a given in these times. I do miss Charr, we both do, but... I know we're not the only ones who lost someone in the War."

"Doesn't make it any less of a loss," Shepard reminded her, causing Ereba to look up at her again, seeming a bit surprised at first, before her expression began to clear into a small, grateful smile. "Thank you, Commander," Ereba answered, quietly. "That means a lot. Especially from you."

Having said this, she paused, faltering a bit, her gaze moving to David, considering him, before she quickly returned her attention to Shepard, taking a sharp breath in and straightening her posture as she made to continue onward. "But... what are you doing on the Citadel, Commander?" she asked, seeming genuinely curious, causing Shepard to hesitate in surprise at not having been asked about the child in her arms. "Are you just here on a supply run? I imagine you have to be extremely busy, with so many planets still recovering from the aftermath of the War."

"I'm..." Shepard faltered, uncertain how best to explain her situation, shifting David more comfortably against her hip as she considered. It was never easy to explain to people who had known her during her glory days that she was now living hand to mouth like everyone else left struggling after the War. "I'm... here to pick up some supplies," she finally answered, truthfully. "Formula for David, and... hopefully to find a job. Though they seem to be going pretty fast today."

Having said this, she glanced up towards the holo-board again, watching as another list of jobs was wiped from the roster almost immediately after having been put up there. Frowning faintly, she gave a soft huff, turning her attention back towards Ereba again, who was looking up at the holo-board as well, seeming almost passively thoughtful as she watched the listings cycle through faster than most people could even read the job titles. "Times are hard," Shepard added, offhandedly, causing Ereba to look back at her again, raising her tattooed brows, attentive. "It's no surprise jobs are hard to come by, I guess. I'm not complaining, it's always like this, I just..."

Frowning again, she glanced up towards the holo-board once more, her gaze lingering momentarily on a rectangle in the top-right corner, the only one that had not changed since her arrival. The box read only one word, Khar'Shan, though no description of the job was provided – instead, across the bottom of the square was a number, and as she watched, the number began to increase, moving upward from 7.4 million to 7.6 million credits. "I'd like to know what I'm getting into," she admitted, letting out another soft, overwhelmed huff, before turning her attention back to Ereba again. "Picking blindly is so risky, with so many merc groups looking for work. If it weren't for David, I wouldn't care how dangerous the work was, but..." Shrugging, she tilted her head, indicating the toddler in her arms. "With him depending on me, I don't want to do anything that I don't know I can come back from," she explained. "Which kind of narrows my employment field to... crossing guard or debt collector."
Letting out a soft, cynical huff of breath, Shepard forced a small, crooked half-smile to her face, attempting to lighten the mood a bit as she took a breath in, preparing to change the subject. "So… where are you working now?" she asked, good-naturedly. "You seem to be doing okay for yourself. You must have gotten your foot in the employment door early after the end of the War."

Ereba seemed surprised at this observation, taking a moment to consider before answering. "Well, actually," she said, speaking slowly. "I work for Citadel employment services. I'm on break right now, but… generally all these jobs have to pass through me or one of my co-workers before they can be put up on the holo-board." Indicating towards the board, she watched as another line of career opportunities disappeared from its face, pausing a moment as she waited for the next list of approved job descriptions to appear. Then, turning her attention back to Shepard again, she considered her for a moment longer, twisting her hands contemplatively in front of her as she pondered the mother and child. "You know," she finally said, getting Shepard's attention again. "You did me such a kindness with Charr… I know it wouldn't even come close to paying you back, but… if you want, if you give me your e-mail address, I could forward you some of the listings as they're coming in. Before they even get put up on the board. That way you could have first choice of any jobs that get passed through our offices."

Shepard blinked at the generous offer, unsure what to say in response. She had not expected anything positive like this to come out of her visit to the Citadel – usually the best she got was an overzealous fan asking for an autograph while others stood around wondering what all the fuss was all about. "That… would be amazing," she finally answered, trying not to trip over her words as she pulled up her omni-tool, doing her best to navigate the program with one hand. "I… I can't thank you enough for this, Ereba. You're doing me an enormous favour." Passing her omni-tool sensor over Ereba's, she waited for the soft beep of confirmation before letting her hand fall back to her side, clenching and unclenching it in antsy exhilaration. Ereba smiled as she pulled up her e-mail program, making sure the information had transferred correctly, before letting her omni-tool flicker out as well and looking up at Shepard and David again.

Shepard shifted her son against her hip, trying to think of what else there was to say, before her attention was drawn back to the holo-board as a new cluster of job descriptions lit up the panel. "Can I ask you a question?" she asked then, turning her attention back to Ereba again. Ereba nodded, and Shepard turned, pointing to the top-right panel of the holo-board, frowning. "What is that?" she asked, warily. "The one that just says 'Khar'Shan'. I see it every time I come here. It's been there since this board went up. The payout amount keeps increasing, but… there's nothing that says what the job is for." Turning back towards Ereba again, she returned her hand to supporting David, bouncing him gently against her waist as she waited for some sort of explanation. "Do you have any idea what that job is?" she asked. "Because that seems… pretty suspicious."

Ereba hesitated, considering the listing for a moment, herself, before turning her attention back to Shepard again, shrugging and shaking her head. "I honestly have no idea," she answered, truthfully, sounding almost disappointed by this fact. "It's been up there since before I started working here. I tried to ask about it once, but everyone who was working here when it first went up is gone, so… nobody knows what it is now." Looking back up at the listing again, she faltered, her tattooed brow furrowing deeper in thought. "It keeps getting claimed, but it keeps coming back," she added, musingly, as if realizing this for the first time. "We've got it set to auto-accept by now. You'd think they would send someone to investigate what it is, but… nobody seems to think anything of it. Or, nobody's ever complained about it. At least, I've never heard anyone complain." Pausing then, she stared at the listing for another moment longer, seeming almost lost in thought, before she turned her gaze back to Shepard again, her blue lips pursed in a thin, pensive line.

"Come to think of it, I've never seen anyone who went to that job come back around to the employment station again," Ereba added, speaking slower now, interested. "I assumed those who
went got filthy rich – what with the big payout and all – and didn't have to come back around looking for low-paying jobs anymore, but… I don't know. It seems strange now. I guess it just never occurred to me to ask." A moment of awkward, telling silence fell over the conversation at this observation, but then, thinking quickly, Ereba raised her brows, taking a deep breath in, breaking the quiet and bringing the discussion back to lighter topics. "Well, it was good seeing you, Shepard," she said, brightly, reaching forward to tap Shepard encouragingly on the arm. "I'm still on my break, so I'm going to head home to see my daughter for a bit. Her nanny is sure to appreciate the short downtime. I should have more fresh listings in within an hour or so, though, so I'll be in contact. Don't forget to check your e-mail!"

Shepard faltered at the friendly reminder, a bit surprised at the short time frame, before a small, appreciative smile began to creep over her face. "Absolutely," she answered, gratefully, giving a nod of agreement. "I can't thank you enough for this, Ereba. You've really saved my life with this one."

"Oh, don't mention it," Ereba answered, giving a soft, warm chuckle. "It's the least I can do for the woman who saved the galaxy from the Reapers." Then, giving David's knee a fond, gentle tickle, she turned away from the two of them, pulling up her omni-tool and selecting a contact number before beginning to talk into her earpiece, her conversation muffled by the noise of the crowd as she began to walk away. Shepard beamed, unable to help herself, pulling David a bit more securely against her waist as she accessed her omni-tool, making sure her inbox was clear enough to accept new messages as she began to turn away from the boisterous crowd, herself. David slid his arms around her neck as she made her way across the walkway spanning the broad Presidium lake, his helmeted attention moving from one massive statue to the next as she checked over her list of old contract contacts, seeing which ones she could eliminate to make room for newer prospects.

A new giant statue had been erected where the old Relay Monument had been, an attempt to cover up for the dormant relay's destruction at the end of the Reaper War. The new statue was an enormous, marbled representation of a handful of known spaceflight races working together to defeat a small, battered-looking Reaper, nowhere near to scale. Several species who had participated in the War were missing from the statue, however, including the hanar and the rachni, a fact which had caused some fuss when the monument had first been erected, but conflict over the statue had long since passed as people realized there were much more pressing issues to worry about. Shepard had been told once that the human in the statue had been made to look a bit like her, but she had never seen a real resemblance, no matter how many times people pointed it out. Making her way to the Presidium elevator, she pushed the button going up, selecting the floor that had once been a refugee holding area, but now had been converted into something of a meetup station for families trying to reunite after the War. Despite the War ending more than three years prior, the area was almost always filled with sad-eyed people clutching photographs, waiting for loved ones to appear, and most of the time not a day went by without at least one tearful reunion occurring.

The memorial wall had grown since the last time Shepard had been to the reunion station, but she only offered it a passing glance as she headed out onto the main floor, taking a quick look around for any familiar faces. She had not asked any of her old crew to meet her there, but she figured that it never hurt to check to see if any of them might show up regardless – that was how she had found Kenneth and Gabby, and how she had found Kelly Chambers several years prior by simply combing the refugee floor. The light on David's breathing mask began to flicker as his breathing started to stagger a bit, and Shepard paused, opening his backpack with her free hand, before turning the oxygen up a bit and zipping up the little backpack up again, shifting him securely against her hip once more as she began to look around. Two batarians stood a few yards away, every so often glancing towards the two of them, but Shepard figured they were probably just looking for a crewmate and so paid them no mind as she pulled up her omni-tool again, checking her e-mail to see if Ereba had sent any promising leads yet.
"Hey, get a load of that miniature suit-rat."

Shepard froze at the telling description, her gaze fixed intently on her omni-tool, not wanting to make it too obvious that she had heard the conversation going on. She could hear the deep chuckles of the onlooking batarians, close enough that they should have known to keep their voices down to avoid being heard, but she figured they likely did not even care enough to think about bothering to do so. "Little freak," the second batarian grumbled in agreement to the first, causing Shepard’s hackles to rise even further as she looked up sharply from her omni-tool. "I thought they’d all screwed off back to their homeworld after the War. The last thing we need is normal people raising some of their kind to think they're equal to the rest of us."

The first batarian snorted in agreement to this statement, making a sour face as he continued to stare at Shepard and her suit-clad child. "Cross-species adoption is such a load of shit," he commented, darkly, looking down towards his datapad again. "You know the only people who do that are the ones who can’t get laid, or the freaks who only fuck other species. If you want a baby so bad, go fuck an asari."

"Nah," the second batarian chuckled, nastily, shaking his head in disagreement. "If I'm fucking an asari, it isn't so we can have a baby. It's just 'cause they're so damn easy." The second batarian laughed in approval to this, causing Shepard to feel the tips of her ears burning with indignation as she turned to face the two of them, shifting David more securely against her hip as she did so. Insulting her was one thing, something she had grown used to, but insulting her child and her quarian and asari friends was another thing entirely.

"Hey," Shepard insisted, loudly, causing both batarians to look her way, seeming less surprised at having been disturbed than annoyed at the interruption. Their mean, wry smiles stayed plastered on their faces as she approached them, holding David proudly against her hip, their black eyes every so often darting between the little alien and his mother, as if trying to figure out how much of their conversation she had heard. Coming up to stand in front of them, Shepard leaned in towards the two of them, pointing an accusatory finger into the face of the nearest batarian. "I don't give a damn what you say about me," she told him, her voice barely above a threatening hiss. "I've heard it all before, and worse. But what you say about my son is for damn sure my business. I don't care who you think you are – how dare you call a child cruel names. A child." Turning her attention to the other batarian then, she pointed in his direction, taking a step closer, getting up in his face, causing him to take a step back to avoid being jabbed. "My son is not a freak," she spat, hatefully. "And I will not allow you, or anyone else like you, to insult him like that. Under any circumstances. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

For a moment, the batarians were silent, frozen in surprise at having been scolded by a complete stranger. Then, suddenly, both of them burst out laughing, the first batarian reaching over to slap the arm of the other in wordless amusement at the indignant mother and child. "Look at this livid bitch," the first batarian laughed, indicating towards Shepard again, who bristled at the insult, holding David closer to her chest. "Who do you think you are, lady?" Then, turning away from Shepard and David, the batarians continued to laugh as they walked away, leaving Shepard feeling stiff and cold, trying her hardest not to feel her body trembling with useless anger under her. Barely three years ago she had been the most revered soldier in the galaxy, and a reprimand like that coming from her would have brought men to their knees, but now she was a has-been, a joke, a faceless anyman whose righteous anger was seen as pathetic, and whose words rang hollow with former glory. She had retained her will and rectitude – she knew she was the same person she had always been – but the world had moved on without her, no longer needing a Commander Shepard to save it.

The sound of David giving a soft huff through his breathing mask brought her suddenly back down
to earth, and she looked down towards him, concerned, watching as he turned his curious, attentive eyes up towards her. "Why are they laughing?" he asked, confused. "Did you make a joke?"

Pausing then, he faltered, thinking a moment, before his brow began to furrow into a faint frown behind the plexiglass of his mask. "Did I do something bad?" he asked, his voice quieter this time, as if afraid to even mention it. "Is it my fault?"

Shepard frowned, taken aback, unsure how to respond for a moment. Then, shaking her head, she adjusted him more comfortably against her hip, resting a reassuring hand on his back as he leaned in towards her, wrapping his arms securely around her neck and burying his head in her shoulder. "No, baby, no," she assured him, rubbing his back, before giving it a soft, encouraging pat. "They just… they're laughing because they don't understand. That's all."

"Why not?" David asked, curiously. "What did you say wrong?"

Letting out a heavy sigh, Shepard turned, pressing a supportive kiss to the shell of his mask, before pausing, realizing she had left a waxy kiss-mark on the plexiglass, obscuring part of his vision. She faltered, unsure how to react, before a faint, sad, almost guilty smile began to creep across her face at the sight of it. "It's nothing, baby," she assured him, warmly, balling up the edge of her hoodie sleeve to wipe the lip marks off his visor. "Nothing is wrong. Don't pay them any mind." Then, finished cleaning his helmet, she turned around again, taking a deep, settling, reassuring breath, before indicating towards the memorial wall niche, where an empty bench had opened up. "You hungry, baby?" she asked, leachingly, watching as he perked up at the mention of his formula. "Let's get some lunch, what do you say? It's been a long day for both of us. The least we can do is get you something to eat."

Pulling his bottle from the loop in her belt, Shepard gave it a good shake, making her way towards the memorial bench before sitting down and pulling a new cap from another pouch in her belt. The new cap was built with a thin metal straw, just small and sturdy enough to fit through the hole in his filtration mask, a trick Shepard had learned from Tali a few years back on the Normandy. Switching the new cap out for the thermos cap, she screwed it into place with one deft hand, watching as David bounced distractedly against her hip as she worked, seeming more interested in the people gathered at the wall in mourning than the idea of his upcoming formula. As soon as the bottle was fitted and ready, however, his attention was instantly drawn back again, and he reached out both hands for the metal bottle, pulling her hand along with it as he fitted the straw through the hole in his mask, leaning back into her warm, soft form as he suckled down on his watery lunch.

Shepard sighed, quietly, tired out, before looking up at the wall of letters and photographs, letting her gaze drift over them as she listened to the sound of David eating. Whenever she had come before, there were usually one or two memorials that would stand out from the rest of the display, but all the memories left at the wall today seemed to blend together somehow. She supposed it was possible that she was just tired, though she figured it was more likely a product of the War. Everyone's grief was hard, she knew, but everyone's life was hard as well, and with how difficult everything had become with the economic crash and the rebuild efforts, it was likely people simply did not have the time or energy to put together exceptional memorials, no matter how important their loved ones had been that they had lost in the War.

"Hey," a male voice suddenly spoke up behind her, causing Shepard to look up sharply, pulled suddenly from her train of thought at the sound of the familiar tone. She turned around quickly, taken aback, convinced for a moment that she was just hearing things, but was even more surprised when she realized that the voice belonged to exactly who she had thought it to be. Shepard faltered for a moment at the sight of Vega, blinking, owl-like, at his tall, imposing form, and Vega smiled back at her look of surprise, taking one hand from the pocket of his slacks to indicate towards the bench she was sitting on. "Is this seat taken?" he asked, good-naturedly, before sliding down on the bench
beside her, doing his best to take up as little room as possible as she moved over a bit to accommodate his broad form. "Sorry if I startled you," he told her, giving a soft, apologetic breath of a laugh. "I thought I saw you over at the board, but I wasn't sure. Didn't want to make an ass of myself in front of a total stranger. By the time I realized it was really you, you were already talking to somebody else. Then I lost you in the crowd." Shrugging, he tucked his hands between his knees, taking a deep breath as he stared up at the memorial board, his dark gaze moving thoughtfully over the layers of photographs, letters, and memorabilia plastered to the wall.

"Guess I should have recognized you by your hoodie," he added, musingly. "But it kind of became a trend after the War. There was a whole market for knockoff Commander Shepard-inspired stuff. I figure some of those hoodies are still floating around, so… you can never be sure."

"Sure," Shepard agreed, giving a soft, amicable chuckle in return, shifting David against her arm as she tilted the bottle further forward, making sure the formula was reaching him all right. Then, taking a deep, pensive breath in, she paused, her brow furrowing a bit in thought, before looking up at Vega again, her expression halfway between concern and amusement. "Wait a minute… people were selling Commander Shepard-themed stuff after the War?" she asked, more surprised by this news than she figured she should have been. People loved a hero, a symbol, anything they could latch onto to inspire hope, and people also loved an easy gimmick, anything to make a quick credit in hard times. Letting out another entertained scoff, she shook her head, turning her attention back down towards David again. "Figures," she said, faking bitterness. "Here I am, struggling to make ends meet, and people are making bank off my brand name. If I cared more I'd try to file for royalties."

"You should," Vega urged, giving her a light, encouraging tap on the arm with the back of his hand, causing her to look up at him again. "It's only right. If anyone should be making money off your accomplishments, it's you."

Shepard shook her head, shrugging her shoulders, passively, before looking back down towards David again, who was watching her with interest from behind his visor. "Nah," she answered, dismissively. "I'm okay. I don't want to draw attention to myself. It's kind of nice to not be stopped on the street by everybody with an opinion." Then, looking up at Vega again, she paused, before offering him a thin, crooked smile. "Better to bow out when you're big than burn out slowly in the public eye, right?" she asked, giving a soft, forced chuckle. "Gives me more time to focus on other priorities. Wouldn't be able to do that if I were a big celebrity still."

"I guess that's true," Vega agreed, running a thoughtful hand back through his hair. "Even if being a big celebrity does pay better." Then, seeming to realize something, he let his hand fall back to his lap, turning his attention to Shepard again as he raised his shaggy brows. "Hey," he told her, causing her to look up again, attentive. "So… why were you standing over at the job board, anyway? Somebody with your skills, you'd think people would be lining up to hire you. Didn't expect to see you slumming for work like the rest of us obreros."

"Slumming is what I do best," Shepard answered, jokingly, jostling David gently against her arm. "You should know that by now, Vega." Finishing feeding David, she capped the formula bottle again, tucking it back into the pouch at her belt as he reached up to wipe at his mouth with the back of his gloved hand, not seeming to remember that there was a barrier there. "Money's been pretty tight for us lately," she admitted, thoughtfully, not meeting Vega's gaze as she spoke. "I've still got the Normandy, though, so… that's something, at least. Not a lot of jobs available for Alliance vets. Or… headstrong mothers with guns." Faltering then, she paused, thoughtful, before letting out a soft, unsurprised huff of breath and raising her brows at the comment. "Not that that's any different from any other peacetime," she added, candidly. "Vets always get the short end of the stick when it comes to post-War accommodations. I wouldn't mind, usually, but… it's just especially hard now that I've got a child to take care of."
"Right," Vega answered, his brow furrowing a bit at the mention of David, trying hard to keep his curious gaze from lingering on the suit-clad toddler. "About that. When exactly did you adopt the little guy? Or… girl, I guess. I don't know. I can't really tell with that, with his little…" Faltering, he made an awkward, miming motion with his hands, indicating the hood pulled up over David's head and mask, before letting his hands drop back to his lap again, giving up the act. "I don't remember you ever mentioning adoption back when we were still working together," he added, thoughtfully. "But I guess…" He paused, considering it a moment, before shrugging again and letting out a soft, agreeable huff of a chuckle. "I guess there were a lot of kids needing adopting after the War," he admitted. "Makes sense you'd take one in. You always were a good person, Lola. That's one thing I always admired about you."

"Well, I appreciate the vote of confidence," Shepard answered, letting David settle comfortably back into her lap. Letting out a yawn beneath his mask, he curled up warmly into her side, pulling her arm around him as he snuggled in for a midday nap. "I'm not sure I entirely deserve it, though," she added, looking up towards Vega again. "There are lots of children who need adopting, but… I didn't adopt him. I had him myself. He's mine. He's my son."

Vega hesitated at this admittance, his dark gaze flicking between Shepard and David, before finally settling on Shepard again, his thick brow furrowing in a look of confusion. "He's yours like… you got pregnant and had him?" he asked, trying to be as delicate as possible, though somehow the words still sounded odd and stilted coming out of his mouth. Looking down at David again, he considered him for a moment longer, his expression frozen, fixed in turmoil, as if trying to figure out exactly how it could have happened. "So he's a… human, under there?" he finally asked, looking up at Shepard again.

Shepard shook her head, trying hard not to smile fondly at Vega's obvious confusion, realizing too late she had dug herself a hole. She had no real idea how to amend the awkward subject, now that she had opened the topic for discussion, but took a deep breath anyway, trying to think of an easy way out. "No, he's… a turian," she finally answered, unsure how else to explain her son's species. "Or, I guess, not really a turian, but… not really a human, either."

"But you had him," Vega pressed, still trying to understand. "You had him, like… from inside your body. You had him, like… a baby." Frowning again, he turned his attention towards the memorial board, staring at the photographs lining the wall as he turned the thought over and over in his head, trying to comprehend. Then, looking over at Shepard again, he raised his brows, taking a deep breath in, before indicating to David, offhandedly. "How old is he now?" he asked, conversationally, moving the subject forward. "It's three and a half years since the end of the War, give or take, so he's gotta be like… two, or…"


Vega nodded, seeming satisfied with this answer, before turning his attention back to David again, offering him a broad, friendly smile before reaching over to tap one of his booted feet, gently. "Happy belated birthday, chico," he told him, giving a soft chuckle.

David frowned a bit at the nickname, still half-asleep. "My name is David," he answered, bluntly.

"David, like, David and Goliath?" Vega asked, looking up at Shepard again. "That's a good, strong name for a little guy. Make sure he doesn't take it too literally though. Don't want him picking fights with Reapers like someone else we know, aye, Lola?"

Shepard gave a weak breath of a laugh, glad to be off the subject of David's birth but not quite ready to breach the subject of the war with the Reapers again. She had to admit she was a bit surprised Vega had not asked if she had been pregnant during the War, but she was not about to press the issue.
if the topic did not come around naturally. "So – what were you doing at the job board?" she asked, taking the opportunity to quickly change the subject. "A big strong guy like you, there's bound to be plenty of work available with planet rebuild efforts."

"Sure, sure," Vega answered, retrieving his hand, before folding both hands in front of him on his knees and letting out a soft, contemplative sigh. "Crazy limited employment, though. After the job is done, they cut you loose. No consideration for where your next paycheck comes from." Shrugging then, he leaned back on the bench, stretching out his long legs in front of him as he thought. "No such thing as reliable income," he added, truthfully. "It's a gambling game at best. But, I'm doing okay. Can't complain. Plenty of grunt work available for… y'know, moving things. Construction. That sort of work. Doesn't pay much, but still enough to afford a room at one of those communal housing units."

Shepard nodded in thoughtful agreement, her gaze trailing downward to rest on his boots, noting the worn leather and weathered heels as she considered his situation for a moment. Then, taking a sharp breath in, she looked up at him again, raising her brows, hopefully. "Well, hey," she told him, causing him to look up in interest at her abruptly bright tone. "If you ever get tired of construction work, there's always a spot open on the Normandy's roster for you. Just say the word and you're welcome aboard. Granted, it might not pay as much as your construction jobs…" Pausing then, she considered this for a moment, before amending herself, quickly, "…Actually, it probably won't pay anything at all. At least, until we can start getting some solid work. But you're still welcome to consider it, if you want. The offer is always open."

Vega faltered, seeming surprised, as if it had not occurred to him that she might extend the offer at all. Then, after a moment of silence, a wide, almost giddy grin began to creep across his face, and he gave a short laugh, holding up a hand to slap Shepard affably on the back, before pausing, stopping halfway as he realized she still held her toddler in her arms. Giving her a light pat on the back instead, he nodded enthusiastically, careful not to disturb the still half-asleep David as he shifted eagerly in his seat, trying his hardest to keep his excitement as low-key as possible, though Shepard could tell it was proving difficult, as he seemed as happy as a puppy who had just been given a new toy. "Hey, that works just great for me," Vega told her, enthusiastically. "Believe it or not, the room and board on the Normandy is a hell of a lot better than anything here. Not to mention the food… yikes. The Citadel housing unit will probably be happy to have my unit open up anyway. They like to double- and triple-occupy people and I have a single-occupant contract." Pausing then, he considered this for a moment, before letting out a low huff of humourless laughter. "I've been living here for a while, I guess," he added, thoughtfully, reaching up to scratch the back of his ear. "That was back when they still offered single-occupant contracts. Dios mio."

"Well, the Normandy is docked in Bay D24," Shepard told him, indicating with her thumb over her shoulder towards the Citadel elevator. "We're not going anywhere for a few hours still, so whenever you're packed and ready to go, you're free to board. I don't know how much stuff you're going to want to bring with you, but if it's not too much you're welcome to bring it aboard as well."

"Everything I own fits in two canvas bags," Vega admitted, letting his hand drop back to his lap as he turned his attention towards the memorial board again, shrugging offhandedly. "I like to keep my living space simple. Escaso. Makes it easy to pack up and go whenever I have to ship out for construction jobs."

"Your exercise gear is still down in the hangar," Shepard told him, causing him to look up at her again, intrigued. "Just in case you're interested. I thought you might want it, so… I didn't get rid of it. That, and a lot of other things, I guess." Looking down towards David then, she smoothed his hood absentmindedly as she thought, before taking a deep breath in, her brow furrowing a bit. "I haven't moved a lot of things on the Normandy since the end of the War," she added, almost guiltily, turning
her attention up towards Vega again, meeting his dark gaze as he stared at her, listening intently. "Just kind of… left a lot of it where it was. I guess I was hoping if I left it the way it was, people might come back to get it. Which… is kind of ridiculous, I guess, all things considered, but…” Trailing off again, she paused, thoughtful, before shrugging and looking down towards David again. "I just… couldn't convince myself to move some of them,” she admitted. "Call me sentimental. Or insane."

"Both sound about right," Vega answered, offering her a faint, joking half-smile.

Shepard laughed softly at the sentiment, reaching over to give Vega a light punch in the arm, before collecting David up and balancing him on her hip as she stood. "Don't be late, Lieutenant Vega," she told him, pointing to him with a playfully scolding finger. "Wouldn't want the Normandy to leave without you."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world, ma'am," Vega answered, offering a small, good-natured salute in return.
The last few wisps of decontamination mist still lingered around Shepard and Vega's ankles as the door leading into the bridge of the Normandy opened with a *hiss* to allow them inside. The fans built low into the sterilization room walls whirred quietly as they attempted to clear the room of any leftover steam, the noise causing Joker to glance back at the three new passengers from the cockpit, offering Shepard a distracted wave before suddenly seeming to realize something and quickly double-taking. Turning around hastily in his chair, he grinned back at the Normandy's newest member, reaching up to adjust the bill of his cap as he gave Vega a quick, encompassing once-over. "Goddamn, Commander," he joked, brightly, unable to keep a broad smirk from his face. "I knew you had a thing for stray animals, but this seems like a bit much."

"I missed you too, *hombre,*" Vega laughed back, pointing a good-humoured finger towards the pilot. "Still in that chair, huh? Good to see some things never change."

"You kidding?" Joker asked, his puckish grin widening, patting the stitched leather siding of the chair. "This ship wouldn't be the same without me to pilot it."

"Be a lot quieter, though, I'm sure," Vega answered, causing Joker to give a small, conceding laugh in return. Then, turning back around in his piloting chair, Joker returned his attention to the controls, allowing Vega to look back towards Shepard again, watching as she ran a quick hand through David's dark down, carefully fluffing it to make sure none of it had gotten knotted or matted in the strap of his mask. Setting David down on the floor of the Normandy, she allowed him to step out of his little backpack, tucking the mask inside the pack and sliding the straps absentmindedly up her arm before watching him cross the short distance between her and Vega, coming to stand in front of the new crewman and staring up at him with wide, curious eyes.

Now that Vega could actually see David without his mask obscuring his face, he seemed unable to decide if he should be more amazed or confused, though Shepard could tell it was still proving difficult for him to wrap his head completely around the idea that David could be somehow both turian and human. He seemed surprised by David's appearance, his expression frozen, half-formed, as if he had not been sure what to expect and now could not quite figure out how to react. Despite this, he kept his countenance collected, his expression stiff, trying hard not to belay any reaction other than one of friendly surprise, keeping his body language loose and casual as David continued to examine him closely, as if Vega had somehow become the most anomalous being in the room. David frowned up at Vega, his mouth twisting into a thin, thoughtful line as he raised both hands to investigate further, pressing them down hard against Vega's taut abdomen before moving on to inspect his large, rough hands. Picking up one of Vega's hands, he turned it over, inspecting his calloused palm and short, dirty nails, before pressing his own hand into it for comparison, watching in fascination as his tiny clawed palm was nearly swallowed by the size of Vega's hand. Letting his hand drop back down again, David took a deep breath in, looking up at Vega once more and taking a step back to inspect him from head to foot.

"You're big," he finally stated, astutely, causing Vega to falter, a bit stunned, before giving a short, surprised laugh at the observation and nodding his head in agreement.

"Well, I work out, *Chico,*" Vega answered, bringing up one arm to flex his muscles. David's eyes widened at the sight of his biceps, as if he had never seen anything quite like them before, and Shepard could see his hands ball subconsciously into fists at his sides as he tried to figure out how Vega did it. "I keep vigilant," Vega added, incisively. "Keep in good shape. Stay healthy. Stay fit."

"Your arms are bigger than my head," David observed, bluntly, causing Vega to give another laugh.
of surprise at the frank remark. Dropping his arm back to his side, he glanced up towards Shepard, as if expecting some sort of explanation or reaction from her, but Shepard only shrugged, not sure what he wanted her to say about the situation. All of David's comments seemed valid, and she took a step back from the two of them, tucking her hands into the pockets of her hoodie as she watched Vega turn his attention back down towards David once more, attentive. David stared back up at Vega, chewing intently at the inside of his cheek, before he suddenly lifted his arms up above his head, eagerly opening and closing his hands as he indicated for Vega to lift him. "Pick up," he requested, earnestly, letting out a small, breathless huff as he tried to regain the wind he had knocked out with so sudden a motion. "...Please.Pick up, please. Want to go up."

Vega faltered at the simple request, looking up towards Shepard again as he crouched down closer to David's level, resting his elbows on his knees as he squatted in front of the boy. "Polite kid," he commented, nodding towards David, seeming unsure what to do with his hands. "Mind if I...?"

"Go ahead," Shepard answered, indicating towards her son with a tilt of her head. "Be gentle when you pick him up, though. He's fragile, so... no horseplay."

Vega nodded in response, seeming to understand the situation, before gently reaching forward to coax David into turning around, lifting the little boy up under the arms and using his knee to push himself back up again. Lifting the light child easily over his head, Vega settled him down into a seat on his broad shoulders, giving David a moment to catch his surprised breath as he realized how high up he suddenly was. Shepard tensed at the sight of her child perched so precariously at such a height, one hand curling into an anxious fist inside the pocket of her hoodie, but she bit her lip, saying nothing, not wanting to ruin his fun or Vega's. She trusted Vega to be consciously careful, knowing he would not intentionally do anything to harm her boy, but she also knew him to be a rough and tumble sort of person, and could not help but worry a bit that he might not know just how fragile David was by comparison. David's legs tightened over Vega's shoulders for a moment, his arms sliding around the man's thick neck, his eyes widening at his surroundings as he took in the height at which he now sat, until, gradually, he seemed to become accustomed to it, his worried expression quickly changing into one of fascinated joy.

Turning to look over towards his mother again, David bit down on his lip, excitedly, letting out a small, breathless giggle as he offered her a crooked smile, gripping securely to the collar of Vega's tight-fitting shirt. Shepard was quick to return the smile, her gaze dropping back to Vega as he patted David's chubby leg, seeming hesitant to move from his spot, as if waiting for some sort of signal that it was all right to leave Shepard's line of sight. "Sweet kid," Vega finally commented, seeming unsure what else to say. "Can I... take him down to the hangar with me? Check out my old quarters, maybe show him some of my workout stuff while I'm at it?" Shrugging, he reached up, his hands curling distractedly around David's little legs, securing him more firmly in place on his shoulders. "We could hang out for a bit," he suggested. "Get to know one another, y'know. Give you some downtime. I'm sure I can find him something he can play with down there. Maybe the five-pounds or something."

"Hm," Shepard answered, frowning, the feeling of anxiety starting to return again. "I'd... prefer he not play with the weights, if possible. He's barely thirty pounds, himself. Five-pound weights might be too much." Looking up towards her son again, she watched as he played with Vega's shaggy hair, seeming entirely fascinated with the way it seemed to be thicker in the middle than on the sides. He felt first Vega's hair, then his own, then Vega's again, trying to figure out the difference, before finally pushing his own hair upwards towards the front, attempting with little success to replicate the style. "Maybe you can find him something more his speed," Shepard suggested, trying hard not to crack a smile at the endearing display. "Like a stress ball. Or maybe a game of catch. His coordination isn't very good, but it could be good practice for him. Maybe help build those skills up."
"Black hair," David commented, speaking to himself, his voice barely loud enough for Shepard to hear him as he petted down Vega's mohawk towards the front, flattening the shape against his head before reaching up towards his own hair, again attempting to replicate it. "Black hair too. Same thing."

At these words, Shepard's smile instantly vanished, and she found herself trying hard to hide a look of guilt as a knot began to tie itself firmly in the lining of her stomach. She had known for a long while that David found it difficult to relate to people because of how different he looked on the surface, but to realize how desperately he wanted to see himself in others hurt more than she would have anticipated. Turning her attention back to Vega again, she cleared her throat, gently, trying her best to look passive and unaffected as she waited for an answer to her request. In return, Vega nodded in understanding, taking one hand away from David's leg to offer a short, amicable salute. David was quick to imitate the motion, seeming unsure what the meaning was but wanting to do whatever Vega was doing. "Yes, ma'am," Vega answered, letting his hand return to David's leg. "Can do. And hey, maybe later he can count my pullups for me. Though… I don't know if he can count that high just yet."

"You should be okay," Shepard answered, jokingly. "He can count at least to three."

"I know three," David confirmed, holding up three fingers of one hand. In return, Vega laughed at the eager corroboration, seeming a bit bewildered by the well-meaning barrage coming from both mother and son.

"Thanks, Lola," Vega returned, sarcastically, turning his attention back to Shepard again with a wry, somewhat dazed smile. "Good to know your faith in my abilities is unshaken."

"It's good to have you back, Vega," Shepard answered, letting out a soft chuckle as she reached forward to pat his solid shoulder.

Gardner was in the middle of preparing dinner for the crew when Shepard swung by for a short visit, and he seemed more than a little annoyed as he watched her make a sandwich for herself before starting to disappear towards the elevators again. "My food not good enough for you, Commander?" he called after her, jokingly, causing Shepard to stop in her tracks at the playful accusation. Turning around to face him again with her mouth full of sandwich, she waved a hand in his direction, buying time as she finished her bite before daring to speak again.

"You know me better than that, Gardner," she told him, waving the slim sandwich dismissively in his line of sight. "You know I'll be back. I wouldn't miss out on your food for the world."

"Yeah, yeah," Gardner mumbled, turning his attention back to the massive pot stewing on the kitchenette stove. "Whatever. Go on, get outta here, Commander. You're breaking my concentration."

The new message light was flashing on Shepard's private terminal by the time she made her way up to her cabin, and for a moment she considered ignoring it in lieu of taking a much-needed rest while Vega was still entertaining David and she had the time to herself. She started to pass by the desk, heading towards the bed at the far end of the room, but had only made it down one of the stairs into the sunken sleep area before her curiosity got the better of her and she found herself turning around again to make her way over to her desk instead. Dropping herself down in her seat in front of her terminal, she took another bite of her sandwich, tapping her screen to wake it up before accessing her unread messages folder and selecting the first of two new bolded titles in her inbox.

The first message was from Ereba, a short, concise e-mail with a listing detailing an extermination-
type job on a planet whose name Shepard had hoped she might never hear again. It seemed that, in the absence of civilized life, Virmire had become overrun with the planet's massive sand crabs in the wake of the bombing incident nearly six years prior. Though a large part of the paradise planet had at first been considered too radioactive for the return of civilian personnel, it had been recently cleared as inhabitable anywhere at least one hundred miles from the centre of initial impact. In an extra effort to stave off the leakage of leftover radiation, what had once been Saren's cloning facility had also been sectioned off from the rest of Virmire, bordered on all sides by a large, electric fence, with an enormous sarcophagus-like structure encasing the building itself inside. Now that people were beginning to return to Virmire in an effort to reinhabit the planet, it seemed that the influx of sand crabs was proving problematic, as the crabs had claimed the buildings as their new homes and did not seem to want to leave. Now, having exhausted all their efforts to remove the sand crabs humanely, the Virmire inhabitants had had to resort to calling in a third party for a somewhat less humanitarian method of extraction for the pesky beasts.

Sending back a quick confirmation message, Shepard reached over towards her intercom button, pressing it as she picked up her sandwich, taking a bite of it as she waited for Joker to answer. "Joker?" she asked, talking around her bite of bread. "Set us a course for Virmire. There's a sand crab infestation there that needs to be taken care of."

"Virmire?" Joked asked back, the name of the planet wavering in his throat, as if he had never anticipated having to speak of it again. A short pause followed this question, in which neither of them seemed to know what to say, until finally Joker cleared his throat, giving a short, uncomfortable, forced-sounding laugh in an attempt to lift the mood again. "Isn't Virmire, like… full of radiation?" he asked. "Ever since we dropped that… thing? I didn't think we could go back again. Regardless of what we were going for."

"It was, in places," Shepard answered, honestly, shrugging her shoulders in response, though she knew Joker could not see it. "But we're not going into the radiation zone. Just into one of the surrounding areas, far enough away that we don't have to worry about radiation poisoning. They filmed Eternity is Forever there, remember? It's totally safe."

"The… Blasto flick?" Joker asked, sounding less than convinced of her reasoning. He paused again, apparently thinking this over, before finally letting out a soft, conceding sigh of defeat. "Okay, Commander," he told her. "It's your call. I'll let Cortez worry about radiation poisoning." Letting out another short, unconvinced huff, he lapsed into silence again, though Shepard could still hear him breathing on the other end of the line, letting her know that his finger was still lingering on the intercom button. "...Sand crabs, though?" he finally asked, unable to hide his scepticism any longer. "This is what we're doing now? Killing sand crabs?"

"It's what we do now if we want to continue eating," Shepard told him, frankly, hoping her joking tone translated through the comm. "It's the best thing going right now, and it pays a decent wage. Just get us there and I'll let you make fun of me as much as you want when I get back. Okay?"

"Can't pass up an offer like that," Joker answered, chuckling through the connection. "Aye-aye, Commander. Virmire it is. We should be there in about two to four days, depending on relay wait times. I'll keep you posted of our progress in the meantime."

"Thanks, Joker," Shepard returned, smirking, before severing the intercom and turning her attention back to her private terminal, taking another bite of her sandwich as she selected the next e-mail down. The sender address on the message was marked as Earth Housing LLC, a fact which gave Shepard a moment of pause as she began to read further into it. The message itself started out inconspicuously enough, a bit of small talk asking her how she had been faring since the end of the War, but it did not take long for Shepard to recognize Miranda's style of writing, and a small, familiar
smile began to curve her lips as she read on. The message was short and concise, informing her that Miranda had taken on a clerical job under government-sanctioned employ, and that she would be thrilled to talk to Shepard to catch up on how she had been in the last year or so. Selecting the contact return address, Shepard was quick to plug the location into her vidcomm terminal, sitting back in her chair and taking another bite of sandwich as she watched the calling screen search for a signal before attempting to make a connection.

She had no idea what time it was on Earth – it was entirely possible that it was the middle of the night, and her call would have to wait another several hours until Miranda returned to her work station in the morning. To her surprise, however, it did not take long for the signal to pick up, and she soon found herself staring through the screen at an astonished-looking Miranda, who sat alone in a small, plexiglass-walled cubicle, a contact device clipped to her ear. "Shepard," Miranda said, sounding more than a bit surprised. Glancing quickly over her shoulder, she leaned back, checking to see if anyone was looking in on her personal station, before turning her attention back to Shepard again and leaning in a bit closer to the vidscreen. "I didn't expect you to call me at work," she told her, her voice a bit lower this time. "Or, I guess, I… didn't really expect you to call me at all, honestly. You've always been more of the… e-mail type."

"I'm working on my contact skills," Shepard answered, cheekily. "It's still a work in progress." Setting her sandwich aside for a moment, she leaned in closer to the vidscreen, folding her arms across the desk as she smiled up at Miranda. "So," she said. "A government job. That's got to be a lot different than working for Cerberus."

"You'd think so," Miranda answered, honestly, letting out a soft, tired sigh. "But, no matter who you're working for, in the end everything always just boils down to numbers."

"So what is it that you're doing now?" Shepard asked, curiously. Then, realizing Miranda was still at work, she quickly amended herself, "…Unless you can't talk now. I can always wait for later to catch up."

"No, no," Miranda was quick to counter, raising her hands. "I can talk now. It's fine. In fact, it's almost time for my lunch break, anyway. Now is a perfect time." Taking the comm clip from her ear, she set it aside on the desk by the vidcomm screen, her slender fingers lingering on it for a moment before she finally retrieved her hand to her lap again, her sculpted brows furrowing a bit in meditation. "You probably already figured out I'm working for Earth Housing Limited," she began, thoughtfully. "The main aspect of EH is building affordable housing for people whose homes were destroyed during the Reaper War. I work in initial asset acquirement… in fact, I'm actually head of IAA. My section's job is to find available properties on habitable planets that EH can use for the construction of housing for that planet's habitants." Pausing a bit, she reached up a hand, tapping her fingers distractedly against her collar-bone in a nervous, subconscious motion Shepard had grown used to over the years of knowing her.

"It's… a brutal process," Miranda admitted, her voice a bit lower this time, as if afraid one of her co-workers might hear her speaking less than flatteringly about her line of work. "You wouldn't think so, but it's not all the company makes it out to be. If the property is government-owned, it's easier to acquire, since we simply have to go through the representatives to go about purchasing it for its current market value. All that's involved there is perhaps a bit of haggling. But if the property is privately owned, our organization is only able to offer a fraction of its true value to the owners." Her brows drew a bit further together at this, her plush lips thinning out into a taut, worried line as she took a deep breath in, before letting it out in a short, soft, regretful huff of an exhale. "It's sad," she added, solemnly, shaking her head. "Heartbreaking, honestly. Most people are only too happy to get whatever credits they can get in these tough times, so most accept the pittance we offer them in exchange for their land without a second thought. I always make a note of the people who are
underpaid for their property and send it along to my superiors in the hopes that they might be able to compensate them a bit further after the fact, but… they always send it back with an attached note saying there's nothing the company can do about it."

Letting her hand drop back to her desk again, Miranda drummed her fingers quietly against the metal surface, glancing over her shoulder again, quickly, making sure they were not being listened in on. Then, turning her attention back to Shepard once more, she let out another soft sigh, this one slower than the last, her expression softening a bit as she considered the Commander through the vidscreen. "It's not a bad job," she clarified, honestly. "It just… it gets to you a little bit, after a while. I've asked several times to be transferred out of this office and over to the department that offers childcare for working parents, but..." Hesitating again, her frown returned, her expression growing abruptly colder as she considered how best to word her predicament. "They feel that my… experience, determines I would be better suited for this department," she explained, bluntly, her disapproval palpable. "Apparently working for Cerberus doesn't bode well for childcare purposes. They'd much rather have me running numbers and haggling for properties than have an ex-agent from a branded terrorist organization anywhere near innocent children."

"Well, that's not fair," Shepard returned, frowning as she leaned back a bit from the vidscreen. "They should give you a chance to prove your merit before judging you on your previous employment. People can change. Circumstances change. Just because you worked for Cerberus doesn't make you a bad person."

Miranda huffed at these kind words, looking down towards her hands in her lap, a wary, almost bitter half-smile starting to curve one corner of her lips upward. "Well, I appreciate your vote of confidence, Shepard," she told her, honestly. "But I don't think they see it that way. To be honest, I'm lucky they employed me at all. Anything having to do with Cerberus generally puts a bad taste in peoples' mouths these days." Pausing again, she stared absentmindedly at the surface of her desk, before finally taking a deep breath in and looking up at Shepard again, raising her sculpted brows, amiably. "How are you and David doing, by the way?" she asked, clearly eager to change the subject. "He's probably growing like a weed by now. How old is he now, about three?"

"He just turned three a couple months ago," Shepard confirmed, offering a nod in return. "That's right," Miranda agreed, pointing indicatively towards the screen. "Because Matilda just turned four, and David's about nine months younger than she is, isn't he?"

"Something like that," Shepard returned, unsure of the exact age difference, herself. "And… he's doing okay. Frail, but happy. I've started trying to find solid food for him, but he doesn't seem to be taking to it well. I figured I'll leave him with formula for the time being and maybe come back to solids later." Letting out a soft sigh, she leaned forward towards the desk a bit more, folding her arms in front of her and resting her chin on top of them. "How are Matilda and Oriana, by the way?" she asked, conversationally. "And – hey, tell Matilda happy birthday from me when you get the chance. If you would."

"I…” Miranda began, but quickly stopped herself, her brows furrowing into a soft, worried frown again. She paused, thinking this over, seeming to grow more visibly uncomfortable under Shepard's gaze, before finally taking a deep, sharp breath in. "I… I would if I could, Shepard," she told her, solemnly. "But… I can't tell her that. Not right now, at least."

Shepard faltered at this, taken aback by the unexpected response, her own brow furrowing into a look of concern as she sat up a bit straighter in her chair. "What do you mean, you can't tell her right now?" she asked, suddenly much more attentive.

Miranda sighed at the question, folding her thin hands worryingly in her lap as she chewed
thoughtfully on her plush lower lip. "I… haven't heard from Oriana in a while," she explained, letting out a short, anxious huff as she looked up at Shepard again, worriedly. "That was one thing I had wanted to talk to you about. The last time I spoke to Oriana was about three months ago. She said that she and Matilda were moving, and that they'd get in contact with me when they settled down, but… they never did get back in contact. I haven't heard from them since then, and… it's really starting to worry me." Pausing again, her pretty frown deepened, her hands moving to twist worriedly together on the desk in front of her. "I have no idea how to reach them at their new home," she admitted, sounding antsier now as she went on. "Or if they even made it there. I kept waiting, thinking Oriana might just be busy, hoping they might ping me again once they've finished settling in, but… three months seems like a long time to wait."

"Yeah," Shepard agreed, quickly. "That does seem like a long time. Especially for Oriana. She's always been so vigilant in keeping in contact with you."

Letting out another short, worried exhale at the confirmation, Miranda bit her lip again, shaking her head as she untwisted her hands, using one of them to pass back through her thick, dark hair. "It's unpleasant, being so helpless," she said, looking up at Shepard again, her blue eyes pleading. "Which is why I was hoping, maybe… if you get a chance… do you think you might be able to use your contacts to look for Oriana? I know you don't have as many resources available to you as you used to, but… maybe Liara can help, or maybe your Spectre resources might have something you could use to aid you." Shrugging her thin shoulders again, she dropped her hands back to her lap, doing her best to keep from fidgeting nervously as she took a deep breath, regarding Shepard with a look of sincerity. "I don't anticipate you finding anything," she added, truthfully, sounding more disappointed than resigned at this. "I'm still holding out some small hope that this will all be a big misunderstanding and they'll contact me soon, but… I figure it doesn't hurt to look for them in the meantime. I suppose all I can really do at this point is wait and hope for the best."

"We'll find Oriana, Miranda," Shepard told her, giving a solemn nod of confirmation in return. "I promise. I won't stop looking until we do."

"Thank you, Shepard," Miranda sighed, her shoulders dropping from their rigid line, making her look much more tired than before as she folded her hands in front of her on her desk again. "You're a wonderful friend. I appreciate any help you can give, even if…" She faltered, her voice trailing off, thoughtful, her brow furrowing into a worried crease, before she quickly gave a huff of breath, shaking her head and sitting back in her chair again. "Nothing," she amended, quickly. "Nevermind. They'll show up. I trust you, Shepard. If anyone can find Oriana and Matilda, it's you." Drumming her fingers absentmindedly against the arm of her chair, she dropped her gaze from the vidscreen, staring for a silent moment at a spot just out of frame, before she finally took in a long, deep breath, turning her gaze back to Shepard again and offering her a forced, hopeful smile. "I'd love for Matilda and David to meet someday," she told her, clearly trying hard to find something positive to say. "I think they'd make the best of friends."

"I'd like to think so," Shepard agreed, a small, fond smile starting to creep its way over her face at the thought. "Though if Matilda is anything like her sisters, David's sure to have his hands full."

At this, Miranda gave a short, weak laugh, nodding along in half-hearted agreement, before her attention was suddenly drawn away from the screen by the sound of a man's voice from somewhere behind her. She paused, listening for a moment, attentive, before finally turning her attention back to Shepard again and letting out a weary, almost resigned-sounding sigh. "I have to get back to work," she said, picking up her earpiece from where she had set it down on the desk and hooking it into her ear again. "It was good talking to you again, Shepard. Even if I do wish it were on better terms."

"Yeah," Shepard agreed, trying her hardest to appear optimistic for Miranda's sake. "We should do
"Well, anytime you want to talk, you know where to find me," Miranda told her, making a quick, indicative gesture over her shoulder towards her office complex. "Though perhaps it would be better if I sent you my home contact instead. That way we wouldn't only have time to talk while I'm on break." Resting her hands on the edge of her desk, Miranda stared at Shepard for a moment, seeming hesitant to hang up the line and sever her contact with her friend again. "Thanks again, Shepard," she finally told her, sincerely. "You have no idea what your help means to me." Then, reaching forward towards the vidscreen, she pressed a button on the side of the monitor, sending Shepard's display once more to a blank blue screen emblazoned with the Alliance symbol.

Letting out a long sigh, Shepard leaned back in her chair again, stretching her legs out in front of her and folding her hands thoughtfully behind her head. Despite her promise to Miranda, she knew she knew she could barely afford to think about chasing after Oriana and Matilda right now, when her resources were already running so slim. She had no idea where she could even start to look for them, let alone afford the fuel it might take to get the Normandy anywhere near where they might be, and while a wild goose chase through space might have been right up her alley when she had been working under the Alliance, now it just sounded like an extra strain on time and resources she did not have. Pulling up Liara's information on her private terminal, she started to compose an e-mail, asking if Liara had any relevant information on the last known location of Oriana and Matilda Lawson. Then, finished with her note, she sent it off to its destination, watching as the loading symbol spun a few times on the terminal screen before confirming that the message had been successfully sent.

Satisfied that she had done all she could for the time being, Shepard pushed her chair away from her desk again, getting up to stretch for a moment before starting to make her way back towards the bed. It seemed unlikely that Oriana would have simply cut contact with Miranda – Shepard knew from experience that the sisters were incredibly close, and she could not think of anything Miranda might have done that would cause Oriana to sever contact, especially after promising to get back in touch with her once she was safe. That simply seemed like too cruel a ploy, and one not characteristic of Oriana, or any of the Lawson sisters. Stubbornness ran deep in their personalities, but so did integrity, which made Shepard wonder if perhaps something unfortunate had befallen the two youngest Lawsons, and if so, who would have an interest in doing harm to two so inconsequentially neutral people, one of them still a small child. Pushing the morbid thought momentarily from her mind, Shepard removed her jacket and boots, setting them neatly by the side of the bed before climbing up under the comforter, pulling the sheets up over her chest and settling in for a much-needed nap.

She would figure out a course of action later, she decided, but for right now, all she needed was a good, long sleep.

It took three full days for Liara to write back, and when she did, it was only to report that she had very little useable information on the possible whereabouts of the missing Lawson sisters. Her only lead was that if they had been en route to new housing, then they might have been on one of the Homeworld Shuttles that had been sent out from the Citadel on their newly extended itinerary. Ever since the Homeworld route had expanded to include systems outside of those in immediate proximity to the Local Cluster, a few of its ships had gone mysteriously dark while on their scheduled travel route. A few of these ships had returned safely up to three months after their scheduled return date, citing relay repairs and emergency stops as the reason for their delayed return, but a few had yet to return to the Citadel, making people wonder if perhaps the ships had been intercepted by pirates or had faced some other misfortune which made it impossible for them to contact the Citadel to let them know that they needed aid. Shepard was quick to forward this information to Miranda, making sure to highlight the parts about the ships returning after a long downtime of silence, hoping that the
possibility that it was all simply a communication malfunction might make her feel a bit better about the situation.

Leaning back in her desk chair, Shepard let out a long, tired sigh, folding her hands on top of her head as she stared up at her model ship display, wondering if she still had the original boxes stashed away on the ship somewhere. She had not realized how much free time she actually had when David was not around, but, between Traynor's lessons and Vega taking up most of his free time, Shepard had seen surprisingly little of her son over the past three days. Pushing her chair away from her desk, she made her way over to her cabin bed, sliding in under the comforter to settle down for a quiet nap, but it seemed like barely any time at all had passed before she suddenly found herself roused from her sleep, feeling her shoulder being shaken gently by a large, rough hand. Turning over to face her waker, she found herself staring instead at David, who was peering over the edge of the bed at her, his arms resting impatiently on top of the comforter, his bright blue eyes barely visible over the tops of them as he stared at her. Shepard paused at the sight of him, a bit confused, before realizing that he was not alone, and she turned to look up towards Vega instead, who smiled amicably down at her, seeming somewhat amused.

"Wake up, sleeping beauty," Vega joked. "Time to suit up. Joker just announced we've arrived at Virmire. He figured when you didn't respond immediately you might be down for the count, so... he asked me to come up here and check on you. Make sure you weren't sick or anything." Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he lifted David up under the arms, setting the boy down in his lap before turning to look over at Shepard again, offering her a wry, fondly crooked smile. "I figured you were probably just asleep," he told her. "Good to see you're doing okay, though."

"Yeah," Shepard agreed, still half-asleep, reaching up to rub at her eye with the palm of her hand. "As okay as I can be. How long was I out for?"

"No idea," Vega told her, shifting David more securely towards the back of his lap, wrapping a strong forearm around the boy's middle to make sure he did not accidentally fall off. "I don't know exactly when you went down. Everybody wanted to give you time to rest, though. We know you're always running around, trying to fix other peoples' problems, so... we figured you could use some time alone."

Shepard gave a short, soft laugh at the truth of this statement, pushing her hands back through her hair before letting them come to rest at her sides on the comforter again, still not entirely awake. "Well, I appreciate it," she told him, truthfully. "Sleep is hard to come by around here." Turning her attention pointedly towards David, she observed him quietly for a moment, watching as he stared distractedly at the cabin fish tank, seeming oblivious to her implication. Turning over onto her side, Shepard reached across to her nightstand, turning on her air filter, before returning her attention to Vega again and letting out another short, tired sigh. "I hate Virmire," she told him, honestly, speaking in a low voice, just loud enough for him to hear. "I'd kind of hoped we might never have to go back there ever again. It feels... wrong, going back. Like the whole place is just one massive tomb."

"Virmire is a planet," David suddenly spoke up, pointedly, causing Shepard to look his way again, a small, proud smile starting to inch across her face as he spoke. "It has water and crabs. Crabs are animals. It's in the Hoc system. It's the third planet." Finished with his explanation, he held up three fingers towards her, his eyes darting every so often from her face to his fingers, as if to double- and triple-check that he were holding up the right amount. "Three," he said, determinedly, a broad smile spreading over his chubby face.

Shepard sat up in bed at this lesson, leaning forward to proudly take hold of David's tiny hand before leaning down to press a kiss to his forehead, causing him to give a soft giggle of approval. Looking
up at Vega again, she smiled at him, expectantly, but he only offered a short shrug in return, clearly trying hard to keep from beaming at his own teaching accomplishments. "He's a smart kid," Vega told her, frankly. "Like you said. He knows how to count to three." Patting David appreciatively on the head, he chuckled, good-naturedly, before lifting the boy up off his lap and turning him in the direction of the cabin door. "Hey, Chico," he told him, brightly, giving him a friendly pat on the shoulder. "Why don't you head down to the mess hall and see what Gardner's got cooking? Then once you're done you can come report back to us about it. Let us know whether we should stay for lunch before heading down to Virmire. Okay?"

David nodded enthusiastically in response to his new instructions, letting out a quiet, excited cough before starting to make his way quickly towards the door of Shepard's cabin, his socked feet pattering eagerly against the metal floor as he went. Shepard frowned as she watched him run, sitting up straighter in bed, her posture rigid. "David, no running," she called after him, causing him to slow down a bit at the door, but once he had passed outside into the hall, she could hear his pace pick up again as he made his way towards the elevator. Letting out a soft, put-upon sigh, Shepard sank down towards her pillows again, unable to help a small, expectant smile from creeping over her face at her son's predictability. Vega watched as David disappeared as well, waiting for the cabin doors to close behind him, before turning his attention back towards Shepard again, his expression now much more solemn.

"Listen, Shepard," Vega told her, his voice quieter this time, more serious. "I… I know it's not really my place and all, but… I wanted to tell you something, because I think it's important you hear it…" Pausing again, he took a deep breath, his dark eyes dropping momentarily from her face, as if trying to find the courage to say what he wanted to tell her so badly. "I didn't know Lieutenant Alenko," he finally said, turning his attention up towards her again. "All I ever heard about him were stories. But from what I can tell, he… he wouldn't want you to dwell on the past. He wouldn't want you to have any regrets. About Virmire, or… anything else."

"He believed in you, and… if he's anything like the rest of us… he was proud to do what he did so you could go on to save the galaxy from the Reapers. And you know what, Shepard? You did it. You kicked the Reapers' asses. Nobody else could've done it but you, and Lieutenant Alenko… I think he knew that."

Lapsing into thoughtful silence, he paused another moment, considering his words, seeming unsure how best to go on but knowing there was much more to say. "His sacrifice shouldn't be forgotten," he added, quick to make that important distinction. "Nobody's saying it should. But you did him proud, Shepard. You did everyone proud. And you should really allow yourself to acknowledge that." Hesitating again, he stared at her for a moment longer, seeming uncertain what else to say, before finally dropping his gaze from her face and folding his hands together in his lap, offering a short, dismissive shrug. "That's all," he told her, quietly. "That's what I wanted to say."

Shepard faltered, taken aback, unsure for a long moment how to respond. Then, reaching forward, she pressed her hand gently against his upper arm, causing him to look up for a moment before dropping his gaze to his lap again. She opened her mouth, preparing to say something, before realizing she had no idea what to say and closing it again, a bit embarrassed by her sudden lack for words. Her hand lingered on his arm for another moment longer, seeming hesitant to move, as if of its own accord, the feeling of his warm skin under her fingers enticing them to stay. There was something different about Vega, something other than the sun-kissed worker's tan or the full five o'clock shadow just dark enough to be the start of a casual, low-cut beard, giving his young face more of an edge and making him seem almost older than his years. There was a softness to his person now, a sort of wisdom that the eager marine of only three years prior had somehow been missing, or that she had somehow missed the last time she had worked with him fighting the Reapers. Now she
realized that perhaps her closeness had been the issue, and what she had really needed was some time away to recognize it.

"Thanks, Vega," she finally told him, quietly. "That really… means a lot."

"Hey, Commander?" Joker's voice suddenly came on over the intercom, causing both Shepard and Vega to look up with a start, Shepard quickly withdrawing her hand from his arm as if afraid of Joker catching her that way. "Just to let you know, we're in proximity to Virmire. Cortez says he's ready to head down whenever you guys are."

"Thanks, Joker," Shepard returned, waving an acknowledging hand towards the overhead comm. Then, turning her attention back to Vega again, she cleared her throat, seeming as hesitant to look at him directly as he was to look at her. "I guess we should… get suited up to head out," she finally told him, speaking quietly, just loud enough to hear. "Don't want to keep Cortez waiting too long. He's in charge of getting us back to the ship after our mission, after all."

"Yeah," Vega answered, giving a soft, almost forced-sounding breath of a laugh. He lingered a moment, seeming hesitant to leave, but then, pushing himself up off the bed, he offered her a short, half-hearted wave, excusing himself from her cabin as he started to make his way towards the door. "See you down in the hangar, Lola," he told her, before passing through the doorway and out into the hall. His footfalls grew quieter on her ears as he made his way towards the elevator, her posture rigid and alert as she listened for the sounds of his retreating feet. Then, finally, with a soft ding, she heard the elevator doors open, allowing him inside, and the sound of his footsteps stopped completely, leaving her sitting alone once more in weighty, pensive silence.
The Kodiak bustled up a flurry of loose sand as it hovered to a gentle landing on the green dotted shoreline, careful to pick a spot clear of crabs to make its final touchdown. The door of the shuttle opened up with a hiss to reveal a lush, watery paradise Shepard had not set eyes on in almost six years, and one she was not entirely certain she was ready to see again. The current of the waterway the Kodiak had settled beside was peaceful, the air tepid and serene, a light breeze blowing gently through Shepard's hair and rustling the small, slim trees and grassy reeds that grew beside the water, the only plants supported by the beach-like ecosystem. Taking a tentative step outside the shuttle, Shepard took a deep breath of Virmire air, closing her eyes for a moment as the scent of the clear, fresh water brought back the memories of her last expedition here. She held her breath for a moment longer, allowing Vega's words of encouragement to play over again in her head, before finally letting her breath out in a long, thin exhale and opening her eyes once more, looking out over the idyllic scenery.

It did not take long for her to spot the creatures they had been sent to deal with, and she quickly waved Vega over before pointing to the crabs sitting across the shallow channel from them. From her research prior to landing, she knew that the crabs as a species were mostly brown, ideal for blending in with the wet sand at the bottom of the crystalline canals, though some ranged in colour from yellow to beige, better for blending into the drier sand of the shoreline. These creatures, however massive, had a nasty habit of burying themselves in the sand just enough to escape detection on a passing glance, which proved problematic for unobservant passers-by who did not know to look for their beady black eyes poking up just above the surface. Most people who accidentally came across the crabs managed to escape with only a minor bruise or scratch, though there had been several scattered reports of people with severed or nearly-severed fingers and toes, or, for some of the larger crabs, entire hands and feet. Unlike the seemingly benign pod crabs that also inhabited the planet, these sand crabs were larger and much, much meaner, and while this had not been too much of a problem when the crabs had kept primarily to themselves, now it seemed that the crabs had taken on a whole new boldness.

Everywhere Shepard and Vega looked, giant crabs sat sunning themselves on the beaches and all over the barricades, hardly even seeming to notice the intruders that had entered their midst. Gripping her gun a bit tighter to her chest, Shepard took a wary step back from the scene, trying to figure out in her head the safest route through the treacherous nest. "The job description says we're just supposed to get the crabs out of the buildings," she stated, buying time as she tried to figure out exactly how to accomplish that. "I guess we could try to round them up and chase them out, or… maybe try setting some traps. I don't know. There seem to be a lot of them in there."

"¿Qué carajo," Vega breathed, frowning. "I've never seen so many crabs in my life. Did the job description say anywhere that we couldn't just shoot them?"

Shepard paused, thinking back to the e-mail, before shaking her head and letting the butt of her Marauder come to rest against her hip. "No," she answered, truthfully. "But I don't want to just start shooting them. They're intrusive, but they're only animals. They don't know any better." Tucking her gun into the maglock at her back, she took a few wary steps forward towards the crabs, starting to make her way over towards one that was sunning itself on a large, domed rock. Pausing a few feet away from the creature, she faltered, unsure what she intended to do, before finally starting to clap her hands loudly in the crab's direction, shouting wordlessly at the crustacean in an attempt to get its attention. Vega looked on in amused scepticism as Shepard continued to hassle the crab, her shouting growing ever more frustrated the longer the crab ignored her, until finally, losing her patience with the creature, she grabbed her Carnifex from her belt, firing a few shots it into the air and waving her
hand in the crab's direction. This seemed to get the crab's attention, as it scuttled quickly off the rock at the sound, waddling away sideways across the beach before settling back into a sunning position a few feet away from where it had been sitting only moments earlier.

"Hey, you're right, Lola," Vega called, barely bothering to contain his laughter at the overly complicated display of force. "This is much better than just shooting them."

"Fuck off," Shepard called back, amused despite her own frustration. Tucking her Carnifex back into its holster, she propped her hands on her hips again, turning to look up towards the barricade and taking a deep breath in, preparing herself for the job ahead. "The sooner we finish up with these crabs, the sooner we get paid," she said, turning to look over towards Vega, who seemed less than enthused at the prospect of payment if it meant dealing with the aggressive pests. "Then we'll never have to deal with sand crabs ever again. At least until the next time someone posts a job listing involving them, which hopefully shouldn't be for a while after this."

"If you say so," Vega answered, sounding less than convinced, his expression twisting into a look of worry as he stared up at the sand crabs that had all but overtaken the barricade. The open walkways had become so full of crabs that some had taken to sunning themselves on the roof of the building instead, making Shepard wonder how they had managed to get up there in the first place. Pushing the thought from her head, she instead drew her Marauder from its maglock again, starting to make her way across the beach towards the overrun blockade. She took special care to pick a path out of snapping reach of the crabs sunning themselves all along the shoreline, but when the two of them finally reached the stairs leading up to the blockade, they found them nearly impossible to navigate, as the crabs had taken to resting on nearly every other step. Firing off a few rounds into the air, Shepard watched as the crabs began to stir, slowly starting to make their way up the stairs towards the main building instead. She could not help but feel that the crabs were being somehow unhelpful on purpose, though she knew that was ridiculous, as she herself had stated that they were only wild animals and so did not know any better. Still, she figured any sort of movement on the crabs' part was still movement, and as long as the stairs got cleared that was all that really mattered.

Once in the building, it was only a matter of figuring out how best to deal with the crabs that seemed to cover every visible inch of flooring. The crabs sunning themselves on the low barricade walls were easy enough to take care of, as it simply took a loud noise or a short push to get them to drop down into the water below. Each crab landed with a loud, satisfying splash as it hit the water before floating lazily downstream to the beach, where they resumed sunning themselves on the rocks and sand as if nothing had happened to send them there. The crabs that had taken up residence in the interior of the building proved somewhat harder to deal with, as many of them seemed to have decided that this was their new home, and they had no intention of leaving it. Zeroing in on a particularly large, ill-tempered crab, Vega fired off a few shots out the open windows of the barricade, shouting at the crab and stamping his foot in its direction in an effort to scare it. In return, the crab reached forward with one of its massive claws, grabbing hold of Vega's leg and giving the armour a good snap. Vega yelped in response to the unexpected retaliation, jumping back away from the crab and firing a few times into the floor of the barricade a few inches from the giant crab's legs. The crab was quick to respond to this new threat, scuttling off sideways towards the stairway as fast as its enormous form could go.

"Hijo de puta," Vega swore, bending down to examine his armour, letting out another soft stream of curses as he ran his gloved fingers along the deep, angry dent the crab had left with its claw. "Stupid thing nearly tore my leg off." Giving the deep indent in his leg armour one last, decisive pat, he stood up again, holding his gun warily at the ready as he looked around for more crabs he could help herd out of the blockade. Spotting two smaller crabs huddled against the far low wall, he started to move in their direction instead, firing his gun out the open window and slapping his hand threateningly against his armoured thigh. The smaller crabs seemed much more eager to respond to the noises, as
they quickly went scuttling off side by side towards the stairs, every so often bumping into each other in their rush to reach the exit. Satisfied that his last faux pas had been redeemed, Vega turned back towards the building interior, following along after Shepard into the inner rooms to look for more crabs to oust.

"Hey, so," Vega began again, getting Shepard's attention, before he faltered, seeming almost hesitant to complete his thought, causing Shepard to frown a bit as she looked at him, intrigued. "I know it's really not my place," he finally went on, still seeming uncertain. "And if it's too intrusive you don't have to answer, but… what happened to you and Garrus?" At this, Shepard could not hold back a short look of surprise, stopping momentarily in her tracks before starting again just as quickly, hoping Vega had not noticed her involuntary lapse in forward motion. "I thought you guys were a couple or something, but he doesn't seem to be on board the Normandy," Vega went on, seeming not to have noticed her hesitation, much to her relief. "Did you guys break up, or is it just more of like a… long-distance sort of thing?"

Shepard paused, considering the question, trying to think how best to answer. She did not really know the definitive state of her relationship with Garrus at that point in time, herself, but she did not think it was crucial to let on to Vega just how rocky of ground she and Garrus found themselves on. "I… don't really know," she finally answered, truthfully, turning to shoo a nearby crab towards the stairs with her gun. "I think we're still together, but sometimes it's hard to tell. We fight a lot – mostly about David – but he only means well. I know he does. He just wants what's best for our son." Firing off a round towards the open balcony, she stamped her foot threateningly in the crab's direction, causing it to snap back at her with one of its claws. "It's hard to be a parent, especially one who doesn't get to see their child all the time," she added, trying hard not to sound too guilty. "I know it has to be hard for him, but David's better off with me. He wouldn't do well on Palaven. It's just too rough for him there." Squeezing off another few bullets into the open air, she jabbed at the crab's shell with the butt of her gun, causing it to give a start before starting to crawl away sideways again. Satisfied that the crab was moving in the right direction, she turned around to face Vega again, letting out a soft, put-upon sigh and resting her gun between her hands.

"I'm sorry," she told him, shaking her head. "It's not really your problem. I don't mean to unload on you. It's just… sometimes I wonder if we'd be better off if we did take a break." Turning to look back towards the crab again, she watched as it began to sidestep down the stairs, seeming to be deliberately taking its time as it waddled from one step to the next. "I like him a lot," she said, before quickly amending herself, "...well, hell. I love him. But the distance is really hard." Taking another decisive breath in, she turned her attention towards Vega again, offering him a short, half-hearted shrug, before starting to move across the room to break up the cluster of smaller crabs huddled in the far corner. As soon as they saw her moving their way, the crabs instantly scattered, scuttling around her towards the stairs as if they knew what would be coming if they did not. "I'm still holding out hope, though," she added, turning to look into the next room over. "We've been through hard times before and we still managed to make it work. He's a good guy, Garrus. Stubborn, too. He doesn't give up easily, especially on things he cares about. I feel like if anyone can make this long distance thing work, it's him."

"Yeah," Vega agreed, truthfully. "I think you're right." At this, Shepard turned to look his way again, surprised, but Vega only shrugged at her expression, taking the opportunity to pop the nearly-spent heat sink from his gun before fishing around in his belt pouch for a new one to replace it. "Garrus is a great guy," he said, matter-of-factly, pushing the new sink into his weapon with a click. "Everybody knows he's crazy about you. It makes sense he'd be crazy about David, too. I don't think he'd let something like distance keep him from trying to be a good dad."

"I never said—" Shepard started to say, but quickly cut herself short, realizing Vega had not actually accused her of anything, and instead turning her attention back towards the crabs. "He is a good
"dad," she agreed, shortly, giving a definitive bob of her head. "And I wish he could spend more time with David. Maybe once we're out of the red with credits we can take a trip by Palaven. It couldn't hurt to see what the rebuild effort has been up to." Then, not wanting to delve any further into the conversation, she turned away from Vega again, starting to make her way over towards a group of crabs that had started to creep back into one of the side rooms, hoping that they might avoid detection by pressing themselves as close against the wall as they could manage.

It took barely three more hours to clear all the crabs from inside the barricades, after which the massive creatures were herded away from the stone blockades, pushed about a mile down the shoreline to where they would be less likely to disturb anyone trying to reinhabit the buildings. The walk back to the Kodiak was a peaceful one, and Shepard could not help but feel a bit guilty for enjoying it as she watched the water lap lazily against the shoreline, the wind rustling gently through the low clusters of sparse greenery dotted along the sandy shore. Their heavy boots dug into the soft sand as they walked, every so often kicking up small clusters of powder with their heels, barely picked up by the leisurely breeze that blew through Shepard's hair, cooling the back of her neck. Virmire, for all intents, was the closest Shepard had ever come to experiencing true paradise, and as she rounded the sloping dune, coming up on the Kodiak's landing site, she could not help a small pang of regret at the idea of leaving once more. Pausing a few feet away from the shuttle, she pressed two fingers into her in-ear comm, hardly seeming to notice the look of surprise Vega gave her at the unexpected sojourn.

"EDI?" Shepard asked, waiting for the confirming sound of the AI on the other end. "Any new messages come in for me while I was planetside?"

"No new messages, Shepard," EDI answered. "Are you almost ready to return to the ship?"

Shepard hesitated at the question, glancing over to look at Vega before turning her attention back out towards the waterway, watching as a reed floated lazily down the current of the crystal-clear stream. "Not just yet," she finally answered. "I need to come up to get something, but after that I'll be heading back down again. There's something here I still need to do. Tell Joker to wait up for us a bit."

"Will do, Commander," EDI returned, and Shepard responded with a confirming nod, dropping her hand from her in-ear comm as she turned her attention back to Vega again.

"I hope you brought your swimming gear," she told him, causing him to look up in surprise. "Unless the beach isn't really your thing. I know some people aren't wild about it."

"Are you kidding, Lola?" Vega asked, his bushy brows creeping higher up his forehead the wider his smile grew in response. "I live for the beach. I'm a certified bum. Just give me some water and a skinboard and I'm set."

"Well, to be honest, I was thinking of something a little… slower speed," Shepard admitted, starting to make her way back up into the Kodiak. Pausing at the foot of the carriage, she knocked her heavy boots against the edge of the doorframe, trying to kick off as much sand as she could before stepping into Cortez's clean shuttle. Satisfied she had gotten rid of as much sand as she could, she dropped herself down on the Kodiak's bench, watching as Vega knocked his boots free of sand as well before joining her against the wall and stretching his legs tiredly out in front of him. Taking a deep breath, Vega stretched, reaching his arms up over his head, before letting his hands come to rest back in his lap as he watched the shuttle door close with a hiss. The shuttle ride to the Normandy was short and uneventful, the only conversation a short exchange with Cortez about the crabs, before the Kodiak finally came to a settling stop in the ship's roomy hangar. Without even bothering to wait for Vega, Shepard was quick to jump to her feet, ducking out of the shuttle as soon as the door opened and
starting to make her way for the central elevator.

David was busy with one of his lessons by the time Shepard found him in his playroom with Traynor, but he seemed only too happy to break away from his schooling when asked if he had any interest in trying something fun and new. Apologizing to Traynor for the interruption, Shepard was quick to collect up her son, perching him comfortably against her hip as she made her way back to the central elevator, selecting the floor of the Captain's cabin. Just as EDI had reported, the new message light was dark on her private terminal, giving her one less thing to worry about as she crossed the room to her armour cabinet, setting David down on the bed and starting to strip out of her armour. Kneeling down to the set of drawers under the main locker, she began to rummage through them, searching for something in particular, until she finally seemed to find what she was looking for, pulling it out with a contented grin and holding it up into the light. It seemed unlikely that she would have held onto her bathing suit after having not used it in so many years, but the one-piece still seemed to be in wearable condition, and, from what she could tell, close to her current size. Taking the swimsuit with her into the bathroom, Shepard quickly changed out of her undersuit into it, emerging from the bathroom a few moments later to start to get David ready as well.

Unlike her swimsuit, his swim attire was little more than a pair of repurposed shorts, as his only swim experience up to then had been splashing in the bathroom sink until the age of two. With no bathtub aboard the Normandy, David had graduated directly from sink to shower, giving him no chance to learn how to swim and no experience with open water. Making sure his shorts were drawn just tight enough to ensure they would not fall off in the water, Shepard picked him up again, setting him down on her computer desk, before turning to retrieve his breathing mask from the sterile locker in the corner of her study. "Where we going?" David asked, watching as she pulled the mask out of the locker, his expression wary as his sharp gaze followed her back across the room towards the desk where he sat. He frowned as she approached him with the mask, craning his head back to avoid the cup, only to have the strap slipped quickly over his head faster than he could evade it. Pushing a switch on the side of the breathing-cup, Shepard listened for the sound of air leaving the mask as the rubber lining sealed itself tightly around the contours of his face, until finally, with a soft, assuring beep, a green light came on in the middle of the unit, letting her know it was working and secure.

Unlike his bulkier expeditionary mask, which hooked up to a portable filtration machine, this smaller, handier waterproof mask had no such machine attached. The mask was designed to filter oxygen directly from air or water, but because of the functionality strain put on so small a contraption, the filter had a limited timeframe of use. The mask could only be worn for up to three hours before its power would have to be recharged, but Shepard still felt that would give them plenty of time to have fun. Lifting David onto her hip again, she ran a quick, fussing hand back through his dark down, making sure to take extra care that the mask strap was not scraping any of his fragile spines. Then, satisfied that she had done all she could, she turned for the door of her cabin again, making her way back to the central elevator before returning to the hangar to meet up with Vega for some hopeful fun in the sun. Vega was already waiting for her when she arrived, still wearing his customary skin-tight white shirt, but he had exchanged his usual military slacks for a pair of waterproof board shorts. He smiled widely at the sight of her, giving her a good look up and down, before holding out a hand towards the Kodiak, indicating for her to go in first. Settling down on the shuttle bench, Shepard pulled David securely into her lap, wrapping her arms around her son to keep him from getting too rattled around by the Kodiak's initial takeoff. Vega was quick to join her on the bench, sliding over to sit a few inches away, and David immediately looked up as he moved in closer, seeming much more intrigued by their expedition now that he had a friend in attendance.

The sun was just starting to go down on Virmire by the time they re-landed on the planet's surface, and Shepard was quick to hoist David up onto her hip, not wanting to waste what little time they had to enjoy the beach before nightfall. Leaving her boots in the Kodiak, she picked her way carefully down the sandy dune, making sure not to jostle David as she made her way down to the water's
edge. The river was cool against her skin as she entered the slow-moving water, cautious to look out for any lingering sand crabs as she waded out waist-deep into the stream. Picking up David off her hip, she began to lower him into the water, but as soon as he saw what she was doing, he quickly began to squirm in her grasp, lifting his legs up above his waist as he looked down towards the water in wide-eyed anticipation. As his feet grew closer to the water, David thrashed, letting out a sharp, inhuman shriek of panic, before kicking his legs to try to get away as Shepard struggled to hang onto him. Realizing how frightened he was, she quickly stopped, pulling him back in to her body and letting him wrap his legs around her waist, circling his arms around her neck as he buried his face in her collar-bone. Letting out a soft, thwarted exhale, Shepard patted her son's back gently, petting down his disheveled hair as she turned to start heading for the shore again.

Just then, the sound of splashing reached her ears, and she turned again, a bit surprised, only to see Vega wading enthusiastically towards them across the waist-deep canal. "Hey," he called, offering a heartening smile. "Thought I saw somebody having some trouble over here. Thought I'd come see what the problem was." Reaching out a hand towards David, Vega patted him reassuringly on the back, causing the boy to peer curiously out at him from his mother's shoulder with one wary, bright blue eye. "What's the matter, Chico?" Vega asked, gently. "You're not scared of a little water, are you?" Dipping his hand down to the water again, Vega splashed a bit of it onto David, causing the boy to whine in disapproval, hiking his legs a bit higher up his mother's torso and burying his face in her neck again. "Hey, come on," Vega urged, stopping his splashing, now sounding a bit more discouraged than before. "Water can't hurt you, Chico. Not while your mom's here. She wouldn't let anything happen to you, promise. What's there to be scared of?"

"Turians can't swim," Shepard told him, candidly, speaking in a low voice as she rubbed David's back, causing Vega to look up at her again, a bit confused. "Garrus told me he couldn't do it. I should have known David couldn't do it, either. I shouldn't have tried to force him to." Adjusting David against her waist, she frowned, looking down at him, before letting out another soft sigh. "It's my fault," she said, frankly. "I was trying too hard. I should know better than to try to force him to do new things."

Vega frowned at this explanation, seeming to have difficulty processing her logic, before he shook his head, crossing his arms thoughtfully over his chest. "Come on, Lola," he told her, frankly, causing her to look up at him in surprise. "This isn't the Commander Shepard I know. Whatever happened to the huge risk taker? The woman who defied fate and death itself to beat the Reapers?"

"Toddlers aren't the same as Reapers," Shepard reminded him, fidgeting distractedly with the strap of David's mask as she spoke. "It's a whole different set of rules. Much harder. And believe it or not, I actually don't want this one to die."

Vega grunted at this explanation, seeming still somewhat unsatisfied, but dropped his arms from his chest anyway, instead holding up a hand to indicate towards David again. "Listen, Lola," he told Shepard, candidly. "Turians might not be able to swim, but humans can. He's half yours, so, he's half human. You should at least let him try." Shepard frowned at this reasoning, looking down towards David again, who had nestled the side of his head against her shoulder, listening intently to the conversation. "One more chance couldn't hurt him," Vega urged. "And – who knows, he might even like it." At this, Shepard let out a soft, unintentional huff, causing Vega to drop his hand to his side again, a bit disconcerted by her reaction. "Come on, Lola," he pressed, making Shepard look up at him again, her expression hard to read. "He's just a kid. He doesn't know any better. And besides, if he never tries anything new, how's he supposed to grow?"

At this, Shepard faltered, taken aback, unsure how to react to his reasoning. His argument was valid, his logic sound, but she still found herself hesitant take the risk of having David resent her for forcing him to do something he did not want to do. She turned her head, glancing over towards the shore
again, but her feet seemed unwilling to move from their spot, as if her body wanted her to stay in the water even if her mind did not. Turning her attention back to Vega again, she shifted David against her waist, offering Vega a strained, crooked smile as she tried to regain some semblance of her original poise. "You never used to be this pushy," she told him, her joking tone forced, trying her hardest to sound good-natured despite her mild frustration at the fact.

Vega shrugged, seeming unsurprised by her observation, passing his hands distractedly over the surface of the water as he answered. "Yeah, well," he said, offhandedly. "You learn some things when you're working for hire. Like how to bargain for a livable wage." Jerking a thumb over his shoulder then, he scoffed, shaking his head in disbelief. "Those big company guys, they'd be happy to take the work without paying for any of it," he told her, frankly. "You gotta be tough when you're dealing with those guys. Otherwise you might end up with a sore back and nothing to show for it."

Shepard nodded along with his explanation, seeing the reason in his words, before shifting her hands under David's arms and pulling him away from her waist again, much to his apparent surprise. Then, taking a readying breath in, she began to lower him down towards the water again, forcing herself to ignore his protests as she dipped his legs gently into the canal. She tried her hardest to hold onto him as his struggling began anew, but she found it harder than she remembered, with David thrashing against the stream, clawing at his mother like a drowning cat before letting out a sharp squawking shriek of protest and starting to kick at the water once more. After a few more moments of fighting, his thrashing slowly began to subside, his breathing growing heavy as his haphazard kicking weakened, until he finally stopped struggling completely, realizing it was a fight he could not win. Leaning back against his mother's stomach, he coughed, breathlessly, fogging up his breathing mask, his blue eyes wide like a trapped sparrow's as he waited for something terrible to happen. His ribcage heaved as he stared at the water, seeming convinced that it intended to take him, until finally, with a look of confusion, his rigid posture began to subside, until eventually he went completely still, limp as a ragdoll against her.

Shepard looked down sharply at this new development, afraid she might have accidentally caused her son to have a heart attack, but she found that he was simply staring blankly at the water, his brow furrowed in a thoughtful frown as he attempted to process this new experience. His lips were drawn, his expression set, the same look he had when he watched her take off her armour, and, after a moment, his hands began to slowly drift across the surface of the water, attempting to clear the ripples away so he could see the rest of his body under the surface. It seemed to be taking him a while to rationalize that the rest of him was still there despite him being submerged up to his waist, but Shepard did not mind the wait, allowing him to understand it in his own good time. Turning to look curiously up at Shepard, David passed his hands over the water's surface again, causing his mother to smile down at him as she watched him grow accustomed to this new sensation.

"It's water," David finally observed, his speech halting as he puzzled it out. "Lots… lots. So much water. What do I do with all of it?" Looking back over the canal again, he paused in his wading, going completely still again as he stared at something somewhere far down the river bank. "Where is it come from?" he asked, still curious. "Where is it go when we're done?" Wavering another moment, he lifted his chin, observant, watching as Vega drifted freely down the calm canal, his hands held out at his sides as he allowed himself to float. Then, giving a sharp kick, David squirmed in Shepard's grasp again, turning around bodily in her arms and causing her to have to readjust her grip so as not to lose him in the water. "Want to go," he told her, earnestly, barely speaking above a whisper, reaching up to try to wrap his wet arms around her neck. "Can't use it all. Please, Mama. Someone else can have it. Want to go. Want to go."

"David," Shepard chided, gently, pulling him in closer so he could more easily take hold of her. Vega frowned over at them from across the stream, concerned, but Shepard only shook her head, assuring him there was nothing to worry about. Righting himself from his relaxed float, Vega
paused, watching them for a moment, before starting to wade back out of the water and up the dune towards the Kodiak again. Letting out a soft, defeated sigh, Shepard hiked David up onto her hip again, watching as he kept trying to hold his feet out of the water, not wanting to touch it for too long for fear he might contaminate it for someone else's use. "David, the water is for everyone," Shepard explained, passing her hand over the water's surface in the hopes that it might help illustrate her point. "It's nobody's water. It belongs to no one. You don't have to worry about using it." Turning to look out over the water, she pointed towards the farthest reaches of the river. "Look at how much water there is," she told him, causing him to look up in interest, still not seeming entirely convinced. "That's way too much for any one person to use all by themselves. You only have to use as much as you want, then the rest belongs to anyone else who decides they want to use it."

David paused for another moment longer, seeming hesitant to take this explanation in. Then, before he could make a decision, the sound of shouting suddenly reached his ears, and he looked up in the direction of the Kodiak, startled, only to watch as Vega and Cortez came running down the dunes towards the water's edge. "Look who I found, Chico," Vega laughed, jerking his thumb over his shoulder towards Cortez, who had stripped down to his boxer shorts and was now wading his way into the water towards Shepard. "This guy says he can teach you how to swim, but I bet him credits I could teach you better. Who do you think is a better teacher, huh? Me? Or Esteban over here?"

"Please," Cortez laughed, his husky voice bright. "You couldn't even teach a rock to sink." Wading his way over to Shepard and David, Cortez positioned himself across from the two of them, starting to splash his hands against the water's surface, getting David's attention. After a few moments of harmless splashing, he began to flick water in Shepard's direction, causing her to give a short laugh of surprise, holding her arm up to cover her face. Realizing they were playing some sort of game, David began to shift in her arms, letting his legs drop back into the water as he reached for the surface to splash back. Cortez laughed as the splashing grew louder, the jets of water growing ever more impressive as the two of them began to soak one another, trying to see who could make the biggest wave. Just then, an enormous splash came crashing towards Cortez, and he turned, surprised, only to see Vega poised to strike, intent to join in on the fun as well. Taking advantage of the momentary downtime, Vega was quick to send a huge splash of water towards Shepard, causing her to give a yelp of surprise as the wave came crashing into her. David squealed with laughter as Shepard began to join in, helping her make bigger and bigger waves to splash both men intent on taking her out, until finally the four of them were soaking wet, too tired to splash anymore.

Now that he had gotten David back into the water, Cortez was quick to take up position across from Shepard and her son again, this time holding out his arms enticingly towards the two of them. "Okay, David," he coaxed, speaking slowly, causing David to look up at him again, attentive. "Now what I want you to do… is kick. Kick like you're riding a bicycle. Kick." David faltered at this odd description, his brow furrowing into a hard, confused line, and Cortez looked up at Shepard for guidance, only to see her shaking her head. Turning his attention towards David again, Cortez cleared his throat, gently, indicating with both hands for him to come across. "Okay, not a bike," he said, thinking on his feet. "Uhh… like you're kicking a soccer ball, then. Or any kind of ball. Just kick your legs." Again, David stared at him, his expression blank, and Cortez looked up at Shepard again, seeming a bit discouraged. "Not a sports player, huh?" he asked, trying to make light of the situation. Then, looking back down at David again, he took a step closer, holding out his arms. "Okay, David," Cortez said, trying hard to think fast. "Just… do with your legs like you're stamping your feet. Like you're stomping down hard. That's good."

At this, David seemed to perk up, finally understanding the prompt, before starting to kick his legs forcefully under him, slowly at first, but then with more drive. Cortez grinned as he watched the boy's progress, nodding reassurance as he urged him on, until finally, with a grunt of effort, David began to struggle forward, kicking his legs awkwardly as he paddled off-rhythm, floundering towards Cortez's waiting arms. "Hey, that's great!" Cortez encouraged, taking another small step
closer, making the distance between them a bit easier for David to cross. "Come on, David! You can do it! Just a few more kicks, that's all!" David gave another kick at the praise, dragging himself forward with an awkward, limping paddle, hardly seeming to notice his mother following along behind him as he splashed his way over to Cortez's waiting hands. As soon as David reached him, Cortez quickly picked the boy up, lifting him up out of the water with a cheer of encouragement before setting him back down again and turning him in Vega's direction. Vega stood with his hands at the ready, beckoning for David to swim to his arms, and this time David seemed to know exactly what to do as he paddled his way lopsidedly from Cortez to Vega, and from there back to Shepard's proud, waiting arms.

David was already half asleep by the time Shepard started to carry him out of the water, having long since tired himself out from almost an hour of swimming. He had long since drifted off to sleep by the time they made their way back to the Kodiak, and as Cortez grabbed his dry shirt out of the pilot's chair, using it to dry off his buzzed hair, Shepard sat down on the shuttle bench with David, rubbing his back distractedly as she watched Vega trekking over the crest of the dune, the last one to make his way back to the shuttle. Dropping himself down on the bench beside her, Vega let out a heavy sigh, running a hand back through his wet mohawk as he looked over at Shepard and her sleeping child. "Out like a light," he commented, grinning, before turning his attention back to the shuttle door, watching as it hissed shut over the pristine landscape, closing them inside.

The Kodiak whined as it fired into life, the thrusters kicking up a bluster of sand as the shuttle lifted up off the ground, starting to make its way for the sky. Looking down at her child in her lap, Shepard patted him gently on the back, petting his wet down away from his face before pressing a soft kiss against his sleeping forehead. Then, letting out a soft sigh, she leaned back against the shuttle bench, listening to the ambiance of the Kodiak, before turning to look over at Vega again and nudging him in the arm with her elbow. "Hey," she told him, quietly, causing him to blink a few times in surprise. "...Thanks."

"For what?" Vega asked, attentive.

"For this," Shepard answered, tilting her head gently downwards towards her sleeping boy. "For convincing me to go back to Virmire. If it hadn't been for you... none of this would have happened."

Vega paused for another moment, seeming less surprised than he had before. Then, finally, he shook his head, letting out a soft chuckle and shrugging his broad shoulders as he turned his attention back towards the wall of the shuttle. "Nah," he told her, casually. "You would've gone whether I was here or not. I'm just glad I got to be here when you did go."

Shepard hesitated, unsure how to respond, before turning her gaze towards the shuttle door as well, allowing the conversation to lapse into comforting, thoughtful silence. Then, looking up at Vega again, she faltered, frowning a bit, before asking him, quietly, "Did you really bet Cortez credits he couldn't teach David how to swim?"

At this, Vega gave a short, unintentional bark of laughter, before shaking his head again, more decisively this time. "Nah," he answered, truthfully. "I wasn't in the mood for losing credits. I've seen Esteban interact with kids before. I knew I didn't stand a chance." Turning to look over at David, he reached over, touching him gently on his sleeping cheek, before giving a soft, fond huff of breath and turning his gaze up towards Shepard again. "He's really something special, Lola," he told Shepard, gently. "You're a lucky mom. And Garrus is a lucky dad."

"Yeah," Shepard agreed, looking down towards David as well, her expression a bit sad despite her efforts to hide it. "I wish Garrus could have been here to see him swimming. I think he would have liked that."
"I'm sure he'll like being told about it," Vega assured her, shrugging again, tucking his hands between his knees. "And hey, maybe next time David can teach him how to do it. Wouldn't that be a trip." Chuckling again, this time a bit weaker, he looked down towards the floor, taking a deep breath in before letting it out in a slow, soft, pensive sigh. "Thanks for letting me come back, Commander," he suddenly spoke up again, causing Shepard to look up at him in surprise this time. "I know you didn't have to, but… I'm really glad you did."

Shepard faltered for a moment, unsure what to say in response. Then, freeing one arm from around David, she reached over towards Vega, putting an encouraging hand on his back instead. Vega looked up at her at the gesture, and she smiled over at him, causing him to pause, before offering back an equally warm smile in return. "Anytime, Vega," she assured him, fondly. "Anytime."
The new message light was flashing on Shepard's private terminal by the time she made her way back up to her cabin, but she took a moment to first tuck David into bed under her comforter before making her way back over to her desk and dropping down in her seat to read. The only new message in her inbox was one with no clear sender, only an easily traceable origin address that led to somewhere on Omega, making it seem that whoever had sent the message had merely forgotten to include a name. The message was concise, informing Shepard that the sender was now working on Omega and would enjoy seeing her and David if they could spare the time to drop by the station, but despite the shortness of the communication, the speaking tone was unmistakeable, and Shepard could not help herself from smiling as she read through it. Sending back a quick e-mail confirming she would try to make her way over to Omega when she could, she closed down her work station, moving to her armour locker to remove her casual clothes from the drawers, before going into the bathroom to shower and change.

She tried to make as little noise as possible as she left her cabin for the lower floors, not wanting to disturb David from his sleep, though she figured he would probably be sleeping soundly for another hour or so, at least. Making her way to the elevator, she took it down to the second level, stopping momentarily by Traynor's station to check on the progress of their payment from Virmire before heading up to the cockpit to see how Joker and EDI were faring. The two pilots were conversing lightly as Shepard entered their midst, but they quickly stopped their conversation as soon as she came to stand behind them, turning around to glance back at her in interest as she folded her arms over her chest, looking out over the sea of stars visible through the windows.

"Is there something we can help you with, Commander?" EDI asked, curiously.

Shepard nodded in response, glancing down towards the fuel and FTL gauges on Joker's display, checking to make sure both were still at acceptable levels before turning her attention back up towards her pilot and co-pilot. "I want to head to Omega," she told them, firmly. "I have some personal business to take care of there. An old friend we haven't seen in a while."

"Omega?" Joker asked, frowning a bit, seeming to completely miss the bit about meeting up with an old friend. "You sure you want to head to Omega, Commander? That's… really far away. It'll take us at least three days to get there." Glancing back towards his navigational display, he checked the ship's gauges as well, reaching up to adjust his hat anxiously as he tried to figure out how much fuel it would take to get to Omega on a relay queue schedule. "Are there no other jobs a bit closer to here you could take first?" he asked, hopefully, turning to look back towards Shepard again. "Maybe save some time, resources…? We could really use a little monetary padding. Not have to be flying on fumes all the time."

"I wish there were," Shepard answered, regretfully, making a face. "Ereba hasn't sent me anything else, though. Probably won't for a few days still." Letting out a short, frustrated sigh, she tucked her hands into the pockets of her hoodie, looking up at the starry expanse again and shrugging, noncommittal. "Ereba's doing the best she can with what she's given," she added, thoughtfully. "She's not the only attendant the submitted jobs get passed through, so I'm bound to miss out on some. She's doing her best, though. Non-construction jobs are just… hard to come across these days, apparently."

"Apparently," Joker agreed, sounding equally disappointed. Turning around in his chair again, he folded his hands together, miming cracking his knuckles before letting out a tired exhale and returning his attention to the controls in front of him. "Well, maybe you can pick up some work on
"Omega while you're there," he suggested, helpfully. "There's bound to be something there that needs transporting, or... to be otherwise taken care of. Omega's full of people looking for favours."

"I'd like to keep my criminal activities to a minimum, if possible," Shepard returned, half-joking, looking down at Joker with a good-natured smirk. "I don't want my kid growing up thinking his mom is some kind of felon."

"It is doubtful that David understands the concept of legality at such a young age," EDI observed, blinking a few times, causing Shepard to look her way, listening. "He is developmentally capable of understanding the concepts of 'good' and 'bad', but 'legal' and 'illegal' are much more complex. He would likely see you no differently whether your activities were strictly legal or not."

Shepard paused at this, unsure exactly how to respond, before shrugging again and turning her attention back to Joker and the panoramic window. "You're probably right," she conceded, dismissively. "But it's still the principle of the thing. Either way, I'm sure there's something legal on Omega I could possibly look into. Like... mercenary work. Omega always has mercenary work available."

"And mercenary work isn't illegal?" Joker asked, seeming sceptical of this alternative.

"No," Shepard answered, shaking her head. "Not illegal. Just... frowned upon."

At this, Joker gave a short, incredulous laugh, holding up his hands in mock dismissal, before returning them to the controls again, shaking his head with a smirk. "Well as long as it's only frowned upon," he returned, sounding less than convinced. "Then I guess everything's okay."

"So glad to have your approval, Joker," Shepard told him, offering an amused grin in return.

On a large scale, Omega had not changed much in the three or so years since its liberation from Cerberus rule, but Shepard could still see the places where progress had been started to be made despite its insolvent beginnings. Ever since Aria, Nyreen, and Gavorn had taken over joint control of the station, extra effort had been put into providing for Omega's civilian population, and though crime was still prevalent on Omega, the amount of casual crime versus professional crime had dropped considerably in correlation with the steady rise of employment fields becoming more and more readily available as the rebuild effort moved forward. The streets of the station were still bleak and grey, the air still stagnant with industrial smog, but it was easy to tell that an effort was being made to improve these things, little by little. From tiny details like streetlamps being put up to make safer, better-lit streets, to larger details like the new, massive air filtration facility Shepard could see peering over the crest of the city's horizon, drawing the greasy factory air into its enormous tower only to pump it back out again cleaner for breathing, it was apparent that Aria and Nyreen had taken their promise to try to improve Omega to heart, and Shepard found herself feeling almost guilty for ever doubting Aria at her word.

Gavorn's involvement in Omega's improvement was easier to spot, even from a cursory glance. Everywhere Shepard looked, armed turian sentries stood posted, one or two to every corner, watching the streets for suspicious activity. One of the guards looked up as Shepard passed, but only offered her a friendly nod of his head and twitch of his mandibles as she continued on by, making her way towards the side alley that led to the back entrance of Afterlife. A small crowd had gathered at the back of the club, most just standing around smoking while they waited to get in, but even so, it did not take Shepard long to find who she was looking for. Weaving her way through the hazy throng, she reached out a hand towards her contact, letting it come to rest on her shoulder, causing her to look up in surprise at having been touched. It did not take long for her expression to relax again, however, quickly changing from a look of surprise to the familiar, toothy smile that Shepard
had missed so much. Beaming brightly, Jack embraced Shepard, hugging her tightly for a moment before pulling away, revealing dark circles under her eyes, likely from sleepless nights and worry, something Shepard was all too familiar with.

"Look at you, hot mama," Jack exclaimed, giving Shepard a quick, inclusive once-over. "Damn, you look amazing. How the hell did you get back into such good shape after having a kid?" Apart from the dark circles, Jack looked almost the same way she had the last time Shepard had seen her, with only a few noticeable differences – her body was a bit thicker all around, stronger and more muscular, much healthier-looking than the emaciated girl she had released from the cryo prison barely four years earlier. Her hair had been allowed to grow out a bit, and she now wore only one side shaved down, the rest falling past her jaw on the other side, obscuring one of her ears. Her fashion sense had stayed almost exactly the same, though Shepard could not help being a bit wary of the hefty pair of spiked brass knuckles she wore across the back of one hand. Forcing herself to look away from the intimidating accessory, Shepard offered a smile back, giving Jack's hands a good, reassuring squeeze before finally allowing herself to let go of her friend.

"Stress," Shepard answered her question, giving a short, nervous laugh in return. She knew Jack would probably be interested to know the specifics of David's unusual birth, but she figured right now was not the ideal time to go into intimate details. "No, but I... I'm good," she amended, raising a hand to quickly dismiss any worry she might have caused. "I'm just fine. But – how are you doing? I haven't seen you in... god, it has to have been almost a year."

"Somewhere around there," Jack agreed, nodding along with the estimate. "I've been good, though. Can't really complain. Got steady work, which is all that really matters." Jerking a tattooed thumb over her shoulder towards the flashing sign of Afterlife, she gave a soft, nonchalant huff of breath, letting her arm return to her side before shrugging, matter-of-factly. "It's no cakewalk, but at least it pays," she added, sounding almost indifferent. "And plus, shit, I've always been good at knockin' heads. Now I'm gettin' paid to do it. Can't really compete with that."

"Not watching your language anymore, huh?" Shepard asked, teasing, noting the casual drop of a familiar swear.

Jack faltered at the observation, seeming surprised, as if unsure how to respond for a moment. Then, finally, she made a sour face, scrunching up her nose in disgust. "Yeah, well... I guess," she answered, unhappily, making Shepard wonder if she had said something wrong. "I mean... it wasn't really my choice, y'know? I really wanted to keep in practice for when I went back to Grissom, but... it's hard to be taken seriously as a bouncer when you say things like 'friggin' and 'darn'." Letting out a soft, disenchanted scoff, she looked down towards the discoloured pavement, sniffing once, offhandedly, before looking back up at Shepard again with a frown. "I can't wait 'til Grissom opens up again and I can go back to teaching," she told her, honestly. "This place isn't terrible, but... I'm spoiled now, ever since working with those kids. Working here just makes me realize how lucky I was to work there for as long as I did."

"I'm sorry, Jack," Shepard apologized, feeling awkward and guilty that her good-natured teasing had caused Jack to react so strongly. She hesitated a moment, unsure what else there was to say, before clearing her throat gently and raising her brows. "I haven't heard anything about Grissom Academy lately," she commented, changing the subject, hoping to move into more pleasant territory. "What's happening on that front? Have you heard anything from Kahllee Sanders about when they might open their doors again?" As she spoke, a large, grizzled-looking turian passed close behind the two of them, making her realize that they were still standing in the middle of the thoroughfare. Waving Jack over to a more secluded corner, she turned her attention back to the younger woman, tucking her hands in the pockets of her hoodie as she listened intently to what Jack had to say.
Jack shrugged at the question, offhandedly, her eyes moving from Shepard's face again, lingering on something in the adjacent alleyway as they spoke about her old line of work. "I dunno," she finally answered, seeming hesitant to even talk about it. "I've been hearing from Kahlee… here and there. Mostly just small updates, though. Barely worth sending. Catching up from week to week… that kind of thing." Going quiet, she shifted uneasily, her frown drawing deeper as her plush lips pursed into a hard, thin, unhappy line. "Grissom Academy is… it's going through some rough times," she finally admitted, speaking up again, looking up at Shepard with a determined expression, too stubborn to look away anymore though Shepard could tell she wanted to. "I mean, clearly it would, after all that Cerberus shit… but that was only the tip of the iceberg, really. Grissom is in danger of shutting down. They barely had any money as it is… all their funds went into providing for the kids, y'know? It was an Alliance-funded safehouse academic program, and… I mean, what sick fuck attacks a place like that?"

Letting out a sharp, disgusted huff, she shook her head, exasperated, her hands digging distractedly at her hips for pockets only to find no solace in the tight material of her pants. "All the money they could spare, they put into rebuilding the school," she went on, determined now to tell Shepard everything. "Anderson even petitioned the Alliance to try to shift around some of its relief funds to help out, but as soon as things started looking up for the school, that's when the lawsuits started rolling in. Liability lawsuits, like – fuck that shit! Who do these people think they are?!

"The parents were probably concerned for their kids," Shepard observed, frowning faintly. "I know if my son had been at that school when it had been attacked I would be beyond upset. I'm not saying the attack was Grissom's fault, but… I could see where the lawsuits would come from."

"But we did everything to keep those kids safe from Cerberus," Jack insisted, unconvinced, shoving a hand out in front of her to further express her frustration. "And plus, those rat bastards, the ones actually filing the lawsuits? I know who they are. I kept track. They didn't care enough about their kids to even send a goddamn birthday card while they were there, but as soon as they saw some potential profit, suddenly they're all caring and protective? Fuck them!" Her voice cracked angrily as she spat out these words, causing a nearby conversing couple to pause in their discussion to glance over, surprised. Jack paid no attention to them, instead letting out another hard huff of breath, balling her hand into a fist at her side before taking a breath to go on. "Anderson did all he could to petition an Alliance-affiliated attorney to fight the suits," she explained, trying her best to keep her voice steady as she spoke. "That guy is good, but the suits just keep coming and coming, appeals on appeals… they're trying to bury him in paperwork. Kahlee thinks they're hoping that if they file enough suits, he'll just give up. Anderson says he's too good to cave, but Kahlee… she thinks he might."

Letting out another hard huff of frustration, Jack gritted her teeth, giving a sharp, muted noise of anger, before letting out a deep, composing breath and holding her hands up, calming herself down. "Anyway," she said, much more collected. "Kahlee had to lay me off since the Academy didn't have enough left to pay me, and she refused to let me stay on as a full-time volunteer. She said with the galaxy the way it was, I'd be better off finding real, paying work… that way I'd have a monetary cushion in case… Grissom shut down for good." Faltering again, Jack hesitated, seeming surprised to hear the words coming out of her own mouth, before clearing her throat gently and swallowing hard, as if her palate had suddenly gone dry. "But, it's not all bad," she added, trying hard to sound optimistic, though Shepard could tell it was proving difficult. "Kahlee did tell me that if Grissom ever got back on its feet again, hiring me back would be her first order of business. It is a little disconcerting that it's been three years since Grissom shut down after the Cerberus attacks, but… I've still got hope. The galaxy needs a place like Grissom Academy. People won't just let it fizzle out. Once they realize how important it is, I'm sure…"

Trailing off again, she bit down on the edge of her lip, twisting her finger anxiously around in her
belt loop until it began to turn fiery pink. "On the bright side," she added, speaking up again, causing Shepard to look up at her once more, attentive. "I know they've at least been getting some relief money. I've been donating half my paycheck anonymously every month for the past three years. It's not a lot... barely living wage... but I figure they can find a better use for it than I can." Shrugging again, she retrieved her hand from her belt loop, instead pressing her palms flat against her thighs, seeming unsure where else to put them. "So what about you?" she finally asked, causing Shepard to raise her brows, intrigued. "What happened to you and what's-his-name? I never saw the two of you apart during the War. Is he here now, or... what's going on with that?"

"Who, Garrus?" Shepard asked, surprised by the question. Jack had never been much for taking an interest in Shepard's personal relationships, except to make the occasional off-colour comment about her interest in other species, and for a moment she had no idea how to respond, unsure if Jack was honestly curious or just desperate to change the subject. "Garrus is fine," she finally answered, trying not to sound too unsure, herself. "He's still on Palaven, working on the rebuild. He doesn't get a lot of free time in his line of work, but... he still tries to make time for us when he can."

"'Us' being you and the little guy?" Jack clarified, pointing a curious finger in the direction of the Normandy.

"David," Shepard answered, nodding. "He doesn't get to see his father as much as we might hope, but... he seems happy, regardless. He knows who Garrus is, at least." Taking a deep breath, she held it in a moment, her gaze straying a bit from Jack's face as she thought. Then, letting her breath out again in a long, low exhale, she shook her head, her brow furrowing in a pensive frown, before looking up towards Jack again, her expression more sombre this time. "Truth be told... Garrus and I have been having a rough spot for about two years now," she finally admitted, speaking in barely above a low murmur, as if afraid some member of her crew might be listening in on their conversation and report back to Garrus on the matter. "Ever since David was born, it feels like... we can't agree on anything anymore. We used to get along so well, and now... I don't know. Something's changed."

"You had a kid," Jack reminded her, frankly. "Things always change when you have kids. You two are just trying to do the best you can in a situation that... shit, nobody's ever dealt with before." Shrugging again, she crossed her tattooed arms over her chest, giving a soft, impressed scoff before tossing her hair away from her face. "And for what it's worth," she added, wryly, "to both of your credit... the fact that you haven't killed one another over this yet is kind of remarkable in its own way. Most people can't even handle having a kid of their own species, let alone one that's a mix of two."

Shepard faltered at these words of assurance, before finally giving a soft, comforted laugh, dropping her gaze to her boots again and nodding along with Jack's sentiment. "I guess you're right," she admitted, unable to help but feel a bit better about the situation despite herself. Jack always seemed to know just what to say to cut to the heart of a matter, and this conversation was no different. Taking a deep breath in then, Shepard lifted her head again, pushing the thought of her crumbling relationship from her mind before jerking an indicative thumb over her shoulder towards where the Normandy was docked at the edge of the station. "Would you like to come aboard and meet him?" she asked, good-naturedly, causing Jack to look up in surprise at the question, as if she had not been expecting it. Shepard's smile widened, and she indicated with her thumb again, causing Jack to glance in the direction of the unseen ship before looking back at Shepard again, seeming a bit confused by the offer. "David," Shepard clarified, causing Jack's expression to clear instantly. "Do you want to come aboard and meet him? I'm sure he'd be ecstatic to meet you. He loves meeting new people, especially people I used to work with."

"I'd love to," Jack exclaimed, unable to keep a broad smile from her face at the offer. Then, realizing
something, she hesitated, glancing over her shoulder towards Afterlife again, before turning her attention back to Shepard and giving a thwarted huff of breath. "But… I can't," she said, indicating towards the nightclub with a toss of her head. "I have to get back to work. I'm not really even supposed to be fraternizing now, not while I'm on the clock. I already took my break, so I can't really get away again until the end of my shift, and that's not for another couple hours." Letting out another sigh, she blew her hair out of her face again, reaching up to tuck it behind her ear only to have it fall out once more. "I wish you'd told me you were coming by," she added, making a face, disappointed. "I would've asked for the day off. But – hey, maybe when my shift is over, you could bring him on by and we could get to know each other? How's that sound?"

"Good to me," Shepard answered, agreeably. Then, thinking quickly, she added, "Hey… you wouldn't happen to know if anyone's looking for someone to do some work for them around here, would you? Work's been kind of tough to find these days, and… well, you seem to know everyone here. I was hoping you might have some inside intel on where I might look for some work."

Shrugging a bit, she scuffed the heel of her heavy boot against the concrete, trying not to let on with her expression just how much she needed this job. "If you don't know of anything, that's fine," she put in, offhanded. "I'm sure I can find something if I just ask around. I just thought, you know me better than anyone here. You'd probably know where to look for the kind of work I can do."

Jack thought for a moment on this request, running the pad of her thumb pensively over the bulky side of her brass knuckles, before giving a reassuring nod and looking up at Shepard again, reaching out a hand to clap her on the arm. "Come on," she told her, jerking her chin towards the back entrance of Afterlife. "I know somebody you can talk to in here. I think you know him, but if not I'll introduce you. He's the one that got me the bouncer job, so he can probably find something for you to do." Sliding her arm through the crook of Shepard's elbow, she started to steer her back towards the bar, giving a nod of recognition to the bouncer at the door before heading down the stairs to the lower level, leading Shepard as she went.

Shepard had been in Afterlife a dozen times before during her visits to Omega, but she almost did not recognize the club this time as Jack led her through the neon dancefloor towards a door at the far back end of the hall. The previously dirty and dingy club had been polished to a shine, and everything that had been destroyed in the fight with Cerberus had been replaced, meaning a new shiny chrome bartop with matching stools and a brand-new dancefloor made of panels that lit up when patrons stepped on them while dancing. Even the sound system had been improved, the thrumming bass of the dance music vibrating up through the floor into the soles of Shepard's shoes, making her body feel tingly and warm as she followed Jack to the private lounge at the back, waiting for the door to slide open with a hiss to allow the two women inside. A large, grizzled krogan sat on a padded bench at the far back of the room, sprawled out comfortably with an asari dancer curled up against each arm, but he looked up from his gathered company as soon as Jack entered, watching with interest as she pulled Shepard around, showing her off.

"Shepard, there's someone I'd like you to meet," Jack told her, indicating towards the krogan with both hands, proudly. "This is Patriarch. Patriarch, this is Commander Shepard. I don't know if you two know each other—"

"Shepard!" Patriarch boomed, cutting her off, causing Shepard to smile in return, glad to be recognized even after so many years. Getting heavily to his feet, the old krogan shuffled over to where she stood, grasping hold of one of her hands and offering it a hearty shake. "Of course I know the Commander," he said, giving a rasping, toothy chuckle. "Why, she and I fought in the resistance together! She was also once a part of my krantt. Helped preserve my honour against a group of delinquent thugs. I owe her my eternal gratitude."

"Great," Jack answered, grinning in return. "Then maybe you can help her find a job. She's looking
"A job, huh?" Patriarch rumbled, giving Shepard a quick once-over, his massive claws still wrapped around her much smaller hand. "Well, I bet I could think of something for you to do. But first, let me buy you a drink, Commander. I bet you're parched after your long trip to Omega." Taking his hands away from hers, he placed one of them on her back instead, steering her out of the private lounge and into the much larger bar area. Dropping himself down into the largest semi-circle booth on one side of the dance hall, he waved over one of the asari dancers, indicating for her to bring them two drinks before turning his attention back to Shepard again. "So, you're looking for a job, are you?" he asked. "Well, can't say there's much to do around here. A few odd jobs crop up every so often, but mostly it's all rebuild work. Manual labour, that kind of thing. Shopkeeping. Stuff with a timecard." Looking up as the asari dancer came by their table again, he thanked her for their drinks with a nod of his huge head, sliding Shepard's bright purple drink across the table towards her before pulling his in for a sip.

"I was hoping for something a little less… permanent," Shepard admitted, pulling the umbrella out of her drink and starting to play with it, anxiously. "Mercenary work, or… something to that degree. Something with a limited timeframe and a definitive payout. Anything like that available?"

At this question, Patriarch paused, thoughtful, his reptilian eyes rolling back a bit in his head as he pondered, the faintest slivers of his clear eyelids creeping up to cover the edge of his retina. Then, letting out another long, slow rumble, he lifted his head, seeming to remember something of interest, before looking back towards Shepard again and clutching his drink, preparing to speak. "There is… some good work like that on Omega," he said, speaking almost agonizingly slow. "But most of it keeps getting snatched up by this… mercenary. The Captain, they call him. He's good – so they say – but he keeps taking all the good work before anyone else can get to it. It's frustrating, especially for people like us… too old to learn any new trades." Shepard faltered a bit at this description, unsure if he was referring to her as part of his inclusive 'us', but resisted the urge to ask just how old he thought she really was. "Mercenary work is all some people have," Patriarch went on, seeming to completely miss her affront. "But this guy seems to have a monopoly on Omega. Some people have tried to do something about it… some even tried banding together to take him out. But he always ended on top. We're more or less come to accept it as a fact of life."

"Sounds like another Archangel situation," Shepard observed, running her finger distractedly around the lip of her glass. In response, Patriarch shook his broad head, slowly, letting out a deep, thoughtful hum.

"No," he answered, frankly. "This guy is nothing like Archangel. Archangel was the scourge of Omega. Playing by his own rules, going after the bad guys… spreading his own particular brand of justice. This guy… he's just in it for the money." Letting out another short, deep grunt, he leaned forward in his seat a bit, adjusting himself on the bench as he reached forward, curling his hand pensively around his drink. "Archangel wasn't in it for the money," he added, doggedly. "He wasn't even really in it for the glory. He was just a headstrong fool with a grandiose goal, using whatever means he deemed necessary to reach his ends." Taking a sip of ryncol, he set down his half-empty glass again, letting out a sigh of satisfaction before giving a deep, almost conspiratorial chuckle. "It's kind of romantic in a way," he said, looking up at Shepard again, his green eyes bright. "When you think about it. The rogue vigilante… that's a young man's game. What I wouldn't give to be young again."

Shepard smiled faintly at this last addendum, picking up her drink to take a sip of it, when she suddenly found her attention drawn to another patron sitting alone in a far corner of the nightclub. This new individual, another krogan, did not seem to be interacting with any of the other patrons, but was staring intently at Shepard and Patriarch as if she had been watching them the entire time.
Pretending she had not noticed the looker-on, Shepard quickly finished her sip, setting down her drink again and trying her hardest to act nonchalant as she turned her attention back to Patriarch once more. "Don't look now, but there's someone watching us," she told him, keeping her voice low so only he could hear. "Back corner, my two o' clock. Female krogan, green eyes, red face scarf. Anyone you or Aria know?"

Patriarch frowned at the description, shifting restlessly in his seat, seeming to be resisting with great difficulty the urge to turn around and look. "Doesn't sound like anyone I know," he admitted, shaking his massive head. "But, lots of upstarts pass through here every day. Could just be a kid, fresh off-world, looking to make a quick bloody buck." Reaching forward for his glass again, he took another sip of his drink, letting out a satisfied sigh as he set it back down again, turning one curious eye onto Shepard. "You think somebody sent her after you?" he asked, sounding almost eager at the idea that she might be in some sort of danger. "Did you piss anybody off more than usual lately?"

"Nobody that I know of," Shepard admitted, glancing over in the direction of the female krogan again. The only person she could think of who might have had a problem with her was the TMX dealer she had helped send to jail, though she figured it was highly unlikely he or his associates would have the time or income to send someone after her personally, especially when she was certain TMX dealers got taken out all the time. The krogan female still sat firmly in her seat, though she was no longer looking at Shepard and Patriarch, instead watching with some degree of boredom as a turian couple danced together on the dance floor. Returning her attention to Patriarch again, Shepard picked up her drink, taking a quick sip, before wetting her lips and setting it back down again, drumming her fingers anxiously against the polished tabletop. "So where can I find this mercenary?" she asked, causing Patriarch to look up at her in surprise, as if he had not been anticipating the question. "Maybe I can convince him to lay off a bit. Give someone else a chance to earn some money. Even if he says no, it never hurts to try."

"If you think you can convince him, I'm not going to stop you," Patriarch answered, frankly, giving a deep, gruff grunt at her boldness. "He's a tough old bird, I'll tell you that. He lives in the old quarantine zone, though now it's all been converted into public housing. First wave of the new improvements. He moves addresses from time to time, little efforts to keep people off his scent, but the last one I heard is right here." Pulling up his omni-tool, he punched something into the keypad, accessing a map of Omega's streets before passing his omni-tool sensor over hers, transferring the data. "You could probably find him by just asking around in there, come to think of it," he added, allowing his omni-tool to flicker out again before reaching forward for another sip of his drink. "Everyone over there seems to know one another. I don't know how they keep track, but… somehow, they do."

Shepard nodded along, half-listening, pulling up the map of Omega on her omni-tool screen and memorizing the number of the marked address before allowing the projection to collapse again. Then, picking up her drink, she indicated towards him with it, offering him a toast of thanks, before finishing it off and setting the empty glass back down again, feeling the burn of the liquid as it made its way down her throat. "Thanks, Patriarch," she told him, offering him a friendly cuff on the arm before starting to slide her way out of the booth. Back on her feet, she gave herself a quick brush down, straightening her hoodie and starting to pull up her banking information on her omni-tool to pay for the drink, but Patriarch quickly held out a clawed hand, stopping her from transferring funds, causing her to look up in surprise as he shook his massive head.

"Drinks are on the house," he told her, assuredly, patting her forearm with his meaty paw. "You just focus on talking to that mercenary. Oh, and Shepard..." Here, she looked up again, expectantly, watching as Patriarch took a deep breath in, clearly trying to appear nonchalant though she could see the worry in his haggard expression. "Try not to get yourself killed," he told her, offhandedly. "I
think Jack would be mighty disappointed if that happened. Can't have one of my bouncers getting sad on me. Bad for business. You understand."

Shepard paused for a moment, unsure how to respond, before an understanding smile finally began to split her face, and she reached a hand forward, clapping it reassuringly on Patriarch's massive shoulder. "Don't worry, old man," she told him, agreeably. "I don't intend to die. Not today. Besides, you know me better than that. I still have unfinished business." Taking her hand away from his shoulder, she pointed instead towards her empty glass, causing him to look towards it as well, as if expecting to see something new there. "Have you ever known me to have just one drink?" she asked, causing him to pause in thought, considering. Then, realizing she was right, he gave a deep, comforted chuckle, turning his attention back to her and gripping his own nearly-finished drink in one giant claw, as if afraid she might try to take it from him if he were not paying close attention to it. "I'll be back for that second round," Shepard told him, pointing a playful finger at his face. "Don't forget that. You still owe me."

"Put it on my tab," Patriarch laughed, reassured, before lifting his drink to her and finishing the rest of it down.

The public housing sector of Omega was much lighter on police presence than the commercial district, a fact which Shepard found odd, as she had always thought that people were far more likely to want their homes, personal valuables, and loved ones protected than their businesses. Still, she had to figure that if this were the lowest-income part of Omega, that probably meant that the people who would be doing the stealing lived here as well, meaning they knew exactly how little there was available to steal in this area. The businesses were a much more viable place for crime to occur than the public housing unit, but the streets still seemed unusually quiet as she made her way down a row of small, uniformly blocky metal housing units, watching as a group of alien children bounced a ball to one another in a circle at the end of the street. As soon as they caught sight of her, however, they quickly stopped their game, running off to hide behind one of the houses and peering out at her from behind the structure.

Shepard frowned, watching as they hid, feeling as her hand drifted almost subconsciously to the gun at her belt, wondering if that was the reason everyone seemed to be avoiding her. As she did so, all the children's eyes moved along with her, watching as she paused with her hand on her gun, staring at them blankly for a long, strange moment, as if trying to convince them to make the first move. Just then, the sound of shouting caught Shepard's attention, and she turned away from the hiding children, looking around for the source of the noise and wondering if she had disturbed some sort of guard animal that was now coming after her. The sound was more of a snarl than a shout, an unintelligible, garbled exclamation, but it did not take long for Shepard to figure out where it was coming from, as she watched a hunched, eager vorcha start to waddle out from one of the houses down the street, waving an excited hand above her head as she started to make her way straight for Shepard. Shepard's hand clenched tighter around the grip of her gun, debating whether she should go ahead and draw it, when the vorcha suddenly came right up to her, pointing a clawed finger into her face, her nearly-bare chest heaving with excitement as she shifted from foot to foot, trying to catch her breath.

"I know you," the vorcha claimed, grinning and gurgling as her gnarled finger came within inches of Shepard's nose. She paused a moment, trying to place Shepard's face, before suddenly letting out another sharp noise of delight and clasping her knotted hands together. "Yes – yes!" she exclaimed, brightly. "Commander Shepard! Friend of Aria's! Fought with resistance during Cerberus takeover!"

"I don't know if I'd call Aria a friend," Shepard answered, honestly, before adding, a bit warily, "Do I... know you?"
The vorcha seemed unfazed by this question, instead indicating towards herself with both hands, beaming as she puffed her chest out proudly, taking another step closer to Shepard. "You remember me?" she asked, expectantly. "I help you find resistance. Help you escape from Cerberus."

Shepard faltered at this reminder, blinking a few times as she tried to recall, before her brows suddenly shot up in remembrance and she pulled her hand quickly away from her gun. "Shreek!" she exclaimed, unable to help but grin. "Of course I remember you. You saved our lives! If it hadn't been for you, we never would have made it past Cerberus to join up with the resistance." Raising a hand, she prepared to offer some show of gratitude, but she quickly stopped mid-gesture, unsure what to do. A handshake seemed far too formal and detached, but she had never seen a vorcha share in a hug, and could not help but wonder if the gesture even had any meaning to their species. Reaching out her hand towards Shreek, she clapped her awkwardly on the shoulder, giving her arm a few good, assuring pats before returning her hand to her side again. "How are you doing, anyway?" she asked, trying to steer the conversation back on track. "How are your kids?"

"Kids fine," Shreek assured her, waving her hands dismissively in front of her. "All healthy. Strapping and stubborn. Three grandkids now, too! Ugly. Rotten as varren. All live with me here in public housing." Jerking her head over her shoulder towards the nearby structure she had just come out of, she gave a short bark of raspy laughter, throwing her hands up to either side in good-natured exasperation. "Ten vorcha sharing one roof," she said. "Crowded! Loud! Better than no roof, though. No complaining. Happy they with me. Keep better eye on them that way."

"When did this area become public housing?" Shepard asked, curiously, folding her arms as she glanced out over the rows of houses again. The children that had been playing earlier had disappeared altogether by now, making her wonder if they had gone home or simply found another street to play in away from the conversing women.

"After Cerberus takeover," Shreek explained, matter-of-factly, moving her hands around in patient circles. "Many people die. Many more driven off-world, never came back. Leave empty houses when they go. Empty houses rented out to people no have homes but still living on Omega. Two problems… one solution." Holding out her hands in front of her then, she made a sweeping motion from one side of her body to the other, as if illustrating the flow of progress since Shepard last came to the station. "All public housing residents given jobs help rebuild Omega," Shreek went on, pragmatically. "All paid living wage, so all pay rent to higher ups. Money from rent then turned around to help pay wages for rebuild effort." Letting her gnarled hands drop back to her sides, she gurgled happily, her toothy grin widening as she stared at Shepard, expectantly. "Omega still a work in progress," she admitted, seeming unfazed by this fact. "But much better than before. Still gang violence, still drugs… but less. Much less."

She hissed through her teeth, clasping her hands, seeming to snuffle a bit as she watched Shepard, as if waiting for a reaction to this good news. Then, seeming to remember something, she suddenly perked up a bit, pointing towards a group of three aliens standing together on a nearby street corner, causing Shepard to look their way, attentive. "Prostitution coming back," Shreek added, quickly, seeming strangely excited for this. "No prostitution before. Too dangerous. Too much risk. Now, working girls feel safer. Perhaps soon others will too."

"And what about your line of work?" Shepard asked, looking back towards Shreek again, hoping she was treading lightly. "Are you still in the red sand trade?"

"Me?" Shreek asked, seeming surprised by the question, before shaking her head, her expression sincere. "No. Me no sell red sand no more. Too much work. Not enough pay." Clasping her clawed hands in front of her, she gave a short, almost dismissive snort of breath, the creases around her flat nose deepening as she frowned at the thought of her old profession. "After Omega reform start to
"kick in, drug policing efforts go up," she explained. "New rules now about off-world buyers. Make it much harder to sell."

"New rules?" Shepard asked, her brow furrowing in interest, propping a curious hand on her hip. "Has Omega finally instated laws prohibiting the sale of sand?"


Pausing then, Shreek peered up at Shepard, taking a step closer into her space, clasping her hands expectantly in front of her as she grinned up at her with needle teeth. "You interested in buying sand?" she asked, almost hopefully. "Me still have contacts. Can get you some sand if you want. No charge. No charge for friends."

"No… thank you," Shepard answered, honestly, holding up a hand to decline. "I don't actually do… sand. Thank you, though." She frowned a bit as the words left her mouth, realizing how awkward and unpractised she sounded, before letting her hand fall back to her side, clearing her throat to try to cover her ineptitude. "I was actually just wondering if you've heard anything about a new drug called TMX," she went on, pressing forward with the conversation. "It's a pretty recent addition to the market, but it seems to be popular, from what I've heard. I was hoping, if you were still familiar with that market—"

"TMX?" Shreek asked, cutting off the rest of her question. She paused a moment, sucking her teeth, slitting her eyes in thought as she tried to remember back, before shaking her head and shrugging her tough shoulders, seeming almost disappointed with her own lack of knowledge. "No see anyone selling TMX here," she admitted, honestly. "Have heard of it, though. Batarian drug. Designer. Supposed to be better than sand." Holding up a gnarled finger then, she straightened her posture, as if preparing to say something important. "Very expensive," she added, thoughtfully. "Hard for vorcha to get hands on. Would do better asking in upscale housing. Probably have better luck there." She paused again, considering, moving her clawed finger to tap against the edge of her tapered chin, before suddenly seeming to get an idea and pointing towards the aliens on the corner again. "Might have luck asking working girls," she suggested, causing Shepard to look their way again, surprised. "Big time businessmen, they come here sometimes. Cheap thrills. Tell prostitutes everything. Don't think they talk."

Retrieving her hand then, Shreek frowned, her heavy brow furrowing in a hard, wrinkled line as her nose flattened against her face again. "They no consider prostitutes people," she observed, sounding affronted for the girls. "No think they can hurt them. But they know plenty. Love to gossip. Could ruin half Omega upper crust if they wanted." Shepard's frown deepened at this information, her gaze lingering on the girls standing on the nearby corner, wondering how many times she had walked past people just like them without even considering how much information they knew. Thane had warned her about taking people like them for granted, but for some reason it had never occurred to her just
how much damage they could do if they really wanted. "Dangerous people," Shreek added, wisely, causing Shepard to look back at her again. "No want to cross them. Good for friends, though. Very good."

"I bet," Shepard agreed, barely over a murmur, glancing over towards the girls on the corner again. Then, giving Shreek another half-attentive pat of thanks on the shoulder, she turned away from her, starting to make her way over towards where the three aliens stood, side by side, staring out at the nearly-empty street with looks of utmost boredom.

The batarian prostitute standing in the middle of the three was smoking a cigarette, her black eyes glassy as she stared out towards a nearby side street, watching a pair of vorcha children playing some sort of wrestling game. As soon as Shepard rounded the corner towards them, however, the batarian instantly shifted her attention onto her, watching her with wary, motionless suspicion as she came to stand in front of the three of them, tucking her hands awkwardly into her pockets as she tried to think of how best to approach the situation. "See anything you like?" the batarian asked, causing Shepard to look up at her in surprise, instantly losing her train of thought. She had never seen a female batarian before, and she could not help wondering where they all were hiding, and if they were so hard to come across, how this one found herself working a street corner in a public housing unit on Omega. Her face was slimmer than any of the male batarians Shepard had met, her chin tapered and fine, though her most striking feature was the double pair of breasts, one set on top of the other, worn proudly displayed in what Shepard guessed was a custom-made corset built to show them off.

"Is it just you three ladies over here doing business?" Shepard asked, trying to start a semi-friendly conversation.

The batarian narrowed her eyes at her, the smoke from her cigarette curling into the stale Omega air as she stared down at Shepard, disapproving. "Yeah, it's just us," she answered, slowly. "Why? Not what you're looking for?"

"We used to have a human associate," the asari prostitute added, causing Shepard to look her way instead, intrigued. "She worked with us for a while. But she's not here anymore. Now it's just us."

"What happened to her?" Shepard asked, interested. "Why doesn't she work here anymore? Did she retire?"

"Retire?" the salarian prostitute returned, letting out a heavy scoff. "Please. We never retire. We'll work 'til we're dead. Which is what that girl did. She died."

Shepard frowned at the blunt statement, turning her attention back to the asari, who seemed to be the most forthcoming of the three. "She died?" she asked, concerned. "How did she die?"

The asari let out a sharp huff, not even bothering to look at Shepard, instead inspecting the chipping polish on her nails as if it were the most interesting thing in the world. "Same thing happened to her that always happens," she answered, dismissively, turning her hand to look at her nails in a different light. "Something she caught."

Shepard's frown deepened at the explanation, and she turned her attention back to the batarian, staring at her for a moment, as if hoping she might provide some further clarification on the subject. Instead, the batarian shifted under her gaze, frowning a bit as she flicked ashes from the end of her smouldering cigarette, before looking Shepard up and down and propping a frustrated hand on her hip. "If you're not interested, honey, then just keep moving," the batarian told Shepard, getting clearly annoyed. "Standing there like that you're not doing anybody any good. Just blocking our view from the street."
"I..." Shepard began to say, but quickly stopped, unsure where she was going. She paused a moment, collecting her thoughts, before taking another quick, steadying breath in. "I was just wondering if you ladies knew where I could find some TMX," she said, refusing to be intimidated despite the batarian's warning tone. "My friend Shreek over there says you might be able to help me. She says you know everything there is to know about Omega."

"She's not wrong," the asari prostitute answered, tracing a distracted finger over her collar-bone as she spoke. "We do know everything there is to know. Doesn't mean we're gonna share it."

"TMX isn't easy to come by," the salarian prostitute spoke up then, causing Shepard to look her way, attentive. "What's your interest in it? Are you a narc?"

"Do I look like a narc?" Shepard asked, defensive. In return, the salarian gave her a tellingly disapproving once-over, before letting out a low, soft scoff, unimpressed.

"You look like some kind of cop," she answered, bluntly. "Might just be your face. Either way, it's hard to get. And it isn't cheap. You need connections to get it."

Shepard frowned at the prostitutes' guarded answers, crossing her arms warily over her chest, but she stood her ground, refusing to be turned away until she got the answers she needed. "Well, I'm pretty good at convincing people," she returned, matter-of-factly. "If you ladies could just point me in the right direction, I'll be glad to get out of your..." Stopping short, she faltered, trailing off as she realized that not one of the prostitutes had any hair. Clearing her throat then, she shifted between her feet, looking between the prostitutes' faces again as she tried to determine which would be the first to give her information. "I'm also looking for a mercenary who lives in the area," she added, forwardly. "Maybe you're familiar with him... if you really know as much as you say. Though with all your tough talk, I'm starting to doubt you do."

The asari instantly bristled at this, but the batarian quickly held out a hand, stopping her from reacting too strongly as she took a threatening step forward instead. "What did you say, human?" she asked, dangerously. "Are you honestly trying to test us?"

"If that's what you want to call it, sure," Shepard answered, frankly, giving a short nod in return. "I'm calling your bluff. What are you going to do about it?"

"I understand I'm on your turf, and I understand what you can do," Shepard answered, bluntly, refusing to waver, standing her ground firmly as the batarian got right in her face. She was so close now that she could smell the prostitute's perfume, but she did not move, hardly even blinking as she stared the batarian's four black eyes down. "I also understand that I'm a Spectre," she added, evenly, her voice commanding, speaking just loud enough for all three ladies to hear her clearly. "And I fought in the resistance to save Omega from Cerberus. I worked side by side with Aria T'Loak and Nyreen Kandros to take this station back for people like you. Taking a step forward then, she got right up in the batarian's space, trying her hardest to block out the stench of smoke on her breath as she imitated her threatening gesture. "The question is, do you know who I am?" she asked, returning the batarian's sentiment. "I'm Commander Shepard of the Alliance Navy. If it hadn't been for me, none of you would even have jobs. So don't get all high and mighty with me. You exist because I made it possible. The least you ladies owe me is some fucking information."
At this unexpected turn, the batarian instantly stepped back again, clearly too startled to answer back immediately, her eyes growing wide as her cigarette dangled, forgotten, between her fingers, burned nearly all the way down to the filter. "C-Commander Shepard," she stammered, stunned. "Of course —! Of course we know who you are! Everyone talks about you all the time! We're so sorry, Commander—"

"Commander Shepard!" the asari exclaimed, cutting over the batarian's stumbling. "Is it true you worked with Aria T'Loak? Did you really kill Helena Blake?"

"Is it true that you helped the salarian STG cure the Genophage on TuChanka?" the salarian asked next, speaking in barely above an awed whisper as she peered around the batarian, hopefully.

"Enough questions – hush!" the batarian scolded, waving dismissive hands at both her associates. "The Commander wanted to know where to find something." Turning her attention back to Shepard again, she flicked ashes anxiously from her cigarette, taking a nervous drag of it before exhaling smoke in a thin, rushed stream. "The stuff you're looking for can be found in upscale housing," she told her, much more helpful now. "TMX is a designer drug, so it's highly sought after. You won't catch anyone with it down by the docks because they're too tightly patrolled, but there's a group of humans living together in a house at the edge of the unit who always seem to have some handy."

Flicking her cigarette again, she grunted, glancing over her shoulder, as if to make sure no one from upscale housing was listening in on their conversation, before turning her attention back to Shepard and taking another nervous drag. "Their cover is that they're middle-class roommates pooling their funds to afford upscale housing, but it's just a front," she finally went on, exhaling her smoke in an agitated huff. "They're in business together, and the only way they can get into the places where TMX is popular – like the VIP lounge at Afterlife – is by being an associated part of the upper class."

"They're not the makers of the drug, though," the salarian put in then, causing Shepard to look over towards her, intent on getting the full story. The salarian wrung her hands nervously, glancing over towards her two associates, as if to make sure she was telling her part of the story correctly. "They get shipments of varying sizes disguised as other things from time to time," she went on, looking back towards Shepard and blinking a few times, quickly. "Sometimes cough medicine, sometimes… potted plants. They just sell and distribute the stuff. Nobody ever sees who drops it off."

Shepard frowned at the explanation, resisting with great difficulty the urge to ask further questions about the prostitutes' knowledge of the drug, before clearing her throat and turning her attention back to her omni-tool instead. "If you ladies don't mind, I have just one more question," she told them, starting to pull up her screen and accessing the map of Omega that Patriarch had given her. "I was told to find someone who lives at this address, but I'm not sure how to get there from here. Maybe you ladies could help me find it." Pointing to the address highlighted on the screen, she allowed the three women to lean in towards it, squinting at the tiny lettering as they tried to decipher where the house was that she was looking for. Then, leaning back again with a grunt, the batarian nodded, flicking dead ashes from the end of her spent cigarette, before jerking her thumb over her shoulder towards a row of houses a few streets over.

"We know who you're looking for," she told Shepard, matter-of-factly. "He lives at the far end, three rows down. People around here call him 'the Captain'. I guess because they think he sounds like a pirate."

"G'day, mate," the salarian quipped, making no effort to mimic an Australian dialect. In return, both the batarian and the asari turned to stare at her, nonplussed, causing her to wither a bit under their gaze.
"He's not Australian, you idiot," the batarian scolded. "He's… I don't know what he is. Hard to talk to. He used to come by here all the time when our human associate was here, but he stopped coming by after she got… died." At this slip-up, she faltered, going quiet a moment, before taking a nervous drag of her dwindling cigarette and blowing what little smoke there was out in an agitated puff. "Anyway, that's all we know," she said, shrugging again, dismissively, quickly covering for her faux pas. "He lives at the back of the housing unit. Just ask for the Captain and people will know who you're talking about… usually." Pausing then, she considered a moment, allowing the last few wisps of smoke to drift lazily from the end of her unattended cigarette as she thought. "Or maybe they call him the Captain because he was military at one point," she added, musingly, more to herself than to Shepard. Then, letting out a sharp huff of breath, she shook her head, reaching forward to push Shepard's arm down again, forcing her omni-tool program to close as her hand returned to her side. "I don't know what his story is," the batarian told her, shortly. "Point is, that's where he lives. Now go. Don't want you scaring off potential customers."

Shepard faltered, glancing over her shoulder, looking around at the empty streets for the supposed customers the batarian kept accusing her of scaring off. Then, shrugging her shoulders, she instead tucked her hands into the pockets of her hoodie, offering the prostitutes a quick, grateful nod as she turned to head in the direction of the side street they had instructed her towards. "Thanks for the information, ladies," she told them, earnestly. "I'll be back to see you if I ever need anything else."

"Bring some credits with you next time," the salarian called back, causing Shepard to chuckle to herself as she turned the corner down the side street, heading in the direction of the Captain's house.
NINE MILLION CREDITS, Pt.2

Though she would never have been able to identify at first glance which of the identical boxy houses lining the drab, unvarying street belonged to the Captain, the closer Shepard came to the bleak, seemingly abandoned building the prostitutes had pointed out, the more apparent it became that it was the house of someone overly wary to the presence of company. The house was locked as Shepard approached, but she disregarded the glaring red holo-lock, reaching out towards it to see if she could hack her way inside. No sooner had her fingers touched the door when she was met with a sharp shock from the lock, causing her to jump back in surprise, only to be called out by a loud, angry buzzing sound, piercing enough not only to alert anyone inside of her presence, but anyone for a three-house radius as well. Frowning, she looked up, rubbing her now-numb hand, watching as a large, conspicuous security camera angled down from the edge of the doorframe to point straight into her face. Pushing the camera away with her good hand, she moved away from the front door of the house, starting to make her way around to see if there was another way inside.

It did not take long for her to realize that all the house's windows had been sealed tightly as well, likely to keep people like her from peering around inside the home uninvited. Frowning again, she returned to the front yard, letting out a huff of breath to blow her bangs from her eyes, before propping her hands frustratedly on her hips and staring up at the house, thwarted. Now that she was actually looking at the house, she could see that there were tiny cameras attached to almost every surface, including one hiding surreptitiously in a window-box full of dainty purple flowers. Making her way to the front door again, she searched around for some kind of bell or intercom, before finally finding a small, grated panel to one side of the doorframe. Pushing the button, she leaned in towards the intercom, clearing her throat, unsure exactly how to state her business without coming off as some sort of cop, as the salarian prostitute had said she did.

"I'm looking for the Captain," Shepard spoke into the intercom, hoping she did not sound as awkward as she felt. "I was hoping we could talk. I wanted to discuss some business with him." No sooner had the words left her mouth when she heard the telltale beep of the lock, and, looking up, she watched as it changed from red to green, the multiple deadbolts in the door unlatching as the house opened up for her to enter. Moving her hand slowly away from the intercom, Shepard frowned, not quite trusting how easily she had been allowed entry. Reaching down, she drew her Carnifex silently from her belt, holding it out of sight at her side as she stepped forward towards the door, allowing the weight sensor to pass her inside into the house's darkened interior.

With the windows drawn, the only light source keeping the house from being plunged into near-darkness was what appeared to be some sort of reading-lamp, and as Shepard approached the lamp, wary that it might be some sort of trap, she noticed a digipad tossed haphazardly to one side beneath it, the text on the screen paused halfway down the page of a novel she could not make out. Picking up the digipad, she examined it, curiously, realizing with some concern that whoever had been reading here had apparently abandoned the novel suddenly, not even bothering to finish their chapter before tossing it aside. No sooner had she lifted the digipad to inspect it when she suddenly heard a sharp popping sound coming from somewhere nearby, and the reading-lamp directly behind her exploded in a spray of sparks and glass, shattered by a plasma bullet aimed for her head. Dropping the digipad quickly to the ground, she ducked down behind the mercenary's couch, pulling her weapon in close to her chest as two more bullets soared over her head.

Sliding over to the edge of the couch, she peered around the side, looking around for the source of the gunfire, but it was difficult to see much of anything in the now near-darkness they found themselves in. Another round of bullets ricocheted off a nearby potted plant, one of them sending fern fronds flying, and Shepard took the opportunity to fire back in the direction of the shots, feeling
a sharp swell of excitement as the mercenary swore, barely avoiding being hit. Squeezing off one more bullet for good measure, Shepard ducked back behind the couch again, tucking her knees up close to her chest as she waited for the mercenary to return fire. "I'm not here to kill you!" she shouted, flinching as a plasma bullet ripped through the arm of the couch near her head, causing her to shift over towards the opposite end of the couch instead. "I just want to talk! That's all!"

"Talk?" the Captain barked back, vexed, and Shepard could see why the batarian prostitute had said he sounded like a pirate. "That's real cute, coming from someone who just tried to hack her way into my house. How fucking dense do you think I am?" Then, without even waiting for an answer, another round of bullets came flying her way, shredding through the material of the back of the couch and knocking a nearby chair off its legs onto the floor. Shepard flinched as the metal chair clanged against the metal flooring, sliding down lower against the front end of the couch, holding her Carnifex almost up against her chin as she waited for a lull in gunfire to try again.

"I'm just here to talk!" Shepard repeated, more forcefully this time, hoping he would listen. "I wasn't trying to kill you, I just… I didn't think you were home, was all."

"So you tried to hack your way into my house?" the Captain returned, incredulous.

Shepard faltered at the pertinent question, feeling suddenly very awkward, realizing for the first time how peculiar several of the mannerisms she had picked up during her time in the Alliance were. Hacking into private homes and laboratories was not something people normally did, but when Shepard knew she needed something inside one or the other, she did not think twice about forcing her way inside to get it. Frowning at her own ingrained behaviour, she wet her lips, trying to direct her train of thought back on track, before moving towards the edge of the couch again, leaning around a bit to speak more directly to the Captain. "Old force of habit," she explained, uncomfortably, not wanting to get into the specifics. "I didn't mean anything by it. Someone told me you knew where to find good work on Omega, and I was hoping, if I came and talked to you, you might be willing to let me in on some of it—"

"Do what?" the Captain called back, his voice gruff, seeming almost offended by the request. "Let you have some of my good work? What, because you came here and asked all polite?" He scoffed, affronted, and Shepard could hear the telltale click of a used heat sink being swapped out for a fresh one. "Patriarch put you up to this, didn't he?" he asked, annoyed. "Always doling out handouts that aren't his to give. Well, tell that blundering sea turtle he can come talk to me himself if he likes. I worked hard to get to where I am. Do I look like a goddamn charity?"

At this last question, Shepard faltered, surprised, feeling a warm, familiar sensation start to well up in her chest, but she quickly pushed the feeling back down again, not wanting to get too hopeful just yet. "I'm coming out," she told the mercenary, slowly holsteing her gun at her belt. "My gun is away. I just want to talk. My hands are up, I'm unarmed." Sliding her hands around the edge of the couch, she allowed him to see both open palms for a moment, moving them slowly up and over the back of the couch as she started to get to her feet, peering cautiously over the top of the couch before finally straightening to her full height. Looking around the small, dark space, she could not see any sign of anyone else being in the house with her, but as she moved warily out from behind the couch, she kept her senses alert, listening for any sound or other sign that the mercenary might be trying to pull something on her. "I'm out from behind the couch," she announced. "Come out and show yourself. I don't want to fight."

A long, tense silence followed this command, with no sign of movement from the Captain, but Shepard kept her hands up, her posture firm, not wavering from her spot as she waited for him to make the next move. After what felt like a solid minute of waiting, she suddenly heard a shifting sound, and she turned to look over in the direction of the noise, alert, expecting to see the Captain
emerging from his hiding place, armed and ready to fight. No sooner had she turned to look, however, when all the lights in the house suddenly turned on at once, causing her to jump nearly out of her skin as they revealed a neat, sparsely-decorated interior, barely large enough to fit a living-room, kitchenette, bedroom, and bathroom inside its walls. Still holding her hands up, now more surprised than anything, Shepard looked back in the direction of the noise, half expecting this to have been some sort of trick to throw her off-balance. When the mercenary finally began to emerge from behind the polished kitchen counter, however, she watched in interest as he moved around it, seeming to ignore her entirely as he ran a thoughtful, calloused finger over a blackened bullet-hole left by one of Shepard's blind shots.

"Wouldn't have killed you to spare the furniture, Shepard," Zaeed commented, frowning a bit at the damage, before looking up at her again, seeming more resigned than anything. "Don't think the person whose house this is will take too kindly to bullet-holes in their kitchen." Then, moving past her towards the decimated couch, he leaned down, picking up the datapad she had dropped on the floor, before holding it up to reveal the cracked screen, now seeming legitimately vexed. "Now, look what you've done," he told her, irritated. "And just when I was getting to the good bit, too. Now I'll never know if Manuel feels the same way about Maria. You owe me for this one, Shepard."

"Zaeed Massani," Shepard returned, lowering her hands to her sides again. "Should've known it was you. Why didn't you just tell me instead of shooting at me like that?"

"And spoil the surprise?" Zaeed asked, looking up at her again with a deep, gruff chuckle. "Never. Even an old bastard like me deserves to have a bit of fun every now and then." Tossing the broken datapad aside onto the couch, he moved across the room past Shepard again, making his way to the polished kitchen and opening one of the cabinets to pull out a large, oblong bottle half-full of amber liquid. "Care for a glass, Shepard?" he asked, taking down two tumblers and setting them on the counter as well. Before she had a chance to answer, he had already poured her half a glass, and he slid it across the table towards her, not even waiting for her to start hers before finishing his off and starting to pour another for himself. Shepard picked up her glass of whiskey, inspecting it for a moment, half wondering how low her alcohol tolerance had become after drinking next to nothing for the past three years. Then, pushing the thought aside, she took a swig from her glass, pulling up one of the chrome barstools to the kitchen counter and sitting down, resting her arms on the countertop as she watched Zaeed, thoughtfully.

"Why do they call you the Captain?" she asked, trailing her finger distractedly along the lip of her glass.

At this, Zaeed paused a moment, frowning a bit, his scarred lips twisting to one side as he considered her question, tapping his finger pensively against the side of his tumbler as he thought. "I dunno," he finally answered, giving an offhanded shrug of his tattooed shoulders. "Some kid called me that one time, and it just stuck. Pretty sure the little shit was making fun of me, but I liked the name, so I kept it." Taking another swig of his whiskey, he snorted then, nonplussed, before letting out a low scoff, shaking his head. "Better than some of the other names these would-be mercs have come up with for themselves," he added, derisively. "Like Annihilator, or Bonesaw. What are you, a goddamn G.I. Joe? Christ."

Shepard chuckled at the observation, bringing her glass up to her lips for another sip before setting it down in her opposite palm, staring down into the liquid, half lost in thought. It felt like such a long time since she had been able to sit down and have a pleasant conversation like this with one of her old crewmates, and she could not help feeling a bit sad that she had allowed herself to fall so far out of contact with everyone that she cared about after the Reaper War. She supposed some of it was unavoidable, such as in the case of Thane and Kasumi, who had vanished without a trace after the final battle without leaving some sort of contact information, but she realized she had no excuse for
not reaching out to most of her other friends, especially people like Miranda and Zaeed, who had always been there for her whenever she had needed them during the War.

"So," Zaeed commented, bringing her back to earth again, causing her to look up in surprise, blinking a few times as she tried to remember the conversation they had been having barely minutes earlier. "I never did hear back from you after the battle in London. You just sort of up and vanished right after the War, so, did you ever end up having that kid?"

Shepard faltered at the query, taken aback, wondering for a moment if she had misunderstood the question. "As opposed to what?" she finally asked, taking another sip of whiskey.

Zaeed shrugged in response, tilting his empty tumbler to stare thoughtfully into the bottom of the glass. "I dunno," he answered, frankly. "Lots of things could've happened. You could've had a late-term abortion, or put it up for adoption. Or maybe you lost the kid some other way. Anything's possible." Picking up the bottle again, he poured himself another partial glass of whiskey, before holding up the bottle towards her, offering her a refill. Shepard shook her head at the offer, picking up her glass to show him that she still had a bit left, and he grunted, setting the bottle down again, before taking a small sip of his drink, wetting his scarred lips in approval. "You got pretty well beat up in that last battle, from what I heard," he told her, setting his tumbler down in front of him again, tapping his rough index finger against the curve of the glass. "Wouldn't have been surprised if something had happened to the kid then."

"Well, something did happen," Shepard admitted, shrugging a bit, still not quite comfortable talking about the details. "But, he's all right now. Got a few… learning disabilities as a result, but he's managing. He's a fighter."

Zaeed huffed at this revelation, his scarred brows raising in admiration and approval. "No kidding," he agreed, nodding along, seeming impressed by David's mettle. "Well, congratulations to both of you. Perhaps I'll get to meet him someday, when you bring him around to the station."

"Why don't you come back to the Normandy and meet him now?" Shepard suggested, indicating with her thumb over her shoulder, causing Zaeed to look up at her again, surprised. Shrugging, she took another sip of whiskey, cupping the tumbler between her palms and working the cool glass thoughtfully between her hands as she tried to figure out how to address her next question. "Listen," she spoke then, causing Zaeed to frown a bit, wary of her now more serious tone. "I don't know how life is treating you here, but… I want you to know you're always welcome back on the Normandy. I know it's not as glamorous as all this, but if you'd be up for it, I'd love to have you back on my crew."

At this, Zaeed gave a soft snort of breath, looking down at his tumbler, before shaking his head, making Shepard wonder if she had said something wrong. "Credits aren't all that important," Zaeed told her, honestly, causing her to falter a bit, surprised by his answer. "I've got a nice nestegg stashed away, if I cared about it. The jobs they have here nowadays… you don't need a merc to do them. People get paranoid, don't know what to do with their money. Hire guys like me to take care of jobs they likely could've done themselves." Taking a deep breath, he rested his free hand against his opposite, tattooed forearm, pausing a moment to think before letting his breath out in a long, tired sigh. "At this point I'm more just doing it to spite everyone else who wants the jobs," he admitted, giving a soft, almost bitter-sounding laugh. "Upstarts with their heads up their asses, thinking they're real mercenaries. Got nothing against their methods, of course… it's just their attitudes I can't abide."

"Why don't you come back to the Normandy and meet him now?" Shepard suggested, indicating with her thumb over her shoulder, causing Zaeed to look up at her again, surprised. Shrugging, she took another sip of whiskey, cupping the tumbler between her palms and working the cool glass thoughtfully between her hands as she tried to figure out how to address her next question. "Listen," she spoke then, causing Zaeed to frown a bit, wary of her now more serious tone. "I don't know how life is treating you here, but… I want you to know you're always welcome back on the Normandy. I know it's not as glamorous as all this, but if you'd be up for it, I'd love to have you back on my crew." Offering him a forced, hopeful smile, she let her offer sink in for a moment, watching his face for some reaction, only to have him stare back at her with the same unchanging look as before, as if he were debating whether buying a newspad was worth the ten credit charge. "It'll be just like the old days," she told him, eagerly, before adding, more honestly, "Except… with less extra credits to burn."

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"Like Bonesaw?" Shepard asked, jokingly, unable to keep a small, conspiratorial smirk from creeping up the sides of her lips.

In response, Zaeed shrugged, noncommittal, seeming less amused by this than she was. "Bonesaw's not bad," he returned, honestly. "Just a bit misguided, is all. It wasn't really fair for me to pick on the kid. For all I know his mum probably picked the name out for him." Picking up his glass of whiskey, he took another swig of it, pausing to ponder the last dregs at the bottom of the glass before finishing it off and setting it back down again with a soft, weary sigh. "We should get going if we're gonna," he suddenly spoke again, causing Shepard to look up at him in surprise. "Time waits for no man, so they say. Plus this family should be getting back any day soon, if memory serves. Better to clear out sooner than later." Setting his used glass aside in the sink, he recapped the bottle of whiskey, returning it to the kitchen cabinet before turning to take one last look around the house, checking to make sure he had not forgotten anything important. "I'll leave a few credits for the damage," he commented. "They can keep the security system. No sense messing with a good thing."

"How do you know when the family is coming back?" Shepard asked, frowning a bit as she took another swig of whiskey, trying to finish quickly.

Zaeed frowned a bit at the question, drumming his fingers thoughtfully against the polished kitchen counter as he tried to remember if he had left anything in any of the other rooms. "I don't," he admitted, shaking his head. "I can just feel when I've begun to overstay my welcome. Call it a sixth sense if you like, but it's served me pretty well thus far. Haven't gotten caught once."

Shepard nodded along with his explanation, finishing off her glass of whiskey, before making her way to the sink as well and depositing her empty glass next to his. Filling both glasses up with water, she gave them a quick rinse, trying to get rid of as much evidence as possible, before leaving the wet glasses to air-dry in the sink and turning back around to Zaeed again. "Ready to head out?" she asked, causing him to look up, surprised, still half lost in thought. Pushing himself up from the kitchen counter, Zaeed brushed his hand quickly over the gun at his hip and the one on his back, making sure both were still there, before patting the pouches at his belt and giving a short grunt, nodding to himself, seeming satisfied with his sweep.

"Got everything I need," he returned, affirmatively.

"Good," Shepard answered. "Let's go."

The streets of the Omega public housing unit were still nearly as empty as before as Shepard and Zaeed started to make their way towards the exit, but something seemed different about the atmosphere now, almost as if simply having Zaeed there with her made her immediately more trustworthy in the eyes of the residents. The group of children that had hidden from Shepard when she had first entered the unit were playing ball in the middle of the road as she and Zaeed turned down a side street, but they did not scatter this time when they saw her, only paused in their game to allow the adults to pass without incident. Tucking her hands into the pockets of her hoodie, Shepard took a look around the uniform street, wondering what time the workers would be returning from their jobs in the rebuild. As they passed the corner where the three prostitutes stood, Zaeed jerked his chin in their direction, causing Shepard to look over in interest, wondering if she had missed something important before.

"I'd look out for those ladies if I were you," Zaeed commented, frowning a bit at the thought. "They're good at what they do, but mean as varren. Used to be a human girl there, too, once, but... she's gone now."

"I know," Shepard answered, nodding along, turning her attention back to the road again. "I talked
to them. They helped me find you… with a bit of coercing. They told me the human girl died from something she caught."

At this, Zaeed gave a sharp, gruff bark of humourless laughter, causing Shepard to look up at him again, her eyes wide with surprise. "Oh, it was something she caught, all right," Zaeed returned, sounding strangely bitter. "If by 'something' you mean a goddamn bullet. Caught it right between the eyes." Looking over at Shepard then, he pointed to a spot dead centre on his own forehead, illustrating the point of entry. "Poor girl," he told her, giving an offhanded sniff, turning to look forward again. "She was a good one. Good person, that is. Selena, her name was. Always had a smile for passer-by… even for rotten old geezers like me." Blowing out a huff of disenchanted air, he kicked a stray ball out of the street into a nearby yard, watching as it bounced against the side of the house before rolling away into the next yard over. "Spose that's what you get, though," he added, bitterly. "Living on Omega. A bullet for your troubles. How's that for a goddamn how-you-do."

"But… why?" Shepard asked, frowning, taken aback by this sudden, startling change of story. "Why would someone want to kill her? Did she do something wrong?"

Making a face at the question, Zaeed scratched absentmindedly at the faded tattoo on his neck, buying time to think of an answer as he took a deep breath in. "Around here that doesn't take much," he finally answered, letting his hand drop back to his side. "As for Selena, she asked too many questions. Got too deep into the drug scene. Started asking about TMX… where it was coming from, who was making it. Thought she'd figured something out when they suddenly found her like they did." Shrugging again, he let out his breath in a hard, heavy huff, narrowing his eyes a bit as he looked out over the uniform street. "That was just a couple days ago," he added, causing Shepard's frown to deepen even further at how recent it was. "One shot, execution style. Just like that. Left her to be found in some goddamn dirty back alley." Rubbing the pad of his thumb broodingly along the side of his stubbled chin, he frowned, deeply, glancing towards a darkened side alley as they passed, as if trying to figure out if it was the one the prostitute had been found in. "Clearly they got panicked when she started getting too close," he added, thoughtfully. "But still… poor girl. She didn't deserve that."

"Do you know what she figured out before they killed her?" Shepard asked, curiously.

At this, Zaeed looked up again, seeming almost surprised at having been asked. "Me?" he asked, faltering a bit, before shaking his head and waving an unconcerned hand, dismissing the question. "Nah," he said, matter-of-factly. "I stay away from that TMX stuff. Too risky, even for an old dog like me. Too many people gone missing just for asking the wrong questions." Frowning then, he paused, thinking about it a moment, before holding up a hand to point at Shepard, as if something had just occurred to him. "Come to think of it though," he added, slowly. "The house they were selling it out of is still there, last I checked. They haven't gone anywhere, so maybe…" Trailing off, he stared ahead in pensive silence, pondering, before finally letting out an unimpressed scoff and looking down towards the street again. "Smug goddamn rotten bastards," he muttered, resting a distracted hand against the gun at his hip. "Shameless as all getout."

Shepard frowned at this turn of events, unable to help but wonder what Zaeed had been about to say before he cut himself short. "They can't be that panicked if they're still hanging around," she pointed out, hoping to subtly steer him back on track. "Maybe we should go investigate, see what they're up to over there."

Zaeed looked up at the suggestion, stopping briefly in his tracks, squinting a bit as he pursed his thin lips into a hard, meditative line. "I tell you someone got killed for asking questions… and your first suggestion is to go investigate?" he finally asked, speaking slowly, letting her hear just how irrational her proposal sounded repeated back to her. He paused a moment, watching her intently, as if waiting
to see if she might squirm or go back on her suggestion. When she only stared back at him, just as evenly, his scarred mouth eventually began to twist into a wide, puckish grin, and he reached out a hand towards her, clapping her favourably on the arm, before turning his attention back towards the exit of the public housing unit. "It's like you never left, Shepard," he told her, giving a gruff, approving chuckle.

Omega's upper-class housing unit seemed like a whole other world compared to its public housing, with its larger, personalized homes and full, florid lawns of artificial grass. Even the roads were better-kept, the concrete surfaces scrubbed greyish-white from meticulous pressure washing, making them seem to almost glow compared to the murky grey streets of the rest of the station. As Shepard passed one of the manicured lawns, she noticed a turian child playing in the fenced-in yard with a robotic dog, but as soon as he saw the two strangers heading his way, he quickly turned to run inside the house, leaving the dog to shine a glaring red light at the intruders from its bulbous flashlight head. The mech-dog stiffened, letting out a loud, alarm-like bark, and Shepard frowned at the overly flashy show, glancing back over her shoulder as they reached the end of the street to see if the child had returned to the yard, but all she could see was the mech-dog prowling the perimeter of the fence in tireless circles, looking for any other potential trespassers to frighten away.

Turning her attention back to the street again, Shepard made a face, feeling strangely out of place, wondering what part of Aria's improvement plan had allowed for an elite area like this to exist when so many people on the station were struggling just to make ends meet. Zaeed seemed to realize what she was thinking, as he gave a deep, agitated grunt, shaking his head, before pointing to a nearby house with three pristine hovercars parked in the drive. "Look at this," he commented, causing her to turn and look, drawn out of her distracted train of thought. "Those can't be older than last year's model. What do they need all brand-new cars for? Who are they trying to impress?"

"Themselves, I guess," Shepard answered, shrugging, not feeling like getting into a conversation about wealth. She had no issue with people who wanted to stay ahead of the curve, especially since she knew she had once been a bit like that herself, but she did have to wonder where the money was coming from. The sand trade was dead, according to Shreek, which meant that they had to be getting their income from somewhere else, which, knowing Omega, was likely just as questionably legal.

Following Zaeed down another side street, Shepard let out a soft breath, chewing her lip, wondering offhandedly what a house in this part of Omega had to cost. She knew Omega was in no way an ideal place to live, with its rampant crime rate and don't-ask-don't-tell policies on all things illegal, as well as its barely-filtered air, which she realized would likely wreak havoc on David's fragile lungs, but she still could not help wondering what it might be like to have somewhere solid to rest her feet after the end of a long day. She had only gotten to take David to her apartment on Intai'sei once before she had had to put it on the market to pay for his medical expenses, and she had long ago gifted the apartment on the Citadel back to Anderson, wanting him and Kahlee to have a place to live with any children they might have, which meant that their only functional home now was the Normandy. Though she loved the ship dearly, she could not help imagining from time to time about having something a bit more permanent, a place for David to settle and make friends without having to be carted all around the galaxy while his mother searched for work.

"Thinking about your boy again?" Zaeed asked, suddenly, causing Shepard to look up in surprise, wondering how he could have possibly known what she was thinking about. He gave a soft chuckle at her expression, flicking his thumbnail distractedly against the edge of his index finger, before shaking his head, taking pity on her. "You get this look when you think about him," he told her, honestly. "This sad look. Like you've just lost your favourite earring down a grate."

Shepard frowned at the description, a bit taken aback, wondering how long this had been going on
without anyone telling her about it. "I was just… feeling badly for him," she explained, shortly, not wanting to get into details. "He doesn't really have anyone to play with. I was worried he might be lonely. That's all."

Zaeed nodded, understanding, turning his attention back to the road. "Makes sense," he said, giving a soft grunt. "Not too many children on starships, I 'spose."

Shepard returned the nod, agreeing with him, but said nothing, instead allowing the conversation to lapse once more into thoughtful silence. They continued walking a ways more, with Zaeed leading the way down the progressively narrowing streets, until the sudden sight of flashing lights at the end of the last thoroughfare caused them to stop, Shepard taking her hands from her pockets, unsure what they had come across. The house at the farthest corner of the street seemed to be the site of an active police investigation, with a sleek black hovercar parked to one side of the building, its bright red and blue lights working to ward off curious eyes as two uniformed officers milled around the scene. The house had been surrounded on all sides by official-looking laser-tape, much like the tape Shepard had seen blocking off the murder scene of the merchant Dakni Kur on Illium, and a large white ambulance hovercar sat parked on the other side of the house, effectively blocking it in. Exchanging a confused glance with Zaeed, Shepard faltered, considering turning back, before realizing that they would likely not get better answers from anyone else and instead turning to start towards the crime scene, pulling the edge of her hoodie down over the butt of her gun so as not to appear threatening to the investigating officers. No sooner had she crossed the laser tape line, however, when the system suddenly gave off a loud, threatening beep, causing one of the officers to look up at them before starting to make his way over, seeming annoyed that they did not understand the concept of the police tape on their own.

"Step away from the crime scene, ma'am, sir," the policeman instructed, holding up a hand towards Shepard and Zaeed, causing them to take a surprised step back, out of the way of the laser tape. "This is not a civilian area. Please don't cross police lines."

"What happened here?" Shepard asked, frowning, craning her neck to try to see over the policeman's shoulder into the house. The policeman seemed irritated by this, holding up his hand to prevent her from seeing past him, directing her attention back to his face as he cleared his throat, annoyed. "Did someone get hurt?" Shepard asked, pressing for information despite his irritation. "What happened to the guys who were living here?"

"Dead," the policeman answered, shortly. "Murder-suicide, from the looks of it. The way we figure, they probably took some of their own product and killed one another in a hallucinogenic-fuelled panic." Glancing over his shoulder towards the house behind him, he made a face, shaking his head, before clicking his tongue disapprovingly and turning his attention back to Shepard and Zaeed. "Dumb kids," he breathed. "Should've known this would happen. Either way, you shouldn't be here. This isn't an open crime scene. Our CSI guy just finished photographing the bodies, and we can't have anyone messing up the crime scene until we've had a chance to do a thorough investigation."

Shepard frowned at his explanation, watching as an EMT crossed from the door of the house to the ambulance, pushing in front of him a hovering gurney covered by a lumpy white sheet. "Officer, I'm a Spectre," she pointed out, turning to look at the policeman again. "I work directly with the Council. I have inherent clearance on their authority to participate in police matters."

"Lady, I don't care if you got clearance from Aria herself," the policeman argued, seeming entirely unimpressed with her title. "Nobody gets past this line without being some sort of Omega police or CSI affiliation. Now clear out. We've got work to do."

Then, waving a dismissive hand, he turned back around to the EMT, huddling in to discuss with him about the state of the crime scene in low, worried voices.
Shepard hesitated at the curt dismissal, half tempted to simply push past the officer and make her way into the house despite what he had said, but she quickly shook the thought from her mind, instead turning away from the crime scene and starting to walk away towards the end of the street. Zaeed blinked a few times, watching her leave, before turning away from the crime scene as well and starting to follow her down the street, seeming much less concerned about being turned away than she was. "Bit surprising," he commented, offhandedly, causing her to glance his way as she tucked her hands back into the pockets of her hoodie. "Them not letting you in for being a Spectre and all. Seems to me that trick always used to work." Shrugging then, he cleared his throat, running his hand distractedly back through his scruffy greying hair before letting it fall back to his side again, resting absentmindedly on the butt of his gun. "Then again, it might have something to do with Omega being Terminus territory," he added. "Not controlled by Council administration. Not sure Spectres have much power here."

"They don't seem to have much power anywhere anymore," Shepard returned, letting out a short, frustrated sigh. Turning a corner onto a different side street, she kicked at a stray rock in the road, watching as it bounced off the nearby sidewalk before rolling back into the street again. Then, suddenly realizing something, she stopped in her tracks, staring ahead for a moment, before turning to look back over her shoulder in the direction of the house they had just come from. "Zaeed, tell me if I'm crazy," she said, causing him to look up in interest at the lead-in. "But… when they were clearing out that crime scene back there… that policeman said both parties were confirmed dead at the scene, right?"

Coming to a stop as well, Zaeed frowned, not quite following, reaching up a hand to scratch thoughtfully at the tattoo on his neck. "Right, yeah," he answered, nodding slowly. "Why? What's that got to do with it?"

"Well… maybe I'm just not up to date with forensic procedure," Shepard answered, her brow furrowing deeper the more she thought about it. "But generally when there are dead bodies at a scene, nobody is allowed to touch them until the coroner arrives. Then the coroner takes the bodies away to the morgue in a first call vehicle. Only… I didn't see a first call vehicle there, only an ambulance. And I didn't see a coroner, only an EMT." Turning to look back at Zaeed then, she shook her head, still somewhat bewildered. "Why would they call in an EMT if both people were already dead?" she asked.

Zaeed hesitated at this pertinent question, seeming surprised the thought had not occurred to him before. He blinked a few times as he stared ahead, one hand propped absently against the butt of his gun, before reaching up with the other hand to scratch distractedly at the edge of his stubbled jaw. "You know, Shepard… you're absolutely right," he finally answered, speaking slowly, turning to glance back in the direction of the house they had just walked away from. Then, looking back at Shepard again, his brow furrowed as sudden realization dawned on both of them, and Shepard instantly took off running back towards the house, listening for the heavy sounds of Zaeed's armoured feet following along close behind her.

The route back to the house took barely half a minute running, but Shepard could still not help feeling a sense of impending dread as they drew closer to the property, until finally, rounding the last corner, they came to a stop in front of the house, and she felt her heart sink down past her stomach at the sight that awaited them. The house that had once been covered in procedural laser-tape and boxed in by emergency hover-vehicles was now completely abandoned, the crime scene having been masterfully disassembled in a matter of minutes as the fake investigation team got away. Quickly assessing the scene, Shepard turned in the direction of the only other escape route, pointing down the side street before quickly taking off on foot, not bothering to check if Zaeed was following along behind her. She could hear the sound of a hovercar's thrusters ahead as she rounded the corner, and she pushed herself to run faster, following the noise, only to see the edge of the black car disappear.
around the corner of another side street, too far ahead for her to catch up on foot. Finally allowing herself to stop, she panted, resting her hands on her knees as she tried to catch her breath, making a note of the few digits of the license plate she had seen, but she knew even that was no use, as the dealers would likely dump the cars before moving on to their next hideout.

"Shit!" she swore loudly, kicking at the bleached pavement, not even bothering to look back as Zaeed came to a stop behind her, coughing as he tried to regain breath. Staring at the corner where the cars had vanished, she clenched her fists, half tempted to try to catch up with them again, before finally turning away from the street and tapping Zaeed absentmindedly on the shoulder, indicating for him to follow behind her as she headed back towards the dealers' house.

Despite their haste in clearing out, the dealers had still remembered to lock up the house, likely in an effort to keep people like Shepard from snooping around, but even so it did not take much effort for her to hack her way inside. As soon as she did, she found her worst suspicions to be confirmed, as the house had been stripped of every piece of furniture, every picture, everything that would make it seem like someone had once been living there. Even the electrical system had been turned off, leaving the house cold and dark, making it seem, for all intents and purposes, as if it had stood abandoned there for months before their arrival. Shepard swore under her breath at the sight of the house, hardly sparing a glance for Zaeed as he came through the door after her, looking around, seeming less surprised by the turn of events.

"Just missed them, aye?" he asked, letting out a gruff sigh. "Figures. Slippery bastards."

"How could they have known we were coming?" Shepard insisted, turning to look at him, frustrated. "Who tipped them off?"

"Beats me," Zaeed answered, shrugging, offhandedly. "Truth be told, I'm surprised they didn't ship out days ago. Everyone knew they killed Selena. Wasn't like it was some big goddamn secret."

Pausing then, he frowned a bit, his lined brow furrowing in sudden thought. "Come to think of it, I'm not really sure how they came to find out about her, either," he added. "Wasn't like she was spreading it around. Just me and a few others who knew her."

Crouching down to look under one of the abandoned counters, Shepard slid her hand under the edge of the low cabinets, opening each one to check inside before closing them again with a thwarted huff of breath. "Nothing under here," she commented, pulling herself to her feet again. "Check under the other ones. They might have left something behind." Zaeed nodded in agreement, letting out a short, confirming grunt, before turning to look under the other structures the dealers had been unable to take with them when they left. Opening the dishwasher, Shepard peered inside, pulling out the rolling racks to check the drip basin before shoving them back in again, finding nothing but empty space. Making her way over to the sink, Shepard snaked her fingers down the drain, hoping to find something stashed away there, when a sudden noise from across the room caused her to look up in surprise, watching as Zaeed pried an air grate up out of the floor before shoving his arm down inside the vent to fish something out from inside. Pulling her hand out of the sink, Shepard moved across the room towards him, watching in rapt, hopeful attention as Zaeed began to pull his arm out of the vent again, finally coming up with his fist clenched around something before turning to show it to her.

"Looks like you were right," Zaeed told her, watching as Shepard picked up the tiny sealed vial out of his palm, turning it over to inspect the last dregs of blue liquid still trapped inside. The vial was unlike anything she had ever seen, barely two inches long from one end to the other, with what looked to be a baster bulb attached to the top of the lid. Squeezing the bulb curiously, she watched as some of the leftover blue liquid moved around inside the vial, making a face as she gave it a shake, trying to figure it out.
"What is this?" Shepard asked, turning it over again, watching as the blue liquid moved from one end of the unusual vial to the other. "I've never seen it in this type of packaging before."

"Single dosage," Zaeed answered, shortly, taking the vial back again to no protest from Shepard. "Or, single recommended dosage. Doesn't mean people pay attention. It's not like sand, you can't just keep snorting more of it 'til you get high. If you want a quick… volatile high, you use a dropper to put it under your tongue…" Unscrewing the cap of the tiny vial, he began to cautiously pull it off, careful not to let any blue liquid drip onto the floor as he showed Shepard the glass dropper attached to the bottom of the lid. "But if you want a longer-lasting trip, you can use a hypodermic needle to inject it into your veins instead," he added, screwing the lid back on again, making sure it was good and tight before tucking it into an ammo pouch at his belt. Giving the vial a reassuring pat to make sure it was safe, he looked up towards Shepard again, his expression grave, before tapping his forehead indicatively with his finger. "I've heard horror stories of idiot kids injecting it straight into their foreheads," he told her, causing her to make a face at the visual, trying hard not to be sick. "The high was immense while it lasted, of course… 'til it caused a blood vessel in their brain to explode. Killed them instantly. Goddamn idiots."

Shepard faltered at the gruesome story, looking down towards Zaeed's pouch, before shaking her head and looking away again, trying not to think about it. "What the hell is this stuff made of, anyway?" she asked, more to herself than Zaeed, turning to glance over her shoulder to check if someone might be watching them, listening in on their conversation. She could not help feeling nervous intruding on the base of operations of a known drug dealer, even if the dealers had already cleared out, leaving hardly any trace that they had ever been there.

"Hell if I know," Zaeed answered, frankly, shrugging in response. "I'm no chemist. Might do some good to get it checked out, though. Finding out what it's made of might help you figure out where it came from."

Shepard nodded along in agreement, only half paying attention, staring at a spot on the metal floor as she tried to think of who she could possibly ask to deconstruct their sample to determine its chemical makeup. The only scientist she had on the ship was Doctor Chakwas, who she knew was not the right type of doctor to take on this sort of task. Letting out a thwarted breath, she shook her head, turning her attention back to Zaeed, before reaching out a hand to tap him on the shoulder, getting his attention. "We should get out of here," she told him, jerking her chin towards the door. "If these guys are anything like the other dealers I've dealt with, they're bound to have incoming backup waiting just around the corner. They won't want to leave any loose ends."

"Right," Zaeed agreed, grunting, turning to check over his shoulder, as if expecting the aforementioned backup to be climbing through the window at any moment. "Like curious goddamn busybodies poking their noses where they aren't wanted. And with us cooped up in here like this, we're basically sitting ducks." No sooner had these words left his lips when they suddenly heard the sound of thrusters just outside the house, followed by the sputtering and whining of two or more hovercars settling to land in the drive, and Shepard and Zaeed instantly ducked down, not wanting to be spotted through the windows. Pulling her gun from the holster at her hip, Shepard crept cautiously over to the window, standing up just enough to peer outside before quickly ducking back down again, turning to motion to Zaeed that they needed to leave, and fast. Three black hovercars sat in the driveway, with seven dark figures readying their weapons as they prepared to enter the house. Drawing his gun from its holster, Zaeed held it at the ready, looking around for an alternate exit, before finally spotting the back door and indicating it with two fingers.

"Out that way," he instructed, under his breath. "We'll wait 'til they've come in, then we'll sneak around the side." Shepard nodded along with his plan, creeping silently back across the house towards the indicated door, before stashing her weapon at her belt and starting to pry the door open
as quietly as possible. Finally managing to unlock the door, she motioned for Zaeed to go out first, checking to make sure they were still in the clear as she slipped out quietly after him, before closing the door noiselessly behind her just in time to hear the telltale *hiss* of the front door opening.
The Normandy hummed with ambient warmth as Shepard and Zaeed made their way onto the bridge, causing a few attending crewman to double-take at the sight of the mercenary. Heading down the hall to the navigation deck, Shepard motioned for Zaeed to wait a moment as she moved around the starmap to Traynor's work station, looking around quickly for David before realizing he was nowhere to be seen.

"Where's David?" Shepard asked, causing Traynor to look up at her, attentive.

Traynor paused, thinking back a moment, before pointing assuredly towards the front of the ship. "Up in the cockpit," she answered, quickly. "He wanted to spend some time with EDI and Joker after he finished his lesson. He said he liked watching the ship fly. I told him it was all right if they didn't mind, and they said it was fine." Glancing back down at her work station, she typed something quickly into the computer, giving a short nod of confirmation before looking back up at Shepard again. "I tried to teach him a bit about the Apien Crest, like you asked," she told her. "He had a bit of trouble pronouncing 'Palaven'. His 'P' and 'V' both need some work, but I think all he needs is a little practice."

"Thanks, Traynor," Shepard returned, offering her a grateful nod. Turning away from the starmap again, she made her way back towards where Zaeed waited, indicating for him to follow behind her as she started instead towards the cockpit. As they approached, she could see David sitting on the floor, but at the sound of her footsteps, he quickly looked up, beaming up at her before pushing himself to his feet to run over and see her. Shepard kneeled down to his level as he approached, allowing him a moment to catch his breath, reaching out to brush his wild bangs out of his eyes. She always enjoyed hearing David's recap of his day – to his young mind, even the smallest of things could be exciting, a trait which almost made her miss the sense of wonder she had lost to her youth and the War. The world had made her weary and jaded, but David always seemed to find something to be happy about, a fact she could not help but be glad for when things were so hard for him otherwise.

"I had a good day today," David told her, brightly, hardly even seeming to notice Zaeed as he came to stand behind the two of them. "I learned a new planet! Then I watched Mister Moreau fly the ship! I wanted Miss Traynor to read me War of the Worlds, but she was busy, so I came up here instead."

"War of the Worlds?" Zaeed repeated, surprised, causing both Shepard and David to turn. "By Wells? That's pretty complex literature for a tyke his age."

"He doesn't really understand the story," Shepard explained, honestly, hardly paying attention as David took hold of her hand, starting to play with her fingers, counting and recounting them. "He just thinks the concept is funny."

"The aliens are tentacle monsters," David put in, giggling.

"Hm," Zaeed returned, nodding along. Then, turning to look at Shepard again, he asked, "Never met a hanar, then, has he?"

Shepard gave a soft laugh at the question, ignoring David's look of confusion as she got to her feet again, picking him up and turning so Zaeed could more clearly see her son. "David, this is Mister Massani," she introduced him, nodding towards Zaeed, causing David to look over at him in interest. "He's a friend of Mommy's. Can you say hi to Mister Massani?" In response, David said nothing, only staring at Zaeed for a long, silent moment, before finally putting his thumb in his mouth,
seeming too distracted to think to do much of anything else.

Zaeed seemed unconcerned by the frigid welcome, instead offering David a quick nod of recognition before turning his attention back to Shepard, realizing he was getting nowhere with the boy. "Handsome boy," he commented, shortly, inclining his head towards David. "Yours and the turian's, yeah?" Shepard faltered a bit, surprised by the question, but quickly nodded in confirmation, shifting David to sit more comfortably against her hip. She had almost forgotten about the conversation she had had with Zaeed the morning after the shore leave party more than three years ago, where he had guessed Vega to be the father of her child and she had not bothered to correct him. Zaeed nodded in return, seeming unsurprised, before reaching out a hand to ruffle David's dark down, causing the boy to flinch a bit at being touched without permission. "He looks like you," Zaeed told Shepard, matter-of-factly, dropping his hand to his side again, not wanting to be too handsy with the Commander's child. "Got your smile. Your shape of face. Vakarian's eyes, though. Mouth, too… more or less."

"Look at my feet!" David exclaimed suddenly, pointing proudly to his socked feet around his mother's waist. Then, reaching out a hand towards Zaeed, he grasped at the air in his direction, leaning back dangerously in Shepard's arms until Zaeed offered up his hand again, watching in amused interest as David took it, turning it over to inspect it. "Did your mama let you drawed on yourself?" he asked, studying the blank underside of Zaeed's palm, before turning it back around again to examine the tattooed reverse. Not letting go of his hand just yet, David's eyes trailed up the rest of Zaeed's scarred arm, finally coming to rest on the faded Blue Suns tattoo on the side of his neck. "My mama gets mad when I drawed on myself," he commented, running the pads of his tiny thumbs over the back of Zaeed's tattooed hand, thoughtfully. "She says I'll get sick from a rash or poison. Did you get sick from a rash or poison?"

"Lots of rashes," Zaeed answered, frankly, offering the boy a crooked smile in response. "Never any poisoning, though. Least, not from the tattoos. —Er, drawings."

"Mister Vega has lots of drawldings too," David informed him, still not letting go of his hand, seemingly unfazed by Zaeed's accidental slip. "He said he'd get one with my name next time he finds somebody to do it. Then he let me drawed on his arm with a marker, so I drew him a planet."

"I was more of just a blob, really," Shepard admitted, speaking in barely above an undertone, just loud enough for Zaeed to hear and give a soft chuckle in return. "So… Vega, huh?" Zaeed asked, pointedly, looking up at Shepard in interest. "You found the jarhead then, did you? Always good to see familiar faces." Pausing then, he made a bit of a face, before adding in an undertone, too quiet for David to hear, "Even if that moron did call me 'Gramps' til I threatened to shoot him if he didn't fuck off… I figure it's still good to have him around."

Shepard stifled a laugh at this, trying hard not to disturb David while he was thinking, before patting him gently on the back, getting his attention and causing him to drop Zaeed's arm from his grasp. "Come on, big man," she told him, hoisting him more securely against her hip. "Time for us to put your suit on. We've got places to go and people I want you to meet." David frowned at the mention of his suit, wrapping his arms around her neck and burying his face in her collar-bone, and Shepard let out a soft sigh, looking up at Zaeed again with a faint, patient half-smile. "Feel free to take whatever quarters you're most comfortable with," she told him, indicating with a toss of her head towards the confines of the ship. "Not a lot of people stayed on from the old crew, so we've got plenty of spaces to choose from."

"Not a lot of return business, aye?" Zaeed asked, turning his mismatched eyes towards the elevator, as if he had already made up his mind what room he was going to occupy. "No matter. They'll come back in time." Then, offering Shepard one last friendly pat on the shoulder, he headed towards the
elevator, offering a nod of recognition towards Traynor at her station, who looked surprised to see him. As soon as he had disappeared into the elevator, Traynor looked up at Shepard again, indicating over her shoulder towards where the merc had just vanished to, but Shepard only shrugged in response, unsure what there was to say about it. Traynor faltered, blinking a few times, seeming hesitant to accept this wordless explanation at first. Then, giving a short, passive sound of interest, she turned her attention back to her work station again, starting to type something into her holo-keypad as Shepard started for the elevator as well, eager to get David ready to hit Omega and meet her old friend.

Fully suited up in his travelling gear, David huffed frustratedly into the cup of his breathing-mask, fogging up the plexiglass as Shepard adjusted his little backpack on his shoulders, ensuring the breathing tubes from his mask were not stretched too far from the oxygen source. Sitting down on a bench halfway between the docks and Afterlife, Shepard dropped David into her lap, making sure no passers-by were looking on as she fixed the hood of his suit to better cover his head and ears. The last thing she needed was some fired-up bum from Omega making a big deal about her unusual-looking toddler, but, finished adjusting his suit, she let him settle back down in her arms instead, pulling his bottle of formula from her belt and giving the thermos a good, evening shake. Prying the travel cap off the bottle, she switched it out for the metal-straw-equipped lid instead, bringing the bottle down to David's waiting hands and allowing him to direct it to his eager mouth through the slot in his breathing-mask. He gave a soft huff of satisfaction as he began to drink his formula, nestling down into the crook of Shepard's arm as she looked up again, patiently watching and waiting for Jack to get off work and join them as she had promised.

It was only a few minutes later before Shepard caught sight of Jack's familiar leather jacket weaving a path through the waning, smoky crowd, and she raised a hand, waving her over, allowing David to take control of his own bottle as she did so. Jack was quick to respond to the gesture, pushing her way past the last few patrons before settling in on the bench beside Shepard, scooting over into her space until the two nearly shared a seat. Then, leaning in, she rested her chin on Shepard's shoulder, watching David as he ate, trying hard to keep from openly fawning over the three-year-old in Shepard's arms. "So this is him, huh?" she asked, inclining her head towards David. "This is your little man?"

"This is David," Shepard agreed, shifting him in her arms so Jack could more easily see. In return, David frowned up at Jack, pulling his bottle away from the slot in his mask to let it rest against his stomach, one sharp tooth peeking over the edge of his lower lip as he tried to determine what to make of her.

"You're funny looking for a human," he finally told her, bluntly.

Shepard felt her ears turn bright, hot red at the statement, and she quickly turned to look at Jack, ready to apologize, but Jack merely faltered, her mouth hanging open for a stunned moment, before she began to laugh, reaching over across Shepard to tickle David under the arms. "You're pretty funny-lookin' for a human, too!" she told him, grinning as he giggled, kicking his little legs to try to get away from the tickles. Finally letting up on him, Jack gave another soft breath of laughter, shaking her head before turning her attention back to Shepard again, amused. "So, go ahead and tell me if this is too personal," she began, causing Shepard to look up in surprise at the unexpected lead-in. "But... how the hell is this little guy even possible? Like, how did it... happen? He looks so..."

She faltered, indicating towards David with both hands, trying to think of the word she was looking for before finally returning her hands to her lap, letting out a thwarted huff of breath instead. "Normal, I guess," she finally decided. "He looks like a kid. Like—put together, y'know? Not like a..."
"Monster?" Shepard suggested, bluntly, cutting her off. Then, realizing how harsh she sounded, she turned her attention back to David, brushing his bangs away from his eyes and letting out a soft, harried sigh. "I'm sorry," she apologized, shaking her head. "I didn't mean to say it like that. I've just been hearing things like that since he was born, and…" Frowning, she paused, collecting her thoughts, before looking up at Jack again, solemn. "It gets to you after a while," she told her. "The insults. Freak, and monster, and… abomination."

Jack frowned at the cruel names, making a face, before shaking her head and looking back down at David again, tucking her hands between her knees as she watched him start to eat again. "I was gonna say 'mix of two species',' she admitted, honestly. "Though now even that feels a little mean."

Shepard gave a soft, guilty laugh at Jack's correction, reaching out a hand to pat her reassuringly on the knee. "It's not mean," she told her, shaking her head, causing Jack to look up again, a bit more hopeful. "He does look a lot like his father though, truthfully. You just need to see the two of them together. You think he looks like me until you see him with Garrus. Then you realize who he really takes after." Taking a deep breath in, she turned her attention back down towards David, giving him a slight readjustment in her lap as he continued to suckle down contentedly on his formula. She paused a moment, trying to think of the best way to explain his birth to Jack, before suddenly realizing that she actually had no idea about the details of how it happened. Miranda had always been the one who understood things, and she had been the one to explain the specifics of David's conception to Shepard, but after three years the details had become fuzzy, and now she had no idea where to start. "I… don't really know how to explain how it happened," she admitted, trying hard not to make a face as she looked up at Jack again, feeling a bit guilty that she did not know the specifics of her own son's birth. "I know it had something to do with my rebuild and Reapertech, but… that's about the extent of my knowledge."

"Fair enough," Jack answered, nodding, turning to look back down at David again, seeming entirely unconcerned about the vagueness of Shepard's answer. "I probably wouldn't have understood it anyway if you'd tried to explain all that sciency shit." Going quiet another moment, she rested her chin on Shepard's shoulder again, watching as she continued feeding her son, seeming captivated by the unusual little boy. Then, seeming to remember something, she suddenly looked up, taking a sharp breath in. "How did your talk with Patriarch go?" she asked, eagerly. "Did he find you some work?"

Shepard hesitated, thinning her lips, before shaking her head and readjusting David's bottle, tilting it a bit further forward to keep him from sucking down air bubbles that might upset his stomach. "Not… really," she answered, honestly, unable to help feeling a bit guilty. "But it's okay. I found something else. Just as good."

"Well, if you're interested, there's one thing I've heard some people mentioning in Afterlife from time to time," Jack returned, seeming unconcerned by Shepard's bum luck with Patriarch, causing Shepard to look up again in interest. "Mostly wannabe mercs looking for an easy score, but still. Pretty sure it's not up your alley, but… I don't think it's illegal, at least. Seems to be a one-time thing, too, which is what you said you were looking for." Looking up at Shepard again, she paused, seeming surprised by how intently Shepard was staring at her, hanging onto her every word. "You might know about it already," she added, raising her scarred brows, expectantly. "But… have you heard about this job they've got available over on Khar'Shan?"

"The Khar'Shan job?" Shepard repeated, trying hard not to let on to Jack just how disappointed she was that that had been what she had been talking about. Looking back down at David again, she nodded, offhandedly, shrugging a bit. "Yeah, I've heard of it before," she answered. "You're right, though. It's not really up my alley."

"Got a good paycheck, though," Jack put in, sounding intrigued despite herself. "Nine million
credits, so they say. And that's just the most recent number. It keeps going up, and people keep disappearing, trying to get it." Letting out a soft scoff, she blew a stray lock of hair out of her face before reaching up to tuck it distractedly behind her ear, looking down at her knees and frowning. "Fuckin' idiots," she muttered, letting out another short, harsh huff of breath. "Throwing their lives away on a rumour. At least, that's what I assume happened. For all I know they hit it rich and are living it up in luxury somewhere. Who knows." Shrugging her shoulders, she sniffed, offhandedly, crossing her thin wrists in her lap as she looked up at Shepard and David again, watching the two of them, interestedly. "As for me, I prefer a real fuckin' job," she added, decidedly. "One you know will pay up at the end of the month… preferably without having to risk your life to get it."

"It's a good option if you can find it," Shepard answered, fairly, bouncing David gently in her lap. "But not everybody has that luxury. Jobs are hard to come by these days, and rent, food… you never know how much you're going to need." Turning her attention down towards David then, she watched as he drank distractedly from his bottle, seeming to not even be paying any attention to the conversation going on around him. "It's not easy living paycheck to paycheck," she added, pensively. "I never really had to think about it when I was working for the Alliance, but now… I wish I'd learned to budget a little better. No matter how hard I try to earn a decent living these days, it always just seems like we're barely scraping by."

Jack faltered at this, frowning a bit at the sentiment, as if it had never really occurred to her before that someone as proud and competent as Shepard could be just barely managing to stay afloat. Then, turning her attention down towards David again, she watched as he snuggled in a bit closer to his mother's side, letting out a soft sigh as she reached forward to take hold of one of his chubby socked feet. "I guess that's true," she finally answered, her voice a bit quieter this time, as if regretful of her earlier judgmental outburst. "I guess I was just thinking about myself. My situation. I should've known it was different when you've got really important bills to pay." Letting go of David's foot, she tickled a finger across his kneecap, causing him to give a soft burble of a giggle, seeming hesitant to take his mouth away from his bottle even to laugh. Looking up at Shepard again, Jack pressed her palms thoughtfully against her knees, taking a deep breath in and raising her scarred brows. "So why not take the Khar'Shan job?" she asked, straightforwardly.

Shepard faltered at the blunt question, unsure how to respond for a moment, shifting David against her arm a bit before returning to feeding him from his bottle. "Didn't you just say everybody who went there never came back?" she asked, unable to keep from frowning a bit. "I can't just run off chasing adventure and glory with no regard for life or death. Not anymore."

Jack huffed at her answer, rocking back a bit in her seat and folding her tattooed arms across her half-exposed chest as she raised one scarred, sceptical brow. "Are you sure you're the real Commander Shepard?" she asked playfully. "Maybe we got the wrong one back from the Crucible. The Shepard I know never thought twice before plunging headfirst into certain death." Leaning towards Shepard a bit then, she added, pointedly, "Or do you not remember leading us on that crazy suicide mission through the Collector Base?"

"Yeah," Shepard answered, chuckling fondly at the memory, tilting David's bottle forward a bit to ensure he got the last of his formula. "I remember. That was back when the fate of the galaxy was at stake and I didn't care if I lived or died, as long as I left the galaxy a safer and freer place than I found it. But..." Letting out another short sigh, she looked down towards David again, meeting his gaze, watching him as he stared up at her, hanging onto her every word. "I've got somebody who needs me to stick around now," she said, earnestly. "And if giving up that life of constantly cheating death means I can make his world just a little bit brighter every day by continuing to be in it, then... you know, I think I can make that sacrifice."

Offering her son a soft, fond smile, Shepard gave him another gentle jostle, letting out a quiet, doting
chuckle before looking up towards Jack again, watching as she snorted, softly, satisfactorily amused, before crossing one leg over her other knee and giving Shepard a quick, telling once-over. "Shit, Shepard," she told her, shaking her head. "That kid's gone and made you all soft."

Shepard laughed again, a bit louder this time, looking down towards David with a doting smile. Then, coaxing the nearly-empty bottle from his mouth, she held it over towards Jack instead, giving it a tempting little shake in her direction. "You want to try feeding him a little?" she started to ask, but the words had barely left her mouth before Jack quickly snatched the bottle out of her hand, setting it aside and holding out her arms for the transfer of the toddler.

"I thought you'd never fuckin' ask!" Jack exclaimed, almost breathlessly. "Hand him over here, woman. Let me show you how the professionals do it."

"The professionals?" Shepard joked, sceptically, shifting David over into Jack's arms instead, careful not to jostle him too much in the transfer. "Meaning you? Since when are you a professional anything?"

"Bite me," Jack answered, not missing a beat. Adjusting David against her arm, she picked up the bottle again, shifting him once against her side as she lowered the bottle back into his waiting hands and mouth, unable to keep a doting smile from her face as she watched him suckle his formula. "There we go," she cooed, gently, giving him a soft, reassuring pat against the side of his chubby leg. "That's it. That's how we do for Auntie Jack."

"Auntie Jack?" Shepard asked, arching a brow at the name.

"It's better than Aunt Jackie," Jack answered, bluntly, hardly even bothering to look up at Shepard as she continued to feed David from his bottle. "Auntie Jack sounds like a cool aunt who takes you hovercar drag racing. Aunt Jackie sounds like someone who sends holiday cards to everyone with pictures of her twelve cats."

Shepard chuckled at the differentiation, taking the moment of downtime to stretch her legs out in front of her on the bench, letting out a stifled yawn as she stretched out her tired arms in front of her as well. She knew she had no time to be tired, but even so she could not help but feel that it had been a remarkably long day, and while she had gotten a few things done on her private agenda, personal stops like these meant she was falling further and further behind on her professional schedule. Letting her hands fall back to her lap, she crossed her ankles under the bench again, watching as Jack continued to feed David, who seemed entirely unfazed by the fact that he had been transferred into the arms of a stranger. Just then, the sound of approaching footsteps caught Shepard's attention, and she turned in time to see a large figure moving towards them, her lowered face just visible enough for them to spot the telltale bright red scarf of the krogan female from the corner booth in Afterlife. Shepard's hand instinctively shifted to the gun on her hip as the krogan approached, her other hand moving over to shield David and Jack as the alien came to stand a few feet in front of them, coming to a silent stop before lifting her head to stare at Shepard with sharp, intent green eyes.

"It's a krogan," David observed, astutely, and Shepard could see Jack's arm tighten around him as the krogan female glanced his way, before she turned her attention back to Shepard, seeming unfazed by the alien child.

"Commander Shepard," the female krogan spoke, causing Shepard to tense even more at the sound of her name being spoken by a stranger. While serving in the Alliance, she had grown used to the idea that more people would recognize her than she would them, but she had already had a bad feeling about this krogan from the first time she had seen her in Afterlife. For her now to have the upper hand in knowing who Shepard was when she did not have the same advantage was unsettling, especially when Shepard's frail infant son was so close by and nearly helpless to attack.
"Can I help you?" Shepard asked, her tone tentative and a bit curt. She could see the veins in Jack's hands begin to draw tight as well, a flicker of blue biotic light glimmering between the fingers holding David's bottle as she stared at the krogan, daring her to come closer. The krogan did not even seem to notice the imminent threat, instead keeping her attention locked on Shepard as she lifted her massive head a bit higher, proudly, holding the Commander's attention.

"Commander Shepard, I am Barshaak Rahma," the krogan stated, speaking clearly, enunciating every word so she could be easily understood. "I have heard tales of your great prowess in battle. It is said that you were once part of the krantt of the great Warlord Urdnot Grunt. Is this not true?"

"Warlord Grunt?" Shepard asked, surprised, turning to glance over at Jack. Jack shrugged, seeming just as surprised as she was, and Shepard let out an impressed, almost unintentional laugh in response, turning to look back towards the female krogan and nodding distractedly along to the news. "I thought Warlord was a title given only to krogan who had biotic abilities," she admitted. "I know Wrex is a Warlord. Okeer was a Warlord."

"The title's meaning has changed with necessity," Rahma explained, thoughtfully, lowering her head a bit as she spoke, just enough that Shepard could barely see what appeared to be a tiny scar peeking out from above the line of her scarf. "Krogan biotic ability has declined exponentially with the Genophage. As a result, 'Warlords' in the traditional sense are all but extinct. The title has begun being applied to those who command great power by virtue of deeds done." Realizing what Shepard was staring at, she quickly lifted her head again, hiding the scar from her sight, her green eyes flashing with worry for a split second before returning quickly to a look of mere indignation. "'Warlord' was once a proud term for krogans, until it was diluted by war and desperation," she went on, trying to act as though nothing had happened between her and Shepard. "But we are reclaiming the title now. It is no longer a name to be dragged through the dirt and sullied by mercenaries who only happen to have a natural-born ability."

"Seems our little tank baby is moving up in the world, then," Shepard commented, agreeably, trying to imagine Grunt as the leader of an army of krogan. It was not a difficult stretch at all, though she still could not help but feel a bit like a proud mother sending her son off to war. Folding her hands over one knee then, she nodded, thoughtfully, returning her attention to the conversation at hand. "That is true, then," she told Rahma, honestly. "I once served in the krantt of Urdnot Grunt. He and I are old friends. Why do you ask?"

"I am simply impressed, Commander," Rahma answered, frankly. "Warlord Grunt is a legend on TuChanka. I had never met someone who had served in his krantt before. When I saw you in Afterlife, I could hardly believe my eyes." Taking another step forward, Rahma leaned in a bit towards the two women, causing Shepard to reach for her gun again, watching as Rahma's reptilian eyes flicked from her hand to her face and back again, as if weighing her chances of coming any closer without getting her head shot off at close range. "I actually came to ask a favour, Commander," Rahma told her, speaking in the same weighted tone, seeming almost entirely unconcerned about the weapon at Shepard's hip. "I know you have worked with krogan before. Urdnot Wrex spoke highly of you. I came to ask you if you would consider allowing me to join your crew."

Shepard hesitated at the request, saying nothing for a long moment as she stared at Rahma, trying to figure out whether she had heard the female krogan's proposition correctly or not. "I'm… sorry," she finally said, blinking a few times, dumbfounded. "I'm not sure I understood you correctly. Did you… just ask to join my crew?"

"I did, Commander," Rahma confirmed, giving a nod of her broad head.
Shepard frowned, chewing thoughtfully at her lower lip, before turning to look at Jack instead, hoping for some sort of sign or reaction to help her figure out how to respond. In return, Jack merely shrugged, shaking her head, seeming just as thrown by the request as Shepard was. Returning her attention to Rahma again, Shepard stared up at the female krogan, wetting her lips slowly as she tried to figure out how best to reply to such a straightforward appeal. "Did you say you were a member of Clan Barshaak?" she finally asked, trying to buy a bit of time as she figured out how to answer Rahma's unusual question. "What exactly is Clan Barshaak? Why have I never heard of you before? I thought I'd heard of all the clans on TuChanka."

"Clan Barshaak is a small clan on the outermost reaches of TuChanka," Rahma clarified, seeming eager to explain herself, almost as if she had anticipated being questioned on her background. "Our specializations are medicines and poisons. We were one of the last clans to be approached to join Clan Urdnot when Urdnot Wrex took over as clan leader and began trying to unite the clans. We are a peaceful clan, mostly, but most clans on TuChanka know to stay clear of us for their own well-being, regardless." She paused, watching Shepard, as if waiting for a reaction, her sharp green eyes not moving from Shepard's face as an uncomfortable silence settled between them. Shepard stared back, unmoving, unblinking, her lips drawn into a hard, pensive line, trying to figure out how much truth there was to this explanation, before Rahma suddenly took a deep breath in, lifting her broad chin again as she made to carry on with her explanation. "The outermost reaches are very far from most civilized areas and home to several dangerous and poisonous creatures not found most other places on the planet," she continued, barrelling onward, seeming intent on impressing Shepard with the severity of her upbringing. "As a part of our culture, all our clan members are taught at least a basic amount of field medicine from childhood—"

"Female krogan aren't usually interested in being warriors," Shepard put in suddenly, cutting over her, causing her to stop short in her explanation, her eyes going wide in surprise. "Or at least, none that I've met have ever been. They have a basic knowledge of how to protect themselves, but every female krogan I've ever met has been more interested in helping rebuild TuChanka than going out and fighting in some pithy mercenary war." Shrugging, she tucked her hands between her knees, making a face as she stared up at Rahma, unmoved by her grandiose talk of harsh environments preparing her for the bloody world. "I'm just a has-been trying to make a living," she told her, frankly. "Why do you want to join up with me when you could be doing something to help your homeworld? Even if it's just helping break up rocks, I'm sure Urdnot Wrex would—"

"Have you met many female krogan, Commander?" Rahma cut over her, challenging her, slitting her green eyes as she spoke. Shepard opened her mouth, intent on answering, before quickly closing it again, knowing better than to speak where she did not have the experience to do so. Rahma snorted, seeming unsurprised by this response, before giving a single, sharp shake of her broad head, balling one clawed fist at her side as she prepared to go on. "We are not all the same, Commander Shepard," she told her, harshly. "Just as you humans are not all the same. Your motivations are not all the same, and neither are your hopes and dreams. One might say that, speaking generally, your only interest as a female of your species is in reproduction. However, there are those of you who prove that this generalization is not correct. The same is true for the krogan."

"I'm sorry," Shepard answered, her voice quieter, giving an earnest shake of her head. "I didn't mean to imply that it was. I just assumed, because of the Genophage—"

"The Genophage was not as bad as many made it out to be, Commander," Rahma told her, sharply, the subject seeming oddly touchy, causing Shepard to look up in interest, wondering if she had struck a nerve. "Before the Cure and the joining of the clans, I was destined to be a warrior. It was my right as a member of Clan Barshaak. After the Genophage was cured, Urdnot Wrex took over, and everything changed." Having said this, she suddenly faltered, her harsh gaze softening for a split second, the change in her expression just barely noticeable enough for Shepard to see it before it
disappeared. "I wanted to be allowed to perform the Right of Passage still, to claim my rightful place as a soldier, but because of the Cure they would not let me," Rahma went on, her voice thin, wavering, seeming close to breaking, though her clenched fists and rigid jaw made it clear that she would not allow that to happen. "They said that now that the Genophage was no longer stopping the repopulation of TuChanka, women were not allowed to be warriors anymore, that... they were too valuable to be allowed to fight. Women were only allowed to have children, to be... incubators for the men."

Shepard frowned deeply at this dark revelation, one hand curling into a curious fist against the side of her knee as she turned the statement over and over in her head. Parts of Rahma's story seemed plausible, such as the idea that the leaders of TuChanka would be unimpressed by the thought of potentially fertile females needlessly risking their lives working in mindless mercenary gangs when they could be helping TuChanka instead. However, the idea that Wrex and Bakara would force anyone, especially female krogan, to do anything against their will seemed a little too contrived, even for Shepard. "That... doesn't seem right," she finally answered, shaking her head slowly, as if still trying to process this new story. "I know Wrex. He isn't a tyrant. He knows better than to treat the women in his clan that way. And even if he didn't, Urdnot Bakara wouldn't allow something like that to happen." Taking another moment to think, she let out a short, uncertain huff of breath, before reaching over to Jack again and picking up David out of her arms, shifting him onto her hip as she stood and holding him angled as far away from Rahma as possible.

"Here's what I can do," she told her, watching Rahma's expression closely, as if waiting for the krogan to give her a reason to go for the gun at her belt. "I'll provide you with transport back to TuChanka. I need to head over there eventually anyway, but I won't be going immediately, so you can help me out until then. You'll earn your keep, and you won't interfere with my crew, and we won't have any problems."

Taking the bottle Jack held up towards her, she capped it, tucking it into a loop on her belt, before turning her attention back towards Rahma again, keeping her locked with a level stare. "Once we're back on board, I'll have a talk with Wrex," she went on, noting the way Rahma stiffened a bit at the mention of Wrex, despite trying hard to hide it. "I still have a bit of clout on TuChanka. This all seems like it's probably just a big misunderstanding, but in case it's not, I'll see if I can't convince Wrex to have his shaman make an exception and let you undergo the Right of Passage—"

"Urdnot Wrex will not listen to reason," Rahma cut her off, not even letting Shepard finish before she shook her head again, her voice grave. "Ever since the Cure that invalidated the Genophage was released on TuChanka, the women have been treated as if their only purpose is to allow the men to reproduce as frequently and as aggressively as they please. It is as if we have been stripped of our rights as women – as individuals." Balling her clawed fists angrily at her sides, she stared Shepard down, rooting herself in place, trying her hardest to keep from physically shaking with anger and nerves. "The camps have been turned into a harem. It is a prison, Commander. And I will not go back there. If you will not let me join your crew without threatening to return me to TuChanka, so be it. I had hoped I might assist a great legend of my people, but it seems that all that is left is just a mindless shell."

Shepard bristled at the blatant insult, her grip stiffening around her son, willing herself not to start a fight over something so juvenile and petty. Gritting her teeth, she offered Rahma a thin-lipped, long-suffering smile, before patting David on the back and shifting him more comfortably against her hip.

"Let's get one thing straight," she told the krogan, doing her best to keep her voice even and agreeable. "I like people. I've always liked people. Humans, krogans, turians... all kinds of people. In fact, depending on who you ask, some might even say that I like people a little more than most." At this, Jack gave a soft snort of agreement, but she quickly covered it with a quiet, fake cough, which Shepard astutely ignored. "I vouched for aliens to be part of my crew when nobody else wanted to trust them," she went on, matter-of-factly. "And when the other races refused to help me
during the Reaper War, I still vouched for them. I still tried to save them. Because I like people, and I believe in them. But if there's one thing I can't abide, no matter what, it's people who think they can demand things of me just because I like to get along."

"Commander, I—" Rahma began to speak, but Shepard quickly held up a hand, cutting her off before she could start.

"I'm not done yet," Shepard told her, silencing her immediately. Pulling David's hands gently away from his mask, she dug around in his little backpack, pulling out his Nexus toy, before turning her attention back to Rahma again, satisfied that her son was momentarily entertained. "You think, just because I have a kid now, I'm not exactly the same person I was back when I was fighting in the Reaper War?" she asked, giving David another reassuring pat to emphasize his presence. "I'm Commander Shepard. You know exactly who I am. You think you can just demand things of me now and I'll cave because I'm… what, soft?" Scoffing, she shook her head, watching with great satisfaction as Rahma squirmed in place, seeming less and less sure of her own boldness the longer she stood being scolded. "I just put my kid through teething and the terrible twos by myself," Shepard told her, frankly. "What makes you think your ridiculous grown up temper tantrum is going to faze me?"

Rahma faltered at this question, her green eyes flicking to the far wall and back, as if trying to find some desperate answer written there that might help her not to look so foolish. "I am sorry, Commander," she finally answered, embarrassed, lowering her eyes to the pavement. "It was not my intention to upset you. I merely… I merely wished to join your crew. I apologize."

Shepard gave a short, satisfied nod in response, allowing Rahma another moment to think about how she had acted, before clearing her throat gently, causing the krogan to look up at her again, hopefully. "The Normandy's the blue ship, second from the end," Shepard told her, jerking her head in the direction of the docks. "I'll be heading over there in a couple minutes, so… go ahead and wait for me at the boarding gate. I wouldn't recommend going on before I get there, though. My crew won't take too kindly if you try boarding without me." For an instant, Rahma seemed unsure how to react, simply standing in place, bewildered, but she quickly changed tact, turning in the direction of the docks and starting to shuffle off as fast as Shepard had seen a krogan go, as if afraid Shepard might change her mind if she stood around dithering for too long. Letting out another soft chuckle at the reaction, Shepard turned her attention towards Jack again, who was watching Rahma leave as well, a look on her face as if she had just seen someone willingly drink sour milk.

"You're not really buying this shit, are you, Shepard?" Jack asked, turning to look at Shepard again and jerking a tattooed thumb over her shoulder towards where Rahma was disappearing through the metal door at the end of the thoroughfare.

Shepard shrugged, taking Nexus from David's tired hands as he laid his head down on her shoulder to rest, wrapping his arms around her neck with a yawn as she tucked the toy back in his pack. "Not a word of it," she answered frankly, shaking her head. Then, letting out a short, sharp breath, she turned to look in the direction of the docks as well, her brow furrowing into a hard, pensive line as her lips pursed in worried thought. Despite the conviction in her answer, something was eating away at her about the female krogan's claims, something unsettling she could not shake about the state of TuChanka since last she had checked up on Wrex and his campaign. It had been a while since she had spoken to Wrex, and though she trusted him implicitly with his new responsibilities, she could not help worrying that something terrible might have in fact happened while she was too busy dealing with David to look. The galaxy was not the same place it was three years ago, and that amount of time had a way of changing people in unexpected ways. Still, she could not help feeling that Wrex would never do something to break her trust like that, no matter how desperate times became, or how extreme he had to become in practice to combat them.
"Something just doesn't seem right about all of this," Shepard admitted, patting David's back distractedly and speaking in a low voice, as if afraid Rahma might still be able to hear them. "That's why I don't feel comfortable letting Rahma out of my sight. Even if what she says isn't true, inflammatory propaganda like that can turn a shaky situation like TuChanka's ugly, fast." Her frown deepening, she chewed her lip, her hand pausing on David's back as she stared at the door to the docks another moment longer, before she finally looked back at Jack again, her expression torn, concerned. "I want to make sure she doesn't spread this around any more than she already has," she told her. "Meanwhile, I'll try to get a straight answer out of Wrex about how much of it is actually true. If that means harbouring her on my ship for a little bit, I figure… I've got at least three other people on there who know how to use a weapon."

"Let's just hope it doesn't come to that," Jack returned, letting out a sigh of her own. Reaching over to David's head, she petted his soft down under his hood, unable to keep a small, fond smile from her face at how sweet he looked sleeping. Then, looking up at Shepard again, she offered her a smile as well, reaching around her encumbered form to give her a warm, wary hug, careful not to jostle David or crowd him too tightly as she did so. "Take care of yourself, Shepard," she told her, finally letting go, before reaching out again to give her shoulder a hearty squeeze. "And hey— take care of the little guy, too. I want to see him back here on his fourth birthday, you hear? I'll even pass him through into the VIP for free." Her puckish smile widening, she reached out towards David again, patting his little back gently, causing him to give another soft yawn at her touch. "Hell, I'll even do you one better," she added, looking up at Shepard again. "Bring him back for his next birthday, and all his drinks are on me."

"When you start carrying nutrient formula at Afterlife, you let me know," Shepard joked back, good-naturedly.

Jack chuckled softly at the quip, letting her hand return to her side, before her expression suddenly changed, becoming a bit more serious. "Listen, Shepard," she said, solemnly, causing Shepard to look up again, worried by her change in tone. "You know I'd go with you to the Normandy in a heartbeat if I could. It's just… you said yourself the Normandy doesn't have extra credits to give its crew. I gotta stay here for the pay. For Grissom. You know that's the only reason, right?"

Shepard faltered, surprised by this sudden, heartfelt show of honesty, before she finally reached her free hand out towards Jack, resting it reassuringly on her shoulder, causing Jack to look up again, only to be met with an earnest, heartening smile. "You don't have to explain anything to me, Jack," Shepard told her, honestly. "You're a good person. You always have been. I trust your judgement to do whatever you think is right." Taking her hand away from Jack's shoulder, she used it to shift David against her waist, hiking up his little backpack from where it had started to slip down his arm. "Besides, I could use some eyes on Omega," she added, optimistically. "Someone to keep me up to date on everything going on here. You can let me know if there's any major changes, or any work that needs to be done… things like that. You know what I mean." Pausing then, she shrugged a bit, a cheeky smile starting to creep across her face. "Or just in case Aria needs someone to… y'know. Liberate another station or something," she added jokingly. "Just give me a call. You know where to find me."

Jack paused for a moment, trying to figure out whether Shepard was merely placating her with her request. Then, seeming to decide she did not care, she smiled back, offering Shepard an understanding nod. "I think I can manage that," she answered, fairly, giving a soft laugh in return. "If you promise not to die before I see you again."

Shepard shrugged, her smile widening. "No promises," she said.
David was fast asleep by the time Shepard returned to the docked Normandy, and she indicated silently with a jerk of her chin for Rahma to follow her up to the bridge, trying to make as little noise as possible as she made her way back up to the waiting ship. She was well aware of the curious, worried eyes that followed her as she journeyed down to the navigation deck, circling the starmap to Traynor's station and tapping the yeoman on the shoulder, causing her to jump a bit in surprise as she was pulled away from her work. Traynor seemed pleased to see Shepard at first, but her expression quickly changed to a look of startled worry as her gaze moved across the imposing krogan standing behind the Commander. Biting her lip, she turned her attention back to Shepard, hoping for an explanation, and Shepard was quick to oblige, indicating over her shoulder towards Rahma with a collected toss of her head.

"Samantha Traynor, this is Barshaak Rahma," Shepard told her, straightforwardly. "She'll be joining our crew for a short while. At least until we can find time to head to TuChanka to see what the situation is over there."

"I had hoped to make it a more permanent stay," Rahma objected, but Shepard ignored her, keeping her attention fixed on Traynor instead.

"David needs a nap, but I want to at least change him out of his suit first," Shepard went on, conversationally, speaking as though Rahma were not even there. "Did Zaeed find his room okay?"

Traynor frowned a bit at the question, trying hard to keep from staring at Rahma, seeming nervous to even speak in front of her, as if afraid she might object to not being included in the conversation. "Mister Massani took up residence in the storage nook," she finally answered, speaking slowly, doing her best to keep her attention fixed on Shepard and David as she spoke. "He said something about it being a nice hideaway spot, and a good place not to be disturbed. He was muttering a lot, so I didn't catch all of it, but... he seemed pleased with his choice." She faltered again, swallowing hard, her dark eyes flicking anxiously to Rahma and back, her hands twitching on her keypad as she tried hard not to fidget nervously under the krogan's censorious stare. "You also received a new message while you were away," she added, looking back at Shepard again. "It was marked urgent, but I didn't see a sender. I didn't open it to check, though. I figured it wasn't my business."

"Thanks, Traynor," Shepard returned, nodding, patting David gently on the back. Then, turning to look back at Rahma, she indicated towards the central elevator with a nod of her head, causing Rahma to turn to look in the direction she was specifying. "Go and wait by the elevator," Shepard instructed, shortly. "I need to finish up here. Traynor will be over in a minute to take you to your room." Rahma nodded, understanding, before turning to head in the direction of the elevator, ignoring the looks from the crewmembers she passed as she shuffled towards the lift. Shepard watched her leave, waiting until she was out of earshot, before turning her attention back to Traynor again, much more serious than before. "Go ahead and set Rahma up in Thane's old quarters," she told her, speaking quietly, as if afraid Rahma might still be able to hear them, even from over by the elevators. "I'd put her in the maintenance room, but I want to keep her as far away from David as possible. I don't want her knowing where his nursery is, at least for as long as I can help it."

Frowning, she turned, looking over her shoulder again, watching as Rahma stared up at the numbers above the elevator doors, as if expecting the carriage to come down to get her on its own. "Plus, this way, if she causes trouble, we'll be prepared," Shepard added, frankly, more to herself than to Traynor. "There are plenty of trained people on the crew floor who know how to deal with an angry krogan."
Traynor nodded, understanding, before turning to look back at Rahma as well, taking a deep breath as she sought to gather up her courage to go over and address the krogan. Then, moving away from her work station, she crossed over to the elevator, greeting Rahma, before reaching out to select the next floor down on the lift panel, starting to converse with the krogan in voices too far away for Shepard to hear. Making her way over to her private terminal, Shepard turned it on, accessing her e-mail, balancing David on her hip with one hand as she scrolled through her messages with the other. Just as Traynor had indicated, the newest message in her inbox was marked as urgent, but the sender section had been left blank, and when she tried to backtrack for an origin, it came back as untraceable. Shifting David against her hip, she opened the message, starting to read, and it did not take long for her to figure out where it had come from.

The e-mail was from Liara, though anyone not familiar with her style of writing would never have been able to tell, as she had left it intentionally open-ended, making sure not to include any details that might link back to her specifically. The message itself was short, informing Shepard that the sender had come across some important information that she needed to share but did not feel comfortable risking sending it over an unsecure line. The message went on to suggest that they meet up at the Citadel to discuss the information, and ended with Liara informing Shepard that she had already gone ahead and wired credits to her account, enough to pay for fuel to get her to the Citadel from anywhere in the galaxy.

Shepard frowned at the vague message, unable to help but wonder what kind of information Liara had that was so sensitive it could not be sent either by vidcomm or e-mail. She knew full well that Liara dealt in risky intel every day in her job as the Shadow Broker, but nothing Shepard had asked her about recently, at least to her memory, seemed like it would be too dangerous to share over a personal message. Still, she figured that Liara had to know what she was talking about, and if she deemed the information too risky to send over e-mail, then she was probably right. Closing out her e-mail again, she headed over to the now-clear elevator, pressing the upward button on the panel and waiting for the carriage to arrive to take her to the top floor. Even with Liara's help, it would still take them a day or so to get to the Serpent Nebula, which meant plenty of time for David to go free without his suit and mask before he had to don them again to go on another outing. Stepping onto the elevator, she pressed the button going up, before pushing her son's hood back and prying his mask gently up over his head, pressing a soft kiss on his forehead, causing him to stir a bit, yawning, before curling up more securely against her neck.

The incoming vidcomm message light was flashing on Shepard's terminal by the time she made it up to her cabin, but she ignored it, figuring that whoever it was would call back or wait for her to answer if it was really important. Setting David's backpack and mask aside on her desk as she passed, she carried him over to her bed, settling him down easily onto the sheets before turning on the air filter beside her bed and starting to coax him sleepily out of his suit. Once the suit was off, she folded it neatly to one side, combing his dark down with her fingers to make sure it had not gotten knotted, before reaching into one of her drawers and pulling out her softest shirt, drawing it down over his head and picking him up to tuck him securely into bed. With David now safely under the covers, she finally turned away from the bed, making her way back over to her terminal station and dropping herself down into her chair, tucking her legs up into her seat as she reached forward to answer the call.

She was surprised to see Garrus' familiar face staring back at her from the other side of the screen, but she quickly raised a finger to her lips, indicating for him to be quiet, before waving a hand of greeting towards him, offering him a thin, weary smile. "David's asleep," she told him, quietly. "He just ate, so I had to put him down for his nap. If I'd known you were going to call, I would have waited to feed him."

"That's okay, let him sleep," Garrus answered, speaking just as quietly, raising a hand to dismiss her
"I was more hoping to talk to you anyway. It's... been a while."

"A couple weeks," Shepard shrugged, running her palms distractedly down her thighs to rest them on her knees. "We've gone without contact longer than that before. Six months... two years."

"Hm," Garrus grunted, seeming unconvinced. "That was before we were exclusive, remember. You're the only woman in my life now, other than Solana. It's a lot harder."

"There were other women before?" Shepard asked, arching a curious brow.

Garrus faltered, trying to decide how to answer, before finally giving a soft huff and looking down, his mandibles twitching faintly as he tried hard not to smile, embarrassed. "Well... no," he admitted, honestly. "Not since I met you. But... you should know it was a very viable option back then. I was a very desirable turian. Bad boy vigilante... former cop."

"Hopeless romantic," Shepard teased him, causing him to look up again, smirking. "Admit it. You never stood a chance. I've always been the only woman for you, Garrus Vakarian."

Garrus gave a soft, conceding chuckle at the definitive statement, his guilty smile widening as his mandibles bobbed thoughtfully at the sides of his mouth. "That's... true," he finally acknowledged, trying his best to sound playfully uncertain, though she knew well he was as hopelessly acquiescent to the fact as she was. "Either way, that's not the reason why I was calling. I was... mostly just thinking about the last time we spoke. I didn't really like the way things left off, and I didn't think it was right to just leave it like that. So... here I am."

Shepard's expression fell a bit at the explanation, a faint sense of dread starting to creep over her at the inevitable discussion she knew was about to come. "Garrus, you don't hav—" she started to say, but Garrus quickly cut her off, holding up both hands to stop her and shaking his head, looking as though he knew he might not be able to say what he was thinking if he did not get it out right then. Shepard hesitated, a bit surprised, before leaning back in her chair again, tucking her arms over her chest, half considering simply continuing to talk in the hopes that Garrus might lose his nerve and not say what he was thinking. She was in no mood to fight, not after what she had just been through on Omega, but he seemed determined to have this conversation, and she did not want to cause a fight in an effort to prevent one.

Taking a deep breath, Garrus shifted anxiously in his seat, folding his hands together in front of him on the desk as he cleared his throat, his mandibles giving a restless twitch as he looked up at her again, preparing to speak. "Listen, Shepard," he told her, frankly, letting out a soft sigh as he spoke, sounding as though he had been thinking about this for a long time but still did not know exactly how to say it. "I just... wanted to apologize for earlier. I didn't mean to give you such a hard time then, and I... I said some things I didn't mean. I was just feeling frustrated, and I took it out on you. It wasn't right, and it wasn't fair, and... I just wanted to let you know. I'm sorry."

Shepard faltered at the heartfelt apology, uncertain what to say in response, unused to people being so forward and sincere when it came to admitting fault. She fidgeted a bit as she tried to think of an appropriate answer, her hand clenching awkwardly beside her on the desk, and Garrus was quick to notice her discomfort, clearing his throat again to fill the silence before moving in a bit further forward towards the screen, squaring his broad shoulders, preparing to go on. "That being said, there were a few things I was... kind of hoping to discuss," he admitted, causing Shepard to look up, listening intently, glad for the change in subject but unsure if she liked where the conversation was now headed instead. "As much as I appreciate everything you're doing... I do feel like I'm missing out on a lot. I know it's not your fault, but... not being able to see David except for over calls like this... it's hard, Shepard. It's damn hard. I just don't want my son growing up thinking his dad wasn't there for him."
Shepard made a face at the observation, unable to help but feel she was being led on, wary that this was starting to sound very much like last conversation they had had on the subject. "I'm not preventing David from going to Palaven because I want to, Garrus," she told him, leaning back in her chair as she spoke, causing it to give a faint, agitated squeak as it rocked on its hinges. "I know your family wants to see him. And I want them to see him, I do, but… I just don't know how to explain to them exactly how fragile he is."

"So just tell them," Garrus returned, frowning a bit, his mandibles giving a broad, agitated dip. "They'll understand. Solana has three children of her own, she knows how important a child's health is to a parent."

"It's not Solana I'm worried about," Shepard answered, bluntly, her frown deepening at the retort. "It's her children that make me nervous. They're too young to understand why David can't play with them, and David's too naïve to tell them no. He wants so badly to be everyone's friend, but he doesn't understand that he can't do the things that everybody else does." Flicking the edge of her thumbnail anxiously against the side of her index finger, she shook her head, before leaning back in her chair again and starting to squeeze it, letting out some of her frustration. "I've tried to explain to him about his limitations, but it's hard for him to understand," she added, turning the ball distractedly in her fingers before giving it a strangling squeeze. "He's still too young to comprehend why he can't do those things other than because mommy said so. I'm starting to realize the only way to keep him from trying to do things and hurting himself is to not expose him to them at all."

"Because ignorance is bliss?" Garrus asked, making a face, sounding entirely unsupportive of her reasoning, one hand curling into a distracted fist on the table in front of him as his mandibles gave several tepid taps against his chin. "That sounds like a miserable existence, Shepard. Not being able to do anything? Might as well just put him in a bubble and wait for him to turn eighteen."

"Well, what am I supposed to do, Garrus?" Shepard returned, exasperated, squeezing the stress ball so tightly her knuckles began to turn white with frustration. "Which is worse, not knowing about something or knowing about it and being told you can't have it? I'm just trying to spare his feelings, that's all. I love him, and I don't want him to know he's missing out on things he can't have."

Unclenching her fist around the stress ball she let out a sharp exhale, shaking her head before starting to roll the ball around distractedly between her fingers. "I want him to have a normal life as much as you do," she told him, her voice lower now, forcing herself to be calm as she spoke. She was in no mood to get into another argument, but she had a hard time not getting nettled over her parenting being put into question. "But he has medical problems—breathing problems. You know he does. If he overexerts himself, he can suffocate. He could die."

Stopping in her nervous fiddling, Shepard paused a moment, holding the ball pensively between her fingers, before setting it aside on the desk again, letting out a long, grave sigh. "When David was a baby, I had to monitor his feeding closely just to make sure he didn't stop breathing while he was eating," she told him, sounding more resigned to this fact than saddened by it, as if she had grown so used to it that it was nothing more than a fact of life. "It almost happened once or twice. I know it's hard, but David, he just… his body can't process air the same way ours can, Garrus. It just can't."

Garrus paused, considering her argument, his mandibles hovering in slow circles as he stared at her, as if trying to find a loophole in her logic. Then, finally, he let out a soft, sad sigh, dropping his blue gaze from the screen and unclenching his hand to rest it absentmindedly against the desktop instead. "I know," he answered, nodding along, his mandibles giving a few soft, even tics against his chin as he spoke. "His body isn't the same as ours. I know that. He's got your lung structure but a mixture of
our blood plasma compounds. The haemocyanin from my blood requires a much higher quantity of oxygen to be able to perform effectively than the haemoglobin in yours. It eats up more of his available oxygen, and it's harder for him to replace." Looking up at her again, he frowned a bit, rubbing the pads of his thumb and second finger distractedly together as he thought. "That's why turians have extra air sacs in their lungs, for consistent cycling of oxygen," he added, more as an afterthought than anything. "David doesn't have that."

"Karin also says he has a weak heart because of it," Shepard put in, her tone solemn. "She says if his body stops processing oxygen for too long, it could cause him to go into cardiac arrest, and that could possibly kill him. I'm just afraid if we do anything to strain him too much, he'll…"

"I know," Garrus answered shortly, not needing her to finish, dropping his gaze to his lap again. "I'm sorry, Shepard. I shouldn't have said anything. I wasn't thinking. I apologize." Taking a deep breath, he lapsed once more into guilty, thoughtful silence, staring intently down at his desk, the only sound breaking the uncomfortable quiet the gentle bubbling of Shepard's fish tank. Then, after a moment, he cleared his throat again, gently, before looking back up at Shepard once more, his expression stern, pensive, but sincere. "Well… this isn't how I'd intended this conversation to go at all," he admitted, causing her to blink a few times, surprised. "I'd kind of hoped we might be able to talk about us for a little bit. You know. Just you and me." Having said this, he paused a moment, considering, before finally letting out another soft, thin chuckle and looking down again, his hand half-curling beside him on the desk as his mandibles gave a wide dip out from his chin. "I guess that's not really possible now though," he added, offhandedly. "No such thing as a conversation about us without David being a part of it. Not that I'm complaining, mind you. Just… observing."

"That's what happens when you have kids," Shepard agreed, offering him a small, fond smile in return.

"Hm," Garrus answered, looking up again, his avian gaze fixed thoughtfully on her as he considered the validity of her statement. "I guess that's true. At least until he grows up and moves out. Then you and I can be wild and crazy again. Just like the old days."

"Speak for yourself," Shepard returned, laughing faintly, before quickly pressing a hand over her mouth and glancing over towards where David was still napping, making sure he had not woken him with her noise. David had not stirred at the sound, still nestled comfortably under the blankets of her bed, his thumb half resting in his mouth as he slept, the gentle rise and fall of the covers assuring Shepard that he was still breathing. Letting her hand fall back to her lap again, she gave a soft, sated sigh, before turning to look back at Garrus again, who was watching her intently, waiting for a verdict, which she offered him in the form of a short, assuring nod. Satisfied that his son was still fast asleep, Garrus let out a quiet, tired exhale, leaning back in his chair as he considered Shepard through the vidscreen, thoughtfully.

"Listen, Shepard," Garrus began again, solemnly, causing her to look at him in interest. Having said this, he now hesitated, unsure how to go on, before finally letting out another, shorter huff of breath, folding his hands across his stomach as his mandibles gave a few quick, agitated twitches against his jaw. "I know you're doing the best you can for David," he told her, causing her to frown a bit, wary of where this statement might lead. "I've never doubted your ability as a parent, not for an instant. Ask anyone. You've done an amazing job so far, and I know I would never have been able to do the things you do – nobody would have. But, it's just that, sometimes…" Frowning again, he paused a moment, taking in a long, meditative breath, his mandibles thrumming pensively against the sides of his chin. "I just… miss you both so much, Shepard," he admitted, honestly, letting out his breath again in a short, sharp huff. "And… I wish I could be there to help. If my job here on Palaven wasn't so demanding, I would join you on the Normandy in a heartbeat. You know I would. But until I get that chance…"
Trailing off again, he frowned, his plated brow furrowing as his mandibles began to tap more agitatedly against his jaw, seeming frustrated that he did not know the right words to express how he was feeling. Shepard had a feeling she knew what he was trying to say, but she stayed quiet, waiting patiently, not wanting to risk cutting him off when she knew how important it was to him to tell her this himself. "I wish… you would update me a little more," Garrus finally decided, giving a short, anxious huff of breath as the statement left his mouth. "I used to hear from you every other day, but now I'm lucky to hear from you even once a month. I know you're busy taking care of David and the Normandy, along with everything else, but… sometimes – I know it's not your fault – but… it almost feels like…" Hesitating again, he gave another hefty, tired sigh, unfolding his hands from across his abdomen to rest them on either armrest. "It almost feels like my son is growing up without me," he admitted, opening his hands out towards her, honestly. Then, having said his piece, he frowned again, going silent, one hand curling into a ball at his side as his mandibles continued to tap anxiously against the sides of his chin.

Shepard was silent for a moment following this, considering, her expression unmoving, unsure how best to respond. She knew how much it had taken for Garrus to get out his feelings the way he had, but she also knew that there was no simple solution to the issue they were facing. Though she wanted very much to assure him that she would try harder, that all their hard work and unhappiness would pay off eventually and everything would turn out all right in the end, she knew that those were empty sentiments, and there was no real, honest way to tell how things would play out in the long run. Folding her hands meditatively over her stomach, she leaned back more comfortably in her chair, letting her legs stretch out in front of her under the desk as she fixed him with an intent, watchful expression. "I recruited someone new today," she informed him, conversationally, watching as his expression instantly cleared in interest at the statement. "A krogan. Her name is Barshaak Rahma."

"Her name?" Garrus asked, intrigued, sitting up straighter in his chair to lean in a bit closer to the vidscreen, seeming not quite satisfied with her response to his heartfelt plea but amenable enough to realize she was making an effort. "It's a female krogan?"

"Surprising, right?" Shepard returned, unable to keep a small, familiar smile from her face. "I thought they would all keep pretty close to TuChanka after the War."

"Yeah, that's what I thought too," Garrus answered, nodding along, resting his elbows on the desk and folding his hands thoughtfully in front of him. "Guess we were both wrong on that one." Pausing then, he frowned a bit, his mandibles giving a few slow, pensive dips as he considered something she had mentioned. "What clan did you say she came from?" he finally asked, inquisitively. "Barshaak? I've never heard of it."

"I'd never heard of it either," Shepard admitted, unclasping her hands from across her stomach to fold her arms over her chest instead, thoughtfully. "She says they're a small clan living on the outskirts of civilization. Might explain why they haven't come up before."

"Are you sure she can be trusted?" Garrus asked, his frown deepening a bit.

Shepard shrugged at the question, unfazed by his second-guessing of her judgement. "No," she admitted, frankly. "But then again I remember this one time when I recruited this… loose cannon cop. Young kid, barely out of academy training. Wanted to take down corruption in C-Sec all on his own." Tilting her head forward a bit, she stared at him, knowingly, unable to keep a wry, puckish smile from creeping across her face at the fond description. "I didn't know much about him either," she told him, matter-of-factly. "Maybe I should have been more careful back then, too. Never know what kind of weirdos you're gonna get when you're recruiting."
Garrus chuckled at her affectionate teasing, dropping his head to look down at his hands folded in front of him on the desk again. "Yeah, well… that's different," he told her, finally, looking up at her again, his blue eyes bright. "That loose cannon cop's the best person you're ever gonna meet. That kind of thing doesn't happen twice." His smile widening, he chuckled again, the noise a deep, familiar, purring thrum in his throat, making Shepard miss the soothing feeling of his vibrating vocal cords against her forehead and fingertips. It had been so long since she had seen him in person, touched him, had any time to be with him other than over these impersonal long-distance calls, that she had almost forgotten the way his scales felt against her skin, cool and sleek, the hard, grainy texture of his spines and carapace, and the gentleness of his clawed hands against her body when they touched. Garrus seemed to be thinking the same thing, as his eyes began to grow slowly sadder the longer he stared at her, until he finally gave a soft, longing sigh, shifting in his chair to lean in even closer to the screen. "I miss you," he told her, honestly, his voice a deep, baritone murmur, just loud enough for her to hear him over the bubbling of the fish tank. "Both of you."

"We miss you too," Shepard returned, quietly, shifting forward in her chair to lean in towards the screen as well. Then, pressing her fingertips to her lips, she turned her hand towards the vidscreen, reaching out to gently touch it, transferring the kiss to him. She was a bit glad no one was around to witness her silly sentimentality, but even so she could not stop a small, sad smile from starting to creep across her face as Garrus repeated the motion from his end, pressing a soft kiss against his two fingers before reaching to touch the screen as well, his fingertips meeting hers on the monitor from across the myriad miles of stars.

Liara was nowhere to be seen by the time Shepard arrived at Apollo's Café, but she figured her friend's absence was nothing to be worried about, as Liara had become notably more elusive since becoming the Shadow Broker, and even more so after the War, with the proverbial dust still settling. She assumed Liara was likely waiting by for her arrival, not wanting to risk being seen and recognized before she got a chance to share her information, and so, taking another look around the café, Shepard began to make her way towards the bar, content to wait until Liara saw fit to join her. Settling down into the first barstool in the row, she leaned her elbows on the counter, causing the familiar bartender to glance up at her once before looking back down at her work again, returning to polishing the countertop to a distracted shine. "She's not here," Aethyta informed her, bluntly, causing Shepard to frown a bit at the acknowledgement. "She was waiting for you to arrive. She's watching, though. From a safe location nearby. Can't be too careful when you're in her position."

"Figured as much," Shepard conceded, fairly. Then, giving a quick glance over her shoulder, she made a short sweep of the café, looking for any small sign of Liara, before turning her attention back to Aethyta again and folding her hands thoughtfully in front of her, observing the weathered asari bartender with interest as she continued to clean the already-spotless countertop. "How long has Liara been staying on the Citadel?" Shepard asked, hoping to change the subject to something a bit less awkward. She always had difficulty conversing with Aethyta, but hoped that by keeping the conversation innocuous until Liara came she might avoid one of the matriarch's classic misdirects that made everything Shepard said sound somehow offensive and insensitive. Aethyta frowned a bit at the question, turning to look at her again, before picking up an abandoned glass sitting at the edge of the bar and starting to clean it instead, at the edge of the bar and staring at it instead, only half paying attention to the tumbler in her hands as she looked out over the piazza over Shepard's shoulder.

"Not as long as I'd like," Aethyta answered, bluntly. "She comes and goes. Sometimes without notice. I've told her she's welcome to stay with me until she can find someplace safer and more permanent, but she says she doesn't want to put me in danger." Having said this, she let out a short grunt, unimpressed, before turning to look down at the glass in her hands again, giving a preoccupied shake of her head. "Some danger wouldn't be so objectionable," she added, almost in an undertone. "Least it'd be a welcome change from the humdrum of living around here."
"Shepard!"

The familiar soft voice came from behind her, and Shepard was quick to turn around to face Liara, grateful for the timely interruption from the conversation at hand. Liara had come on so suddenly and quietly that Shepard had not even heard her approaching, and she could not help but wonder how long she had been standing by, listening in on her conversation. The thought was soon pushed from her head, however, as Liara smiled fondly up at her, pulling her into a warm, tight hug, before letting go of her to give her a quick, inclusive once-over. "You look well, Shepard," Liara told her, cheerfully. Then, indicating towards the far end of the bar counter, she began to lead her over towards the last two barstools in the row, motioning for her to take a seat before seating herself down on the stool beside hers. Making one last, quick check over her shoulder for trouble, Liara turned her full attention to Shepard again, her blue eyes bright with anticipation as she set her datapad down on the bar counter in front of her. "I apologize for the short notice," she told her, leading straight into the issue at hand, smoothing the front of her white and blue coat anxiously over her lap. "I must admit, I'm a bit surprised to see you here. Also a bit relieved. I thought you might have been too pressed for time to come. I know how busy you are these days."

"Not too busy to see my best friend," Shepard returned, offering Liara an assuring smile. Liara glanced up quickly at this, the faintest purple blush touching the tops of her cheeks, before she quickly pushed it back down again, turning her attention back to the datapad in front of her and pulling it in towards her across the bar. "Yes, well… I appreciate that, Shepard," she returned, her voice quiet, almost self-conscious. "It's hard to find true friends these days. Even harder to hold onto them. Knowing I still have you as a friend… it means much more to me than you can imagine."

Having said this, she paused a bit, seeming oddly melancholy, making Shepard wonder if there was something deeper going on. Then, taking a deep breath in, Liara suddenly looked up at Shepard again, folding her hands determinedly in front of her on the bar and resting her elbows against the datapad, obscuring it from view. "To be perfectly honest, I originally came here to see my father," Liara admitted, glancing offhandedly towards the far end of the bar, causing Shepard to do the same. Aethyta looked up from her cleaning as the two of them looked her way, offering them a watchful jerk of her chin before returning to her busywork, not wanting to draw too much attention to the two women sitting at the end of the bar. Turning her attention back to Liara, Shepard watched as she gave a soft, wistful sigh, seeming too distracted by her own thoughts to even seem to realize that Shepard was looking at her again. "I have been keeping in contact with her since the end of the War," Liara added, thoughtfully, tilting her head a bit to one side as she spoke. "She is… a character. Nothing like my mother… though a bit like you, in ways." Having said this, she paused, considering a bit, before a small, warm smile began to creep across her lips, fixing her gaze on her folded hands in front of her. "I can see why my mother loved her," she said. "She is a good person. Gruff… but good."

Shepard nodded along with Liara’s thoughts, unable to help but wonder a bit if Liara had ever had any sensitive information for her at all, or if she had simply wanted to see her to have time to talk and catch up. Suddenly, the sound of something scraping across the wood grain counter caught her attention, and she looked up in time to see two nearly-full glasses of light-blue liquid sliding their way towards them across the countertop. "Two drinks, on the house," Aethyta told them, wiping her hands with her cleaning rag. "Don't want to interrupt your meeting. Just thought you might be a bit thirsty."

"Thank you," Liara answered, quietly, picking up her drink and taking a delicate sip from the straw. Shepard picked up her drink as well, ignoring the straw to take a bit of a deeper swig, and Aethyta grunted again, nodding in satisfaction, before turning away from the two of them to return to her post work. "To be perfectly honest, I originally came here to see my father," Liara admitted, glancing offhandedly towards the far end of the bar, causing Shepard to do the same. Aethyta looked up from her cleaning as the two of them looked her way, offering them a watchful jerk of her chin before returning to her busywork, not wanting to draw too much attention to the two women sitting at the end of the bar. Turning her attention back to Liara, Shepard watched as she gave a soft, wistful sigh, seeming too distracted by her own thoughts to even seem to realize that Shepard was looking at her again. "I have been keeping in contact with her since the end of the War," Liara added, thoughtfully, tilting her head a bit to one side as she spoke. "She is… a character. Nothing like my mother… though a bit like you, in ways." Having said this, she paused, considering a bit, before a small, warm smile began to creep across her lips, fixing her gaze on her folded hands in front of her. "I can see why my mother loved her," she said. "She is a good person. Gruff… but good."

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at the far end of the bar. Setting her drink down in front of her again, Liara cleared her throat gently, folding her gloved hands over her datapad as she stared down thoughtfully into the light-blue liquid. Then, taking a long, thin breath in, she looked up at Shepard again, attentive, her painted brow furrowing faintly as she tried to think of a way to start up the conversation again. "How is David?" she finally asked, causing Shepard to nearly choke on the second swig she had been taking of her drink. Setting it back down in front of her again, Shepard coughed, wiping her mouth with the back of her hoodie sleeve, causing Liara to blink a few times in confusion, unsure what she had said incorrectly.

"David is fine," Shepard answered, frankly. "Why do you ask?"

Liara paused at this dubious answer, her lips thinning out into a doubtful line, before finally looking back down at her pad again and flicking her gloved finger upward, causing the tiny white text to scroll with it, her brow furrowing even deeper as she searched for something in her file. "I apologize, it must seem strange to ask," she admitted, pressing a finger against the holographic page to pause its scrolling. "It's only that... I've been keeping track of his medical records through my network access to Doctor Chakwas' files. I hope you don't mind. I simply hadn't heard about him from you in a while, and I wanted to see how he was doing." Hesitating again, she wavered on the page, her finger moving to the top of the screen before slowly scrolling to the bottom, seeming to be considering something written in the text. "He is... struggling," she added, her brow furrowing a bit, looking up at Shepard again, as if for confirmation. "I guess it's to be expected... considering his genes and all. But you are taking good care of him. I can tell from his checkup reports—"

"What was this information you couldn't tell me over e-mail or vidcomm?" Shepard asked, cutting the end of Liara's statement short, trying hard to keep a curt, annoyed edge from entering her voice. She knew Liara only meant well by her commentary on David's well-being, but it still seemed that no matter where she went, people were always trying to give her advice on how to be a parent. Liara faltered at the blunt change of subject, her finger still poised on the edge of the digipad, but she was quick to recover her collected composure, glancing out over the expanse of the café to make sure no one was listening in on their private conversation before moving her stool in closer to Shepard's and leaning in towards her, indicating with a quick jerk of her head for Shepard to do the same.

"I didn't want to tell you over e-mail because I didn't want to risk the information getting intercepted," Liara explained, speaking in barely above a whisper, just loud enough for Shepard to hear. "There are important lives potentially hanging in the balance with this. I didn't want someone to hack into your e-mail and have my intel put someone's life unnecessarily at risk."

"Whose life?" Shepard asked, all but forgetting her frustration of before as she moved her stool in closer to Liara's, her frown deepening in worry. "Whose life is at risk? Is it somebody we know?"

"Yes," Liara answered, quickly, her malt-blue eyes flicking across the café patio over Shepard's shoulder, searching for suspicious characters. Spotting something, she paused a moment, her plum lips pursing together as she stared at a salarian sitting a few tables away, trying to decide whether the alien was a potential threat. Then, seeming to decide the salarian was not dangerous, she turned her attention back to Shepard again, much more intent, her painted brow unfurrowing as she took a short, sharp, readying breath in. "I have pertinent information about the possible whereabouts of Oriana Lawson," she informed Shepard, still speaking in barely a whisper, causing Shepard's brows to shoot up, instantly attentive. "The homeworld shuttle she and Matilda were travelling on went off-grid while waiting for a relay queue in the Aru cluster. That's a volus cluster, which explains why there wasn't very good communication on the matter. They likely didn't see a reason to keep track of human vessels."

"So she was on the homeworld shuttles," Shepard returned, her brow furrowing again, worried.
"Yes," Liara answered, shortly. "I couldn't find anything on her for a while after the ship disappeared. Both she and Matilda seemed to have vanished into thin air, along with everyone else on the shuttle. Then, when I was running a face recognition software through the darknet, I found a profile matching Oriana's description, with a photograph attached that had a good percentage match to the comparative one I had uploaded." Reaching into a small pouch at her belt, she fished out a handheld digipad, barely larger than a playing card, turning it on and scrolling through the files until she reached the one she was looking for. Then, selecting it, she turned the pad around, handing it over for Shepard to take a better look at the photograph. The girl in the photograph was young, barely into her twenties from the looks of her, with dirt streaked across both of her cheeks and black hair obscuring part of her face, but Shepard could tell from the bright blue eyes and familiar shape of mouth that it was indeed Oriana.

"The profile was on a slave trading hub," Liara went on, causing Shepard to look up at her again, startled. "So I created a dummy account and doctored it to look like it had been active for several years. I used the account to inquire after Oriana, but after I sent the message the corporation that put her profile up contacted my account to inform me that she was no longer available, and when I checked her profile again, it had been removed."

"Did they figure out it was a sting?" Shepard asked, handing the handheld digipad back.

Liara shook her head, turning the pad to look down at Oriana's baleful face, herself, before turning it off and stashing it back in the pouch at her belt. "I don't think so," she answered, honestly. "When I tried to ask the seller why she was no longer available, they informed me that there was an 'incident', and that she was no longer in their hands. Of course, I didn't believe that was really the case, so I made an attempt to trace the location of the seller corporation, to see where they were working out of, but..." Pausing a moment, she frowned, folding her gloved hands together on the bar and tapping the pads of her thumbs together, discouraged by her failure. "It only tracked back to a random meteor in a mostly-abandoned system," she admitted, letting out a sharp huff, her lips twisting together in a look of disappointment. "Which made me suspect that the sellers are likely utilizing some sort of scrambler to expressly deter tracers like mine. I've been attempting to decrypt the scrambling software so as to trace the source, but in the meantime, Shepard, you should keep a sharp lookout for slavers and other pirates in the outer reaches."

"Duly noted," Shepard agreed, reaching for her drink again to take a sip. Then, setting her drink aside again, she wet her lips, pausing a moment, watching as Liara stared down at her folded hands, her expression set, discouraged, seeming hesitant to even look at her own drink, let alone touch it. "How have you been holding up, Liara?" Shepard asked, causing Liara to look up in surprise at the question, blinking a few times, her eyes wide, as if she had been lost in thought up until that moment. "Have you been doing okay? I realize I jumped straight into asking about your information without bothering to see how you were doing. That was pretty rude of me."

"Not rude at all," Liara assured her, holding up a hand to quell her worry. "I realize I sent you a pretty inflammatory e-mail. It was only natural for you to want to know what I had called you here for first, before wondering about my personal well-being." Picking up her drink then, she took a delicate sip through the straw, allowing a moment of pointed silence to pass between them before setting her drink back down again with a soft, thoughtful sigh. "Things have been... difficult," she finally admitted, seeming hesitant to even say that much about her situation. "I've been on the move since the end of the War... mostly operating out of remote locations, and using only one portable information store. As you can imagine, this has been immensely inconvenient, especially considering the amount of information that gets passed and traded through the Broker network every day. It's also led to a much reduced rate of efficiency, such as in the case of Oriana and Matilda Lawson."

Pinching her straw, she rolled it thoughtfully between her thumb and forefinger, staring down at her drink as if it had become the most interesting thing in the café. "I am sorry about the amount of time
it's taken me to come up with the information you asked for, Shepard," she added, causing Shepard to frown a bit, understanding. "But with the amount of piracy and black market businesses in the galaxy running so high after the War, the price on my head has all but skyrocketed. I can't risk settling down in any one place for any extended amount of time for fear of being found and killed. You understand my predicament."

"Sure," Shepard answered, nodding along, concerned. Then, reaching forward towards her glass again, she paused a moment, considering, before starting to trace her finger around the lip of the tumbler as she thought. "Listen… Liara," she said, hesitantly, noting as Liara looked up at her again, her blue eyes intrigued. "I don't want to put you under any pressure, and I don't really know how hard it is for you to… relocate… But if you ever had any interest in coming back to the Normandy, we'd be happy to take you." Pausing again, she looked up, watching Liara for some sort of reaction, but when one did not immediately come, she frowned a bit, now feeling somewhat self-conscious, before pulling her drink in towards her and picking up the straw, starting to prod the liquid with it, distractedly. "Your old room hasn't been touched since the last time you were there," she added, wondering if perhaps she had said something insensitive without realizing it. "I thought, if you wanted to set up there instead of continuing to move around from place to place—"

"I would," Liara suddenly spoke up, eagerly, cutting off the end of Shepard's proposition. Then, without waiting to hear if there was more, she activated her omni-tool, pulling up a program Shepard did not recognize, before inputting a few quick commands and nodding in satisfaction, collapsing it again. Once she had finished, she picked up her datapad from the bar, tucking it securely under her arm, before taking one last sip of her drink and sliding the rest of it over to Shepard. "You can finish that if you want," she told her, hastily, not even seeming to notice Shepard's somewhat confused expression. "I have things that need taking care of. I'll meet you on board the Normandy when I'm done, if that's all right with you?" Having finished collecting her things, she started to get up from her stool to leave, when she suddenly stopped, seeming to remember something, before turning around to face Shepard again and pulling up her omni-tool once more. "By the way, I received an e-mail before you arrived requesting information regarding your whereabouts," she informed her, accessing her e-mail and pulling up the message, causing Shepard to frown a bit at the addendum, wary. "The request came from an encrypted address, but I managed to decrypt it before responding to ensure it wasn't anyone looking to do you harm. I told the requester to meet you near the memorial wall after I finished talking with you."

"Somebody wanted to meet with me?" Shepard asked, trying to read the text through the holographic screen. She did not have time to see what it said, however, before she suddenly heard a soft ping coming from her own omni-tool sensor, and she looked down to see her sensor flashing yellow, indicating that something had been sent her way. Pulling up her holographic tool, she was surprised to see a map of the Citadel immediately pop up, the location of the requester highlighted with a bright yellow dot, but when she looked up at Liara again, she had already collapsed her holo-tool, making one last quick brush-down of the front of her coat before looking up at Shepard again, intent.

"I'll try not to take too much time moving my things onto the Normandy," Liara told her, reasonably. "I don't know how long you intended to stay on the Citadel, but I don't want to hold you up any longer than necessary. I'll meet you on board when you're done, Shepard."

"Wait— how much stuff do you have?" Shepard asked, unable to help a sense of growing apprehension. "Who's wanting to meet with me? Liara? Liara!" But Liara was already out of earshot, making her way past the last few tables and out of the open-air café towards the interior of the Citadel. Blowing out a frustrated huff of breath, Shepard collapsed her omni-tool again, turning back to the bar and picking up her drink to finish it off. Then, done with her own drink, she moved on to Liara's, figuring she could use the extra boost of liquid courage, pointedly ignoring the telling look
she was getting from Aethyta at the other end of the bar. Setting the now-empty glass aside, she
opened her omni-tool again, searching for the yellow dot that designated her contact, until she finally
found the indicator pacing back and forth by the memorial wall, just as Liara said it would be. Then,
pushing herself up from her barstool, she offered Aethyta a short wave of thanks for the drinks and
the information before starting to head out of the café as well, making her way towards whatever
unknown awaited her at the memorial wall.
The yellow indicator on Shepard's omni-tool program flashed as she entered the memorial floor, letting out a soft ping to inform her that her contact was somewhere nearby. Taking a few steps forward towards the spot where her contact appeared on the map, Shepard frowned, taking a quick look around, before checking her map again, only to find that her contact had moved a few steps over, and was now somewhere closer to the memorial wall. Following the yellow indicator, Shepard watched as it continued to flash, before it suddenly gave another ping, a bit louder this time, indicating that the mark was somewhere very close by. Turning to face her awaited contact, Shepard looked up, expecting to see someone watching her, but only found the spot to be vexingly empty once more. Frowning in frustration, she gave her omni-sensor a sharp, agitated tap, before letting out a short huff and allowing her hand to fall back to her side. She could not help but wonder if her tool had gotten glitched somehow when it had linked up with Liara's, and for a moment she considered giving up on this endeavour and simply going back to the Normandy. No sooner had she started to turn to leave the memorial floor, however, when she suddenly felt the weight of a hand on her shoulder, and she jumped, turning around quickly, her hand moving instinctively to her hip as she looked around for the source of the disruption.

A flash of movement flickered in the corner of her vision, and she turned again, still wary, watching the empty air for a moment. Then, suddenly realizing what was going on, she instead took a step back, her worried expression relaxing as she let her hand drop from her hip back to her side again. "Show yourself," she demanded, shortly, staring at the spot where the movement had come from. A silent pause followed this command, and for an instant Shepard wondered if she had guessed incorrectly, and if she was actually just staring at a patch of blank air like a lunatic. Then, just as she was about to lose her conviction, the empty space in front of her shifted again, the still air flickering to reveal the outline of a slender human form, before her contact finally shed her cloaking shield, propping her hands puckishly on her thin hips as she revealed herself to Shepard.

"Not very sportsmanlike of you, Shepard," Kasumi commented, cheekily, reaching up to touch her hood, making sure it still covered the most important parts of her face. "Though, to be fair, I suppose it wasn't entirely undeserved. I know how you dislike being teased, so that was my fault. I couldn't resist." Pulling up her omni-tool, she punched something into the holo-keypad, causing Shepard's tool to stop flashing instantly, having found its intended mark. Then, letting her omni-tool flicker out again, Kasumi returned her hand to her hip, taking a moment to observe Shepard before letting out a short, thoughtful exhale. "I have to admit, I'm glad you decided to show up," she told her, honestly, causing Shepard to blink a few times in surprise. "I had hoped Liara would pass my request on to you, but I wasn't sure she would, since I sent it from an encrypted address. I guess I shouldn't be surprised she figured out where the request was coming from."

"Liara's pretty good at that," Shepard answered, nodding in agreement.

"Yes," Kasumi returned, thoughtfully, turning her dark gaze to look out over the reunion floor, taking in the groups of civilians standing around, waiting to be joined by unknown companions. "She wouldn't make for a very good Shadow Broker if she wasn't." Pausing a moment, she stared at a group of humans sitting on the floor near the edge of the memorial wall, watching as they passed around a digital photo pad, swiping slowly from one photo to the next in the pad's memory, their smiles sad as they remembered whatever good times were being portrayed in the frame. Then, turning her attention back to Shepard, she indicated for her to follow behind her, before turning to make her way over to the panoramic windows overlooking the walkways of the Citadel below. Tucking her hands behind her back, Kasumi took a deep, pensive breath in, her usually puckish expression solemn as she looked out over the expanse of the Citadel, her dark eyes glittering..."
beneath her hood as Shepard waited for her to speak up again. "I heard about your retirement from the Alliance," Kasumi finally spoke again, causing Shepard to look up at her in interest. "I suppose it was inevitable... still, it was surprising to hear. I always thought of you as a career soldier, Shepard. I don't really know how to think of you any other way."

"It's a little weird for me, too," Shepard admitted, giving a soft, consenting huff. "My whole life has been the Alliance Navy. Now that that part of my life is over... I don't really know what to do with myself anymore."

"Raise your child," Kasumi answered, looking over at her with a small, wry half-smirk.

Shepard faltered, a bit taken aback, before letting out a short, assenting chuckle, nodding along with the suggestion as she turned to look out the window again. "Well... that, of course," she answered, frankly, folding her arms in thought. "And that's really the most important thing. Anything other than that can wait."

"Don't let it wait too long," Kasumi cautioned, causing Shepard to look over at her again, only to find the thief looking back at her, her expression pleasant, but intent. Turning to look out the window again, Kasumi folded her arms in front of her, mimicking Shepard's motion as she took a short breath in, before letting it out in a small, tired sigh. "I think I'd like to meet him someday," she suddenly spoke up again, breaking the short, thoughtful silence that had fallen between them. "Your son. If he's anything like either of his parents, he's bound to be quite the character."

"He's..." Shepard faltered, making a face, trying to think of an appropriate way to describe her son that would not sound too unusual to someone not familiar with the particulars of his conditions. "...Sweet," she finally decided, truthfully. "He... tries his best."

Kasumi frowned at the vague commendation, her painted lips twisting as she stared at Shepard. "Not very high praise for your only child," she commented, bluntly.

Shepard sighed at the observation, dropping her hands to her hips and staring pointedly out the window as she tried to think of a better way to describe her situation. "It's not that easy to explain," she finally admitted, turning to look at Kasumi, watching as the thief's hooded brows began to slowly rise in interest. "I love him more than anything, clearly, but... you'd have to meet him to understand. He's the best kid I could have asked for, honestly, but he's..." Trailing off again, she frowned, feeling less and less comfortable with the conversation the harder she tried to find a way to talk about David with Kasumi. Kasumi seemed to be feeling the same way, her scrutinizing expression unmoving as she stared at Shepard in watchful silence, waiting for some viable explanation for the guarded way she talked about her son. "...Not what I expected when I thought about having kids," Shepard finally decided, honestly.

"You talk about him like he's some kind of puppy," Kasumi observed, causing Shepard's frown to quickly deepen at the remark. "He's sweet enough, but for the fact that he piddles on the carpet sometimes."

"I didn't—" Shepard started to argue, but quickly cut herself off, turning to look back out the window towards the Citadel, vexed. "I didn't mean for it to sound like that," she amended, forcing herself to be calmer this time, not wanting Kasumi to think she was jumping to the offensive.

Kasumi nodded, understanding, before turning to look out the large window again, tilting her head thoughtfully to one side as she stared down at the Citadel stretched out below. "I know," she answered, shortly, causing Shepard to look over at her in surprise. Turning to look at Shepard again, she offered her an earnest, knowing expression, one brow raising under her hood as her painted lips curved into a small, shrewd smile. "I'm not stupid, Shepard," she told her, frankly, causing Shepard.
to frown a bit, feeling somewhat guilty that she had doubted Kasumi's trust in her. "I know what kind of person you are. I know it's hard for you to express affection. It's always been one of your quirks." Looking back out towards the window again, she shrugged, offhandedly, before starting to drum her thin fingers against the line of her upper arm as she stared out over the Citadel view. "It's nothing to be ashamed of," she added, practically. "It's obvious you care about him a great deal. I'm just giving you a hard time."

"Thanks a lot," Shepard teased, deadpan, causing Kasumi to smirk over at her again, pleased with herself for so thoroughly ruffling the Commander's feathers. Shepard huffed, still feeling a bit on edge, tucking her hands into the pockets of her slacks as she stared out the panoramic window towards the Citadel below. "So, are you on a job?" she finally asked, breaking the momentary silence between them. "Is that why you're here? On the Citadel?"

Kasumi paused, considering the question, sucking thoughtfully on her lower lip as she tried to decide how best to answer. "No," she finally returned, matter-of-factly, shrugging her thin shoulders. "No job. I'm sort of… between jobs at the moment. Not really looking for something new, either, to be totally honest." Turning to look at Shepard again, she smiled, offhandedly, seeming completely at ease, making Shepard wonder if perhaps there was more to her decision than she was letting on. "Work is hard to come by these days," she added, honestly. "I'm sure I don't need to tell you that. You're working to support more than just yourself. It has to be even harder for you in this economic climate."

"I get by," Shepard answered, shortly, not wanting to get into the details of her workload.

"I figured as much," Kasumi returned, looking out over the Citadel again. "You always were resourceful, Shepard. Though I admit, I'm a bit surprised you haven't taken the Khar'Shan job yet. A mysterious mission with a ten million credit payout… I'd expect you'd be the type of person to jump at the opportunity to do something crazy like that."

"I'm not interested in taking the Khar'Shan job," Shepard answered, frankly, unable to help feeling a bit like a broken record.

Kasumi frowned a bit at her response, her gaze unmoving from the Citadel view as her painted lips thinned into a pensive line. "Hm," she answered, unconvinced. "If you say so, Shepard." A long pause followed this exchange, with neither woman seeming to know what to say next now that the issue of the economy had been covered. "So," Kasumi suddenly spoke up again, causing Shepard to look over at her, raising her brows, attentive. "Liara says you've been recruiting the old crew back to the Normandy again. Chakwas, Traynor, Zaeed… Vega." Having said this, she paused a moment, considering, before turning to look at Shepard again, her expression hopeful under her hood. "Do you know if he's still single?" she asked, trying hard to sound casual about it.

Shepard paused, thinking a moment, trying to remember if Vega had mentioned anything about having a girlfriend. Then, remembering no conversation of the sort, she turned her attention to Kasumi again, shrugging as she stuffed her hands into the pockets of her hoodie. "I think so," she answered, truthfully. "I don't know, though. Why?"

"No reason," Kasumi answered, quickly, before turning to look back out the window again.

Deciding to let the subject go, Shepard turned to look back out the window as well, taking in a deep breath before letting it out in a short, tired sigh. "I recruited Liara back, too," she noted, causing Kasumi to glance over at her again, intent.

"So… everyone but me," Kasumi commented, astutely.
Shepard shook her head at the remark, her brow furrowing a bit in concentration as she stared down at the bustling Citadel spread out below their feet. "Not everyone," she corrected, thoughtfully. "I'm still missing a few people. Thane, Miranda… Garrus."

"Not what I was going for, Shepard," Kasumi answered, frankly, causing Shepard to look up at her again in surprise. Shepard blinked a few times, unsure what she had said incorrectly, before she suddenly realized what Kasumi was talking about, and she gave a soft, amicable huff, arching one brow, as a small, knowing half-smile began to creep across her face.

"Do you want to come back to the Normandy, Kasumi?" Shepard asked, expectantly.

Kasumi wavered on the question a moment, pretending to give the offer some serious thought. Then, turning to look at Shepard again, she offered her a familiar wide, puckish smile. "I thought you'd never ask," she told her, before letting out a soft, warm chuckle.

With Liara and Kasumi settled into their respective rooms, the crew deck on the Normandy was almost starting to feel a little bit like the old days again. Shepard could hardly help but smile a bit to herself as she made her way to the mess hall to start work on David's bottle, pulling his thermos out of one of the upper cabinets and unscrewing the lid before setting it aside on the kitchenette counter, moving to retrieve a vial of milky grey liquid from one of the formula palettes stacked to one side of the kitchenette unit. Returning to the counter, she gave the vial a good shake, making sure everything was evenly distributed, before popping the seal off the cylinder and pouring it into the waiting thermos. Though the quarian formula she bought for David had the highest percentage of nutritional value available, the ingredients had a frustrating way of settling in transit, and if left alone for more than a few hours, the heavier nutrients would sometimes separate to the base of the vial, leaving only a thin, white, brothy liquid with little nutritional value at the top, and a thick, grey, gruesome-looking sludge at the bottom. Tapping the cylinder against the edge of the thermos to ensure she had gotten every last bit of nutrient out, she tossed the empty formula vial, before capping the thermos and starting to shake it as well, not wanting to risk upsetting her son's delicate digestive system with a poorly-mixed bottle.

She had become so enraptured in the details of her work that she had not even noticed as she was approached at the counter, until she suddenly looked up from shaking her bottle to see Traynor watching her, intrigued. She had folded her hands in front of her on the edge of the kitchenette counter, not wanting to disrupt Shepard while she was working, but as soon as she saw Shepard looking up at her, she instantly perked up, seeing her opportunity. "Hard at work, I see," she commented, amicably, causing Shepard to glance down at the thermos in her hand before looking back up at Traynor again, blinking a few times, confused.

"Yeah," Shepard answered, unsure what else there was to say. "A little. Did you need me for something, Traynor?"

"Actually… yes," Traynor answered, truthfully, dropping her casual façade. She seemed relieved to not have to slog through futile small talk to lead into her concern, but at the same time she now seemed a bit hesitant to voice it, now that she had Shepard's attention. Fidgeting with her hands on the counter, her dark brows creased a bit in thought, as if she were trying to figure out the most tactful way to ask her question. "I've been meaning to discuss something with you," she finally said, speaking slowly, treading with caution. "And… it seems especially relevant now. It's nothing too horrendously pressing, mind you, but… it has to do with the ship."

"Something wrong with the Normandy?" Shepard asked, pausing in her shaking to check the formula, watching as the last of the unmixed ingredients swam together, forming a murky greyish cyclone inside the bottle.
Traynor quickly shook her head, crossing her arms more tightly over her ribcage as she did so. "No, not at all," she answered, hurriedly. "It's only that… well, with all these new crew members you're taking on… I was just wondering if, perhaps…" Hesitating, she frowned, pursing her lips in frustration, not quite sure how to get out what she was trying to say. "A competent crew is worth its weight in gold, Commander," she finally decided, trying her best to keep her tone casual as she watched Shepard shake the contents of the bottle, evening them out. "But, I was just wondering how many more people you were thinking of recruiting. I only ask because…” Pausing again, she chewed anxiously at her lower lip, watching as Shepard switched out the mixing cap on the formula bottle, before letting out a short, worried exhale and looking up at the Commander again. "Well, I'm just not certain our food stores can hold up to much more additional demand," she admitted, trying hard not to make a face as she voiced her concern. "We've brought on five people in the last month alone, and we've barely gotten any work to make up for it. I'm just afraid we're going to end up overexerting our resources if we're not careful."

Setting down the bottle on the kitchenette counter, Shepard turned to look at Traynor, watching as the yeoman fidgeted a bit under her gaze, waiting for an answer. Then, pursing her lips into a thin, solemn line, she looked down towards the floor of the mess hall, nodding along, before looking up at Traynor once more, her expression understanding. "Walk with me," she told her, indicating for Traynor to follow behind her, taking her by surprise as she began to move past her towards the elevator. Traynor was quick to jump to attention, hovering closely behind Shepard as she led the way towards the lift, staring up at the numbers over the door as she waited for the carriage to reach their floor. "Your point is valid, Traynor," Shepard told her, suddenly, causing Traynor's eyebrows to rise at the vote of confidence. "But I'd still like to bring on a few more crew members. Ideally enough to be able to bring different people out on assignments on a regular basis. Give the rest of my crew time to rest between missions." Looking back towards the elevator again, she watched as it arrived on their floor with a soft ding, the white metal door opening with a hiss to allow the women inside. Then, selecting the button for the next floor down, Shepard let out a soft, tired sigh, leaning back against the cool glass of the siding as she waited for the doors to close again.

"Plus, Liara brought intel with her we didn't have before," Shepard added then, matter-of-factly, hoping she sounded more convincing to Traynor than she did to herself. "She should be able to get us more work. Maybe even some that pays better than what we're already getting."

"I trust your judgment, Shepard," Traynor assured her, causing Shepard to give a relieved nod, turning to look back towards the elevator door again, ending the conversation.

The lift settled with a soft ding as it reached the engineering floor, the doors opening to allow Shepard and Traynor to step out into the metal hallway, before turning to make their way towards the door at the far end of the hall. The door to David's nursery was locked securely from the inside, but it opened easily from the outside as they approached, the heavily-filtered air inside the room feeling oddly misty against Shepard's skin as she entered. As soon as David saw his mother in the doorway, his little face lit up in a wide, beaming smile, and he quickly pushed himself up off the floor to run over and take hold of her knees in a tight hug, staggering her momentarily. Shepard gave a soft laugh at the unexpected, enthusiastic greeting, bending down to pick up her boy and hoist him instead onto her hip, letting him wrap his arms and legs around her protectively as if afraid she might disappear again if he did not hold on tightly. "Somebody's glad to see me," Shepard commented, brushing back a lock of David's shaggy down, only to have him bury his face in her collar-bone. "You hungry, buddy?"

"Yes," David answered, quietly, his voice muffled against her collar-bone.

Shepard smiled as she patted his back reassuringly, turning to look towards Traynor again, who was staring intently at one of David's colouring-books that had been left open on the floor. "Has he had a
nap today?" she asked, causing Traynor to look up in surprise at the question. "Or has he not finished all his lessons yet?"

"Not… quite," Traynor admitted, hesitantly, starting to fidget a bit with her hands as she spoke. "We were discussing about the Apien Crest, like you asked, and then we got onto the subject of Jon Grissom, and the first humans to ever see Palaven… and the First Contact War." She faltered at this, her fidgeting growing more obvious, her dark brow furrowing into a hard line as she tried to read the Commander's expression. "I cut the lesson short," she added, quickly. "For… obvious reasons. I tried to steer it back on track by talking about Grissom Academy instead, but that only led to a conversation about biotics, and since I wasn't sure if he would be developing biotics, I… just let him have playtime instead." Forcing herself to stop fidgeting, she clenched her hands tightly instead, dropping them back to her sides before letting out a short, sharp, rueful huff of breath. "I apologize, Shepard," she said, doing her best to remain professional-sounding. "Today's lesson was a disaster. I'll make sure to do better tomorrow. Perhaps draw up a lesson plan ahead of time so this sort of thing doesn't happen again."

Shepard shook her head at the offer, trying hard not to smile sympathetically at Traynor's plight as she patted David on the back again. She had no doubt the derailment of the lesson had been entirely his fault, as his knack for asking questions outside the box had led to a number of uncomfortable conversations with her before as well, especially when it came to queries about the War and where alien-human babies came from. "No need," she answered, bouncing David gingerly against her hip. "Curiosity is a good thing. Let him ask questions. Anything to help him learn." Pausing then, she let her hand rest thoughtfully against her son's back, her brows furrowing a bit in concern as she thought about what she had just said. "But… try to keep the answers appropriate for a three year old, if you can," she added, more as an afterthought than anything. "He still wears diapers. He doesn't need to know about people blowing each other up over a land dispute."

Traynor hesitated at the reassuring response, before a small, comforted smile began to creep over her face instead, and she looked down towards the padded floor, letting out a soft, relieved breath. "Right… of course," she answered, sheepishly. "Wouldn't want to go giving him nightmares. He already has enough of those as it is."

Shepard hesitated a bit at the end of Traynor's statement, her expression starting to fall at the revelation that her son's bad dreams were recurrent and patent enough that they had become common knowledge. Forcing herself to smile instead, she patted David's back again, before turning to take her leave from Traynor and the play room, making her way over to the mess hall to return to the mess hall to feed her son. The mess hall was empty by the time she arrived, the last few stragglers of before having already dispersed to return to their assigned posts, and Shepard was only too glad to take the opportunity to allow herself a moment off her feet. Retrieving the thermos of formula from the kitchenette counter, she made her way over to one of the empty mess tables, dropping herself into one of the chairs and stretching her legs out in front of her, letting out a soft, pleased groan as her thigh muscles tensed and relaxed. Seeing an opportunity to escape, David quickly climbed out of her lap, crawling over into the chair beside her and settling in with a sharp huff, his toes curling and uncurling gleefully in the material of his socks as he drank his formula, seeming pleased with himself.

Shepard chuckled at his puckish nerve, reaching over to ruffle his soft down, before turning her attention towards Chakwas' medbay instead, watching the doctor through the window as she worked. Chakwas' thin brow was furrowed in concentration as she pored over some sort of medical report, and as Shepard watched her, she could feel her own expression start to fall, and she could not help but wonder if what Chakwas was working on had anything to do with David. From her solemn expression it seemed to be something serious, and though Shepard trusted Chakwas implicitly, she could not help wondering just how much of her medical determinations on the subject of David she...
kept from the Commander in an effort to spare her feelings of protectiveness over her son. Shepard figured, if it came down to it, she could just ask Liara to tell her what Chakwas would not, as Liara seemed to have access to all of Chakwas' personal files, but at the same time she was not entirely certain she wanted to know the extent of her son's illnesses and disabilities. She often already felt like she was dealing with something made of glass, and she feared what other revelations might be yet to come.

She had allowed herself to become so lost in thought over what Chakwas might be keeping quiet that she had not even noticed Kasumi approaching her table, and it was not until the thief began to slide the bag she was carrying from her shoulder that Shepard looked up again, a bit taken aback at having been so quietly crept up on. Still, she watched curiously as Kasumi lowered her knapsack wordlessly onto the mess-hall table, frowning faintly in surprise when it settled against the metal with a heavy thump. The pack was nearly two feet tall, stretched to its limits to accommodate its cargo, and from the sound it made when it hit the table, Shepard could only guess that whatever was inside had to be extremely heavy. She had no idea what Kasumi could have carried along with her that would possibly weigh that much, but she figured it was better not to ask, as whatever it was would likely be revealed to her in time. "I hope you don't mind," Kasumi told them, her dark eyes glittering beneath the shadow of her hood, causing both Shepard and David to look up at her, curiously. "It's just a small gift, since I had really no extra room to store it… You can't believe those little personal travel ships. They advertise them as being so space-efficient, but it's like living out of your car."

Having said this, she paused a moment, thoughtful, before a small, telling smirk began to pass over her painted lips. "Of course, I suppose I shouldn't really complain," she added, giving a small, dismissive shrug of one shoulder. "I got a pretty good price on it, for what it's worth. You really can't beat free."

"No," Shepard agreed, nodding along, unsurprised by this turn of events. She had long ago learned not to be surprised by the extent of what Kasumi could lift undetected, and she supposed when it came to the master thief, a spaceship was as easy a mark as anything. "I guess you can't." Just then, the feeling of a tiny hand tugging on her sleeve got her attention, and she turned away from Kasumi and the bag, looking down at David, watching as he stared warily between his mother and the woman across the table. Then, seeing that he had gotten Shepard's attention, he waved her down towards him, setting his formula bottle aside momentarily as he leaned in towards her ear.

"She doesn't have a face," David whispered, causing Shepard to have to stifle a laugh at the observation. He was right, she realized – she had never really considered it before, but whenever she thought of Kasumi, she thought primarily of her hood, and never of her having an actual face. Looking up at Kasumi again, she hesitated, folding her hands in front of her on the table, wondering how best to approach her request.

"David is… a little bit spooked by your hood," Shepard admitted, speaking carefully, not wanting to offend. She had no idea how attached Kasumi was to her anonymity even in safe spaces like the Normandy, but she figured the only way to find out for sure would be to ask. "Do you think you could… maybe, just this once…?"

Kasumi blinked a few times, seeming a bit surprised by the request, as if she herself had forgotten that she was still wearing her hood at all. "Of course," she answered, reaching up to pull her hood down over her shoulders. "Why didn't you just say so, Shepard? I would have taken it off ages ago." Smiling up at the two of them again, Kasumi reached forward towards her bag, turning it around so she could more easily access the zipper, but Shepard was too distracted by her face to even register the what was happening with the bag. Kasumi's face was round, almost heart-shaped, with high cheekbones and dark, clever eyes heavily lidded with smoky makeup. She wore her black hair cropped barely three inches long from her scalp, short enough to easily show off her cute, round ears,
ringed up the sides in differing intervals with tiny, fine gold hoops and studs. Shepard realized now that she had had no idea what she had expected Kasumi to look like, but now that she knew, it seemed strange for the thief to have a face at all, let alone one that was somehow so entirely human. Unzipping the pack in front of her, Kasumi slid her gloved hands proudly over the smooth surface of the off-white object inside, drawing Shepard's attention back to it as Kasumi let out a deep, satisfied sigh at the sight of her gift.

"I know I missed David's birthday," Kasumi admitted, sounding more pleased with herself than apologetic for missing the actual date. "Well, his first three birthdays, really… but hopefully this will make up for it." Then, turning the object around to face them, she moved her hands away from its striking form, allowing Shepard to finally see what the present inside the satchel was.

Shepard's brows shot up immediately at the sight of the gift, her hand moving towards her mouth in shock, but she stopped it halfway, letting it linger awkwardly in mid-air as she stared into the sombre eyes and stern, disembodied Romanesque face that now glowered back at her from the mess hall table. "Kasumi," she breathed, hoarse, finally managing to catch her breath again after a long moment. "That's… that's…"

"The Statue of David," Kasumi finished her sentence, beaming proudly around the side. "Or, at least his head. I got it from Donovan Hock's private collection." Pulling out a chair opposite the two of them, she dropped herself down satisfactorily into it, tracing a thoughtful finger down the statue's lovingly detailed curls as she propped her elbow on the table, resting her cheek against her hand and staring at the back of the marble head. A small, telling smile had begun to creep across her face, as if she were replaying in her mind her grand adventure retrieving the statue, and Shepard could not help but wonder what kind of mischief had led to the retrieval of such an illustrious artefact. "His associates were going to auction off his belongings and estate to the highest bidder to further fund their operations," Kasumi explained, sounding almost blasé about it. "I figured, well, since they're just a bunch of crooks anyway, there was really nothing stopping me from taking it. After all, I would be giving it to somebody who would actually appreciate it, rather than just lock it away in a vault somewhere."

As if on cue, David made a face at the disembodied head, scrunching up his nose as he stared into the statue's massive, hooded white eyes. "Where is his body?" he asked, looking up at Kasumi and then back at the statue again. "Why is he just a head?"

"Yeah, but…" Shepard reached forward, ignoring her son's comment, framing the marble face with her hands, one hand on each strong cheek. A deep gash had been carved through one of the statue's famous cheeks, likely a product of its incredible age, but apart from that one defacement the head was amazingly pristine. She wet her lips, trying to think of how to respond to something as unexpected as this, before looking up at Kasumi again and shaking her head, bewildered. "How… how did you…?"

"Easy," Kasumi answered, freely. Then, thinking a moment, she amended herself, "Well, not easy. Getting it out was the easy part. Lugging it around after that was a little bit difficult. It was worth it, though, to see the look on your face when I showed it to you." Chuckling quietly to herself, she rested her hands in front of her on the table, pressing her palms flat against the cool metal surface as she smiled across at Shepard. "A lot of the artefacts in Hock's collection were injured when those Eclipse mercs blasted through the wall to try to get to us, including the statue," she explained, watching in satisfaction as Shepard turned her bewildered attention back to the statue's head. "I figured it was for the best anyway, since I would never have been able to bring that whole statue out of there by myself with nobody seeing. So I just… quietly took his head." Reaching for the marble head, she turned it slightly so that she could better see the illustrious, solemn face, before letting out a soft chirp of a laugh, still clearly pleased with her accomplishment. "I don't think anybody really
noticed," she added, thoughtfully. "At least, not until after I was already gone. I'm sure somebody is furious right now, but it's not really my problem anymore."

Shepard nodded along with the wild story, unsure what else there was to say, until she suddenly felt a soft tug on the sleeve of her hoodie, and she looked down towards her son again, only to see him looking up at her with wide, earnest eyes. "Mama, I'm tired," he told her, barely speaking above a hoarse whisper, as if afraid to offend Kasumi by not being totally enraptured by her gift. "Can I sleep in your bed?"

Shepard faltered, looking up at Kasumi, and then the statue, before turning her attention back down to David again, reaching over to pick him up under the arms and pull him into her lap. "Yeah, baby," she answered, just as quietly, petting back his dark hair to press a soft kiss to his forehead. "Sure. Let me just…" Looking up at the statue again, she frowned faintly, wondering if Kasumi had considered what exactly she was supposed to do with the gift past the big, exciting reveal. Then, getting to her feet, she shifted David onto her hip, using her other hand to awkwardly pull the canvas bag back up over the edges of the statue's head. "We can put this up in my cabin for now," she suggested, causing Kasumi to get to her feet as well, starting to help fit the massive head back into the too-small bag. "Prop it up in a corner until I can figure out where to display it. I just don't want it anywhere that David can hurt himself with it when I'm not looking."

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"Probably a good idea," Kasumi agreed, starting to zip up the side of the bag. Once the bag was closed, she slid it off the edge of the table, giving a soft grunt as she slung it over her shoulder again, making Shepard wonder just how much muscle was hidden away in her tiny, wiry frame. Then, following Shepard to the elevator, Kasumi stood behind her, watching David closely as they waited for the lift to reach their floor. David stared back at her, just as intently, sucking sleepily on his thumb as he rested his head on his mother's shoulder, seeming not quite sure why Kasumi was so oddly interested in him. Shepard remembered well how Kasumi had tricked her into revealing she had been pregnant back during the War, and how at the time she had not believed her when she had said that the baby was Garrus'. Now, she seemed to be making up for lost time, as she stared at the toddler on Shepard's hip, taking in all his unique details, trying to figure out quietly where the turian ended and the human began.

It did not take long for the elevator to arrive on their level, the door opening with a soft ding to allow the three of them inside. Selecting the top button, Shepard took a step back, resting her shoulder against the cool glass of the siding as the doors closed again and the lift began to move. Kasumi shifted her heavy bag against her shoulder, watching the numbers above the door, until finally the elevator arrived on their designated level, the doors opening again to allow them access to the Captain's cabin floor. Shepard was first to enter the cabin, pointing to a spot under her desk for Kasumi to set down the statue, before making her way to the bed and setting David gently down onto it, kneeling in front of him to start changing him out of his tiny uniform and into his pyjamas. With his soft, roomy pyjamas on, she tucked him securely under the covers, making sure to turn on his air purifier on the nightstand before giving him one last, soft kiss goodnight. Then, satisfied that she had done all she could do for him, she turned away from the bed again, starting for the door, waving silently for Kasumi to follow her back to the elevator.

Kasumi grinned knowingly as she stepped into the elevator after Shepard, watching as she selected the mess hall floor before stepping back to allow the lift to take them down once more. "You can't fool me, Shepard," she told her, causing Shepard to turn to look back at her, surprised. "It's obvious you're crazy about that baby. Even if you don't like letting on to people about it. The moon and stars set over his head for you."

"Was it that obvious?" Shepard joked back, giving a soft, conceding chuckle as the elevator reached their level. Stepping out of the elevator, she made her way over to the kitchenette, opening one of the
cabinets and pulling down a jar of sealed packets before picking up the tea kettle from the stovetop and moving to the sink to fill it. "You want some tea?" she asked, glancing over towards Kasumi, who had settled back in her chair at the mess table, waiting for Shepard to finish what she was doing, not wanting to interrupt her.

"Tea sounds great," Kasumi answered, pulling her hood back up over her face. Shepard assumed she was probably more comfortable that way, and now, without David to worry about, she was free to return to the way she had been before. Setting the kettle back on the stove, Shepard turned it on, pulling two mugs down from the open cabinet, before dropping a packet into each mug and returning the jar to the cabinet again. Kasumi watched her as she worked, folding her hands thoughtfully in front of her, her dark eyes observant as she waited for an opportunity to speak her mind again.

"Truth be told, I never really imagined you with a baby on your hip," she suddenly admitted, letting out a low, good-natured chuckle, causing Shepard to look back at her in surprise again. "But it's a good look for you, Shepard. Motherhood. I never would have guessed it, but you're a natural."

Shepard gave a soft snort at the descriptor, shaking her head, before moving the now-hot tea kettle off the burner and turning off the stove, starting to pour the hot water into the two nearby mugs. "If by 'natural' you mean 'naturally terrified', then maybe," she answered, taking a deep breath as the smell of fresh vanilla began to fill the mess hall. "I have no idea how to raise a kid. Every day with David is just… me trying my hardest not to kill one or both of us." Finished pouring the hot water, she set the kettle aside again, taking special care not to spill any tea as she picked up both mugs and started to carry them over to the table where Kasumi sat. "So, where have you been the last few years?" Shepard asked, curiously, changing the subject, sitting back down across from Kasumi and sliding her mug of tea over to her. "You went off-grid after the War. I tried to find you to contact you, but I couldn't find any leads."

"That's because I didn't leave any," Kasumi answered, quickly, seeming more than satisfied with a job well done, pulling her mug in towards her to watch the steam wafting off the hot liquid. "I apologize, Shepard. It was nothing against you personally. I simply realized it was in my best interest to disappear after the War, and that meant cutting off all outside contact, including you and Liara."

Shrugging a bit, she looked down into her mug instead, tapping her gloved fingers thoughtfully against the sides as she chewed pensively at the inside of her painted lower lip. "It was never meant to be a permanent arrangement," she explained, almost as an afterthought, still seeming a bit too distracted to look up at Shepard directly. "Only until I established myself a bit. I wanted to wait until the worst of the post-War repercussions blew over before starting to make a name for myself again. The jobs out there now… they aren't the same as the ones available before the War."

"So where did you go?" Shepard asked, curiously, picking up her drink and blowing on it before taking a tentative sip. The tea was still hot, but she swallowed it quickly, not allowing it time to burn her tongue or throat on the way down.

"Illium," Kasumi answered, simply, tracing her finger distractedly around the steamy lip of her cup. "You might remember it was… not exactly the epitome of lawfulness, even before the War."

"I remember," Shepard returned, blowing on her tea again to cool it. "Illium was a ghost town last time we were there, though. Why, what happened to it?"

"It… changed, somewhat," Kasumi answered, seeming not quite sure how to word her explanation. "They cleaned it up quite a bit after the War. …Physically, that is. Physically, it is basically spotless, absolutely pristine. Beautiful new polished sidewalks, flower gardens…" Hesitating then, she frowned a bit, her painted lips drawing into a thin, thoughtful line as her dark eyes glinted pensively under the shadow of her hood. "But… the nature of the station has also changed," she added, speaking slower now, sounding almost cautious with her words. "And it is… not quite so clean. It
is… less about vital business now – competitive business, you know – and more about… exclusive business. Marketing to the upper class, the elite few who managed to hold onto their wealth or profit after the war. Criminals, mostly. But not common criminals. More like… high profile criminals."

Hesitating again, her frown deepened, her fingers curling more intently around the edge of her mug. "Not that I'm one to talk," she added, quickly, giving a soft, almost nervous breath of a laugh as she did so. "But even I am not qualified to deal with these people for the most part. These are a whole other class of criminals. Black market kings. The type of criminals who keep smaller, more specialized criminals like me from going out of business."

"Like Aria T'Loak," Shepard observed, picking up her mug to blow on it again.

"Aria T'Loak is one of them," Kasumi agreed, nodding along. "Though she mostly keeps to herself on Omega. She sometimes sends Patriarch as a representative if Omega is in need of anything."

"Who else is there other than Aria?" Shepard asked, taking another hesitant sip of her tea. This one was much cooler than the last, and she wet her lips as she set her mug down again, happy to have not been burned.

"Lots," Kasumi answered, simply, letting out a hefty sigh. "Even more after the end of the War. Most of them send representatives, so I've never actually seen some of them, but Illium has become the newest convergence location for the galaxy's black market royalty." Stopping her nervous fidgeting, she folded her hands in front of her, her hooded expression drawing into a pensive frown as she looked up at Shepard again, intent. "Since it's out of Council space, it's legally untouchable by Council laws," she told her, matter-of-factly. "So as long as they play by an established set of rules, there's nothing anyone can do to stop them." Reaching for her own drink then, she picked it up, taking a quick sip, before setting it down in front of her again, unaffected by the heat. "Aria and Omega aren't even the worst of them," she added, almost as a sceptical afterthought. "In fact, they're probably the most honourable, as strange as that sounds. Mostly they're just trying to unload red sand stores that have been abandoned since the new taxation laws were set in place. They sell it there for resale, or trade it in bulk for supplies Omega needs. People are only too happy to buy."

"Drugs are bigger now than they ever were before the War," Shepard acknowledged, her own frown deepening, tapping her finger thoughtfully against the side of her mug. "You didn't happen to hear anything about TMX while you were on Illium, did you?"

"TMX? Sure," Kasumi answered, shrugging. "TMX, red sand, Minagen X3, hallex… even videlacet, for the white collar addict. Drugs are a pretty basic product in the black market. You can't throw a stone on Illium without hitting someone who's involved in the drug trade." Wrapping her hands around her mug again, she paused a moment to stare down into it, tapping her index fingers against the sides as she tried to think back to important details from her time on Illium. "I heard a lot of talk while I was on Illium, come to think of it," she suddenly spoke up again, causing Shepard to look up at her in interest. "Talk about the Council, mostly, and the policies they were trying to instate. Of course, the Council's actions don't make any difference on Illium, but word gets around. Galactic news networks, plus people watching their own backs for business purposes. Have to keep track of laws everywhere to avoid getting in trouble with import and export from different systems."

"Makes sense," Shepard conceded, thoughtfully, picking up her mug to take another sip. "What kind of things did you hear about the Council?"

"Political things, mostly," Kasumi admitted, sounding almost disappointed by this distinction. "Nothing really taboo or juicy, unfortunately. The word on Illium was that the Council has tried several times since the end of the War to put various economic policies into effect in an effort to help balance out the wealth of the galaxy. Trying to bring things back to the way they were… for
whatever it's worth." Shrugging offhandedly, she took another sip of tea, the tip of her tongue passing absentmindedly along the painted line of her lip as she took a deep breath in, preparing to go on. "Unfortunately, because of the way the market is now, with the lowered wages and inflated prices – plus all the illegal marketing schemes and underhanded piracy, like on Illium – the gap between the rich and the poor has just kept growing, to the point that it has become almost overwhelming," she added, reflectively. "Too overwhelming for the Council to fix, at least in our lifetimes."

Frowning again, Kasumi drummed her fingers pensively against the sides of her mug, her dark gaze straying away from Shepard across the table as she thought. "It's a terrible state of affairs," she suddenly added, looking up again, sounding now almost affronted. "As a result, more and more people are getting desperate and turning to shoddy mercenary or criminal work to try to support themselves and their families. That in turn is making it harder for professionals like me to find work, since so many amateurs are now flooding the market, offering their services for cheap." Then, seeming to realize how single-minded she sounded, she shrugged again, pulling her drink in further towards her across the table. "It's also making it difficult for legitimate businesses to do their jobs," she amended. "Since their shipments keep getting ransacked by desperate would-be mercenaries and pirates. And because their work is so sloppy, people often get hurt in the process. It's an awful situation. For everyone involved."

"That is awful," Shepard agreed, frowning again, perturbed.

"And that's not even the worst of it," Kasumi returned, causing Shepard's brows to raise again, alert. "Because of all this, the businesses have had to invest in defence systems. That in turn has made the mercenaries have to step up their game as well." Sitting back in her chair again, she leaned her elbow over the back of it, frowning a bit as she reached forward to trace her gloved finger thoughtfully around the misty lip of her mug. "In the end, the only ones who are profiting are those in the weapons industry," she said, her tone grave. "Which, as you can probably guess, is an industry now being controlled almost entirely either by the Council or by the black market kings on Illium."

"Those slippery sons of bitches," Shepard spat, her affronted frown deepening as her hand curled angrily around the edge of her mug. "They had to know this would happen. There's no way they wouldn't have foreseen the impact."

"Perhaps," Kasumi answered, turning over her free hand, seeming much less fazed by this turn of events. "But from what I've heard, they were only trying to do their jobs. The profit is an inadvertent side effect." Leaning forward in her chair again, she held out her hands in front of her, perpendicular to one another, as if in an effort to illustrate the point she was trying to make. "The way I hear it, they were trying to control the weapons trade in an effort to prevent this kind of thing from happening," she explained, matter-of-factly, causing Shepard to falter a bit at the backward logic. "They put a high fee on weapons regulations and licensing, which means if citizens want to own weapons legally, they have to pay extra to the Council to do it. They hoped that by instating extra hoops for people to go through they might discourage people away from immediately turning to mercenary work, but with this economy, people are scared. That means their only options are to pay extra money to the Council to own a weapon legally, or get their weapons through the black market, which is less expensive but a lot more risky."

Giving another short shrug of her shoulders, Kasumi reached forward, picking up her drink again, before using the hand holding the drink to point at Shepard, indicative. "Weapons sold by Council sources are checked for safety regulations," she told her, frankly. "But weapons sold on the black market are not. They don't have to be. And, unfortunately, people can't afford to be picky when they're as desperate as the economy has made them now."
"Even so, the Council has to know what's going on," Shepard argued, nearly forgetting her own drink as she leaned forward towards Kasumi on the table, intent. "Has anyone tried to draw attention to this?"

Kasumi nodded in response, finishing the sip of her tea she had been taking, before setting her mug down in front of her again and wetting her lips, considering. "Some have," she answered, tapping her finger distractedly against the side of her mug. "There has been some resistance… civilian protest mostly. Strikes. Protestors have tried to inform the general public of this crooked state of affairs, but most of them are quickly arrested for public disturbance and are never seen again." Swirling her tea around in her mug, she stared down into the low contents, taking another sip of it before letting out a short, soft sigh. "Presumably they were thrown in prison to think about the anarchy they tried to incite," she went on, sounding more concerned the longer she talked about it. "The only problem with that is that the prisons, especially the higher-end ones, have started filling up with petty criminals faster than they can process them out. Clearly people have begun to realise that they can get better food, care, and shelter in prison than they can working in the real world, and for much cheaper, too."

Frowning again, she made a face, twisting her mouth to one side as her fingers curled more anxiously around her now-cool mug. "People are desperate, Shepard," she said, looking up at Shepard again, her usually collected tone starting to waver with worry. "And the people on Illium are profiting off their desperation. They don't care about the people they hurt, as long as the bottom line stays green. Though… speaking of war profiteering…” She paused again, her expression stilling, her dark eyes fixed stonily on her mug, as if convinced the answers to what she was looking to say were written somewhere at the bottom of her tea. "While I was on Illium… the Dantius Corporation mysteriously started up again," she continued, her brow starting to slowly furrow as she spoke, causing Shepard to look up in alarm at the unwelcome news. "That was about two years ago. I never saw anybody go in or out of the buildings, but one day the smokestacks started functioning again, and after that it was a trickle effect. People started talking about it, but… nobody seemed to know what was going on."

"That doesn't make any sense," Shepard frowned, feeling her fingers starting to tingle, before realizing that she had gripped them around her mug so hard they had started to turn deathly white. Loosening her grip on her mug, she pushed it forward away from herself, folding her hands in front of her instead to keep her from causing any more damage. "Both Dantius sisters are dead," she added, brusquely. "I killed one and Thane killed the other. Unless..." She paused again, thinking about it, running her teeth thoughtfully along her lower lip. "Unless there's another sister we don't know about," she added, speaking slower, almost reluctant to bring up the possibility. "Thane did say Nassana believed that one of her sisters might try to kill her, not just her sister Dahlia. But the odds of that happening are…"

"Better than you might suspect," Kasumi returned, causing Shepard's frown to deepen at the revelation. "The Dantius sisters kept a lot of secrets. But – I'm not saying that's what happened, mind you. I don't know what happened. Some people speculated that a family friend had taken over the corporation, but..." Shrugging again, she pulled her mug in towards her, resting it pensively against her chest as she took a breath in, staring at the wall of the mess hall over Shepard's shoulder. "The bottom line was that as long as they were not doing anything horrendously illegal, nobody had the authority to go in and forcibly investigate," she added, frankly. "They especially did not want to risk messing with it since the re-opening of the Corporation meant more jobs for those in desperate need of such. I guess it isn't so far of a stretch to consider that anything that provides work in these times is given extra leeway, no matter how suspicious the circumstances."

"So are they making weapons again?" Shepard asked, bluntly, ignoring Kasumi's comment about the good the Corporation was doing for Illium's working class. She found it hard to feel any sort of amity
for the Dantius Corporation's hiring of civilians when barely five years prior she had seen its workers being thrown from the towers and mauled by FENRIS mechs at the behest of its CEO.

Kasumi shrugged at the frank question, seeming unfazed by the brusqueness of it. "I don't know," she answered, truthfully, shaking her head. "I don't think so. I don't really know what they're doing now. I left before they started concretely producing anything. I heard a rumour they were doing something related to genetic engineering, but..." She hesitated, thinking about this for a moment, before shrugging again, seeming even less convinced this time. "I can't be sure," she admitted, honestly. "It wasn't a very reliable source."

At the mention of genetic engineering, Shepard bristled, remembering too well the black market genetic engineering clinic she had been sent to on her visit to Illium by Miranda's recommendation. She had warned Rana Thanoptis to close her business for good this time, but it seemed the asari geneticist was determined to defy her, in spite of all the undeserved second chances she had been given. Gritting her teeth so tightly she could feel her head start to ache with the tension, Shepard found herself suddenly wishing that she had killed Thanoptis on Virmire when she had the chance, but she quickly pushed the bloody thought from her head, not wanting to resort to knee-jerk feelings of violence. Taking a determined sip of her tea, Shepard chewed her bottom lip, staring intently down at her mug, trying not to let on too obviously how much the thought of an open-market genetic engineering business bothered her. She knew that it was hypocritical of her to take issue with the practice, as she was well aware she would never have been brought back to life if not for genetic engineering, but still, between Henry Lawson's ruthless eugenics and the Reapers' bastardization of intelligent races into Collectors and Husks for their disposal, the idea that people would openly welcome a business built around the normalization of genetic modification so soon after the War was almost more than she could stomach.

"Are you okay, Shepard?" Kasumi suddenly asked, causing Shepard to look up again, startled, not having realized how long she had lapsed into frigid, angry silence. Recovering quickly, Shepard nodded in response, taking another short sip of her tea before setting it back down in front of her again, tapping her fingers distractedly against the sides of the now-cool mug.

"Yeah, sorry," she apologized, shortly. "Just… remembering something. Didn't mean to zone out on you like that." Making a mental note to request a detour to Illium when funds permitted, she let out a soft sigh, crossing her ankles under her chair as she stared down into her tea again, wondering how many more of the places she had not had a chance to revisit since the end of the War had changed in unexpected ways. She had been so busy the last three years simply trying to stay afloat and keep her son in moderately good health that she had not even realized just how detached from the rest of the galaxy she had become. Finishing the last few sips of her tea, Shepard set her mug aside, feeling suddenly much less energized than she had only moments earlier. With everything Kasumi had told her, she could not help feeling as if nothing at all had been accomplished by the solidarity she had worked so hard to achieve during the course of the Reaper War, but, more than that, the idea that people were so quick to forget the horrors of the past and make the same mistakes all over again made her wonder if anything she had done, any of the sacrifices she had made, had even been worth the effort. Getting up from the mess table, Shepard picked up her mug, taking it over to the kitchenette sink before turning to face Kasumi again, letting out a soft, weary sigh as she leaned against the preparation counter.

"I'm gonna go check up on David," Shepard told her, trying hard not to sound as burnt-out as she felt. "You let me know if there's anything else you need to feel at home." Starting to head towards the elevator again, she suddenly stopped, realizing something, before turning to face Kasumi again, holding up a hand in thought. "Oh," she said. "And – thank you for talking with me… letting me know what's going on. And… for being a part of my crew." She paused again, unsure what else there was to add, before dropping her hand to her side again, letting out a short, soft breath as she
stared at Kasumi, feeling a gentle well of fondness for the thief she had not really considered before. The last three years had been so busy that she had not even truly had a chance to realize just how much she had missed her crewmates, but now that she had some of them back again, she could not imagine how she could have gone so long without them. "Thanks for everything, Kasumi," she repeated, quietly. "I don't know what I would do without you. Any of you."

"Oh, you'd find a way to get by. I'm sure," Kasumi teased, wrapping her fingers absentmindedly around her now-cold tea mug. "You are still Commander Shepard, after all. That much has not changed."

"Yeah… I guess that's true," Shepard answered, before giving awan, crooked smile in return.
The new message light was flashing as Shepard dropped herself down into her desk chair, letting out a heavy sigh as she accessed the e-mail terminal, scrolling to the top to check for unread messages. The first unread message was a spam e-mail advertising a subscription to some sort of health and fitness mag, which Shepard was quick to send to the trash before opening the second e-mail, this one from Earth Housing LLC. The message was short, but the language sounded imperative, informing Shepard that Miranda had come across some crucial information regarding her sisters, and requesting her to contact her about it as soon as she possibly could. Shepard frowned at the anxious tone of the e-mail, quickly closing out her inbox and switching instead to her vidcomm link, pulling up the origin address of the EHL e-mail and setting it to call. The screen had barely had time to display its loading call symbol before Miranda quickly picked up on the other end, her expression mixed relief and apprehension as she pulled her earcomm out, setting it quickly aside to attend to the more important conversation on her screen.

"Shepard," Miranda breathed, sounding relieved that Shepard had even taken the time to call. "I'm so glad you got my message. I was afraid you might be too busy to worry about my problem."

"Never too busy for you, Miranda," Shepard assured her, unable to help feeling a bit worried. "What's going on? You said you had some information about Oriana and Matilda?"

"Yes," Miranda answered quickly. Then, thinking a moment, she amended, "Or, well… yes and no. I have some good news and some bad news, unfortunately." Glancing over her shoulder, she took a quick look around her work station, making sure no one was listening in on their conversation, before turning to lean in closer towards the vidscreen again, folding her hands anxiously in front of her. "The good news is that Oriana came back home," she began, speaking in a low voice, just loud enough for Shepard to hear her over the vidcomm. "She only just arrived today. I offered to stay home from work to take care of her, but she insisted I not risk my job for her sake." Letting out a low huff, she looked down at her folded hands, her pristine brows furrowing in worry as the corners of her pretty mouth turned down in a troubled frown. "She's completely shaken up," she added after a moment, looking up at Shepard again, concerned. "She could hardly tell me what was wrong when she first came back. Eventually I got her to calm down enough to tell me that she and Matilda had been on one of the Homeworld Shuttles when it was intercepted by slavers. She just barely managed to escape of her own volition before they had a chance to sell her into slavery."

"Liara told me as much," Shepard agreed, nodding, her frown deepening in concentration. "Or at least, the part about the Homeworld Shuttle. She said they were intercepted in a volus system, but that there hadn't been any updates on their whereabouts since, or anyone else who had been on the Shuttle."

"Exactly," Miranda returned, solemnly, letting out a heavy, worried sigh. "The way Oriana tells it, she and several others were taken to one location, while Matilda and the rest were taken to another. She says she has no idea where they took Matilda. She tried to look for her after she got free of the slavers, but she was unable to find out where they took her and the other children."

Shepard faltered at this new information, feeling her posture tense, her hands clenching into subconscious fists on the desk in front of her at the news. "They separated the adults from the children?" she asked, unable to help a growing feeling of dread at the implication. "Why?"

"I'm not sure," Miranda answered, honestly, shaking her head. "Apparently, though, they did take some of the adults when they took the children away. Young adults, though— younger than twenty-five. Oriana says she isn't sure what their motive was for separating them, but…" Pausing again, she
frowned deeper, her plush lips pursing into a taut, worried line as she shifted restlessly in her seat, clearly made uncomfortable by the feeling of helplessness brought on by her current situation. "I just don't know what to do, Shepard," she finally admitted, earnestly. "Matilda is... she's the closest thing Oriana and I might ever have to a biological daughter. Sometimes I forget she's not actually my niece. All I want is to see her happy and safe." Crossing her arms over her desk, she hesitated again, her blue gaze drifting to one side of the vidscreen as she passed her hands anxiously over her thin upper arms. "I just hope they aren't intending to do her any harm," she added, quieter, seeming almost unwilling to consider the possibility. "She's only four years old. She's still just an innocent child."

"We'll find her, Miranda," Shepard assured her, causing Miranda to look up at her again, her expression worried, as if unsure whether she could even believe the heroic sentiment. She paused a moment, considering Shepard's pledge, before finally taking a deep breath in and sitting back in her chair again, seeming to decide that if anyone could carry through with that promise, it would be Shepard.

"Thank you, Shepard," Miranda returned, her voice still quiet, trying hard to keep it from shaking with nerves. Falling silent again, she looked down at her hands folded together in her lap, chewing pensively at the inside of her cheek, before she suddenly seemed to remember something, looking up at Shepard again, her blue eyes wide with realization. "Oriana said the two groups of slavers travelled together from the Atheon Cluster to the Apien Crest, but split off when they reached the Serpent Nebula," she commented, seeming much more alert now, causing Shepard to sit up straighter in her chair as well, listening. "Her captors took the route to the Exodus Cluster on their way to the Armstrong Nebula, which is where she escaped from... but she said Matilda's captors went before hers in the Serpent Nebula relay queue, and she thought she saw them heading in the opposite direction." Pausing again, Miranda went rigid, her pretty brow furrowing in thought at this information as she worried distractedly at her plush lower lip, before she suddenly seemed to remember something, looking up at Shepard again, her blue eyes wide with realization. "If they went to the Silean Nebula, the Minos Wasteland, or the Ismar Frontier, that would be their final stop," she mused, her thin fingers flying across the keypad, typing in something too fast for Shepard to make out. "There aren't any other relays out of those systems. I can put out some feelers, get an update system in place that can ping me if there's ever any reports of suspicious activity in those areas... even any activity through the Athena Nebula and the Nimbus Cluster shouldn't be too hard to track..." Stopping again, she hesitated, her hopeful expression starting to waver, before it suddenly began to fall again, her smile fading into a worried frown as she stared at her computer screen, considering something Shepard could not see. "The only downside is that if they went to the Eagle Nebula... they could be anywhere," Miranda added, gravely. "That relay connects to the Crescent Nebula, which goes to the Omega Nebula, which goes... everywhere. There's no telling where they might have ended up if they went that route."

"And the Crescent Nebula is Illium," Shepard added, worriedly, remembering too well the recent conversation she had had with Kasumi about the state of the lawless garden world.

Miranda looked up at Shepard again at this addendum, seeming even more concerned than before, as if she had not even considered the possibility of the ship being headed for Illium. Then, holding her hands up, she shook her head, waving the implication away. "I... I don't want to think about it," she said, shortly, clearly trying hard not to let the idea bury itself too deeply in her mind. "Just... keep an ear to the ground on your end, and I'll do the same on mine. I know you've got Liara there with you, so you've got more resources at your disposal than I do, so just... please, keep your eyes and ears open for any sign of Matilda." Shepard hesitated at this request, considering for a moment asking Miranda how she had found out so quickly that Liara had re-joined the crew of the Normandy, before deciding it was better not to say anything and instead offering only a supportive nod in
response. "And, Shepard—" Miranda suddenly added, causing Shepard to look up again, attentive. Having said this, Miranda faltered, chewing her lip for a moment, seeming uncertain what she wanted to say next, before finally taking a sharp breath in and looking up at Shepard again, decisive. "Thank you so much for helping me with this," she told her, honestly. "I really can't tell you what it means to know I have a friend in times like these."

Shepard frowned a bit at the acknowledgment, wondering for a moment if Miranda had honestly thought there might be a possibility that she would not want to help, before quickly changing her expression and instead offering Miranda a warm, unintentionally crooked smile in response. "Of course, Miranda," she answered, frankly. "I know how much your sisters mean to you. You don't even have to ask."

"If you say so," Miranda returned, reaching up to tuck a stray lock of hair behind one ear. Then, letting her hand drop back to her desk again, she stared for a moment at her abandoned earpiece, before finally giving a soft, weary sigh and looking up at the vidscreen again. "I should probably get back to work," she said, her expression earnest, though Shepard could tell from her tone that was the last thing she wanted to do. "I've more than used up my lunch break. I'd much rather be at home with Oriana right now, of course, but…" She paused again, considering what she had been about to say, before letting out a short, bitter huff of breath and looking up at Shepard again, knowingly. "Well," she added, shortly. "I don't have to tell you about working disagreeable jobs to support the ones we care about." Rubbing her fingers anxiously together, she shook her head slowly, thoughtful for a moment, before finally reaching forward to pick up her earcomm again, clipping it over the cusp of her ear, before looking over at Shepard once more and raising her pristine brows. "Working here isn't so bad, though," she told her, trying her hardest to sound optimistic, though Shepard could not help noting something a bit manic-sounding in her forced nonchalance. "And, besides… busywork will do me some good, I figure. Get my mind off Matilda for a while, at least."

"We'll find Matilda, Miranda," Shepard assured her, leaning forward towards the vidcomm screen again, her brow furrowing intently. "You have my word."

"I believe you, Shepard," Miranda answered, quieter this time, nodding in agreement. Then, reaching towards her vidscreen console, she severed the connection, sending Shepard's screen to a bright blue splash display of the EHL logo. Shepard made a face at the logo, wondering whose job it had been to design it, before shaking her head and reaching forward to her own console, turning it off and sending the screen finally to black.

It was another few days before any more new messages arrived to the Normandy, and though three days was a short enough time in perspective, it still somehow seemed agonizingly long to Shepard, who had taken to refreshing her terminal several times a day in the hopes of an update from Miranda, Garrus, or Ereba. The lack of communication made her nervous, making her wonder if perhaps something terrible had happened to one or all of them, though she knew the odds of that happening were highly unlikely. Still, she could not help feeling as if everyone had suddenly decided to go silent on her all at once, making her suspect that there might perhaps be an issue with the Normandy's communications reception system. She had almost convinced herself to go down to engineering and ask them to check on the ship's comm status when the new message light on her terminal suddenly started flashing again, causing her to quickly drop what she had been doing to scramble across the room to check her e-mail instead. Dropping herself down into her desk chair, she anxiously opened her inbox, scrolling up to the single bolded e-mail at the top and selecting it before eagerly starting to read.

She quickly recognized the message as being one from Ereba, a forwarded listing for a search and rescue operation, one Shepard could not help noticing offered a surprising sum for what appeared to
be a simple task. Scrolling down to the extended description, she frowned as she read the job specifics, wondering what part of the search and rescue warranted such a high payout. It seemed an easy enough mission: a research vessel had crash-landed on a terrestrial planet outside their scope of radio transmission, and a crew was needed to investigate the crash to see if any of the research crew had survived. Sending back a quick response that she was interested in taking the job, Shepard moved her hand over to the intercom button on her desk instead, pressing down on it before picking up her star-pattern stress ball with her free hand and starting to roll it between her fingers. "Joker, we need to head to the Nubian Expanse," she informed the pilot. "To the planet Parnack."

"Parnack, Commander?" Joker asked back, sounding confused. "Are you sure? Isn't that where those, y'know… creepy yahg things come from?"

Shepard hesitated at the question, the stress ball stilling in her palm, her other hand frozen on the intercom button as she realized that Joker was completely right. The logical reason for the job’s payout being so high had been staring her in the face the entire time, but she had been so eager to take any work offered her that she had let the obvious danger go right over her head. "Yeah," she answered, trying to keep her voice even and calm as she turned her attention back to the intercom, squeezing the stress ball tightly as she swore inwardly at her own short-sightedness. "Yeah, it is. I still need you to set a course for it, though. The quicker we can get there, the better."

"Liara's gonna have a cow over this," Joker told her, sounding none too pleased with the idea of visiting the planet, himself. "You know how much she hates yahgs. …Yahg? Is it yahg or yahgs?"

"What Liara doesn't know can't hurt her," Shepard answered, ignoring his question, starting to get a bit frustrated with the back-and-forth. The longer she tried to justify taking the job, the more she regretted having accepted it so hastily, knowing full well that even the payment would hardly be worth the backlash she would be receiving from her crew about it. Either way, she knew that if Liara were to find out about the mission, she would never let Shepard hear the end of it. "Just don't mention where we're going until we actually get there," she added, hastily. "I need this job, Joker. This is the first job I've been sent in a week. I have to take it."

"If you say so, Commander," Joker conceded, still sounding less than thrilled. Then, cutting off the intercom connection again, he left Shepard to her own devices once more, letting her stew in irritated regret at the hasty decision she had made.

It took several more days for the Normandy to arrive in the vicinity of the Nubian Expanse, making Shepard worry that the time spent waiting in the relay queues might have eaten up most of the resources they needed to make it to a safe system to refuel once the job was done. Making her way up to the cockpit, she hovered anxiously over Joker's chair, trying to read the ship's gauges over his shoulder, to little success. Though she was a certified expert at reading galaxy charts and strategy maps, most of the symbols on Joker's navigational display were still a mystery to her, and she could not help but feel a bit impressed that he had memorized what all of them meant. Joker frowned a bit as he looked up, noticing Shepard standing over him, before quickly realizing what she was trying to do and taking pity on her, tapping the maintenance symbols on his navigation screen for her to more easily see the readings. "We're still doing okay, fuel-wise," he told her, pointing to one of the gauges. "Won't really have to start worrying about our fuel levels for another day or two. Hopefully by that time we'll be out of this creepy system. Either way, I'll be putting the ship in energy conservation mode while you're planetside."

"I will shut down all additional unnecessary ship functions until you return," EDI added, causing Shepard to look her way as she blinked a few times, helpfully. "If we are enterprising with our resources, we may not be forced to refuel for another two to three days."
"That's good news," Shepard returned, feeling a bit more encouraged.

"We should be arriving at Parnack in a couple hours," Joker told her, tapping the gauges to collapse them again. "I'll let you know when we're a little bit closer. Give you time to suit up and stuff."

"Appreciate it," Shepard answered, offering him a short nod of thanks, before turning to head back towards the elevator again, wanting to make one last check on her son before getting ready to head planetside.

David was already fast asleep as Shepard entered his playroom, and she bit her lip, hoping the sound of the door opening would not wake him up. Traynor sat cross-legged on the floor in a corner of the room, a digipad resting on her knees as she read quietly to herself, not wanting to disturb the sleeping child. As soon as she heard Shepard enter, however, she looked up quickly from her book, her dark eyes wide as she held a finger to her lips, indicating for total silence. "He just fell asleep," she whispered, glancing over towards the tiny corner bed. David stirred at the sound, causing both women to look over in concern, but he quickly settled back down again, nestling into his pillow and letting out a soft huff as he continued sleepily sucking his thumb. Moving as quietly as she could over to the bed, Shepard knelt down beside her son, gently prying his thumb from his mouth and tucking it safely against his chest before pressing a soft, reassuring kiss to his temple. David gave a soft yawn at her touch, but he still did not wake up from his nap, causing Shepard to let out a soundless sigh of relief as she turned away from the bed again, making her way back towards the door, hoping to make a silent exit.

"Try to keep him from sucking his thumb when he sleeps," she whispered to Traynor, causing the yeoman to look up again, listening intently to the instructions she was being given. "Having his thumb in his mouth blocks his airway. It increases his chance of suffocating in his sleep." Traynor frowned at the morbid thought, turning immediately to look back at David again, before returning her attention to Shepard once more and nodding her understanding. Then, suddenly seeming to remember something, she held up a finger, indicative, causing Shepard to turn back from the door again to hear what she had to say.

"Gardner says he may have found a recipe that would work well with David's physiology," Traynor whispered, sounding hopeful, causing Shepard's brows to raise in tentative interest. "It was a lot of trial and error, but I still thought it best to ask first – would it be all right for us to try giving him something other than formula? Gardner really thinks this recipe might work, which would be a nice change from the usual." Having said this, she paused, realizing she had said something wrong, before quickly correcting herself, "...For David, that is. I wasn't meaning to imply Gardner's recipes never work out. That wasn't my intention at all. Please don't tell him I said that."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Shepard answered, giving a soft, fond chuckle in return.

Traynor smiled sheepishly at the reassurance, glancing down at the digipad on her knees, before looking back up at Shepard again, just as hopeful as before. "Might we please try this recipe, though?" she asked again, a bit more expectant this time. "Chakwas says some variety in his diet would be good for him. Plus, I honestly believe he'd be much happier if he had something to eat other than formula once in a while. He is already three years old."

Shepard's patient smile faltered at Traynor's reasoning, before she instinctively turned to look over at her sleeping son, feeling her expression start to fall at the thought of him never being able to stomach anything other than formula. The last time she had tried to give him something solid, it had come back up almost immediately, and she had promised not to try again for a while to keep from traumatizing him. Now that she thought about it, however, she realized that that had been over a year ago, and she had simply been too busy with trying to find work to even realize how long it had been
since her last attempt. It stood to reason that David's digestive system might have gotten stronger in that amount of time, but the idea of forcing him to eat something that might cause him discomfort still made her more nervous than she would have liked to admit. Turning to look back at Traynor again, she took a deep breath, folding her arms, before finally giving a sharp, brusque nod, agreeing before she could overthink and stop herself. "Sure," she answered, shortly. "When he wakes up from his nap. And I assume I'll get a full report on how he does when I get back from this mission."

"Of course, Commander," Traynor answered, dutifully, giving a quick little nod in return, before turning to look back down towards her digipad, trying hard to hide a small, relieved smile that had crept over her face at Shepard's confirmation. Shepard gave a soft breath at the sight, a small, fond smile of her own pinching at the corners of her lips, before she looked up thoughtfully at David again, uncrossing her arms from over her chest to tuck them into her hoodie pockets instead. She had worried when she had first brought David aboard that her crew members might react poorly to him, perhaps even resent him, but she had been pleasantly surprised when they had proved that they not only cared about David almost as much as she did, but also seemed to almost instinctively consider him to be part of their family. Nodding once more in satisfaction, Shepard turned away from Traynor and David, passing through the door of the playroom as quietly as she could as she headed instead towards the elevator, making her way up to her cabin to change into her armour.

Liara was already waiting in the Captain's cabin by the time Shepard arrived, and she quickly stood up from the desk chair as Shepard entered, making her pause for a moment in the doorway, wondering if there had been something important she had forgotten to do before coming up. Not remembering anything crucial, Shepard took a few more cautious steps into her cabin, waiting for the other shoe to drop, before deciding she had waited long enough and instead turning to make her way over towards her armour display cabinet, opening it up and starting to disrobe, getting ready to change into her armour. "Something you need, Liara?" she asked, unzipping her hoodie and tossing it aside at the foot of the bed, followed by her shirt. Liara hesitated at the question, staring at Shepard blankly for a moment, before finally seeming to remember why she was there and instead settling back down into the desk chair again, folding her gloved hands in front of her as she prepared to explain her presence.

"Yes," Liara answered, simply, watching as Shepard pulled off her pants, before folding them haphazardly at the foot of her bed. "I had a few questions about your projected itinerary."

"I don't really have a projected itinerary," Shepard returned, frankly, reaching for her undersuit and starting to step into it. Pulling her stiff undersuit up over her body, she gave it a firm yank, freeing up any extra movement room, before sliding both arms into the sleeves and reaching around to zip it up the back.

"That's what I know," Liara told her, her painted brows furrowing a bit at the dismissive answer. "I had wanted to ask if you might be interested in me looking for work for you. For the Normandy. I know you have a source, but I..." Pausing, she trailed off, her expression growing more worried as her blue eyes strayed to the fish tank, her lips pursing into a thin line as she tried to think of a kinder way to word her proposal. "Well... the truth is, you don't seem to be getting enough work to hold you over from one job to the next," she finally said, earnestly, causing Shepard to look up at her again, her expression flat. "If you want me to, I can check my channels to see if I can find you something supplemental. Something to give you a little extra spending money, with... a little more information attached." Looking back over at Shepard again, she hesitated, waiting for some sort of response, before finally realizing she would likely not be getting one and giving a short, helpful shrug instead. "The Citadel work board is a good place to find work if you're not picky, but... only about twenty percent of the galaxy's actual jobs get posted there," she added, sounding more confident now that the most uncomfortable part was out of the way. "A majority of work these days is handled internally. I'm only saying that I have the resources to look for available jobs that might
"Like what?" Shepard asked, more polite than actually curious. Pulling her helmet from its display, she turned it over in her hands, making sure no before-unnoticed damage existed that might compromise her upcoming mission. Then, satisfied her helmet was in working order, she set it aside on her bedding, still not looking over at Liara as she began to remove the rest of her armour from the locker, setting it down neatly on her bed as she prepared to change into it for the mission.

"Well, for example… there have been reports of a TMX trade ring on Lorek," Liara began, sliding her hand into her belt pouch to produce her portable datapad. Tapping the screen, she pulled something up from her databank, before quickly dragging the image out of the tiny frame to transfer it to the much larger display of Shepard's desk holo-screen instead. The displayed image was of a minimalistic map of the galaxy, with several of the systems circled in white and little notes in Liara's handwriting next to each one. Shepard frowned up at the display, certain that Liara had been waiting for an opportunity to do that since her arrival, before returning her attention to her armour again, already dreading where the deceptively friendly conversation was going to lead. "It's taken a while for anyone to find it, so the assumption is that it's either very small, or very expertly cloaked," Liara went on, skilfully ignoring Shepard's dour reaction to her diagram. "There have also been rumours about a slave trafficking ring that has sprung up in the Minos Wasteland area in the last year or so. Nobody knows much of anything about it, so nobody knows how true the rumours are, but…"

Trailing off, Liara paused, realizing that the mention of this mission had gotten Shepard's full attention at last. Shepard frowned up at the holo-screen, holding her spine-guard absentmindedly between her hands, seeming to have forgotten about the piece of armour entirely. The Minos Wasteland had been one of the places Miranda had mentioned as a possible destination for the slavers who had taken Matilda, but Shepard knew the chances of Matilda's slavers being the same as Liara's were almost slim to none. With the economy being as bad as it was, she knew that slave trafficking was most likely on the rise, which meant that even hoping that these traffickers might be the ones who had taken Matilda felt foolish and overly optimistic. "I can try to look a little further into that for you," Liara offered, pulling Shepard back to earth suddenly, interrupting her train of thought. "Perhaps, if you like, we could even substitute that mission for this one—"

"No thanks," Shepard answered, curtly, cutting Liara off short. Then, moving over to the intercom button beside her armour cabinet, she pressed it, waiting for the familiar cockpit sounds on the other end to let her know Joker was listening. "Joker, tell Vega and Rahma to suit up and meet me in the hangar," she instructed the pilot, bluntly. "And tell them to bring extra ammo. We're gonna need all the help we can get."

A moment of silence followed these instructions, as if Joker were trying to decide whether he had heard her request correctly. "Uhh… Rahma, Commander?" he finally asked, hoping for clarification.

"Yes," Shepard answered, shortly. "And Vega. Can you think of anyone else better to take with me to Parnack?" At the name of the planet, she quickly turned to look over towards Liara, and was unsurprised when the asari did not even react, instead staring distractedly up at her holo-map as she rocked thoughtfully side to side in the desk chair. Shepard had suspected that Liara had figured out their destination long before coming up to her cabin, and this only proved to confirm that, as well as explaining why she had been so eager to try to replace the current mission with something she knew would pique Shepard's interest. Turning back to the intercom again, Shepard waited for an answer from Joker, wondering if it would even be worth the effort to bother calling Liara out on her transparency.

"I'll let them know, Commander," Joker confirmed, before disconnecting the intercom again, leaving Shepard and Liara alone in uncomfortable privacy once more.
Turning away from the now-dead intercom, Shepard instantly looked up at Liara at the desk, not even bothering to hide her disappointed, knowing frown as she turned to face her friend. "You knew already," she told her, frankly, causing Liara to look up quickly from the holo-map, her painted brows raising faintly in surprise.

"Knew what?" Liara asked, innocently.

"You knew we were going to Parnack," Shepard answered, bluntly, not in the mood to play.

Liara shrugged at the accusation, unconcerned, before reaching to pick up her tiny datapad from the desk, holding it up to the much larger display and retracting the digital image back into the portable pad again. "Of course I knew," she answered, not even bothering to be evasive about it anymore. "I figured it out a while ago. I wouldn't be a very good information broker if I couldn't figure out something as simple as our destination."

Shepard hesitated at the frank response, realizing that Liara was right, before shaking her head and looking back down at her armour again, picking up the first piece and holding it up to inspect it. "I figured you wouldn't want to know," she admitted, honestly, her voice lower this time.

"You figured I'd react poorly if I knew," Liara corrected her, looking down at her from the desk, austerely. "I'm not a child, Shepard. I can handle being told things. Even things I might not like."

"Hm," Shepard answered, shortly, pulling the spine-guard around her back, before securing it firmly into place with the strap around her front.

A silence followed this uncomfortable exchange, with neither woman seeming to know what to say. Then, finally, Liara gently cleared her throat, getting Shepard's attention again, causing her to look up from her armour once more. "You didn't have to take this mission, you know," Liara told her, candidly. "I could have gotten you another mission. A better mission."

"We're here now, Liara," Shepard answered, picking up her abdominal guard and pressing it flat against her stomach, making sure it was positioned correctly to protect her internal organs. "Might as well take it."

"That's like saying that you've been given poison, so you might as well drink it," Liara answered, sharply.

Shepard looked up at the comparison, raising a brow, waiting to see how long it took Liara to recognize the time-tested flaw in her logic. For as long as Liara had known her, Shepard had never turned down a free drink, even when she was warned ahead of time that it might in fact do her harm, and she could not help a small, wry smirk from curling the corners of her lips as she waited for Liara to remember this fact. "Have you met me, Liara?" she finally asked, darkly amused, looking back down at her armour again.

Liara pursed her lips at the quip, disapproving, before letting out a short, disgruntled huff of breath and dropping her gaze to the desk again, tracing her finger around the edge of the holo-keyboard as she tried to think of an appropriate response. "Well… we'll just agree to disagree, I suppose," she finally answered, clearly seeming to realize that no matter what argument she made, she would not be getting through Shepard's stubbornness anytime soon.

Shepard nodded in response, unconcerned, pulling the abdominal guard strap around her waist as securely as she could, before giving the layered plate a few good raps, making sure it was sturdy and sound. "It's a simple enough job," she commented, picking up her hip-guard and starting to step into it, sliding it up over the base of her abdominal plate and locking them securely against one another.
"Just go in, investigate a downed ship, and get out. If there are survivors, we take them with us. If not, we can just leave. No incident." Holding her thigh-guard against her leg, she tightened the strap holding it in place, making sure the front and back plates lined up and that both were securely fastened. "I figure if the yahg are the scariest things on the planet, we're pretty much set," she added, checking to make sure the movement pins on both sides of her hips were aligned correctly. "We've faced off with one of them before." Pausing then, she stopped, considering, before amending herself, "...Well, you and I have. Vega and Rahma haven't, but... I have. So I know what I'm up against."

"Except that you don't," Liara returned, still unconvinced, her painted brows furrowing deeper at Shepard's flippant attitude. "These aren't like the yahg we faced before, Shepard. They're uncivilized. Brutal, savage creatures." Gripping the armrests of the desk chair, she watched as Shepard continued dressing, seeming to be completely ignoring the warnings Liara was giving her. "The one we faced off against was educated – uplifted," she added, matter-of-factly. "Most yahg aren't even enlightened enough to be classified as spaceflight species."

"The yahg aren't mindless brutes, Liara," Shepard contended, frowning as she reached for her armoured gloves, pulling them on and flexing her fingers to make sure she could move them efficiently. "You've read the reports, I know you have. The yahg had tech equivalent to twentieth-century Earth tech back when they were first discovered by the Council. It's been at least sixty years since then, so they've probably advanced at least a bit by now." Tightening the straps on her forearm guards, she gave them each a hard shake, making sure they would not come loose, before moving on to pick up her calf-guards from the bed instead, starting to lock them into place. Liara huffed at the argument, folding her gloved hands over her stomach, her elbows still resting rigidly against the armrests as she watched Shepard continue dressing.

"Twentieth century Earth tech barely covers the discovery of electricity, Shepard," Liara argued, watching as Shepard sat down on the bed, starting to slide one of her hefty armoured boots on. "Your species was so busy inventing the atomic bomb in an effort to destroy one another that they hardly had time to worry about advancements in actually beneficial scientific fields."

"That's not entirely true," Shepard answered, securing her armoured boot against the hinging-pins of her calf-guard. "In the twentieth century we discovered quantum theory, completed the first successful cloning trial—"

"And fought both World War One and World War Two," Liara returned, just as quickly. "And that was just within the span of twenty years of human conflict. How do you think that will compare to a society of yahg?"

Finishing securing her boot in place, Shepard let out a deep, harried sigh, leaning her elbows on her knees as she looked over at Liara, exasperated. "Not everyone can be the Protheans, Liara," she reminded her, frankly.

Liara bristled at the implication, her plum lips pursing into a thin, stubborn line as a faint purple blush rushed up into her cheeks, but she quickly pushed it back down again, refusing to be embarrassed. "That's not what I was implying, Shepard," she answered, her tone pointedly quieter this time. Turning to look over Shepard's desk, she spotted the starry stress ball, reaching over to it and beginning to roll it distractedly around on the desk with two fingers. Her brow was still furrowed as she thought, refusing to look at Shepard as she continued to don her armour, trying to think of a reasonable argument that might change Shepard's mind about visiting Parnack. The stress ball's spongy form was so worn down that cracks had started to appear throughout the patterned exterior, looking like rips in the fabric of space itself, making it clear that the ball had been used over the past six years with almost distressing frequency. "You have a three-year-old son," Liara suddenly reminded her, looking up at Shepard again, causing her to pause in donning her second boot to return
the look, affronted. "He needs his mother. You have no guarantee that this mission will be a success."

"I have a three-year-old son who has to eat, Liara," Shepard answered, sharply, starting to get annoyed with Liara's arguments. "And a ship full of people depending on me to provide for them. Food, shelter, defences, ship maintenance… how am I supposed to pay for that if I only take the jobs that appeal to me?" Leaning down to her boot again, she clicked the hinging pins in place, making sure they were securely locked before standing up again, finished outfitting her lower extremities. Picking up her upper-arm guard, she held it in place, pulling the second piece around before securing them together and tightening the strap, making sure the armour stayed put as she reached for the elbow guard next. "Just because it's dangerous doesn't mean I'm going to fail this mission," she added, bending her arm a few times to make sure she could still move it freely. "Whatever happened to your faith in me, Liara? You've known me longer than anyone. I'm the same person I always was. That much hasn't changed."

"But it should, Shepard," Liara returned, exasperated, picking up the stress ball and squeezing it. "You claim to be being more careful for David's sake, but what have you really done? Turned down one job with a zero percent success rate only to take every other perilous contract sent your way?"

"What am I supposed to do, Liara?" Shepard shot back, now entirely fed up with the conversation, turning to face Liara with her hands planted indignantly on her hips. "I can't please everyone. I tried once, I tried to be that person once, and I… I can't..." Gritting her teeth, she took a deep breath, clenching her hands at her sides, before letting out her breath in a long, low exhale, allowing her hands to open again, forcing herself to be calm as she sat back down on the bed, reaching for her second upper-arm guard and starting to equip it. "I can't live like that," she said, her voice much more even, shaking her head as she pulled the arm-guard straps into place. "My mother raised me as a single mother. If I can't even provide for my son the same way she provided for me, it's… it's an insult to her. It's an insult to her mothering. She raised me better than that. She raised me with a sense of responsibility, to take care of my own, and if..." Trailong off again, she shook her head once more, securing her second elbow guard before flexing her arm to ensure she could move it. "I have to take care of my son and my crew, Liara," she said, turning to look at Liara across the room again and resting her hands on her knees. "This is the only way I know how. And I'll be damned if I'm going to let some bug-eyed alien land shark keep me from coming back to David. I'll be damned."

"Commander, we're coming up on Parnack," Joker's voice suddenly came through over the intercom, causing both Shepard and Liara to look up at the sound, surprised. "Vega and Rahma are waiting for you down in the hangar."

"Thanks, Joker," Shepard returned, shortly. "Tell Cortez I'll be right down." Letting out a weary sigh, she turned back to her bed again, picking up her breastplate and sliding it on over her shoulders before settling it securely over her abdominal and spinal guards, tightening the straps around her ribcage to ensure the armour was snug enough. Once done positioning the plate, she locked the front and back parts of the armour together, forming one solid piece, before twisting a bit from side to side, making sure she could still move freely. "I am interested in the jobs you mentioned, Liara," she finally spoke up again, reaching for her neck protector, causing Liara to look up in surprise at this unexpected statement. "Both of them. Though now I'm not sure if they were actually real, or if you were just trying to get me to ditch this mission."

"Of course they're real," Liara answered quickly, sitting up straighter in the desk chair, unable to help sounding a bit affronted at Shepard's suspicion. "I wouldn't attempt to pull you out of a credit-earning mission unless I had something to offer with just as much of a payout." Stopping herself then, she took a deep breath, regaining some of her lost composure, before sitting back in the chair again and shaking her head, folding her hands one on top of the other in her lap as she looked up at Shepard,
intent. "I'm not going to sabotage you, Shepard," she told her, fairly. "Even if I don't always like what you're doing. I want to help."

"You can start by not questioning my judgement," Shepard told her, frankly, securing the neck-guard around her throat. "I didn't come this far just to get taken out on a search and rescue." Sliding two fingers under her neck-guard to ensure she had enough room to breathe, Shepard gave a short noise of confirmation, more to herself than to Liara, before turning to pick up her helmet from the bed again and tucking it under her arm, ready to go. "I'll be back in a couple hours," she stated, matter-of-factly. "Make sure David doesn't get into too much trouble while I'm gone. I want to hear a good report when I get back."

"That won't be difficult," Liara returned, trying hard to sound optimistic, offering Shepard a thin, forced smile in response. "David is always good."
The Kodiak shuddered as it entered the first atmospheric level of Parnack, the sides of the carriage giving a bone-chilling creak, groan and rattle as the shuttle adjusted to the new gravitational field. Shepard bit her lip at the sound, turning to look at the exterior display screen, hoping the gravitational variance would not put too much strain on the outdated model. The Kodiak had served them well thus far, but she still had to admit that she had no idea if it was even equipped for the mission ahead, as they had had very little information available to them concerning the specifics of Parnack. While this was unsurprising, it also meant that the ground crew had been forced to go in effectively blind, with little to prepare them for what they might find on the surface apart from what they could see from orbit.

The part of the planet where the research ship had crashed appeared tropical, dense with leafy forests, but Shepard knew that that did not necessarily mean there would be oxygen. The ground party had been instructed to wear their breathing helmets on the mission, something Shepard hoped might also help them adjust to the planet's gravitational levels, though they, too, had been a complete mystery going in. She figured that since the yahg had had little trouble adjusting to the gravity on Sur'Kesh, that meant that the gravity on their planet might likely be near to that of Earth's, but she quickly began to doubt her conviction as soon as the shuttle passed from the planet's stratosphere into the troposphere. No sooner had they reached the new level of atmospheric pressure when the thrusters gave one last low, sharp whine, before the Kodiak suddenly dropped a few feet straight down through the open air, causing the landing crew to grab for the first solid thing they could reach to keep from being thrown around the back of the shuttle like a collection of ragdolls. Grabbing hold of the steering module, Cortez pulled back sharply on the controls, turning the thrusters downward in an effort to regain control of the craft, and the Kodiak gave a hard, short stop in response, recoiling a few times in midair as it attempted to stabilize, before finally settling into an uneasy hover.

"Everybody doing okay back there?" Cortez called back, glancing over his shoulder to make sure everyone was all right.

Shepard nodded in response, offering him an uneasy smile and a wary thumbs-up. "Just a little shaken up," she told him, honestly. "Nothing we can't handle."

Cortez nodded at her answer, turning his attention back to the controls, before starting to put in something into the command module, making the ship give another rattling shudder as it processed the information. After a moment of deliberation, the engine finally gave a low groan, the thrusters giving off short bursts of energy as they began to let up, before Cortez began to steer the craft again, using the gravity of the planet to his advantage to slowly guide the shuttle towards the surface for landing. Shepard could tell that this manoeuvring took skill, and silently thanked the Alliance for finding her a shuttle pilot as competent as Cortez – anyone less capable would have easily crashed the shuttle into the planet's surface at the unexpected change in gravity, and she had to wonder if that was what had happened in the case of the missing research crew.

The Kodiak let out another few unsettling clicks and whines as it hovered unsteadily downward, and Shepard turned to look over at her landing crew, making sure both of them were still doing all right. Vega held fast to the edge of his seat, trying hard to stave off motion sickness, and even Rahma was gripping tightly to one of the overhead handlebars, her free hand clutching her gun to her chest too tightly to allow it to shake with obvious nerves. Though Shepard could only see a sliver of Rahma's face through the cut of her helmet, she could tell that the young krogan had closed her eyes tightly, waiting for the worst of the shuttle ride to be over. "We'll be on solid ground soon," she assured Rahma, causing her to open her eyes in surprise at having been addressed. Rahma hesitated at the
encouragement for a moment, blinking a few times in surprise, before suddenly frowning in response, seeming more annoyed at having been coddled than relieved that her discomfort would be over soon.

"Not soon enough," Rahma returned, dryly, before turning to fix her gaze intently on the exterior display.

Shepard huffed quietly at the dismissive response, turning her attention down to her boots, not even bothering to see how Vega was faring in light of the shaky landing. It was barely another minute of precarious manoeuvring before the shuttle finally found solid ground, the door of the carriage popping open with a hiss to allow the passengers to hop out onto the floor of the clearing. The last of the dust kicked up from the Kodiak's engines was still settling as Shepard took her first few steps towards the edge of the forest, noting the sturdy, hard-packed earth under her feet, but as she began to make her way past the first wall of trees, the ground beneath her quickly began to soften, turning instead to a leafy mulch. Pulling up her omni-tool, she accessed the map of the jungle, noting the white dots that showed their location, and then the flashing indicator that told her where the downed shuttle was thought to be. She knew the indicator was just an estimation, and that the research vessel could be anywhere in the dense jungle, but she also knew that she would not be paid for her time unless she found it. Making a note of the clearing on her digimap in relation to the supposed crash, she collapsed her omni-tool again, before taking one last glance over her shoulder in an effort to memorize the site, wanting to make sure that even if they did end up straying from the set route, they would still be able to find their way back to the pickup point.

"The sooner we find this crash, the better," Shepard called to her teammates, drawing her Avenger from its maglock and indicating further into the jungle with it. "We don't want to get lost in here after dark if we can help it."

"I'm hoping we don't get lost in here at all," Vega admitted, drawing his own SMG from its holster and holding it at the ready.

The jungle path was overgrown with low-growing plants, the roots and vines that threatened to trip them hidden by stray twigs and leaves that had fallen from the tall trees and ferns overshadowing the forest floor. As they picked their way through the underbrush, Shepard heard a rustling sound coming from somewhere nearby, and when she looked over, it was to see two greenish-yellow deer-like creatures, each one at least fourteen hands at the shoulder, chewing the leaves from one of the more intricate-looking ferns as they watched the progressing ground party. The deer creatures seemed unfazed by the trespassers, the larger one chewing lazily on a large, curly frond as the other deer grazed peacefully at the ground foliage. The larger deer flicked one of its four ears as it chewed, its four eyes blinking out of sync as it watched the party, and Shepard was reminded suddenly of Javik, who had had a bad habit of doing that all the time just because of how much he knew it bothered her. She wondered what had become of him after the battle of London, and if he had actually gone through with his post-War plans, or if perhaps he was still out there somewhere, helping people and making new friends while pretending to make someone else's unsuspecting life as miserable as he could possibly manage.

Her train of thought was suddenly interrupted by a piercing squawk coming from somewhere in the thick branches overhead, and when she looked up, it was to see something that reminded her strongly of some sort of prehistoric flying lizard watching her from one of the nearby trees. The winged creature was enormous, well over five feet in length without counting its wingspan, dappled yellow in colour with blue patterning all down its head and back, with a sharply-tapered tail draped beside it on the branch. Its leathery wings were half-open, tentative, allowing the stray rays of sunlight filtering in through the thick canopy to warm its scaly membranes, and as Shepard watched, the feathers on its head began to puff up, its four yellow eyes growing wide as it stared at her in what
she guessed was an intimidation display, before it suddenly opened its beak to hiss at the party, showing off its rows of needle teeth. Then, without waiting for a reaction from the ground party, the creature took off, letting out a loud, shrill screech as it launched itself through the jungle canopy, disappearing into the foliage and causing the entire tree it had been sitting in to shake as it departed.

"I do not think the creatures here like intruders, Commander," Rahma observed, frowning up at the hole of sunlight where the flying creature had just disappeared to.

Shepard shook her head, assenting, before reaching into the pouch at her hip, making sure all the ammo she had brought along was still easily available for use. Satisfied that she was fully prepared, she looked down towards the jungle floor, watching as the leaves at her feet began to shift, before what looked to be a massive centipede began to crawl out of the mulch and across her boot. The insect's long feelers perused up to the knee of her armour as it climbed over the unfamiliar obstacle in its path, not even seeming to care that its new perch had a weapon and a pulse. The insect was black, with red spots down its back, and long legs stretching out much further than a normal centipede's would, but what made Shepard's skin crawl the most about this creature was that each section of its body seemed to have a number of tiny, beady black eyes, each pair independently functional and all moving in different directions as it inspected the forest floor around it.

Making a face at the insect, Shepard quickly shook it off her boot, taking a step back as it wriggled on the forest floor in a frenzied attempt to regain its feet. When it realized it could not right itself, the insect instantly stopped writhing, instead rolling itself into a massive ball and letting out a sound like an enormous, terrifying rattle. Vega was quick to react to this defence mechanism, moving up and bunting the insect unceremoniously into the underbrush, where they watched it disappear back into the jungle mulch with a hissing sound like an angry snake.

"Man, fuck this jungle," Vega swore, disturbed, before giving his ammo belt a good readjustment, making sure everything he needed was just as easily accessible as Shepard's.

The sun was beginning to darken through the leaf-choked canopy as the ground party picked their way through the jungle thicket, turning slowly from a cheerful yellow to a much more sinister orange, but Shepard paid it little mind, holding her omni-tool map out in front of her to keep a constant watch on their progress. It was hard to tell whether it was getting later, or if the jungle was simply getting denser, but Shepard kept checking her map program every so often regardless, making sure they were still heading in the right direction, all the while listening for the quiet blip of the tool updating with their current location. She knew the thick rainforest-like foliage would likely interfere with her tool's useability, but she hoped they would be able to reach their destination and return to the pickup point before that occurred. The worst possibility would be having to stay on the planet's surface overnight, hunkered down in the wreck of the research shuttle until Cortez could use the Normandy's more advanced tracking systems to find them again in the morning. Frowning at the prospect, Shepard quickly shook the thought from her mind, not wanting to even consider it as she held the omni-tool map a bit higher, hoping the extra boost might help it gain some clearance through the thick trees.

Despite the bevy of curious wildlife that had greeted them on first entering the forest, the ground crew now found themselves seeing barely any faunae as they made their way through the dense underbrush. Apart from a few more of the massive, colourful winged predators preening themselves on the highest branches, the only thing that let them know the animals were still there at all were the wild, disembodied calls echoing every so often through the trees. A few times, an enormous flying insect would buzz past one of their faces, but the insects seemed uninterested in the ground party, instead flying right past them, their long legs brushing against every leaf in their path as they droned on to their next unknown destination. Just then, a chilling sound like a woman's scream resounded through the jungle glen, causing the three travellers to stop short in their tracks, Shepard holding her
gun at the ready as the hair on the back of her neck stood on end at the sound. She had hoped they might find survivors among the crashed research crew, but now she feared they had arrived on the planet just barely a few minutes too late. She was surprised and a bit humiliated, then, to realize that the sound had not come from a human, but from something much more native, and much closer by.

A creature that looked like an enormous purple, six-legged lizard, its body entirely flat but for the raised, ridged edge around the outline of its abdomen, was pressed flush against the bark of a nearby tree, so flat that Shepard had at first thought that it might be some sort of fungus or other tree growth. The lizard uncurled its head from around the curve of the tree to stare up at the three of them with slitted, dark-blue eyes, before it slowly began to creak open its maw again, opening it up as wide as it could and showing off fearsome rows of shiny, sharp, bright red teeth. The lizard's mouth took up so much of its head shape that Shepard had to wonder where its ears were situated, and if the back of its jaw was located somewhere near the top of its neck. She also could not help wondering what had happened to the creature's skeleton that it could press itself so flat, or if it was perhaps made of collapsible cartilage like some of the animals on Earth.

As the ground crew watched in morbid fascination, the lizard began to slowly puff itself up, growing larger by the minute as it inhaled litres of air. Its sides inflated outward into a massive yellow balloon covered in black, tiger-like stripes, until finally the lizard had grown to more than twice its original size, making it look now more like a hideous, brightly-coloured life raft than the bizarre reptile it had resembled earlier. Once full of air, the lizard gave another heinous scream, before suddenly letting out a foul, indigo liquid that dribbled down the bark of the tree and into the ground, causing the ground plants nearby to shrivel up as the noxious fluid touched their leaves. Shepard gagged at the horrid display, taking a step back from the lizard as the acrid burning stench of the poisonous liquid began to fog her visor. Then, quickly indicating for her party members to follow her lead, she cut through the adjoining ring of trees, leading the ground crew away from the vulgar predatory creature.

The jungle seemed to grow even thicker as they pushed their way through the underbrush, until finally Shepard was forced to stop to catch her breath, bending double with her hands on her knees as Vega and Rahma finally caught up to her, their breathing loud in her in-helmet comm as they tried to slow their rapidly beating hearts. Letting out a soft cough, Shepard straightened her posture, not wanting to appear out of shape in front of her crew, before pulling up her omni-tool program again to check their location on the map, noting with some frustration that they were now even further away from the crash than before. Giving a heavy, exasperated sigh at the information, she dropped her hand to her side again, looking back over her shoulder for some hopeful sign of familiar plant growth. The wildlife of Parnack was starting to grow steadily on her nerves, and Shepard found herself half considering simply ditching the mission and returning to the Normandy, but the thought of Liara learning that she had given up halfway through the mission she had been so stubborn about taking kept her firmly rooted in place despite her frustration. Looking up towards the canopy, she squinted into the leafy brush, noting that the sun had grown to a bloody orange-red colour by now. She could not help worrying that that might mean it would soon be setting, and that they might be stuck in the wilderness overnight, and so, gathering up what patience and composure the jungle had not already beaten out of her, she started to trek steadily forward again, letting her omni-tool map program guide the three of them once more towards the potential site of the crash.

It was another few hours of hard hiking before the ground party finally began to close in on the location the omni-tool had marked as the crash site. Shepard frowned into the jungle foliage ahead, looking around for some sign of the wreck, but could see nothing but rows of trees and ferns obscuring the path forward. The crash site indicator on the omni-tool map flashed brightly, letting them know it was somewhere nearby, but none of them seemed to be able to find it, until finally Shepard heard the sound of Rahma's voice through her in-helmet comm calling for her to come further into the brush. Exchanging looks of surprise with Vega, she quickly began to make her way
through the thick undergrowth towards the indicator showing Rahma on her omni-tool, until, finally, she and Vega found themselves in a small, rocky, tree-barren clearing, with Rahma standing at the edge of the dene, pointing towards something inside of it. Shepard frowned at the wordless indication, before turning to see what Rahma was pointing at, feeling her heart sink like a rock as she looked out over what her teammate had discovered.

The scene that awaited them in the clearing was one none of them had been prepared for. The research vessel had been capsized, one thruster completely buried in the jungle mulch, with more than half of the exterior of the shuttle burned and blackened, its paint bubbling and chipping off where it had apparently previously caught fire. Most of the fire had been doused by time, but one small, stubborn flame still survived, flickering feebly near the nose of the shuttle. Shepard quickly picked up a handful of dirt to douse the flame, patting the fire out, before taking the opportunity to look over the rest of the wrecked craft. The windshield of the vessel had been shattered, the broken glass in the pilot's seat suggesting it had been done from the outside, and the large side door to the carriage was broken and twisted, as if something had manually peeled it open like a tuna can. Pieces of seating installations had been scattered around the jungle clearing, ripped into pieces Shepard still recognized as being similar to the bench built into the Kodiak's carriage, and metal boxes like those she had seen used to store medi-gel lay broken and empty around the dene, as if something had gone through and intentionally emptied and destroyed the contents of each one looking for food, or perhaps simply looking to ransack and destroy.

"We found the wreck," Shepard reported, solemnly, leaning into her earcomm to relay the news. Then, moving over to the more exposed side of the capsized shuttle again, she crouched down, leaning in to examine the blackened exterior of the craft more closely. Reaching out a hand, she traced her fingertips along the deep indents carved into the hull of the vessel, wondering what could have caused such deep, uniform markings. The marks seemed to drag along the side of the shuttle, some leaving indent trails three to five inches long, as if something with several impact points had tried to slice into the ship while it had still been in motion. She paused as her fingers trailed over a spattering of dried red blood, wondering which of the explorers had been the one unlucky enough to bleed out all over the side of the ship, before pulling her hand back in again, rubbing her fingers thoughtfully together as she passed her gaze down the length of the shuttle, looking for some clue as to what might have caused the ship to go down in the first place.

"They must've hit something big," Vega observed, frowning gravely at the carnage of the shuttle.

"Or something big hit them," Shepard returned, frankly. Her attention was suddenly drawn to what looked to be a large, jagged piece of debris that had lodged itself into the side of the ship, and, frowning a bit, she squinted at it, trying to figure out what it was. Then, taking a few more crouching steps forward towards the ship, she reached for the piece of unidentified debris, starting to try and pull it loose. Shepard gave a frustrated grunt as the jagged splinter stuck fast in the thick metal siding, making one last fruitless attempt to try to work it loose before finally letting go of the stubborn piece of debris and wiping her smarting hands on her thigh-guards, frowning down at the piece of castoff as she tried to figure out what to try next. Hearing the crunch of twigs, she looked over, noticing Vega starting towards her to assist, but she quickly held up a hand, stopping him, indicating that she wanted to figure it out on her own. Getting to her feet, she braced her boot against the side of the shuttle's hull, gripping hold of the foreign object with both hands, before giving a hefty tug, huffing and grunting as she dug her free foot into the forest floor, until, inch by inch, the piece of debris began to dislodge, finally sliding out with a bone-chilling sound like a saw cutting through wood.

Still out of breath from pulling so hard, Shepard lifted the object towards the sun-stippled canopy, squinting into the forest light as she tried to make out what it could be. The object was triangular in shape and nearly an inch and a half in length, serrated on two sides, but oddly bulky and smooth on the bottom. Dried blood had crusted over the flat part of the debris, and as she scraped it away with
her armoured glove, she realized that what she was holding was some sort of tooth, similar in shape and build to an Earth shark's tooth, but much larger than any shark's tooth she had ever seen. Turning towards Vega and Rahma again, she held up the tooth for them to see, causing Vega to frown in concern at the size of the object she was holding.

"There's some *gran criatura aterrador* in this jungle," Vega muttered, moving over to take hold of the tooth and turning it over in his hand to inspect it more closely.

Nodding distractedly in agreement, Shepard turned away from the wrecked research shuttle, making a face as she stepped into the centre of the clearing instead, her gun growing slack in her hands as she looked out over the carnage spread out in front of them. Four desiccated bodies had been strewn across the open grove, one missing its arm, another missing a leg, though the arm was quickly found a few feet away, twisted double over itself in a way an arm would never bend on a living being. The body of the pilot, the fifth unlucky victim, still hung, decapitated, from the co-pilot's side window of the shuttle, as if he had not even managed to fully escape the craft before being brutalized and killed. All the researcher's faces had been twisted into looks of horror, teeth bared, eyes half closed, looking almost as if they might spring to life at any moment to tell the terrifying tale of their last expedition. The buzzing of massive carrion flies was almost overwhelming in Shepard's ears as she moved over to inspect the bodies of the researchers more closely, only to be mortified to find a giant centipede creature like the one she had dealt with earlier chewing blithely on one of the bodies. The sound of its pincers crunching through the brittle bone was enough to make her stomach turn, and she hastily let off a few plasma bullets into the dirt beside the corpse, making the giant insect jump in surprise, its feelers going shock straight, waving wildly in the air as it let out a loud hiss. Then, before she could shoot at it again, the insect crawled quickly over the body, burying itself in the mulch again and slithering off into the safer depths of the jungle.

Shepard huffed as she watched it disappear, wrinkling up her nose in disgust, before suddenly spotting something flashing in the underbrush where the insect had disappeared to. Moving over towards the light, she bent down to pick the flashing object up, only to realize what she now held was a broken datapad. Shaking off the leaves and dirt that had been covering most of its cracked face, she tapped a few buttons on the shattered screen, eventually managing to pull up what looked to be a list of dated logs from the research shuttle, the most recent log from the day before she had received the e-mail from Ereba. Hearing the sound of Vega and Rahma curiously approaching from behind her, she turned around, indicating for them to listen in, before selecting the first log on the list and letting the data play. "...Research into fast-growing plant life," the log began, the recorded voice stilted and warped by the damage to the pad. "Breathable air levels still flagging… outside solutions have been deemed necessary. Hoping to introduce some controlled samples into Earth's bionetwork to improve oxygen levels in response to air pollution caused by devastation during the Reaper War. Nubian Expanse known to have impressive floral growth on at least two of its p… p-p-p… R-r-r-radiation levels were determined to be too high on that portion of Pragia to be able to research-ch—"

The recording suddenly crackled, the voice of the researcher breaking off completely as the pad gave a loud, high-pitched whine, causing all three listening to flinch as Shepard quickly exited out of the log, selecting the next entry down on the list instead and letting it play. "We made a rookie mistake," the second log began, the researcher on the recording letting out a hefty, exasperated sigh. It was odd to hear something so startlingly human, and it caused Shepard's brow to furrow even deeper as she listened, dreading the inevitable end she knew was coming for the research team. "We miscalculated the gravitational pull on Parn-n-n-nack… crash-landed on the planet's surface. It's not a te-e-e-e-errible wr-wr-wr… shouldn't take too long to fix. Just an inconvenience in the meantime." At this, all three listening turned to look back towards the smouldering wreckage in surprise, wondering what the crash might have looked like before the shuttle was punched full of massive bite- and claw-marks and scorched to a smoking husk.
Returning her attention to the datapad again, Shepard leaned in towards the speakers, trying to hear the garbled report log over the sounds of the jungle around her. "The radio transmission is out as well," the recording continued, stoically. "The jungle foliage is too thick to punch through, but we figure we can go ahead and do some research on the planet's plant life while our engineer works on fixing the ship. We've already found some samples to bring back that we believe will be compatible with Earth's ecosystem... W-w-we will continue to research the planet's flora and provide updates until we can return to the main research carrier." With that, the second log ended, and Shepard quickly switched to the final log, bringing the datapad in closer so all three of them could hear. "We're under attack!" the last log began, causing Shepard to look up sharply, exchanging worried looks with Vega before looking back down at the pad again. "What is it?! What is that?! Is that a y-ya-a-a-a—...?!

The question was quickly swallowed by what sounded like a muffled roar in the distance, followed by the sound of something heavy hitting the forest floor, before the log fizzled out again, the voice of the researcher coming through only in short blips through the static. Shepard gave the datapad an irritated shake, trying to get the log to come back, until finally the voice on the recording started shouting again, a bit clearer this time, but still a bit shaky as the corrupted data tried its best to read. "The shuttle isn't totally fix... w-w-we have to... g... -o GO!" the researcher shouted, the datapad giving a short buzzing sound as the corrupted data read forward. "Get in the shuttle! Thrusters on! Lock the door! Lock the d—!

The voice of the researcher was suddenly interrupted by a massive BANG, the sound of something heavy hitting the side of the shuttle at full speed, followed by the voices of the research crew shouting something Shepard could not make out. A loud, guttural howl blared out of the digipad's speakers, causing the sound system to falter, crackling as it tried to replay the terrifying noise, and Shepard could hear the loud, alarming crunch as whatever it was that had attacked the shuttle bit down on the exterior of the hull. The biting sound was followed by a skin-crawling shrieking as the creature's teeth dragged along the metal exterior, followed by a sharp bump as they managed to shake whatever it was – but only for a moment. No sooner had they managed to get rid of the attacker when the angry screech of metal being ripped apart at the hinges suddenly cut through the sound of the researchers' voices, causing them to shout even louder in panic as the craft thudded heavily to the ground again, its crippled thrusters offering no match for whatever had deemed it prey. Another deep, loud roar followed this, coupled with the sound of anguished screaming, before the recording fizzled out into static, leaving the three listeners standing in heavy silence in the middle of the inevitable conclusion.

"That's fucked up," Vega commented, pointing to the broken datapad.

Shepard frowned down at the record logs, considering what she had just heard, before glancing back towards the wreckage of the shuttle, and then to the tooth still held in Vega's hand, trying to figure out if either of those things could have come from a standard yahg. She figured the bite-marks were the right shape, but the size of the maw that had bitten down on the craft seemed to be much bigger than the jaws she remembered on the Shadow Broker, or any other yahg she had ever encountered, including the ones on Sur'Kesh. A normal-sized yahg would have to have unhinged its jaw completely to be able to make a bite-mark that big, and nothing she had read on the species had indicated that they might be capable of doing that. She figured it might have been a group of yahg attacking all at once, but she had never heard of yahg participating in pack-type group attacks, and the creature on the recording had sounded like just one entity. Tucking the datapad into her belt, she turned back towards the smouldering wreckage again, taking one last look over the demolished craft before shaking her head and starting towards the scene of the crash again, indicating for Vega and Rahma to follow along behind her.

"We should check and see if they have anything we can bring back," Shepard suggested, ducking
under the twisted door-flap to squeeze her way into the dented shuttle. The research shuttle, she realized on standing, was barely bigger than the Kodiak, just large enough to fit two pilots in the front and a small laboratory-type setup in the back carriage. "They said on the log they'd found some samples," she added, looking around the interior of the shuttle for storage compartments. "If nothing else, we can at least try and help their cause." Finally spotting what she was looking for, she made her way to the far back of the shuttle, crouching down to slide open the four floor-mounted lockers before starting to pull out a series of glass boxes containing samples of Parnack's plant life. Then, waving a hand for Vega to come in closer, she started to hand the samples to him over her shoulder, indicating for him to stash them in his belt pouches for safekeeping.

"You think someone's gonna come back to get the bodies?" Vega asked, opening the largest pouch on his belt to carefully store one of the plants inside.

Shepard hesitated at the question, pausing halfway through pulling out another labelled plant sample, before giving a short shake of her head and handing the sample over to Vega. "I don't think so," she answered, solemnly. "There's barely anyplace to land here that's safe enough to risk that kind of mission."

"So they're just gonna leave them here?" Vega asked, frowning, before turning to glance back towards the desiccated bodies of the researchers still lying on the forest floor where they had found them. "Leave them for the animals? No closure for their families?"

Tucking the last few samples into the crook of her arm, Shepard stood from the research lockers, turning around to face Vega again and handing the samples over to him, not sure what he wanted her to say to make the situation better. "All the original Normandy crew's families got were their dogtags," she finally answered, honestly. "You know war, Vega. You know what it's like. Sometimes that's the best you can do. A memento and 'I'm sorry'."

"Some do not even get that," Rahma put in, causing Vega to glance over his shoulder towards where she was waiting outside the shuttle, keeping watch with her gun pressed attentively to her chest. "Some only know their loved ones are gone when they do not come home for months on end. Sometimes there is no closure. It happened a lot on TuChanka."

"Yeah, but..." Vega's frown deepened at Shepard's candid reply, and he stared down at the plant samples in his hands, as if wondering if it was even worth bringing them back if they could not bring the scientists who had found them along with them. "I guess you're right," he finally answered, letting out a deep, disappointed sigh, before starting to tuck the last of the samples into his belt as well. "We could at least check to see if they're wearing identification, though. That would be better than nothing. At least... for their families' sake."

Shepard hesitated at this suggestion, pausing halfway through closing the lid of the sample container to consider the feasibility of Vega's proposition. She knew that searching the bodies for identification would add extra time to their mission, and that from what she could tell the sun was already dangerously close to setting over the jungle as it was. She also knew it would likely take much longer to find the researchers' identifiers than Vega might have anticipated, as parts of the explorers were strewn all over the clearing, making it impossible to know where to look first. Whatever had attacked the research crew could very have thrown their tags around while rooting through their supplies, or might have even run off with them, if it was a scavenger of some sort. Even so, Shepard could not help feeling a small sense of contentment knowing that Vega was still the same kind, compassionate person he had always been, even before the War, and that the horrors of battle and the everyday struggle of the next few years following it had not hardened him past the point of empathy. Closing the box the rest of the way, she turned away from the containment station, sliding out under the mangled shuttle door to stand once more in the jungle clearing, looking out over the desiccated
bodies of the research crew with a soft, solemn sigh.

"I'll start with the pilot and search the perimeter once I'm done," she told her crewmates, indicating towards the decapitated researcher with a jerk of her head. "Vega, you take the two on this side of the clearing. Rahma, you take the other two." Vega beamed gratefully at the assignment, turning to head over quickly towards the bodies he had been assigned, but Rahma only grunted in response before wandering aimlessly towards her two, seeming less opposed to the idea of rooting around in corpses than to the idea of wasting precious time to do so.

It took barely fifteen minutes to collect all the researchers' identification cards, a fact which made Shepard glad she had taken the time to do it. Once they had established that the IDs were being kept in the explorer's pouches and not around their necks, Shepard had gratefully abandoned her search for the pilot's disembodied head, instead heading back to reach in through the broken shuttle window and root around in his belt pouches. This proved no more pleasant than the search for his head had been, as the first few, most easily accessible pouches had proven to be empty, forcing her to lean in further to reach the rest of his belt. She tried hard to ignore the putrid smell of death filtering in through her mask as she rooted through his belt pouches, as well as the sick crack of the pilot's rotting bones as she balanced against his mangled black and purple arm. Finally managing to reach the pouch holding his identification card, she quickly retrieved it, ducking back out of the shuttle again to catch her breath, before turning on the pilot's holo-ID, curious as to what her unfortunate ward had looked like in life. The holo-ID flickered once, letting out a low, thoughtful buzz, before finally lighting up to display the pilot's statistics, credentials, and beaming, distressingly youthful face.

Shepard hesitated at the sight of the pilot, feeling a cold chill run through her at the sight of him. Whatever she had expected the headless man to look like, it had been nothing like this. She had expected an experienced man, perhaps someone into his forties or fifties, but this man was barely into his early twenties according to his ID. The idea that someone with so much life ahead of him had met such a brutal and early end was almost enough to make her stomach turn, but she knew too well from her time in the Alliance that tragedies like this happened all the time. Quickly pushing the thought from her mind, she instead turned the holo-ID off, tucking the card into the pouch at her belt before securing the snap, making sure the bag was safe against her hip.

Looking out over the clearing again, she noted that Vega and Rahma seemed to be having a much simpler time collecting their assigned bodies' holo-cards. Despite the fact that one of Rahma's corpses had had his leg torn off at the hip, his storage belt was still blessedly intact, making it easy for her to go in and find his card before handing it over to Shepard to stash with the others. Collecting all the identification cards together in her belt-pouch, Shepard double-checked them, making sure they were secure, before pulling her Avenger from its maglock and reaching into her ammo pouch to quickly swap out her used heat sink for a new one. Even though she had had barely any reason to fire her gun just yet, she wanted to make sure that everything was fresh before they started heading back into the jungle again. She knew they had been lucky up to that point, having not yet encountered any yahg, but she did not want to risk running into something sinister on the way back only to have her weapon overheat when she needed it most. Finishing up with her weapon, she jerked her head instead towards the darkening treeline, indicating for Vega and Rahma to follow along behind her as she started back into the thick jungle foliage, leaving the wreckage of the research vessel behind as they began the long journey back through the forest towards the designated pick-up spot.

The trek back through the jungle was much harder than it had been going in, making Shepard wonder just how many people had at one time attempted to brave the wilderness of Parnack and how many of them had ever made it out alive to tell the tale. The sun was taking much longer to set than she had initially anticipated, making her wonder if perhaps the jungle canopy had been playing tricks
on her all day, but she still did not want to risk letting her guard down in case she was reading the sky completely wrong, and the sunlight was about to disappear completely. The last thing she wanted was to dawdle around, thinking they had plenty of time to get back, only to be suddenly caught in the jungle when it became pitch-black and they could no longer see five feet in front of them to walk. No sooner had this chilling thought crossed her mind when her in-helmet headset suddenly gave a sharp whine and crackle, causing her to stop quickly in her tracks, letting her gun drop to her side again as she lifted a hand to stop her companions as well. Vega and Rahma paused at the indication to stop, still holding their guns at the ready in uneasy confusion, unsure what the problem was, watching as Shepard leaned into the comm, trying to better hear the transmission. She could hear a sharp whistle come in through her headset, and she gave her helmet a sharp tap, trying to get it to pick up the signal through the obstructive cluster of trees.

"Uhh, Commander?" Joker's voice suddenly crackled over her headset, his words fading in and out a bit as the comm signal tried to lock on.

"What is it, Joker?" Shepard asked, shortly, nervous for the news.

"Commander, it—it's David," Joker reported, sounding worried, causing Shepard's frown to deepen at his tone. "The little man is—he's barfing all over the place. I honestly don't know what happened, I-I-I didn't give him anything, and it was just—it was completely out of nowhere, like, there was no warning, I didn't even know it was gonna happen until—"

"Whoa, whoa, Joker, slow down," Shepard instructed, quickly, holding up her hands in an unseen calming gesture. "Listen, it's fine. It's nothing you did. David throws up all the time, it's…" Letting out a hefty sigh, she pressed a hand to her helmet, rubbing anxiously at her visor with the back of her hand as she tried to think of a reasonable way to explain it. "He can't… really handle food all that well. It's called cyclical vomiting syndrome. It's not abnormal, he's not sick, you just… have to deal with it as it comes."

"Yeah, well, he was sitting up here in the co-pilot's chair, drinking his formula, totally cool, when all of a sudden he just started spewing," Joker answered, sounding exasperated, though Shepard could hear a note a relief in his voice at the knowledge that it was not his fault. "You told me formula was fine for him, so it must've been something he ate earlier that just decided to come up now."

Shepard frowned at this statement, realizing that she knew exactly what had caused the issue. "Well, at least he kept it down for a little while this time," she sighed, resting her gun against her shoulder-gaurd. At this, Vega and Rahma exchanged knowing looks, before both diverted their gaze from Shepard, Vega becoming suddenly very interested in the landscape while Rahma turned her entire attention to cleaning her assault rifle. Shepard paused a moment, considering, trying to figure out what the best course of action would be until she had a chance to return to the Normandy. In the background of the comm connection she could hear David apologizing softly for the mess, sounding close to tears, while Joker and EDI tried to reassure him it was not his fault. "You told me formula was fine for him, so it must've been something he ate earlier that just decided to come up now."

"Hey, it's not a problem, Commander," Joker assured her, sincerely. "We love the little guy. Just hate to see him so sick all the time. I know how much that blows for a kid."

Shepard nodded, understanding, realizing for the first time just how much Joker likely identified with David's limitations. He had been a sickly child, himself, but he had overcome his disability to excel as the galaxy's most proficient pilot. It was a heartening story, and one she hoped brought as much hope to David in regards to his future as it did to her. Just then, the sound of rustling from behind her
caught her attention, pulling her away from her train of thought, causing her to turn sharply, aiming her gun, ready for whatever was about to jump out at the three of them from the dense foliage. Vega and Rahma turned at the sound as well, gripping their weapons tightly, Vega's feet planted firmly in the thick jungle dirt, unflinching, as he waited for the impending danger. An eerie silence followed this disruption, the jungle foliage growing quiet as the last ripples of movement shook themselves out of the massive fern-like leaves. Then, suddenly, one of the massive, deer-like creatures leapt out of the underbrush, letting out a loud, shrill, honking-like cry as it skirted around Shepard and her party, causing them all to take a step back as it bounded out of their midst again, causing the foliage to shake in frightened waves as it disappeared into the jungle forest once more.

"Weird-ass fauna," Shepard muttered, letting her gun drop back to her side again, before turning around to return her attention to the situation on the Normandy. "Joker, listen—" she started to say, but she was quickly interrupted by Vega tapping her on the shoulder, trying to get her attention for something in the other direction. She shrugged off his hand, a bit annoyed, before shaking her head and waving her free hand, indicating that she was busy. No sooner had she given this signal when she suddenly found herself lifted bodily off the forest floor, picked up easily by the shoulders by Rahma, who turned her around to face the opposite direction before setting her back down again, forcing her to pay attention. Shepard let out a perturbed huff at the ungentle handling, quickly moving to pull herself together again, before noticing both companions staring intently at something straight ahead. Still frowning at the interruption, she looked up towards what they were gaping at, only to have her heart sink down to her stomach as she realized abruptly what they had been trying to tell her. Her gaze moved slowly up towards the canopy, following the form of the colossus in front of them, only stopping when she reached the face of the creature that now stood towering over them, glowering angrily down at them in the thick, wild Parnack jungle.

Shepard's first thought when looking at the creature was that they had come face to face with a freakishly large yahg, but the longer she stared up into its grotesque face, the less convinced she became that this was one of the aliens she had come to Parnack expecting to find. Whereas a normal yahg stood close to eight feet in height, this one easily surpassed twelve, its head so high in the canopy that most of its face was blocked out by the dappled light of the blazing Parnack sun. Despite this, Shepard could still easily make out the trails of glistening saliva snaking from the corners of its tri-cut mouth, the gruesome liquid dripping from its bony, crescent-shaped chin onto the forest floor as it breathed, harsh and laborious, like a large dog that had just run a long stretch. There seemed to be something else strangely off about this yahg as well, and as Shepard continued staring at it, she realized that its head was oddly lumpy, misshapen, and disproportionately wide, and that its beady black spider eyes were spread almost randomly across its grotesque face – twelve of them, all blinking at unsystematic times, as if each one operated independently of one another, allowing the creature to look in twelve different directions at once.

How something that large had managed to sneak up on them was a wild mystery to Shepard, though she had to guess it probably travelled much more quietly in the trees than on the ground. Its massive, bull-like, demonesquely gnarled horns scraped the foliage as it breathed, causing the tree branches to rustle as the creature continued staring at them, the noise causing the hair on the back of her neck to stand fearfully on end. Dry, congealed blood was smeared across its massive, hanging stomach – red blood, clearly human – and its webbed ears and chin-spines were flared, vibrating in what was obviously an intimidation display. What startled her most about this creature, however, was that, in addition to the two large, muscular arms that yahg normally had, this one had two additional arms sprouting from its ribcage beneath the first set. The first set of arms was held poised, ready to strike, but the bony, protruding knuckles of the second set of arms dragged on the forest floor like a Neanderthal, something which only added to its already overwhelmingly animalistic, bloodthirsty look. Shepard realized after a moment that her mouth had fallen open in awe at the grotesque vision of this creature, her tongue growing dry as she leaned in to her in-ear comm again, clearing her
"Um, Joker," she whispered, her voice thin, almost strangled as she looked up again into the creature's snarling face.

"Yes, Commander?" Joker asked, his voice unchanged, oblivious.

"Could you tell Liara something for me?" Shepard asked, taking a cautious step back from the creature. As she did so, its snarling grew a bit louder, and she could hear the crunching of twigs and leaves beneath its feet as it shifted forward towards her and her companions.

"Uh… sure, I guess so," Joker answered, sounding a bit confused. "What do you want me to tell her?"

Shooting a quick glance towards her two companions, Shepard noted that Vega's rifle was shaking slightly in his grasp, but Rahma held her weapon perfectly still, unwavering, aiming assuredly at the monster that now towered above them. Wetting her lips, Shepard took a deep, shaky breath, before leaning in towards her in-ear comm once more. "Could you tell her… she got off easy?" she asked, taking another cautious step back, only to flinch as she felt her foot come down on a dry twig behind her, breaking in half under her weight and letting out a loud, heart-stopping SNAP.

That single sound seemed to be all the creature needed to set it off. No sooner had the noise reached its ears when the monster yahg suddenly loomed forward, its tri-cut mouth flying open to let loose a monstrous, howling roar, showing off no less than five rows of bloody, serrated teeth as noxious spit and old blood sprayed all over the ground party. The first three rows of the monster's teeth were stacked one directly behind the other, the way they would be in a shark's mouth, but the last two rows of razor-sharp teeth lined the interior of the creature's throat in a cylindrical, evenly-spaced pattern, like the maw of a hagfish. The creature's lower set of arms slamming against the jungle floor, causing the ground to shake beneath their feet, and Shepard had to brace herself to keep from losing her balance as the shockwave ran up her legs, making her helmet and teeth rattle in response. She squeezed off a few rounds into the creature's legs, but that only seemed to make it madder, and it shrieked in response, letting off a feral blast of biotic energy, knocking the ground party off their feet and ripping through the foliage of the lowest trees, shredding the leaves of the massive ferns that had once surrounded them. Scrambling to get back to her feet, Shepard shunted her weapon unceremoniously back into her maglock, grabbing hold of Vega and Rahma's arms and pulling them to their feet as well, dragging them a few steps behind her as she started to make her way into the underbrush.

"Fuck! It's got biotics!" Shepard shouted. "Run! Just fucking—! Run!"

The jungle was almost too thick to run through, but Shepard did not let that disrupt her stride, leaping over bushes she could not push through and ripping down leaves and branches she could not shove aside. She could hear her heart pounding heavily in her ears as she pushed her way through the jungle underbrush, running as fast as her legs could carry her in whatever direction she was headed, not knowing which way led back to the shuttle landing site but just wanting to get as far away from the creature as fast as she could. She could hear Rahma and Vega running right behind her, their panting heavy in her helmet comm, but even more loudly she could hear the sound of the creature gaining on the three of them, its muscular palms pounding against the forest floor like an enormous horse's hooves, tearing its way through the jungle foliage as it moved in to catch its helpless prey. She could hear the sound of branches cracking easily under its strength, and she turned around, running backwards, firing a hail of bullets into the vegetation. The creature howled in dissent at this, forcing its way through the canopy of trees, pushing two moss-choked trees aside as if they were nothing as it honed in on Shepard in the underbrush. Shepard could feel Vega grab her arm,
dragging her onward, deeper into the jungle, but she shouted wordlessly in protest, firing more
useless plasma bullets into the creature's massive chest.

"It's no good, Lola!" Vega shouted, giving her arm another pull. "Guns don't do anything! You have
to move or you're gonna die!"

"If I'm gonna die on this hellhole planet, I'm not going down without a fight!" Shepard shouted back,
firing off another round of bullets towards the creature. The monster roared, beating its chest, its
second set of arms dragging across the jungle floor, before it took another step towards Shepard,
reaching forward to grab her up. Shepard felt Vega give one last fruitless tug on her arm, before he
suddenly let go, letting out a short shout of what sounded like surprise as he did so. A moment later
Shepard could hear the sound of something heavy being dragged along the forest floor from
somewhere behind her, and she took a step back, not daring to look, keeping her gaze locked firmly
on the creature. Suddenly, she felt something new grab her arm, something with a grip much stronger
than Vega's, but the sensation lasted only a second before she was suddenly pulled from her feet as
well, dragged a few feet along the jungle floor before being unceremoniously dropped into what felt
like a large, dirt-floored hole.

It was dark in the hole, too dark for her to see, but she could just make out the outline of something
huge and black in the dwindling light coming in from the opening she had been pulled through.
Before she could see what the figure was, however, the light suddenly went out again as the hole
was closed, and she found herself sitting in startling near-darkness, the only thing breaking the
sudden silence the muffled sound of the misshapen creature roaring angrily from somewhere outside.
A huge BANG suddenly shook the foundation of the hole, causing small rocks and dust to filter
down from the ceiling of the enclosure, making Shepard nearly jump out of her skin as she reached
instinctively for her gun again. This sound was followed by another huge BANG as the creature tried
to get in again, but to no avail, as the hole – or whatever it was – held firm, sheltering them in
darkness. The monster mulled irately around the hole for a moment, its grunting and roaring audible
even through the thick walls of the warren, until eventually it seemed to give up the effort, deciding
the three of them as prey was not worth its time. The sound of its huffing and grunting began to grow
der fainter as it lumbered angrily away, until finally, after what felt like an eternity, nothing remained but
for blessed, darkened silence, the only sound breaking the precarious stillness the residual hammering
of Shepard's heartbeat in her ears.

It took Shepard a moment to realize that she had been holding her breath this entire time, and she
slowly let it out again in a thin, shaky stream, feeling her heart still pounding in her chest as she
blinked a few times, attempting to adjust her eyes to the dim light of wherever she now found herself.
The dirt burrow, or whatever it was, was much larger than she had initially realized, and it seemed to
be lit from a single source, a calmly crackling fireplace built into a large hole in the far, clay wall.
Despite the initial crudeness of its appearance, she soon realized that the fireplace was actually oddly
sophisticated, venting the smoke out of the den through an unseen chimney shaft, as if someone with
an architect's understanding had taken the time to dig the functional structure out from the clay of the
earth itself. As her eyes continued to adjust to the dimness of her surroundings, she began to
recognize other structures in the burrow, the familiar shapes of domestic furnishings starting to come
into sharper view as she looked around, still bewildered and confused as to what mysterious rabbit
hole she had been so unceremoniously dropped through. Coming a bit more to her senses, Shepard
quickly realized that she was still sitting on the floor, still too shocked by what had just occurred to
even get back to her feet just yet, and, pushing herself up off the ground again, she dusted herself off
distractedly, looking around in dazed confusion as she tried to figure out what had happened.

Vega was already standing a few paces away as she regained her feet, his hand pressed anxiously to
his gun, but as soon as he saw Shepard standing again, he quickly moved over to stand beside her,
his expression stiff as he stared at whatever was occupying the hole with the three of them. Rahma,
too, seemed overly wary of their mysterious saviour, shuffling over to stand beside Shepard as she slowly regained her lost composure, her clawed hand clutched tightly at her side as she stared at the looming fourth party, prepared to use her biotic abilities if needed. Shepard frowned as she gave herself another quick dusting off, checking her forearm guards to make sure neither of them had gotten cracked in the scuffle, before sliding two fingers into her belt-pouch to ensure she still had the researchers' ID cards. Satisfied nothing had gotten lost or broken, she quickly straightened her posture again, looking over towards the shadowy figure whose form had been the last thing she had seen before the door had closed on the monster outside.

As soon as her eyes came to rest on their rescuer, she instantly felt herself freeze up, her blood running cold as her stomach twisted, her heart giving a strangled squeeze in her chest at the sight of the familiar horned head and eight sunken, beady black eyes. She had anticipated something like this happening, but she was not prepared for it to happen so soon after their last life-or-death encounter, and she instinctively reached up towards her maglock where her Avenger would normally be, only to realize she had dropped it a few feet away on the floor when she had been dragged down into the warren. She glanced back towards her weapon, trying to decide how good her odds were in getting to it before she was attacked, but she had barely managed to take a single step back towards her gun before the yahg took a step forward towards her, straightening up to its full, massive height, its bulky outline illuminated in blood-orange from the glow from the clay-pit fireplace.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," the yahg warned her, coolly, causing Shepard to stop in her tracks, the knot in her stomach tightening even further at the almost offhanded counsel. The yahg stared at the three of them for a moment, his webbed ears quivering as he considered them, before he finally gave his ears a quick, seemingly involuntary backwards flick, almost as if he were batting away a bothersome gnat. "Drawing your weapons on your only ally out here in the jungle would be most unwise," the yahg enunciated, speaking to all three of them now, his leftmost eyes moving to Vega, followed by his rightmost, before the top four moved to Rahma, followed by the bottom four, causing both of them to instinctively recoil at the sight. "Not to mention… rude."

"You…" Shepard started to say, pointing to the creature, still trying to measure her fight or flight odds. She knew if she could just reach her gun, she might be able to fight past this yahg, but she still did not like her potential chances against the much larger creature outside. "You—you're a—"

"Yahg," the yahg answered, finishing her statement, seeming completely unfazed by her prevaricating. "Yes, I am a yahg." He spoke in a tempered, flowing bass, his tone seeming practiced, almost dramaturgical, and his ears gave another quivering flick as he stared at the three of them, blinking his eight sunken eyes a few times, thoughtfully. Then, seeming satisfied that he had observed all he needed to, he gave a deep, offhanded, almost bored-sounding grunt, before glancing back towards his rocky abode. "I know it's not much," he said, letting out a short, sharp sigh. "But it's sturdy, and it will keep you safe, particularly from predators. As long as you don't try to shoot me…" At this, he looked back towards the three of them again, pointedly, his cutting gaze coming to rest last of all on Shepard, who locked up at the acerbic stare, despite the fact that she had not yet dared take another step back towards her gun again. "The three of you are welcome to stay here as long as you like, I suppose… if you really want to," the yahg informed them, sounding indifferent to

"Night?" Vega repeated, his voice strangled, before quickly biting his tongue, as if he had not intended for his exclamation to be out loud in the first place.

The yahg seemed barely interested in Vega's exclamation of distress, taking a delayed moment to pointedly ignore him, before turning to look at him, appearing almost bored. "You're free to sleep here if you like, I suppose… if you really want to," the yahg informed them, sounding indifferent to
the idea. "There's only one bed of course, so the likelihood of you all sleeping here is doubtful, but… if you're very determined, I suppose you could try. Other than that, I don't have much to offer, since I rarely have guests here, but…" Waving a massive arm over the layout of his underground home, he gave another deep, burbling sigh, sounding almost like he was clearing his throat through the mouthpiece of an enormous tuba. "Please… feel free to make yourselves at home."
Shepard hesitated at the invitation, unsure if she trusted the yahg or not. While he had been civil with the three of them up to that point, almost to the point of apathy, she was not sure she trusted his base intentions. She felt uncomfortable without her gun, incomplete almost, as if she were missing an important part of her arm, and as soon as the yahg turned to start heading back towards the fireplace again, she quickly dove down, scooping up her Avenger off the floor, before hastily tucking it into her maglock, hoping the yahg had not heard the telltale sliding and clicking noises of the magnets rotating into place. Looking up towards their host, she hesitated again, expecting the yahg to turn around and object. However, he seemed either to have not heard the sound of the maglock or to have purposely ignored it, and so, taking another chance while his back was turned, Shepard leaned slightly into her in-helmet comm, attempting to link back up with the Normandy, but found she could hear nothing but the sound of static over the shot connection. "You can take off your helmets, by the way," the yahg informed them suddenly, causing Shepard to look up again, quickly, afraid he had caught her trying to communicate with the outside, but he seemed just as disinterested as ever before, his back still turned to the party. "We all breathe the same air here."

At this prompting, Shepard reached up towards her helmet, starting to unlatch it from her neck-guard, before suddenly stopping, realizing that she was not quite sure she could trust the word of a known predator. Waiting a moment to ensure the yahg would not turn around again, she quickly pulled up her omni-tool program, running a short atmospheric check, watching as the program trilled for a moment as it processed the surrounding air. Then, finally, it popped up with a reading confirming that the air was safe for oxygen-breathing life forms. Collapsing her omni-tool again, she unlatched her helmet, pulling it off, before shaking out her matted hair, sparing only a moment to try to smooth it down before tucking her helmet under her arm, looking up to await instructions from the yahg as to what she was supposed to do next.

The yahg, seeming satisfied with his unceremonious introduction, shuffled over towards the crackling fireplace, picking up the lid off the massive, bubbling teapot hanging on a hook over the blaze and peering inside, checking whatever was boiling there. He considered the contents for a moment, his ridged brow furrowing in deliberation, before he finally gave an unimpressed, offhanded sniff and dropped the lid back down again, clearly dissatisfied with the state of whatever it was inside the kettle. "Please, take a seat," he offered his guests, indicating a nearby table surrounded by what looked to be crudely-formed stumps or stools. It took Shepard a moment to realize that all the seats around the table were uniformly fashioned, meaning that someone had taken the time to make each and every one as misshapen and ugly as the next, and this yahg had then thought it charming to intentionally put these monstrosities in his house as decoration. "I don't mean to keep you standing around," the yahg added, taking a civil step forward, causing the travellers to grip their helmets tighter in response, all three resisting the knee-jerk reaction to reach for their guns. "You must be exhausted. Please, sit."

Shepard hesitated at the proposition, unsure if she wanted to let herself get too comfortable around this creature, but then, realizing that it would be better not to make him angry until she had a real plan of action, she began to move tentatively towards the arrangement, setting her helmet down on the table before pulling herself awkwardly into one of the offered seats. She watched as Rahma and Vega settled cautiously into the other seats situated around the uneven table, Vega trying to find room for his legs while Rahma tried to keep her hump from getting crushed up against the too-close wall. Watching them struggle, Shepard could not help but wonder who the table had been set up for, as she could not imagine a space too small to fit two humans and a krogan would be large enough to fit one or more yahg. "I'm not sure why you doubted my invitation to remove your helmets," the yahg suddenly spoke up again, causing Shepard to look up, startled at having been caught. "It seems
fatuous that I would have bothered saving you from danger if I only intended to suffocate you immediately afterward."

Shepard flushed bright red at the sensible argument, feeling the tips of her ears start to burn at having been called out, but quickly forced the blush back down again, clearing her throat instead. "Why did you save us, by the way?" she asked, hoping her curiosity would not prove to be the insult that turned his temperament. Vega looked up at her at the question, his eyes wide at her boldness, but she kept her expression impassive, polite, not allowing the yahg to see her squirm. She did not see a surface issue with asking such a pertinent question, considering the circumstances, but she also had little experience with yahg, and so could not be certain whether that would or would not upset his predatory sensibilities.

The yahg seemed less surprised by the question, as if he had fully expected her to ask it, and he let out another low, rolling, grunting noise, as if he were adding extra sound to his sighs in an effort to fill space. "Would you have preferred I not save you?" he asked, bluntly. "I could very easily deposit you all back outside… if it's really that much of an issue." Shepard instantly clenched her jaw at the straightforward answer, sitting up a bit straighter in her seat and pressing her hands flat on the table, trying hard to ignore the pointed look Rahma was giving her, as if she had known from the start that asking such a question would be a bad idea. Moving over to his misshapen cabinet, the yahg pulled down a small, clay jar full of black and purple leaves, considering the contents for a moment before giving them an offhanded sniff. Then, seeming satisfied with his find, he picked up a large wooden spoon from his counter, moving back over to the tea kettle and opening the lid again, before tipping a few of the leaves inside, watching them boil into the water for a moment before starting to stir the pot, meditatively.

Realizing the yahg was not going to say anything else on the matter of their rescue, Shepard glanced over towards her crew, unsure what she was supposed to do, before finally clearing her throat again, softly, hoping to get the yahg's attention. "We appreciate the offer of shelter, uh… sir… but unfortunately, we can't stay here overnight," she informed him, frankly, hoping he would respect her straightforwardness more than he took offense at her refusal of his hospitality. "We have to get back to our pickup point before it gets too late. There's no comm reception down here in your… house… and if we don't get back to the pickup point, they're going to think we died down here—"

"That's too bad," the yahg returned, insipidly, pulling his stirring spoon from the tea kettle to tap it against the side, getting rid of any stray drops still attached to the end. "So many people do die down here." Shepard stiffened at the ominous comment, wondering again if this yahg had trapped them down in this hole with the intent to kill them, but he made no move to intimidate them further, only bringing the stirring-spoon up to his mouth, testing the flavour of the tea, before muttering something and shaking his head, starting to stir the pot again. "Generally visitors dally around for too long, not realizing there's barely half an hour between low sun and nightfall," he went on, as if there had been no interruption. "The worst wildlife on Parnack comes out at night. That's when the prey animals are sleeping, and the predators can catch them off-guard. It's a coward's sport, really, but… they're only animals." Staring down into his teapot again, he gave it another few thoughtful stirs, seeming preoccupied with his task, before letting out another short, soft grunt. "I suppose we're all only animals, in a way," he added, musingly, more to himself than to his guests. "Doing what we must to survive."

Shepard frowned at the bizarre addendum, before shaking her head, deciding it would be best not to draw attention to it. "Speaking of which—what was that thing?" she asked, attempting to change the subject, still trying hard to get comfortable in the too-high chair. The seat was hard and lumpy, likely made out of wood or clay, but it still felt good to rest her tired legs after her mad dash through the thick jungle.
"What thing?" the yahg asked, turning to glance back at them from the fireplace again, giving his ears a short flick as he did so.

"That… thing," Shepard repeated, unsure how else to say it, jerking her thumb over her shoulder. "That big thing. The thing that was chasing us."

"Oh, that," the yahg returned, seeming only half-interested as he shuffled away from the hearth again, holding the grip of the massive teakettle in one meaty hand. "Yes. That. That was a yaarex. A brutish sub-species of the yahg. Totally wild. They're something of a… a distantly related super-yahg, I suppose you might call them. Like gorillas would be to humans." Turning to face his visitors then, the yahg held up the teakettle, causing the three of them to lean back in their seats, not wanting to be splashed with any stray hot liquid. "Tea?" he asked, pointing to the kettle with his free hand.

"Uhh… sure," Shepard answered, not wanting to offend him.

The yahg nodded in satisfaction at her answer, crossing back to his cabinet, before pulling out three matching black mugs and setting them down on the table in front of his guests. The mugs looked reasonably sized in his large hands, but as he brought them closer, it did not take long to realize that each one was nearly the size of Shepard's head. Still, she bit her lip, saying nothing, only watching in uneasy anticipation as he poured them each a nearly-full cup, sliding the steaming liquid to each of them as he finished filling the mug. Once done pouring tea for his guests, the yahg turned away from the table again, moving to the cabinet to fetch himself a mug and pouring some tea for himself. Shepard brought her mug in closer, wincing as she looked down into the murky black liquid, before blowing on the steaming cup, hoping to buy time without actually having to drink the mystery brew. The tea smelled earthy, like topsoil, the scent so overwhelmingly strong that she could barely stand to keep it near her without tearing up at the intensity, and she slowly pushed it a few inches away again, just far enough to give the illusion that she still intended to drink it.

"I've never heard of a yaarex before," Shepard commented, returning to the original conversation, causing the yahg to glance back at her again in interest as he finished pouring his own cup of tea. She hoped that by distracting the yahg with discourse she might take his mind off attacking them, if that was his intent, but she also found herself admittedly curious about the strange and frightening fauna of Parnack. She had never really given the planet any sort of thought before, which she realized now was likely foolish on her part, as any world that served as a homeworld to an intelligent lifeform was probably one best kept on the radar, if only for safety's sake.

"Some people claim that the yaarex are a new species to Parnack," the yahg answered, informatively, turning around to face Shepard again and resting the base of his mug against the rough palm of his opposite paw. "Relatively speaking. They've been here for hundreds of years, of course, but since the planet is millions of years old…" Trailing off, he gave a small shrug, taking a sip of his pitch-black tea, before looking down into the mug in his palm and frowning, seeming a bit perturbed by the taste. "Bitter," he commented, offhandedly, before turning back to the cabinet again, this time pulling down a yellowed cylinder of liquid that seemed too watery to be jam and too thick to be juice. Setting his tea down on the counter, he unscrewed the lid from the flavouring container, carefully tipping the liquid into his tea and watching as a dribbling of whatever it was trickled down into the massive mug. Finished adding the mystery liquid to his tea, he then turned back towards his guests at the table, picking up the same large spoon he had used before and holding both objects up for the three of them to see.

"Would any of you like some calak plant extract in your tea?" he asked, courteously. "It's quite good once you get past the initial flat taste. Quite sweet at the back of your tongue. Just have to avoid it at the front." Then, before Shepard had a chance to protest, he dropped the soupy dollop unceremoniously into her mug, stirring it in with a cheerful smile as he watched it dissolve into the
tea. Seeing this, Vega and Rahma quickly pulled their mugs in towards themselves, protecting them from being given any extra flavouring, and, in return, the yahg gave a faint, understanding grunt, before turning away from the table again, screwing the lid back onto the cylinder and returning the extract to the cabinet. Now having finished flavouring their tea, the yahg picked his own mug up from the counter again, making his way back towards his large fireside chair and settling down in it with a hefty sigh. Setting his tea aside on his armrest, he stuck the spoon he had used for the calak into his mouth, licking off what extract still remained with a faint slobbering sound, and Shepard could barely keep from making a face as she watched him, wondering how often – if ever – he cleaned the spoon he had just used to stir her drink.

Finishing licking off the last of the calak from the spoon, the yahg wet his lips, cleaning the last traces from the serrated exterior of his tri-cut mouth, and Shepard had to look down intently at her own mug of tea to stop herself from staring. His tongue was long, black, and tapered, and seemed to have the same tiny hooks on its surface as a cat's tongue – a precautionary evolution, she supposed, to keep the yahg from hurting their tongues against their own sharp teeth. "Nobody is quite sure where the yaarex came from originally," the yahg finally spoke again, returning to the previous conversation, breaking the agonizing silence. "There's been no real scientific conclusion as yet on whether they were the result of a terrible mutation somewhere along the line that breeding has blessedly exacerbated over several years of natural evolution… or a horrific experiment that was dropped off on our planet when the ones who made them realized they couldn't control them. All we know for certain is that they came from us, not the other way around."

Taking another tentative sip of his black, murky tea, he clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, considering the taste, before giving another deep, dissatisfied grunt. "Cold," he muttered, perturbed, making Shepard wonder just how hot it had to be to satisfy him, as her own drink was still quite warm to the touch. "Regardless – they've been here since before my time, the yaarex. They've been here since before any of our times. They're a staple around here, more or less. But that doesn't mean we like them." Having said this, the yahg paused, considering, giving his ears another subconscious flick as he tried to think if there was anything else about the yaarex he had neglected to say. Then, seeming satisfied that he had explained all on the matter he needed to, he took another sip of his tea, pensive, staring intently into the fireplace, before suddenly seeming to realize something and setting his tea aside once more. "I'm afraid I haven't asked your names," he told his three visitors, glancing back at them over the top of his steaming mug sitting on the low side table. "How rude of me. What should I call you?"

Shepard hesitated at the question, unsure how best to respond. She knew it would likely be unwise to give this alien their real names, but the thought was quickly pushed aside as she realized that it would probably not make any real difference if he knew them or not. Yahg were pre-spaceflight, so she figured the possibility of this yahg using his knowledge of their identities to chase after them after they left his planet were slim to none. "I'm Shepard," she finally answered, indicating herself, before moving on to her teammates in turn. "This is Vega, and this is Rahma."

"Shepard?" the yahg asked, seeming suddenly intrigued, his webbed ears vibrating as he perked up a bit at the mention of her name. "Any connection to Commander Shepard, the fabled war hero?"

Shepard frowned in response, gripping her tea mug tighter between her hands as she tried hard not to let her discomfort show too plainly at the pointed question. She had not expected word of her accomplishments to have reached the residents of Parnack – they had been mostly unaffected by the Reaper War, as far as she knew, so she could think of no reason for any of them to have specifically sought out information concerning her. "None that I know of," she finally answered, cagily, before pursing her lips, making it clear she had nothing more to say on the subject.

The yahg grunted at the short return, seeming untroubled by her coldness. "Well. It's good to meet
you, Shepard," he answered, simply, before turning to look at her other two companions. "And you, Vega… and Rahma. My name is Mov. It's good to meet all of you, even if it is under… such unusual circumstances."

Shepard's expression instantly cleared at this, and she hesitated, her fingers itching around the edges of her massive mug, unsure how to ask him about his name without offending him. "Your name is Mowve?" she finally asked, forgoing her attempt at delicacy. "As in—Mauve? The colour mauve?"

Mov gave a heavy, weary sigh at this, but nodded his massive head in response, regardless. "Yes," he said, his tone sounding strained, as if he were too used to entertaining this question. "Or, well… not exactly like the colour. M-O-V. But close enough that people always assume that's what I was named for. My mother didn't know what the word meant when she gave the name to me, or so it goes. She merely liked that it was a short, effective name, and she was rather fond of that hard 'o' sound." Giving a short, deep chuckle at this, he flicked his ears back once, before nodding pensively again, more to himself than to Shepard, hardly seeming to notice that Vega had gotten out of his seat during the course of the conversation and was starting to curiously explore the compact house. "I have a brother named Kovak and a sister named Kota, so I suppose I can believe her on that," Mov added then, an almost conspiratorial sort of humour in his black eyes as he said it. "Kovak and Kota are my older siblings. I'm, of course, the baby of the family." Shepard frowned even deeper at this addition, finding it difficult to parse the idea that this nearly eight-foot-tall, likely half-ton-plus alien could be considered the baby of anything, but she was spared having to respond as Mov quickly cleared his throat, preparing to go on.

"The yahg are very adept at picking up new languages," Mov explained, this time glancing back towards Shepard as he spoke. "I myself know thirty-four. My mother knew sixteen languages, but Sol-English just happened to be one of the ones she never quite got the hang of." Then, sipping at his tea again, Mov fell silent, allowing for a moment of thought to hang heavy, in the small, neat hovel, hardly seeming to notice as the two visitors still sitting at the table exchanged anxious glances behind him.

"If you don't mind me asking," Shepard finally spoke up again, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "Your Sol-English is… impeccable. Have there been human visitors to your planet before now?"

"Oh, yes," Mov answered, giving a slow, knowing nod of his broad, horned head. "Absolutely. Dozens. Most of them crash-land here on accident and are quickly eaten by the yaarex, or are brutalized by the less socialized of my kind. Not many come here voluntarily like you three." Taking another sip of tea, he hummed musingly to himself, staring intently into the fireplace as his webbed ears gave another meditative quiver. "I suppose that makes the three of you either very foolhardy or very brave," he added, almost as an afterthought. "Or perhaps you have another, more secretive ulterior motive I'm not yet aware of. It wouldn't be the first time."

Shepard frowned at this unusual addendum, exchanging a quick, curious glance with Rahma before turning her attention back to Mov again, intrigued. "What do you mean, not the first time?" she asked.

"I mean it's not the first time someone has come to Parnack claiming one motivation when they really had another," Mov repeated, bluntly, turning to look at the two of them in almost irritated candour. Then, seeming satisfied that this explanation was all he needed to give, he turned back towards the fireplace again, taking another sip of his tea as he stared pensively into the flames.

"Hey, cool," Vega's voice suddenly piped up from across the tiny house, causing both Shepard and Mov to turn at the sound, only to realize that he was holding up what looked to be a very old, hardcover comic book. A wide, pleased grin lit up his face as he cracked the book open, flipping the
pages, before starting to skim over the colourful panels, scanning his armoured fingers eagerly down the glossy folios as he read. "I love the X-Men!" he added, excitedly, pointing to one of the panels. "And this one has Beast in it! He's the bomb."

No sooner had the words left Vega's lips when Mov suddenly gave a massive roar, turning away from his peaceful fireplace to lunge towards Vega across the room, using one muscular arm to springboard himself over the floor before quickly snatching the worn comic away from Vega's hands. The webbed spines at his jaw flared out, vibrating defensively as he held it protectively against his chest, and Vega quickly reached for his weapon in response, drawing it and pointing it at the yahg. Shepard and Rahma were swift to repeat the motion from their positions across the room, but Mov only clutched the book even tighter, protecting it from Vega's grasp, seeming to not even care that he now had three guns pointed at his head. "Don't touch that!" he bellowed, snarling at Vega. Then, after a moment, his defensive spines began to settle down again, and he turned, placing the book carefully back on the shelf, before taking the time to make absolute sure it was tucked as neatly into place as it had been before it had been disturbed. Then, once the book was safe again, Mov gave a heavy, weary sigh, turning away from his bookshelf again, before lumbering back towards his chair and dropping himself heavily down into it, picking up his mug and taking a long, settling draft of tea.

After a moment of awkward silence, broken only by the faint slurping sound of Mov sipping his tea, he finally set his mug down on the side-table again, folding his clawed hands over his chest and taking a moment of meditation. Then, looking over towards his guests again, he paused, an expression of loath world-weariness on his grizzled features. "I apologize if my behaviour startled you," he finally said, glancing pointedly towards Vega again. Vega still held his gun at the ready, his resolve wavering only slightly at the apology as he stared at the yahg with wide, wary eyes. "But you must understand how difficult it is to get anything of any intellectual value on Parnack. The majority of the yahg… they're a warring race. Brutish. Unsophisticated. Ever since being barred from Council Space – due to their own barbarous actions, might I add – they have no interest in anything beyond that which they have already managed to figure out for themselves." Sneering a bit at the thought of the incompetence of the others of his species, Mov stared back towards the clay firepit again, his gnarled, toothy lip curling as he let out a low, buzzing hum. "They don't take the power of suggestion kindly," he added, nearly spitting out the words as he said them. "They prefer to discover, rather than be taught. So whenever a foreign ship crash-lands on Parnack, the yahg who find it almost always destroy everything in it without a second thought as to its potential scholastic significance."

His brow furrowing over his eight black eyes again, he paused again, thoughtfully, before letting out a deep, sharp grunt, considering his explanation. "That's why I chose to live out here," he told his visitors, shrugging a bit as he took a deep breath in, causing his hands to move forward with his ribcage before falling again as he let his breath out once more. "Away from civilization. It serves me better in my efforts to find educational materials from visiting starships, you see. Whenever an exploration vessel lands on Parnack, they never land in the populated areas, oh no. They know better than to try to interact with the yahg directly. When people come to Parnack, it's generally to study the wildlife… and, relatedly, when they crash, it's usually out here in the jungle." Pausing again, Mov stared over at the line of books on the shelf for another moment longer, before turning to glance back at his three visitors again. "That's what I was doing in the forest this evening," he told them, almost conversationally. "Searching for the most recent reported crash site. I have exterior monitors set up that tell me whenever ships crash within a fifteen-mile radius of my home, you see. I've had to restrict myself to that tight radius, unfortunately… attempting to travel any further than that alone in the jungle would be suicide."

"The research ship crash site, you mean?" Shepard asked, surprised.
Mov hesitated a moment at her question, thinking back, his ears giving another few distracted flicks as he did so. "...No," he finally answered, slowly. "No, I already found that one. That was days ago. This one was smaller. It seemed like a drop-off vehicle more than a research vessel, really. But when I got to the place where my monitor said it would be, it was gone." Frowning again, he shook his head, turning to look back towards the fireplace once more. "Bizarre," he added, sounding disappointed. "Most unfortunate. An entire day's journey, wasted."

Shepard instantly perked up at the remark about the vanishing drop-off vehicle, feeling her whole body stiffen with anticipation. "Do you remember where the spot was on your monitor?" she asked, hopefully.

Mov let out another soft, buzzing hum, as if the strange sound helped him gather his thoughts, before finally shaking his head and glancing over his shoulder towards the far corner of his abode, where a jumble of dim-faced electronic panels sat whirring quietly, so quietly that Shepard had not even noticed them up to that point. "My monitor keeps a record, but... it's so much trouble to check it," he answered, sounding suddenly much more tired than he had only moments earlier. "Perhaps later, once I've had a chance to rest. It was a long journey coming back, you know. I'm not as young as I used to be." Shepard frowned at the brushoff, disappointed, but kept her resolve firm, determined to come back to the subject in a little while, perhaps when the yahg was better warmed up to the three of them. She knew that the vanishing shuttle he was referring to had to be the Kodiak, which had likely pinged on his crash radar when it had dropped them off several hours ago, and if he had coordinates to the exact location where Cortez had left them, that meant he might be able to help them get back to the pick-up site through the dark, treacherous jungle.

"Why don't people try to interact with the yahg directly when they come here?" Vega suddenly asked, frowning a bit, causing both Shepard and Mov to look up at him in surprise. "Wouldn't that be more beneficial to studies of Parnack?"

Mov hesitated at his question, as if trying to determine for a moment if he were being serious or not. Then, realizing he was being sincere, the yahg gave a soft, pointed clearing of his throat, before looking back over towards his books again. "The yahg see alien interference as a threat," Mov informed Vega, solemnly. "Ever since the salarians started trying to uplift other species, the yahg have been on high alert in regards to trespassers to our planet. They have a tendency to become... uncivilized, if they feel their way of life has the potential to be threatened."

"I remember seeing some yahg on Sur'Kesh," Shepard agreed, nodding along, attentively.

Mov paused at her comment, turning to look at her, his gaze penetrating and pensive, and for a moment he sat in odd, thoughtful silence, the only movement his webbed ears giving a few short, preoccupied flicks. "Yes..." he finally answered, slowly. "That did happen, I suppose." Then, turning his attention away from her again, he frowned down into the fireplace, seeming to be trying to remember where he had been before she had cut him off so rudely. "Most of the yahg are opposed to uplifting," he finally went on, matter-of-factly, returning quickly to the subject at hand. "They think it's cheap. Dishonest. They reject all discoveries made by lifeforms outside of yahg societies. As a result, what few enlightening alien specimens I do manage to salvage are precious to me. You understand." Turning around in his chair again, he pointed towards the display of books, raising the ridges of his brows above his top set of eyes and puffing himself up faintly in pride, his webbed ears giving another flick as he showcased his impressive collection.

"Those are the result of several years of painstaking collecting," he told them. "A majority of them, including the colourful one your friend Vega was just looking at, I got from the ship of a human collector of rare and unusual oddities. He kept them in a display case in his private quarters. The oldest of them has to be at least three hundred years old." Looking back over at Shepard again, he
picked up his mug, before clearing his throat, faintly. "You're welcome to look at them," he told her, giving a short nod of his head in the direction of the bookshelf. "Just as long as you don't touch anything. They're fragile enough as it is. I don't want them falling apart on me." Pausing here, he lifted his tea-mug towards his tri-cut mouth again, effectively hiding the lower half of his face with it, before his beetle-black eyes shifted back to Vega once more, trapping him with a cold, glistening stare. "If they did happen to fall apart, that would be… unfortunate," he added, his voice a slow, meditative rumble now. "For everyone involved." Vega shifted uncomfortably at this telling comment, stashing his gun back at his belt, but Shepard quickly pushed her mug of tea away from her, glad to have an excuse not to drink it, before sliding out of her chair to move over to the shelf of books. Leaning in, she began to inspect the neatly-arranged spines, noting with some interest that all of the books were of differing sizes, some of them short and slim, others tall and thick, and while some of the titles were still readable, others had been rubbed off over time, making the books almost unidentifiable.

As she combed the shelf, admiring the ancient books, her eyes were quickly drawn to one title in particular, and she instinctively gave a soft, sharp intake of breath as she realized it was an old dusty copy of Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*. "You've got an old Bradbury in here," she commented, reaching forward to touch the mid-sized book, before quickly remembering the outburst that Vega handling the X-Men volume had prompted and retrieving her hand again. The book was bound in peeling red leather, with most of its gold-embossed title rubbed off along the spine, and from the yellowing visible on the exterior of the pages, she figured it had to be at least two hundred years old. "My son loves old science fiction," she added, turning to look back at Mov again, hoping to distract from the fact that she had almost handled the fragile tome. "That's the only reason I know it. I'm not much of a reader, myself. At least… not of that kind of stuff."

"Oh, you've got a son?" Mov asked, sipping idly at his tea, seeming wholly content not to move from his seat. "What's his name?"

"David," Shepard answered, quickly, unable to help wondering if she had already said too much. She had no idea what this yahg's interest in her son was, but she figured with David back on the Normandy, he was at least safe from harm by proximity alone. "He just turned three. He doesn't know how to read yet, but… he loves to be read to."

"David," Mov mused, nodding along. "Well, there are worse names for a child, I suppose."

"Like Mauve, you mean?" Shepard returned, deadpan, barely missing a beat.

At this, Mov choked, nearly spitting out his tea, before quickly looking up at Shepard again, his ear- and chin-spines flared and vibrating, his eight black eyes wide, as if he could not believe what he had just heard. Then, after what seemed like an eternity, he let out a deep, assenting chuckle, giving a nod of his large, horned head and turning to look back at the fireplace again. "Touché," he answered, honestly, flicking his ears in surprised amusement. "Very bold. I like you, Shepard."

"Thanks," Shepard answered, flatty, unmoved by his approval. Moving back across the tiny house, she stood beneath the opening she and her crewmates had been originally pulled down through, observing the nearly-perfect circular shape carved out of the stone. It was so well camouflaged that it could easily have been mistaken for part of the wall, and she figured it probably blended in just as well from the other side, a precautionary measure to keep passing predators from suspecting anyone lived there. Thinking about this, she quickly realized that it being so well-hidden also provided another, rather more glaring problem – if Mov were to kill them down here in this hole, or otherwise try to keep them prisoner, then even a search party sent from the Normandy might not be able to find them so well hidden underground. "So do you think you might be able to pull up those coordinates for us?" Shepard asked, tired of beating around the bush, turning away from the door again to cross
back to the table where Vega and Rahma were still sitting, shifting uncomfortably in their seats.

Mov sucked his teeth for a moment, considering the bold question. "Hm," he finally answered, giving his ears another thoughtful flick. "Perhaps." Picking up his tea again, he took another long, deliberate draft, forcing them to wait for him to finish before receiving the rest of his answer. Then, finished with his drink of tea, he let out a soft, satisfied sigh, tilting the mug to inspect the last dregs still clingning to the bottom, before deciding they were not worth fooling with and setting it aside on his chairside table again. "But first... you have to do something for me."

Shepard bristled at the inevitable catch, feeling her teeth clench and her hands curl subconsciously into fists in front of her on the lumpy table. Mov seemed to notice this reaction as well, as his bottom four eyes flicked down to her hands before turning back up to her face again, glinting wickedly in the firelight as he watched her, as if enjoying the turmoil she was trying so hard to keep from showing all over her face. "What do I need to do?" Shepard asked, trying her hardest to keep her tone civil, though everyone in the room could tell she was feeling anything but.

Mov paused, staring at Shepard another moment longer, seeming to be considering the possibilities of his request. Then, finally, he grunted again, the sound seeming an almost unconscious reaction at that point, before his black eyes slid away from Shepard to settle on the crackling fire cove. "Allow me to join your crew," he told her, simply, his tone incredibly blasé, as if he were asking to have something different for that night's supper.

Shepard instantly blanched at his appeal, her hands and teeth unclenching immediately as the shock of the demand hit her like a ten-ton weight. "What?" she insisted, sharply, hardly caring to keep her tone polite, hoping she had heard him incorrectly even though she knew she had not.

"Your crew," Mov repeated, unaffected, turning to look at her again. "On your spaceship, where you live. Take me aboard, let me join your crew, and I'll help you out."

"I... I can't do that," Shepard told him, shaking her head, quickly. "I'm sorry. I'm not comfortable letting people I just met join my crew." Having said this, she pursed her lips, pointedly not looking at Vega or Rahma, hoping they knew well enough at this point not to say anything about her hypocrisy. Both seemed to receive the message loud and clear, as neither one said anything in response, merely sitting in wary silence as Shepard faced off with the yahg.

Mov seemed less convinced by her resolve, his ridged expression slowly folding into a suspicious, censorious frown, before he gave off another deep, rolling, rumbling sound, low enough that Shepard could see the surface of the tea in their still-full mugs begin to ripple faintly in response. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of disapproving bass, Mov turned away from the three of them again, staring indignantly into the fireplace and taking in a deep breath, before letting it out in a long, drawn-out sigh. "Then I suppose I can't help you find your disappearing crash site," he told them, matter-of-factly. "I'm simply... not comfortable guiding people I just met through the jungle. Especially at this time of night."

Shepard swore inwardly at the smarmy retort, knowing full well she should have expected something petty like this from Mov. He had given them nothing but trouble so far, so she had no idea why she had expected him to change now. "Listen, it's not you," she told him, trying to be reasonable despite her frustration. "I just don't have the resources to take on any new crew members at this time. We're already spread thin enough as it is – in fact, the only reason I'm here at all was because I could barely afford to support the crew I have—"

"You said you needed to get off Parnack tonight," Mov cut over her explanation, bluntly, turning to look over at her again with piercing, sunken eyes. "Either you do this for me, or I don't help you. There's no more discussion to be done on the matter. Take my offer, or leave it."

Turning his gaze to
the firepit again, he settled down lower into his lumpy chair, the bony brow over one set of eyes arching ever so slightly in pedantic thought. "If you leave it, you're still welcome to stay here," he added, as an important afterthought. "I'm not going to go back on my original offer. And whenever morning comes, you're welcome to take your chances again in the jungle on your own. But without me, you'll never get out of here alive at night." Having said this, his ears gave another thoughtful flick, and he paused, considering the flickering flames, before turning to look back at Shepard again, much more pointedly this time. "That's all there is to it," he told her, frankly. "...Commander Shepard."

Shepard glowered at this last comment, feeling her hackles rise sharply at the way he said her name, as if he had known much more about her all along than he had let on to this point. If he had recognized her as Commander Shepard early on despite her claims to the contrary, then that meant he knew about the Normandy, and though it made sense that anyone who followed her career closely enough to be able to recognize her three years after the War would want to see her famous ship, it also made her extremely nervous that this yahg knew so much about her. Being familiar with her ship meant that he might also be familiar with her crew, or at least the ones from before the War, which also meant he had an idea of who was waiting on board for Shepard's return. She knew that several untrained, unarmed members of her crew would make for easy targets for a yahg, including her own son, and she found herself cursing her eager mouth, wishing she had simply told Mov his book collection was nice without revealing anything about her personal life. Now that she had said it, however, it was too late to take it back, as yahg had excellent memories so the possibility of him forgetting she had mentioned David at all was slim to none. It seemed her only option now was to do whatever she could to protect her son, which at the moment meant taking every measure to prevent this eight-foot eviscerater from setting foot anywhere near her ship.

"Is this why you rescued us in the first place?" Shepard asked, testily, now unsure if she felt more frustrated with the intentionally futile back and forth or angry at having been deceived by this yahg up to this point. "So you could blackmail me into letting you on board my ship?"

"'Blackmail' is such an ugly word," Mov answered, cool as ever, his expression unchanging as he looked back into the fire again. "But to answer your question frankly – no. I saved you because I was, quite honestly, bored. Plus, I was tired of seeing the yaarex kill travellers… especially right on my doorstep." Making a face then, he scrunched up his flat, high-perched nose, the jagged corners of his tri-cut mouth pursing in censorious thought. "Messy," he muttered, disapprovingly, more to himself than to them. Then, returning to his train of thought, he cleared his throat, raising his ridged brows, before looking back over at them again, giving them his full attention. "I never intended to harm you, if that was your question," he told Shepard, candidly. "That would be pointless, after I went to all the trouble to save you. But on the same note, I'm not about to risk my neck out there against the yaarex again unless there's something in it for me in return. You must understand where I'm coming from… a pragmatic woman like you."

"He's got a point," Vega observed, causing both Shepard and Rahma to turn to look at him, a bit bewildered. Vega shrugged at their reactions, seeming unaffected, before leaning in a bit closer to the two of them and lowering his voice to speak more confidentially. "Besides, I don't think we have much of a choice," he added, matter-of-factly. "He's the only one out of any of us who knows anything about this planet. Plus he's been to the pickup site, so he knows the way without having to guess. Without his help, we could be wandering around in the jungle for hours."

"Commander no," Rahma countered sharply, leaning in and speaking in a low, anxious hiss. "We cannot allow this creature to join our crew. He is a yahg! They are dangerous and unpredictable. How do we know he will not attack us once he is on board?" Glancing up towards Mov again, she paused, anxious, expecting him to have heard and object, but he seemed to be ignoring the three of them completely, staring intently into the fire cove. "We do not know his true motivations for
wanting to join your crew," Rahma went on, speaking even lower than before, turning her attention back to Shepard again. "All we know is what he claims, though he could very well be lying to you simply to falsely gain your trust. You do not know him nearly well enough for him to be allowed on board!"

Shepard glanced up at Rahma at this last remark, tempted to comment on the irony of her objection, but decided it would benefit no one to bring up technicalities at the moment, no matter how glaring. "Vega's right," she finally decided, hating the words even as they were coming out of her mouth. "Without Mov's help, we'll never make it back to the Normandy. I don't like it any more than you do, but..." Letting out a deep, regretful sigh, she frowned, glancing over towards Mov still sitting comfortably in his fireside chair. "We're just going to have to hope for the best and trust he won't turn on us once he's on board," she said. Sitting up straighter in her chair, she cleared her throat, turning to look over towards Mov again, still silently trying to convince herself she was doing the right thing. "Mov—" she started to say, but found herself quickly cut off again.

"You're taking me up on my offer," Mov answered, simply, still sitting restfully in his chair as he spoke. "You've decided to trust me for the time being. Good. We should get going then." Shepard frowned at his nonchalant response, feeling her stomach turn a flip. She could not help wondering just how long he had been listening in on their conversation, and how much of it he had heard, but she did not have time to get her answer as, pushing himself up out of his chair with a deep, tired-sounding grunt, Mov shuffled across the den towards the machines in the far corner, pulling up a holo-keypad on one of them and starting to input commands into the console. The scanner gave a soft, drawn-out beep in response, before projecting a blue screen marked with a flashing white light, the clock in the lower corner showing the time it had been recorded on the radar. Mov nodded approvingly, picking up his omni-tool sensor from beside the machine and sliding it onto the back of his meaty hand, before matching it up to the sensor on his machine, uploading the corresponding data. The machine gave another short, soft beep as the information finished transferring, before Mov turned away from it again, giving it one last, almost subconscious pat on its dimly-lit face, as if assuring a beloved pet he would return from a day at the office.

Shepard watched, captivated, as the yahg moved almost reluctantly between the familiar fixtures of his house, as if he were making one last, melancholy sweep of the life he was about to leave behind. It seemed odd to her to see such apparent sentimentality in a creature as vicious as a yahg, but she figured she had likely let her previous experiences warp her perception of the species, and she could not help feeling a bit ashamed by her knee-jerk stereotyping. Anyone would feel sad with the knowledge that they were about to leave behind the only life they knew for something as yet unknown, even someone as alien as Mov. Crossing over to his shelf of books, Mov knelt down, opening a pair of cabinet doors below the shelf, before pulling out a large, leather-looking knapsack from the cupboard. Then, setting the rucksack on the floor of the den, he began to remove the books from the shelf, stacking them neatly inside the pack as slowly and carefully as if he were dealing with sugar-spun glass. Shepard huffed at the sluggish process, glancing back towards the door of the den, anxious about the amount of time this was taking, but decided it was not worth saying anything for fear of their alien guide taking offense and backing out of his part of the bargain again.

Once the books were neatly stashed, Mov tied up the rucksack securely, making sure the strings were double-knotted and the flap was safely fortified. Then, sliding the pack carefully onto his back, he began across the floor of his house again, making his way over to a large, dusty metal box sitting in a corner of his shack. Shepard wondered if perhaps this box was where Mov kept his sentimental keepsakes, the things he wanted to keep best protected and would miss the most once he was gone, exploring the galaxy with her crew, but the feeling of romanticism was quickly forced from her mind as he pushed open the box lid, reaching inside, only to pull out an enormous, well-loved semi-automatic rifle, half Shepard's height and almost half her width as well. Popping the empty heat sink out of the massive gun, Mov let it roll away across the floor, unattended, before grabbing a handful
of fresh sinks from the bottom of the box and shoving them into his side pouch pockets. Pushing a fresh sink into the barrel of the gun, he listened as the weapon whined to life, before slinging the well-worn strap over his colossal shoulder and turning to look back at Shepard and her bewildered crew again.

"Well, let's get going, then," he repeated, offhandedly, as if speaking about a casual trip to the cinema. "It's not getting any lighter outside." Then, patting the massive gun now hanging at his side, he indicated with a jerk of his huge head towards the door of the warren. "Might as well get this over with."
The jungle was pitch black as Mov poked his head out through the circular doorway of his underground abode, taking a quick look around for any signs of predators lurking nearby. His webbed ears quivered with anticipation as he listened to the sounds of the forest around him, poised, motionless, as if waiting for something, though Shepard could not imagine what. After a moment of contemplation, Mov let out a low, soft rumble, slitting his eyes, before ducking back down into the hole again and indicating for Shepard and her crew to follow his lead. Then, climbing up into the forest again, he disappeared out of the hole and into the night. Shepard was next to climb the makeshift ladder into the fearsome outdoors, and though she could not see Vega or Rahma following her out of the hole, she could hear the sounds of their breathing through the comm inside her helmet.

Even at night, with zero visibility, the jungle appeared distressingly alive, though Shepard could not tell if the feeling of things moving under the mulch beneath her feet was actually real, or if it was all in her head. From somewhere deep in the jungle, they could hear the sound of something trilling, followed by the far-off screech of the purple lizard creature from before, but Mov seemed entirely unaffected by these noises, instead pulling up his omni-tool display and checking the location of the pickup site again.

"It should take about an hour and a half to get there from here," Mov determined, collapsing his omni-tool again. "Two hours if we run into trouble. If we walk too fast, we'll make too much noise, and the yaarex has excellent hearing. Even from the trees." At this comment, all three ground crew members instantly looked up towards the canopy, as if expecting to see one of the massive, four-armed creatures looming down at them from the trees like some sort of colossal spider monkey. Instead, all they saw was more darkness, penetrated in tiny pinprick windows by beams of navy blue, a bleak, dim source of light not even strong enough to make it all the way to the forest floor.

"The yaarex that was here before probably left to find easier prey," Mov added, getting their disconcerted attention again as he readjusted his gun on his flank. "We can't depend on it being distracted for too long, though. They're tricky things, yaarex."

"So they're smart?" Shepard asked, distressed by this news, trying hard not to speak above a hissing whisper. She did not want to draw undue attention to herself before they even had a chance to start.

"About as smart as your average human," Mov answered, still distracted. Then, turning to look at Shepard again, he gave her a telling, up-and-down look. "You're pretty smart, aren't you?" he asked, in a tone that made it clear he was not looking for an answer. Shepard pursed her lips at the hooded insult, gripping her gun tightly between her hands to keep herself from firing an insult back, and Mov snorted softly at her reaction, turning to look into the treeline again, before indicating with a wave of his hand for them to follow him into the vegetation.

The flashlights mounted on their weapons barely seemed to make a dent in the darkness of the forest as they walked, the pitch black night appearing to swallow the beams before they could penetrate even three feet in front of their faces. Floating debris drifted in front of their beams as they walked, particles of sand and dust kicked up by their forward trudge, and at one point the party had to stop to shoo away an enormous, moth-like creature that had become attracted to the light of Vega's weapon. The creature was enormous, the size of Vega's head, yellow-green in colour but for its white abdomen and reddish-purple eyes and legs, with a random-looking, frightening Rorschach pattern on its wings. Its eyes, too many to count in the dark, grew out of its overlarge, round head like pustules, and its long, curved mouth kept rolling and unrolling as it skittered up and down the length of Vega's weapon and arm, keeping its thin, whip-like scorpion tail curled in a tight coil above its sloped back as it explored. Vega let out a strangled yelp, attempting to swat the creature away with his gun, but the moth-creature seemed more determined than he was, all six of its bizarre, paper-thin wings
Shepard wanted to grab Vega, to stop him from making so much noise, but she was spared having to do it by Mov grabbing hold of the moth-creature from off the weapon, causing it to let out a high-pitched shriek, before ripping off its stinging tail, tossing it aside into the underbrush, and shoving the entire, still-struggling creature into his mouth. Shepard felt her stomach turn as she watched him chew the insect slowly, the agonizing sound of squishing making her feel more sick than she had when the lizard had sprayed them with noxious fluid earlier that day. "Delicious," Mov finally commented, making Shepard have to physically hold back the urge to gag. "Finneglos. They're very rare. And very hard to catch. She must have liked your scent, Mister Vega."

"That thing was a she?" Vega responded, his voice cracking.

Mov ignored his startled question, lumbering forward into the underbrush again, and Shepard indicated with her rifle for her two companions to follow behind. Even with their flashlights turned on, they could barely make out which way they were going, or if they were even travelling in a straight line, and though Shepard wanted to trust that Mov knew what he was doing out here in the jungle, every tree and pile of mulch her light moved over all seemed to look exactly the same. Pointing her light at a nearby tree, she frowned as she recognized the burnt, blackened markings from the lizard's poisonous bile, and she wondered if perhaps that meant they were getting closer, or simply getting more lost. They had run across the lizard entirely by accident on their first trek through the forest, and it had sent them on a detour several hours long on their way to finding the crashed research ship. Hearing the sound of crackling twigs, she shot her beam of light upward, checking the trees for signs of the yaarex, but saw nothing but a group of surprisingly tiny, puffy, brownish-green birds huddled together on a branch. One of the birds peeped in protest as the light skimmed over the group, and Shepard quickly diverted the beam, not wanting to disturb what appeared to be the only pleasant creature she had come across during her entire visit.

"Don't wake those up," Mov suddenly hissed, causing Shepard to nearly jump out of her skin at the unexpected command, swinging her light around to instead illuminate their guide. She frowned at his reaction, confused, watching as he glanced up nervously towards the tree she had just been looking at, before looking back down at her again and pointing to the tiny birds up in the tree. "Those are ficcal brunties," he explained, speaking in a low, rumbling whisper. "Fighting birds. They nest together in colonies, and if you disturb them, they swarm. Look." Turning on the light on his assault rifle, he pointed it up into the canopy, illuminating the ring of tree surrounding them in the thick, black forest. Just as he had said, the branches of every tree around them seemed to be full to bursting with the tiny, puffy birds, each set of birds as small and harmless-looking as the next, hundreds upon hundreds of them. As the light stayed on them, the brunties slowly began to protest, the tiny peeps of indignation beginning to get more and more frustrated the longer it stayed on, and Shepard stared around the treeline in fascination, noticing with interest that some of the birds were more colourful than others. Some were bright yellow with purple splotches, some bright blue with white, but before she had a chance to get a good look at all them, Mov quickly shut off his light again, indicating for the rest of them to do the same.

"Best not to take any chances if we can help it," he decided, seriously. "Those brunties are mean little devils. Let's just keep the lights off until we're a little bit further. Don't want them waking up and coming after us."

Vega nodded quickly in agreement, but Rahma and Shepard were a bit more hesitant to agree. Without their lights to show them the way in front of them, there was no telling what sort of snags, traps, or unpleasant creatures they might stumble across in the wilds of the jungle. Shepard could hear the last few lingering peeps of the brunties going back to sleep behind her, and she let out a soft, agitated sigh, realizing they did not have much of a choice in the matter. Turning away from the
trees, she reached out, finding Mov, before indicating for him to lead the way deeper into the jungle, hoping he knew what he was doing and where he was taking them in the dark.

Despite knowing they still had a way's left to go before they would reach the pickup point, all conversation between the four party members had by now ground to a stony halt. Mov had warned them in the beginning to be quiet so as not to draw attention to themselves, but small exchanges had still sprung up from time to time along the way, in a miniscule effort to keep the quietude and the wild atmosphere of the jungle from driving them crazy with anxiety. Now, however, no one seemed to have anything else to say, and the noises of the jungle quickly took over, the ambient nightlife creating almost a blanket of sound as they pushed their way further through the thick, directionless jungle, the din of the forest keeping them constantly on their toes.

The first few times something sounded out from close nearby, Shepard had spun quickly on her heel, pointing her gun into the underbrush to see what had made the noise, but after a while she had grown used to the noises, training herself to ignore all but the most dangerous-sounding ones. The clustering of the colossal trees also worked well to trap the humidity and warmth of the forest under their canopy, threatening to smother the four explorers in sweltering moisture as they walked ever onward. Shepard could feel sweat pooling up under the collar of her undersuit as she walked, her hair matted and wet against her skull under her form-fitted helmet, and she closed her eyes, trying to imagine the cool, dry quarters that would be waiting for her back on the Normandy if they ever managed to find their way back to the pickup point. Her armour felt sticky and heavy against her skin as she shouldered her way past a massive, overgrown fern, swatting the extra hanging leaves out of her face as she passed, and she found herself almost cursing herself for complaining so much during her pregnancy days.

Her discomfort then had at least been consistent, and distracting enough to take her mind off the other things going on around her – now all she had was the sweat seeping down from the backs of her knees into the crevices of her boots, making a terrible squishing sound in her ears every time she took another step forward through the murk and mulch, following Mov and his coordinates towards the clearing.

As she walked, Shepard began to hear the sound of hurried, heavy footsteps moving up somewhere close beside her, and when she turned, she was surprised to find Rahma attempting to walk in stride with her, her much taller gait stilted and awkward as she tried to match Shepard's pace. Rahma's eyes were fixed astringently on Mov at the head of the party as she walked, continuing a few more paces in cold, mistrustful silence, before she suddenly leaned in towards Shepard, checking again to make sure Mov was not listening in on them before taking a short breath in, preparing to speak. "Are we certain he knows where he is going, Commander?" Rahma whispered, causing Shepard to frown, wondering how long she had been holding onto this doubt. She had seen no reason to mistrust Mov's directions thus far, but she also had no real sense of direction, and so realized she would probably have continued following him blindly no matter how astray he was leading them. Rahma's frown deepened behind her helmet, her green eyes mistrustful as she looked up towards Mov again. "We have been following his lead for hours," she added, her voice deep in Shepard's in-ear comm. "We should be much closer to the pickup point than this by now. If he honestly knows where he is going, and is not just leading us to certain death—"

"You're welcome to try to find the way yourself, if you wish," Mov cut her off suddenly, speaking loud enough for them to easily hear, causing both women to stop short in their tracks. Rahma stiffened at the offer, her eyes growing wide, her shoulders locking, as if she expected her heart to give out at any moment. Shepard, however, only stood a bit straighter at the snide remark, wondering how many of their ambient walking conversations Mov had listened in on to that point without letting on to any of them about it. He seemed to be maddeningly good at that, she was starting to
realize, and as he turned to glance back at the two women, she could guess even without seeing his face in the dark that his expression was probably somewhere between aggravation and disapproval. Mov stared at the two of them for another moment longer, before his ears suddenly gave a quick, intuitive quiver, and he let out a short, disgusted grunt, hefting his gun more securely in his grip and turning to head into the jungle again. Rahma hung back for a while after that, always keeping at least one party member between herself and Mov, until the jungle began to grow thicker around them, and she was forced to stick close to the rest of the party for fear of getting lost.

Even the sparse patches of starlight they had seen peering through the canopy before now seemed to have all been choked out by the growth, and Shepard reached out a hand for Vega, making sure he was still close enough that she could find him by touch alone. Realizing they were getting nowhere with their flashlights, Shepard took a few steps away from the party, giving herself some space, before pulling up her omni-blade and raising it over her head, hoping the light from the weapon might help overcome some of the crushing darkness surrounding them. In spite of her resourcefulness, the blade only managed to bathe a two-foot circle around her in a reddish-orange light, allowing her to see the mulch, roots, and plants growing around her feet but not much else. Still, she was pleased to realize that she could finally see her companions' faces illuminated in the fiery glow: Vega looking worried, Rahma looking anxious, and Mov looking contemplative, as if he had not anticipated meeting with resistance like this unrelenting darkness. He had never been outside in the jungle at this time of night before, Shepard remembered, and she quickly bit her lip, not wanting him to know that she was starting to seriously doubt his sense of direction as well. They had made it this far into the jungle, which she knew meant there was no turning back now, and the last thing they all needed right now was to panic and turn on one another.

"Turn that thing off," Mov instructed, gruffly, waving a curt hand towards the omni-blade. "It's too bright. We don't want to draw attention to ourselves any more than we already have." Shepard was quick to comply, collapsing her omni-tool and letting her hand drop back to her gun again, holding it at the ready. Mov gave a short grunt in response, seeming perturbed, before turning and indicating for the group to follow him, heading into the trees again. He pulled up his directional display as he walked, staring at it with a frown, his ears flicking anxiously as he watched the flashing indicator dot, their agitated vibrations giving away his frustration with the unclear path ahead. Still, despite his uncertainty, he continued assuredly onward, leading the rest of them as he went, until the clustered woods eventually began to open up around them, giving way to more widely-spaced trees. A few scattered flecks of light peeked through the sweltering canopy in pinprick beams, reassuring them that there was still an existence outside the jungle foliage, one they might eventually reach if they just kept moving forward, and Mov looked up as they passed under one of the tiny pinholes of light, his ears giving another brooding flick. Then, collapsing his holo-map, he lifted his gun again, pointing the light into what looked to be a tiny clearing in the trees up ahead.

"This way," he told them, sounding sure of himself, nodding towards the ring of trees. Then, without waiting to make sure they were following behind him, he began to move in that direction, lumbering onward into the foliage, his stubbornness clearly starting to get the better of him. Shepard shrugged at her other two companions, unsure what else there was to say, before starting to follow Mov again, picking up her pace to keep up with his much taller stride. She had grown so used to the sound of the jungle nightlife that it took her a moment to realize that it had begun to fade away as soon as they began to draw close to the clearing, the sounds of restless faunae trickling out until all that remained was an eerie, hair-raising silence. The air of quiet as they entered the clearing was so thick she could almost feel it pressing against her skin. Mov seemed to feel it too, as he had stopped short in the middle of the glade, his gun still held, ready, in his hands, his ears at full, quivering attention, all eight black eyes staring intently into a gaping black tunnel into the deeper trees. Vega and Rahma seemed to feel the sensation as soon as they entered the clearing as well, both slowing as they stepped past the ring of underbrush, as if instantly hit with a visceral chill that neither of them could explain.
Backing slowly towards the rest of the group in the centre of the clearing, Shepard held her weapon at the ready, barely daring to breathe as she pointed her light into the underbrush. "I don't think we should be here," she whispered, jerking her light as she heard something rustle in one of the footpath ferns. The leaves of the plant still shook, but whatever had caused the disturbance was long gone, making her wonder if she had just imagined the sound, or if something had been there, watching them, only to be scared off by her light.

The forest around them was deathly still, disquietingly so, so still she could swear she heard the sound of plant life growing around her. Just then, Rahma let out a gasp from behind her, and Shepard jumped nearly out of her skin at the sound, turning quickly to see what the problem was. Looking down, she realized that Rahma was staring intently at something laying on the ground between them, and, bending to inspect it, Shepard frowned, picking the object up to look it over more closely. It looked at first to be some kind of plant growth, curled and green like a fern leaf, but as she held it up, shining her light more closely on it, she realized that it was actually a small green tail, one likely torn from an equally small, green lizard. The base of the tail was ragged and bloody, carelessly ripped from the rest of the body, with one limp hind leg still attached to one side of it, the clawed toes curled inward in frozen agony. Shepard made a face at the carnage, turning it over in her fingers, before looking up instead into the dark canopy, trying to figure out where the bloody tail had come from. Turning her light up towards the trees, she squinted into the darkness, scanning her flashlight over the branches, only to quickly stop as soon as her light passed over something massive. She instantly felt her stomach sink down to her knees at the sight that awaited her in the trees, her blood turning to ice in her veins as her heart threatened to come up through her throat.

The same yaarex from earlier that day was propped between the trunks of several trees, suspended above the four of them like an engorged, blood-smeared spider. Its webbed ear- and chin-spines were flared around its deformed face, making it look like some sort of enormous, misshapen lionfish, and a deep, guttural rumble bubbled up from the creature's throat as it readjusted its grip on the branches, its twelve sunken eyes moving over each of the ground crew members erratically as it tried to decide which one it wanted to devour first. "Nobody make any sudden movements," Shepard warned, whispering into her in-helmet mic, hoping Mov could hear her as well as her companions could. "And don't... look up." This last instruction seemed to make her party members even more anxious than before, but she could tell even without looking that they were trying very hard to obey her instructions. The yaarex let out a low, rolling rumble, its webbed spines vibrating as it stared at the four of them, its head moving oddly from side to side on its short, fat neck as it readjusted its grip on one of the tree trunks. Shepard swallowed back the lump of anxious bile threatening to come up on her, praying that if they just stood still long enough the yaarex would deem them uninteresting and move on to more stimulating prey. Then, as she looked on in horror, a globule of curdled blood began to drip down from the yaarex's jagged mouth, hanging from its bony chin for a split, unholy second, before streaking through the air to splatter directly onto her visor with a loud, visceral SLOP.

No sooner had the sound rung out through the clearing when the yaarex gave a massive, howling scream, launching itself from the treetops down into the dell, barely giving the four of them enough time to scatter before it hit the ground with a thunderous, earth-shaking crash. The ground quaked violently under their feet as the yaarex landed, knocking the party off their feet and into the dark mulch, the impact making Shepard momentarily dizzy as she struggled to get back to her feet again. Staggering into the darkened trees, she wiped the rotten red slime haphazardly from her vision, groping for her weapon and turning off the light before shoving it back into her maglock again and starting to run in the direction she thought they had been heading in before. "RUN!" she shouted, her voice cracking, barely daring to glance over her shoulder to make sure her party members were running in the same direction. She prayed she would reach the dropoff clearing before the yaarex caught up to her and her party, but she could scarcely see a foot in front of her as she tore through the darkened forest, slapping ferns and branches out of her way as she weaved between the trees.
The trees seemed to spring out of nowhere as she ran, as fast as her legs could carry her, and as she ran she could hear the sound of the yaarex howling from somewhere close behind her, every roar sounding dangerously closer than the last. "SHEPARD!" Vega's voice rang out from somewhere to her right. "SHEPARD LOOK OUT!" But Shepard refused to look, not wanting to risk losing even an inch of the distance she had managed to put between her and the monster. No sooner had she made this decision when she suddenly found her foot snagged on something, and she went down hard, her elbows slamming into the forest floor as her head bounced, hard, against the inside of her helmet. Shaking herself out of her momentary daze, she tried to yank herself back to her feet again, but found her ankle held fast, yanking her back as the sound of the yaarex tearing through the trees grew closer and closer. Twisting around quickly, she was mortified to see that her leg was ankle-deep in what appeared to be a pit of thick, molasses-like mud, and that one of the nearby florae, a massive, black flowering plant shaped like a tub, had wrapped its tentacle-like vines around both of her ankles, and was dragging her back even further into the sludge. She figured the flower was probably trying to drown her before starting to devour her, and she let out a scream of frustration, kicking at its vines with her only leg still free of the mud, feeling her sense of panic swelling as the yaarex crashed closer to her through the thick surrounding trees.

She could see the explosions from the yaarex's wild biotic pulses blowing branches and pieces of unsuspecting animals into the air as it rampaged through the underbrush, and she quickly sat up, refusing to be a sitting duck, grabbing hold of the vine that was dragging her down and starting to tear it apart. Her own hands glowed blue with biotic energy as she pulled at the thick vines, ripping through the first one with a shout of success, only to be surprised when the flower let out a shrill, piercing shriek in response, its thick, fleshy petals flying open to expose what looked to be several tongue-like pistils and a curdled, greasy liquid that looked like rotten body fat. The end of the vine she had just ripped apart flailed in agony in her hand, spraying her with a yellowish, tacky liquid that stuck to her visor, blinding her. She tried in vain to wipe the liquid away, reaching unseeingly for the next of the vines, only to feel the plant give another strong pull, dragging her even further into the pit. By now the plant had dragged her in up to her knees, and she could feel the cold, wet slop begin to seep in between her armour and her undersuit, the weight starting to pull her down even further into the mud.

"Not today, you son of a bitch!" she growled, reaching over to grab hold of the plant, causing it to give another loud squeal of protest as she wrapped her arms around its vile base and squeezed, her entire body glowing with biotic energy as she attempted to rip it up out of the ground by its roots. The plant gurgled and thrashed, giving a yank of its vine into the mud, causing Shepard to slip from the bank down further into the pit, so deep she could feel the cold sensation of the mud against her thighs, but she still did not let go of the plant. The yaarex howled from somewhere nearby, and another tree went flying through the darkened forest, lit up like a firework with blue biotic energy. The plant gave a strangled cry that sounded like vomiting, its petals peeling open to leak some of its coagulated digestive fluid all over Shepard's arms and chest, causing her to gag as the acrid smell seeped through her helmet's breathing filter. Just then, the sound of shouting from nearby caught her attention, and she looked up just in time to see Vega pulling a pin from a grenade retrieved from his belt. Tossing the grenade into the flower's open maw, he skirted quickly around the plant, grabbing hold of Shepard under the arms and pulling her off the plant with effort, before dragging her up out of the sludge pit and pulling her into the nearby trees.

"GET DOWN!" Vega shouted, tossing her down into the ferns, before quickly dropping down to join her, covering her body with his own. The flower gave one last, angry scream, its ruined vine thrashing angrily through the air, before the grenade beeped one last time and the plant exploded in a shower of floriated gore all over the surrounding trees. Bits of plant and digestive fluid still dripped from the trees as Vega pushed himself back to his feet, reaching down again a moment later to help Shepard back to hers as well. "You stink," he told her, candidly, causing her to give a short, sharp
laugh of surprise, but the moment was quickly cut short as the yaarex roared angrily from somewhere nearby, making it clear it had heard the sound of the grenade explosion and now knew exactly where the two of them were. Shepard was still a bit dazed from the plant incident, but the sound of the yaarex crashing loudly through the trees brought her quickly back to her senses, and she turned to Vega, who indicating for the two of them to start running again. "Come on!" Vega shouted, signalling for them to change direction, before pointing towards something deeper in the forest. Shepard had no idea what he was doing, but she figured she was better off trusting him than running off blindly on her own, and so, slapping another huge fern out of her way, she ducked through back into the thicker underbrush, following Vega back down a path she could have sworn they had gone down before.

Rahma and Mov were already waiting for them as they entered a familiar clearing, both of them clearly anticipating Shepard’s return, but Shepard could barely spare them a glance as Vega grabbed up his gun, breathless and excited, ready to use it as the sound of the yaarex drew ever closer through the trees. "Los pájaros!" Vega shouted, pointing up into the canopy. "The birds, Shepard! Wake the birds!"

Shepard hesitated a moment, not quite understanding what he was telling her to do. Then, suddenly realizing what he was talking about, she quickly drew her gun from its maglock, shaking off the rotten digestive fluid and turning the gun-mounted light onto its highest setting, before starting to wave the beam around in the canopy of the surrounding trees. In response, the brunties nesting in the branches all around them began peeping agitatedly, some of them huddling their heads in closer to their puffy chests in an attempt to block out the irritating light. "CHEEP CHEEP!" Shepard shouted, her voice breaking as she yelled, realizing exactly how ridiculous she sounded but not having the time to care. Continuing to wave her light around, she fired a few shots from her pistol into the ground, the sound of the plasma bullets ricocheting off the ring of closely-grown trees like an echo chamber. Vega, Rahma, and Mov did the same, the sounds of the gunfire filling the clearing, barely leaving any time for quiet as each new shot rang out. As they continued firing, the sound of the birds' cheeping grew louder and much more pointedly aggravated as more and more birds began to wake up, realizing they were being disturbed on purpose.

"Shine your light into the birds’ eyes!" Shepard shouted, sparing only a quick glance as all of her companions switched their lights to the highest setting as well before starting to wave their guns around. By now the chirping of the birds had reached near an angry fever pitch, as every sleeping bird in the clearing was woken by the sound of bullets being fired into the ground and the glare of strobe lights. "PEEP PEEP!" Shepard shouted, firing off another round of bullets into the mulch. "WAKE UP, BIRDIES! WAKE UP!"

That taunting seemed to do the trick, as no sooner had the words left her mouth when her beam of light was interrupted by what appeared to be a miniscule, puffy missile zipping through the branches towards her with tiny claws outstretched. The bruntie screeched as it dive-bombed her, its call high-pitched and shrill, the previously charming chirping noises replaced by the sound of a frantic, angry whistle. Shepard ducked to avoid the attack, thanking her lucky stars that she and her team had thought to wear their helmets onto the surface of Parnack, before the sound of the yaarex tearing through the trees suddenly brought her back to the present. Grabbing hold of Vega and Rahma's arms, she gave them a pull, urging them to run, just as the monstrous, four-armed creature came bursting into the clearing, beating its chest with its upper arms while pounding the ground with its lower. The yaarex let out a massive roar as it looked around the clearing, its black eyes wide, high-perched nostrils flaring, pushing two trees aside as it searched, causing the trunks to pop and crack under its strength as if it were pushing over a stack of dominos.

No sooner had the monster entered the clearing when the brunties suddenly gave a loud, shrieking war cry, and the yaarex looked up towards the canopy just in time to see hundreds of birds swooping
down on it from above. The brunties tore at the yaarex mercilessly, pecking at its misshapen eyes and
diving to attack it again and again, pecking and clawing at its leathery flesh as it fought to swat them
away, its efforts as fruitless as if it were swatting at a swarm of attacking hornets. Shepard felt her
blood run cold as the yaarex gave a strangled scream of agony from behind her, but she forced
herself not to look back over her shoulder at the fate the monster had met as she raced towards the
drop-off point, pressing a hand absentmindedly to the side of her helmet as she pushed through to
comm contact with Cortez. "Cortez come in!" she shouted, breathlessly. "Cortez you have to get us
now! Now, Cortez! We have to get out of here RIGHT NOW!"

"On my way," Cortez returned, just as quickly. "Just hold tight for thirty seconds. Are you at the
drop-off point? Is your position defensible?"

Shepard turned as she burst through the underbrush into the drop-off clearing, picking up her gun
and looking around to see if anything was coming through the treeline towards them. The jungle was
now alive with raucous noise, the sound of the brunties attacking the yaarex seeming to have woken
up every sleeping creature within a five-mile radius. Three reddish-purple monkeys had taken up
roost on a nearby tree branch to watch the carnage, their long, prehensile tails whipping through the
air as they whooped in response to the show, the extra, misshapen hand on the end of each of their
tails gripping the tree branch or swatting the other monkeys' tails out of the way as they watched.
The yaarex let out another bloodcurdling scream from deep in the jungle, and the monkeys shrieked
even louder in response, seeming to enjoy it, their heads turning around on their necks like owls as
they chittered and screeched with amusement, their huge, black, too-far-spaced eyes and wide, too-
toothy mouths making them look like possessed clown dolls more than actual animals. Shepard
swore inwardly at the creepy wildlife, gripping her gun even tighter to her chest as the yaarex
screamed again, even louder this time, the sound of his agony sounding distressingly closer this time
than it had last time.

Leaning into her in-helmet comm, she readied her weapon, her rifle shaking in her sweaty grip as she
tried to figure out what part of the blackened treeline to point at. "I don't know how much longer we
can hold this position," she admitted. "Just get down here as fast as you can!"

"Aye-aye, Commander," Cortez returned, affirmatively.

Shepard fired a few frantic rounds into the underbrush, hoping to scare off anything lurking nearby,
knowing she should save her ammunition for the yaarex but unsure how much longer she could
stand to wait for it to show up. The sound of its roaring was coming closer with every second, and
Shepard backed up closer to the rest of the party, standing back to back with them in the clearing, not
daring to leave any direction unguarded. From far away she could hear the faint sound of thrusters
drawing closer, and she looked up into the muddled night sky, squinting as she tried to find the
Kodiak among the stars. She had no time to keep looking, however, as a moment later, the yaarex
burst through the trees into the clearing, letting out a bone-chilling roar as it did so, causing the
monkeys watching from the trees to screech and leap for their lives, the thin membranes of skin
between their sticky-fingered arms and sides allowing them to glide across the clearing and stick to
the trees on the safer, further side. The yaarex beat its chest in anger, shaking two nearby trees with
its second set of arms, shrieking as blood poured down its misshapen face from three punctured eyes,
one of which had been torn completely out of its socket and now dangled sickeningly close to the
monster's howling mouth.

Shepard screamed wordlessly back in response, unsure what else there was to say, firing off a round
of bullets towards the monster's hanging stomach. This only seemed to make the yaarex even angrier,
and it swiped for her, grasping through the air with one bloodied hand, covered in tiny, blood-sticky
feathers. Shepard quickly leapt out of the way, firing at its grasping hand, causing it to give a shriek
of protest as her plasma bullet burned through one of its fingers. Letting out another, even louder
howl, the yaarex beat the ground of the clearing, its roar combining with a burst of biotic energy that bowled the ground party over, crippling them momentarily as they scrambled to reach for their weapons. No sooner had they started to right themselves again when the sound of the Kodiak swooping low caught their attention, the blazing blue thrusters peeling through the night sky to hover a few feet away in the clearing. "GET IN, GET IN!" Cortez shouted, popping open the carriage door and waving wildly for them to comply. He barely seemed to notice their new yahg companion until Mov was starting to climb into the shuttle compartment, and Shepard could see him reaching for the controls, ready to bank sharply upward in an effort to lose the yahg, but she quickly grabbed hold of his arm, stopping him.

"He's a friend!" she shouted, barely able to hear herself over the sounds of the thrusters, the howling of the yaarex, and the cacophonous shrieking of the wide-awake jungle. Cortez looked confused for a moment, but quickly realized there was no time to argue, turning his attention immediately back towards the manic yaarex. The yaarex seemed to consider the Kodiak a more interesting enemy than its previous prey, as it was quick to turn all of its attention onto the shuttle, giving off another challenging roar before starting to charge the ship, grabbing hold of its contours with all four of its muscular arms. The lights inside the Kodiak began to flash red, the alarm blaring over the intercom as the shuttle was shaken wildly around, all attempts to lift off from the ground thwarted by the strength of the yaarex pulling it back again. The yaarex howled as it swung the Kodiak from one side to the other, its claws piercing into the metal exterior as it dug its heels into the jungle floor, refusing to be moved by the efforts of the shuttle. Then, giving the shuttle another jerk, the yaarex opened its massive, toothy maw, before biting down, hard, on the nose of the shuttle, sinking its serrated teeth in up to the rotten gums.

The alarms inside the Kodiak blared even louder as hot steam volleyed forth out of the shuttle's nose, spraying the yaarex in the face, causing it to give another muffled scream. Still, it refused to let go of the Kodiak, even as Shepard watched a piece of flesh start to peel away from the top of its head, its dangling eye starting to visibly boil with the heat from the pressurized steam. "Shepard, we have to get out of here NOW!" Cortez told her, frantically, leaning around the back of his chair and pointing to his control panel, where a holographic image of the Kodiak had taken up a majority of the screen. The front of the shuttle and one of the thrusters were both flashing red on the diagram, with yellow lines branching off of each piece detailing the problem in text too tiny for Shepard to read from her position. "As it is the Kodiak is gonna need some serious repair when we get back to the Normandy," Cortez added, out of breath, clearly trying hard not to panic. "If we don't shake this thing now we're not gonna be able to get back to the ship before we need to fix it!"

"This must have been what happened to those researchers," Rahma added, gripping tightly to one of the overhead handlebars to keep from being thrown around the shuttle carriage.

Shepard gritted her teeth at the maddening turn of events, looking around the shuttle for some idea of what she could do to get the yaarex to let go. Then, spotting something, she moved quickly back over towards the carriage door, banging on the inside to get Cortez's attention. "Cortez, open the door!" she shouted, and the pilot immediately did as he was told, popping open the shuttle access to let Shepard lean out over the side. The yaarex screamed through its teeth as it caught sight of her again, giving the shuttle another shake, causing her to stumble momentarily before grabbing hold of the side of the carriage door. Then, quickly righting herself again, she braced herself against the door, before turning back to her teammates again.

"Get me the gatling gun," Shepard told them, pointing to a heavy, mounted weapon stashed in the corner of the shuttle carriage. "If this thing wants a fight, it's gonna get one."

Vega and Mov sprang into action immediately, moving over to the mounted gun and starting to wheel it to the door on treads built into the floor of the carriage. Gripping hold of the handles on
either side of the gun, Shepard swung it wide, feeling the heavy weapon resist, before aiming it as far
towards the front of the shuttle as she could, focusing in on the yaarex in her sights as it gave the
Kodiak another shake. Bracing herself against the gun, she squeezed down hard on the trigger grip,
feeling her whole body vibrate along with the weapon as it fired off a barrage of heavy rounds into
the yaarex's ugly face and arms. The yaarex keened as the hail of bullets bombarded its face and
arms, its claws scraping against the sides of the Kodiak with a loud, discordant sound like a thousand
nails on a chalkboard, and it gave the shuttle another hard shake, trying to knock Shepard off her
perch. She felt her footing slip from under her, but her hands were still clenched fast around the grip,
and she quickly righted herself again, firing off another round into the yaarex's vile shoulders and
head. Finally, with one last angry, protesting cry, the yaarex dislodged its teeth from the shuttle's
nose, leaving a bloody trail and several teeth behind as the thrusters fired again at full strength,
pushing the yaarex back to earth with only four deep, frightening trails of claws down the sides of
the shuttle's exterior to show it had ever been there.

Now free of the yaarex's grip, the shuttle gave one more push of the systems at full blast, the carriage
doors closing over the gatling gun, before the Kodiak finally rose up above the monstrous jungle,
shooting up through the atmosphere and into the stars.

Now safe in the confines of the Kodiak, Shepard immediately collapsed to her knees on the floor,
feeling her legs go out under her a moment before she realized she was no longer standing. Mov had
taken charge of the gatling gun after the door had closed, rolling it back over to its appropriate
corner, but Vega's attention was all on Shepard, kneeling down to make sure everything was all right
and she was not seriously hurt. Waving away his offer of help, Shepard attempted to stand again,
bracing herself against the floor, before realizing her legs did not want to work and instead accepting
to just stay sitting. Letting out a long, low, shaky breath, she reached up, taking off her helmet,
before setting it aside beside her on the floor, silently assuring herself that she had made it out of
Parnack alive, that her mission was now complete, and that now that it was over, she would never
have to do it again. Still, she realized, running a hand back through her matted hair, the sentiment felt
strangely hollow in her mind, even as she said it, and, frowning, she looked down towards her tired
legs again, wondering why she felt no sense of pride in the thought that she had completed another
mission to the best of her abilities.

As she thought, she noticed Mov moving across the shuttle towards her, until finally he came to
stand beside her, towering over her from her seat on the floor. Reaching down a hand towards her,
he indicated for her to take it, offering to help her to her feet, but she was in no mood to humour him
or his acts of petty civility. Turning at the waist, she instead braced herself firmly against the shuttle
bench, straining against the hard structure as she pushed herself painfully and shakily back to her
feet. She still felt weak from the run through the jungle, and for a moment she considered sitting
down again, having proven her point to Mov, but she quickly decided against that too, not wanting
give her new yahg companion any more height leverage over her than he already naturally had.
Mov slowly retrieved his proffered hand at the show, seeming less impressed with her display of
stubbornness than the effort had cost her physically, before giving another of his low, stuffy grunts
and looking her quickly once up and down.

"Well… it looks like now your shuttle has got some battle scars," Mov commented, good-naturedly,
two points of his jagged mouth curving up in what was obviously meant as an agreeable smile.
Shepard did not return the smile, instead merely staring back at him with unamused, baleful eyes, and
Mov's expression quickly began to waver, uncertain, before he finally let his forced smile drop again,
returning instead to his usual flat, solemn expression. Shepard looked down at the floor at this,
silently triumphant, before reaching up to take hold of one of the railings, feeling her gut clench as
the Kodiak gave a lurch in flight. She hoped they still had enough of a shuttle to make it back to the
Normandy without incident, though she was quick to reassure herself that Cortez knew what he was
doing. "I've… heard tell of your actions, Commander," Mov suddenly spoke up again, breaking the
awkward silence once more. Shepard glanced up at him at this, surprised, before looking back down at the floor again, not wanting to retain eye contact for too long, for fear he might think it meant something. "It was only because of you that the yahg subjects on Sur'Kesh managed to get out of captivity and back to their homeworld," Move went on, undeterred. "If it had not been for your intervention, they might never have made it out of there alive."

"I didn't set off the alarm that opened the cages," Shepard admitted, shortly, tightening her grip on the overhead handle as the Kodiak gave another faint shake. "That was Cerberus. They were trying to get the female krogan. Urdnot Bakara."

"Hm," Mov answered, shortly, his voice deep. "Cerberus. Pro-human organization. I hear they went underground after the War. Something about regrouping and licking their wounds." His ridged brow furrowing, he flicked his ears again, thoughtful, his gaze moving from Shepard to rest distractedly on the back of Cortez's chair. "I doubt they'll be able to find enough galactic support to continue forward with their objectives even if they do decide to come back eventually," he added, matter-of-factly, causing Vega to look up from the floor in interest at the observation. "They simply lost too much traction after the War and the fall of the Illusive Man."

Shepard shook her head at the argument, bracing herself for another rattle of the shuttle. "Cerberus isn't done for," she answered, frankly. "I'm not naïve enough to believe that. Everyone knows Cerberus has three heads – three individuals in positions of power – and so far we've only cut off two."

Mov pondered the counterpoint for a moment, humming thoughtfully as he turned it over, the sound a low, bass thrumming in the back of his throat. Then, finally, he lifted his bony chin, taking a sharp breath and looking back over at Shepard again. "Agree to disagree," he answered, simply, before going silent again, seeming convinced there was nothing else to say in the conversation. Vega seemed surprised that that was all there was to the argument, and for a moment he looked between Shepard and Mov, as if expecting one of them to say something else. Then, realizing that nothing else was going to be said, he looked back down towards the floor again, folding his hands nervously across his knees as he waited for the shuttle to reach the Normandy. Another long moment of uncomfortable quiet filled the confines of the Kodiak, until suddenly, Mov looked up at Shepard again, seeming to remember something important, his ears giving a few excited flicks as he shifted his weight in the shuttle again.

"Did you know that krogan and yahg can mate?" Mov asked, causing both Shepard and Rahma to look up at the interjection, startled. Vega was the last to look up a moment later, still clearly trying to reconcile that he had truly heard what he thought he had. "Nothing would come of it, obviously," Mov added, quick to amend himself, though it still seemed to do little to placate Rahma. "The idea is about as ridiculous as something resulting from the crossproliferation of an elcor and a volus, or a human and a turian. But the two species' biological organs are such that they are capable of, er… mélange, in such a way."

"Fascinating," Shepard answered, hardly bothering not to let her incredulity show.

"Isn't it though?" Mov asked, still oblivious. "I wasn't aware of it until I… overheard it, in a conversation. Salarians, though – they are quite aware of it. I personally have never mated with a krogan, myself, but…" Letting out another huff, he paused, getting ahead of himself, before shaking his massive head and propping his free hand against his thick hip, seeming to be getting much more comfortable speaking to Shepard and her companions. "They're strange, invasive little creatures, salarians," he told her, his rumbling voice lowering to an almost conspiratorial murmur. "Treat everything like a medical textbook. Especially when it comes to sex. I've never met a salarian with an active sex drive, really, but when it comes to the mating habits of other species, they talk about it like
it's a sport."

"I've noticed," Shepard agreed, giving a soft snort, before looking down at the floor again, unsure what else there was to say. She still did not feel entirely comfortable conversing with Mov, but the conversation itself, however strange, was making her miss Mordin more than she had previously realized. She could not help wondering what the salarian was getting up to these days, and, glancing over towards the shuttle's exterior display, she gave a soft sigh, deciding silently that when she got back to the Normandy, she would see if she could still contact him at his last known address. Her pleasant rumination did not last long, however, as Mov quickly took a deep breath, intent on continuing on with the conversation, making Shepard wish she had taken a seat somewhere further away from the yahg. She doubted even that would have served her any better, however, as no matter how little she responded to Mov, it did not seem to deter him from trying to engage her in further awkward conversation.

"Salarians also seem to lack a certain fear of mortality," Mov went on, matter-of-factly, seeming somewhat more pensive now as he continued his train of thought. "Not so much that they aren't afraid to die in the grand scheme, or that they want to die, but… they don't seem to be particularly fearful of premature expiration. I suppose it might be due in part to their insignificant lifespans, but the way I see it, they likely figure they have so little to begin with that it seems foolish to waste what remains when it could be put to better use." He grunted again at this, thoughtfully, giving Shepard time to look up at him once more, barely trying to hide the incredulity on her face at his observation, giving him a moment to back out of it again if he were being facetious, though she doubted he would.

"Have you ever actually talked to a salarian?" Shepard finally asked, sharply.

Mov seemed unfazed by her question, instead turning to look down at her with all eight of his beady black eyes, before reaching up to take hold of one of the handrails lining the overhead, mimicking Shepard's movements. "Never, no," he answered, frankly, speaking slower this time. "Even if I'd wanted to, I doubt they would have complied. They don't generally talk to… aliens like me."
Shepard's frown deepened at his evasive answer, and for a moment she considered countering his point, to tell him that not all salarians were disdainful and condescending, but she figured he likely would find some reason to shoot down this argument as well. The thought was soon pushed from her mind altogether as the shuttle gave another rattle, and she quickly reached up a second hand to the overhead rail to brace herself, turning her attention towards the front of the shuttle to check how Cortez was faring.

"Doing okay up there, Steve?" Shepard asked, craning her neck to try to see his navigation screen over the back of his chair.

Cortez nodded in response, waving a reassuring hand over his shoulder. "Doing fine," he returned, his answer clipped. "Just having some issues with the autopilot. Switching back over to manual control to compensate. Won't be a problem, Commander."

"Wouldn't that be an irony," Mov commented dryly at the update, causing Shepard to grit her teeth as she waited for the undoubtedly insufferable remark to follow. "Making it out of Parnack alive, only to die en route to the ship." Shepard quickly turned to look back at him at this comment, intent on saying something cutting, reminding him that the only reason the shuttle was having difficulty was because it was not used to carrying a crew member of his size, but she quickly bit her tongue when she saw Vega looking pointedly up at her from his seat on the shuttle bench. Stifling her retort for the time being, she let go of the overhead rail, instead moving to sit down beside Vega on the bench and scooting up as close beside him as their limited carriage space permitted. She knew that Vega was well aware of what kind of person she was, and how little she tolerated anyone who had
something negative to say about any member of her crew, but she also knew how quickly things could turn ugly if she were to say something to upset their new yahg teammate. Vega seemed perfectly at ease with her change of seat, and quickly shifted his arm back and over the edge of the backrest to allow her to more easily settle in beside him on the bench.

"I bet David is gonna be really happy to see you," Vega told her, causing Shepard to pause, taking a moment to process the comment, before looking up to offer him a soft, surprised smile in return.

"I hope so," she answered, honestly. Then, letting out a heavy sigh, she turned her gaze down towards the floor again, staring intently at her boots as she thought – about her son, about her job, about the amount of energy it took simply to keep the Normandy from going under. It was a difficult job, but one she had undertaken willingly, though missions like this sometimes made her wonder if it would all turn out to be worth it in the end. She knew it was unrealistic to expect every mission to be safe and pleasant, but as time went on she could not help feeling more and more like she was being intentionally relegated to the missions no one else wanted to take. Just one more final, knife-twisting insult to the disgraced military hero, she figured, who it seemed was not quite finished playing the part of the galaxy's janitor. "It's been a long day," she finally added, letting out another, softer huff of breath, tucking her hands between her knees as she stared intently at the floor, hoping Vega would not be able to read the expression on her face. "I just hope David's feeling okay after that… incident, earlier."

"Hm," Vega grunted, assenting, before looking away again, seeming to have nothing else to say on the matter. Another silence fell over the Kodiak, this one less painful than the last, the sound of Cortez inputting commands into his navigational console somehow soothing to Shepard's mind. It reminded her a bit of home, or the only home she had ever known – the peaceful ambience of space, the soft beeping and whirring of computers, the empty silences filled with introspective thought. There was always something left unsaid in space, or something left to think about. Vega gave a soft cough then, breaking her peaceful train of thought, before letting out another, shorter, disapproving noise, turning to look down at her again. "Man, Lola, you stink," he told her, teasingly, though she could tell he was only half-joking. "You smell straight-up nasty. You're gonna need to take like, three showers when we get back to the Normandy."

Shepard hesitated for a moment, unsure how to react to his teasing. Then, leaning in, she pressed a soft, grateful kiss to the side of his scruffy jaw, giving him a quiet chuckle in return, before settling her head down against his armoured shoulder, taking in a deep breath and closing her tired eyes. "Maybe two showers," she compromised, stifling a yawn.
The remainder of the shuttle ride from Parnack to the Normandy was relatively quiet, almost blessedly so. Mov had tried to strike up further conversation once or twice along the way, but, finding his efforts to be in vain, he had eventually allowed his attention to instead become fixated on the windshield panelling over Cortez's shoulder, where he had watched in rapt silence as fields of stars soared past the windows of the Kodiak, a million twinkling blurs in a neverending sea of midnight blue. It occurred to Shepard, watching him, that the yahg were still a pre-spaceflight species, and so this sight was likely new to Mov, or at least relatively new. She remembered the first time she had stared out at the passing expanse of space from an Alliance ship's cockpit – she had been barely a child at the time, two years old, holding her mother's hand as she watched the blankets of stars hurdling past, wondering how many there could possibly be, or if they perhaps went on forever. The thought of her own mother was enough to bring her back to the present with a sharp jolt, making her realize she had promised David she would return to the Normandy in only a few hours' time. She had no idea how long it had been since her departure to Parnack, but she knew it had to have been longer than that, and she could not help worrying that he might already be wondering where she was, or worse, having an anxiety flareup over the fact that she had not returned within her promised timeframe.

The shuttle port of the Normandy was already open as they approached, waiting readily for their arrival, and Cortez pulled the craft inside the small slot with ease, hardly reacting as the Kodiak gave a faint kick and rattle as it settled down, tucking its thrusters up neatly as it nestled onto the metal floor. Shepard had to admire his confidence in the shuttle as she braced her palms against the edge of the bench, steadying herself for the shaky landing. She figured Cortez knew the craft better than any of them, having spent most of his time assigned to it, so if he had confidence that nothing was severely wrong with it – even after the brutal beating it had taken at the hands of the yaarex – then that likely meant there was nothing for her to be seriously concerned about. Still, it seemed Rahma could barely wait to leave the shuttle as it was ferried up into the underbelly of the ship, leaping eagerly down onto the hangar bay floor as soon as the carriage door popped open, not even waiting for Shepard and Vega to leave their seats before starting for the elevator. Shepard could not honestly blame her for not wanting to be anywhere near Mov – he was less than amicable, pessimistic and narcissistic in equal amounts, and Rahma was still young, perhaps too young to yet have skin tough enough to deal with his cynicism.

Shepard was the next to leave the shuttle, followed closely by Vega, who kept a wary hand near her back in case she needed help keeping her feet. Mov was the last to exit the craft, taking up the rear of the party, making sure to take as much time as he needed to leave the Kodiak. The shuttle creaked warily under the yahg's weight as he shuffled to the edge of the carriage, dropping down into the ship's hangar with a deep grunt before straightening again to look around at his new, unfamiliar surroundings. His webbed ears quivered with curiosity as his beady eyes moved over the stacks of boxes, the weaponry storage displays, and the corner where Vega's cot and workout equipment had been carefully arranged before he had left to go on the mission. His gaze lingered momentarily on a group of crewmen standing huddled in a corner of the hangar, their conversation stopped short as they stared in wary surprise at the new arrival, but he was quick to look away again, clearly not finding the crewmen interesting enough to hold his attention.

Taking the opportunity while Mov was still distracted, Shepard sidled over a bit closer to Vega, reaching up and tapping him lightly on the shoulder to get his attention. Vega looked up in surprise at the gesture, but Shepard only jerked her chin subtly in Mov's direction, not wanting to draw too much attention to the fact that she was talking about him. Vega was quick to follow her gaze, glancing up towards the massive alien as well, and frowned a bit as he watched the yahg begin to
move slowly around the exterior of the hangar, inspecting the floor. "I have no idea where I'm going to put him," Shepard admitted, keeping her voice low, just loud enough for Vega to hear standing next to her. "I already put up Rahma and Zaeed in the best rooms. I don't know where I can put a yahg that wouldn't be…"

"Conspicuous?" Vega guessed, sucking thoughtfully at the inside of his lip.

Shepard frowned a bit, glancing over at him, before looking back towards Mov again and raising her brows. "I was going to say cramped," she admitted, frankly. "But… yeah. I guess that too."

"He could stay down here with me," Vega suggested, crossing his arms as he looked out over the wide hangar floor. "It's not ideal, but… if it'll take a load off your mind, I wouldn't object too much to sharing space with a big ugly alien." Then, having said this, he turned to glance back towards Cortez, who was half-listening in on their conversation as he worked on the busted shuttle thruster behind them. "Hell, I already share it with Esteban," Vega joked, jerking his thumb over his shoulder towards the mechanic. "You can't get much uglier than that."

"Unless it's you, Vega," Cortez returned, never missing a beat.

Vega laughed at the snappy retort, his thick brows shooting up, impressed. "Touché, Esteban," he chuckled, before turning his attention back to Shepard again and looking over towards Mov once more, considering him, intently. "I guess he could sleep in the observatory," he suggested, shrugging, offhandedly. "I mean, it's big enough. The only problem then is that he'd be on the same floor as Liara and Rahma."

"And Chakwas," Shepard added, her frown deepening. "If something happens to Karin I'll never forgive myself."

"What about the engineering floor?" Vega suggested, glancing over at her again, before quickly remembering why that was a bad idea and shaking his head. "Oh. Right. Chico."

"Yeah," Shepard agreed, nodding along distractedly.

"Well, what about the second floor?" Vega asked, refusing to give up being helpful. "The war room is defunct now. You could put him up in one of the little side rooms. Or the meeting room. Just collapse the table and put in a mattress and it'll be perfect." A thoughtful silence followed this, with Shepard staring intently at Mov, trying to imagine how big of a mattress she would have to set down for him. She supposed she could take two mattresses from the crew's quarters, as only a handful of the beds in there were currently in use, but she did not like the idea of having Mov so close to the starmap, the cockpit, and her on-duty crew. Just then, the sound of Vega clearing his throat gently caught her attention, and she looked up in time to see him staring down at her, worriedly. "Hey," he told her, speaking in a lower, worried voice now, one likely meant for her ears only. "No offense, Commander, but you look like shit."

Shepard faltered at the blunt observation, but had no doubt he was probably right. She had not had a chance to glimpse a reflection of herself since leaving Parnack, but she was still more than aware of her mud- and blood-streaked face, her scuffed and blackened armour, and her dirty, dishevelled hair. "Thanks, Vega," she answered, half-jokingly. "Always good to know you've got my back."

"I'm just saying, maybe you should think more on this rooming business after you've had a chance to take a quick shower or something," Vega told her, raising his brows, concerned, barely seeming to acknowledge her joking retort at all. "I'm sure our new friend will keep until you get back. Plus, I'm pretty sure your little cariño is probably wondering where you are by now. I know I'd be getting worried if I was him."
Shepard blinked at this, taken aback by the offer, unsure for a moment how to respond. After everything she had faced in the Parnack jungle, she knew she was lucky to have gotten out with only superficial injuries, but she also knew that it would not be wise to show up to her son's playroom looking as if she had just gone a marathon being dragged on her face. It was a generous offer, and one she was tempted to take, but she still could not quite shake the feeling of guilt that Vega had just been through the same nightmare she had and was probably wanting to shower and change just as badly as she was. "So, whaddya say, Lola?" Vega asked, drawing her quickly back to the present. "I can keep our buddy here distracted as long as you need me to. You go get washed and changed."

Then, a small, puckish smile quirking his lips, he turned to look back at Mov again, arching his thick brows. "I'm sure we're gonna be best friends by the time you get back," he added, good-humouredly, now speaking loud enough for Mov to clearly hear him. "You'll see. Me and my amigo, uh..." He trailed off, having already forgotten the name of their new yahg companion, before indicating towards the massive alien with an open-palmed glove. "Gordo," he finished, amused by his own name choice. "Me and my buddy Gordo."

"I speak Sol-Spanish, you know," Mov returned, deadpan, his ears giving another unamused flick as he turned to glance back at Vega again with his eight beady, black eyes. "Your childish epithets are not amusing."

"You'll learn to love them," Vega assured him, teasingly, not even seeming rattled by the fact that his clever nickname had been called out. "Everybody does eventually." Then, turning back to Shepard again, he jerked his chin in the direction of the elevator. "Go get cleaned up, Commander," he told her, reassuringly. "I can handle this guy. Go ahead."

"Thanks, Vega," Shepard answered, gratefully, starting to lean in towards him. She found herself having the sudden urge to kiss him on the cheek, to thank him for his sacrifice, but she quickly stopped herself, unsure if the gesture might come off as too romantically-charged. She had tried, a few years ago, to stir up Vega's interest in some sort of romantic interlude – however half-heartedly on her part, as she had been seeing Garrus more and more seriously at the time – but Vega had made it clear then that he had not been interested in being anything more than friends and military associates. She did not want to make the same mistake of making him uncomfortable again if that was still all he wanted, and so, lifting an uncertain hand, she instead clapped him awkwardly on the shoulder, offering him a stiff, soldierly pat on the arm as thanks for helping her out. "Thanks," she repeated, unsure what else there was to say. Then, turning away from him again, she started to head towards the elevator, trying to convince herself as she walked away that he had not looked as disappointed in the standoffish gesture as she had felt in giving it.

The bathroom was still choked with steam as Shepard stepped out of the shower, tousling her now-clean hair dry before wiping off the mirror with her towel to check her reflection in it. Although the worst of the mud and blood had been washed away down the shower drain, she could still clearly see the cuts and bruises she had earned in the treacherous jungle. The entire left side of her face was bruised and swollen, her cheek red and tender from a massive cut, and she quickly pulled a small tube of medi-gel from her bathroom drawer, dabbing the solution onto the cut to seal it off from getting infected. Her neck, collar-bone, and all down her arms and thighs were covered in crosshatched scratches, likely a result of having been dragged, and one of her elbows and both of her knees were so bruised they were almost bloody. Blisters had formed on the backs of her heels and on her wrists, and a puffy reddish ring had formed around her right eye, one she knew would eventually turn into a bad bruise. She could see specks of blood in the white of the same eye, likely from a popped vessel, and she sighed as she stared at her haggard reflection, trying her best to comb her bangs over her facial bruises as best she could before giving up the futile effort and moving into her room to change into her ship clothes instead.
Vega and Mov had relocated by the time she returned to the hangar to find them, but it did not take long for her to spot them tucked into Vega's tiny cubby-hole, playing a game of cards on a stack of shipping boxes. Vega sat on an overturned crate, but Mov sat directly on the floor, his impressive height still making him tall enough to match Vega even without the added padding. She could see that, while she had been up in her cabin showering and changing into clean clothes, Vega had shed his dirty armour and had taken what appeared to be a quick towel to his face, but he still wore his stiff undersuit, and the cuts and scrapes on his face were still bloody, having not yet been patched up. She felt a sudden pang of guilt at the sight of his sorry, rushed clean-up, but said nothing, determined she would give him a proper thanking later, when Mov was not listening in. She could not tell what game they were playing from where she stood, but as she moved closer, tucking her hands curiously behind her back, she recognized it as a form of Ratscrew she had seen Vega playing with Ashley at one point during their time in the Alliance. It was a fast-paced game, one more about speed than strategy, and one Vega was infuriatingly good at, making her wonder how long they had been playing before her arrival, and how many hands Vega had allowed Mov to win simply to keep him from getting frustrated with the game. "You boys having fun over here?" Shepard asked, causing Vega to look up quickly at the question, before looking back down at the table again and swearing softly in Spanish as Mov flipped a card and claimed the deck.

"Yeah, Commander, loads of fun," Vega answered, giving a thin, strained laugh at the question. "Or we would be. If this tramposo over here didn't keep taking all the cards."

"Don't be a sore loser, James," Mov returned, drolly, meticulously straightening his now much larger stack of cards. Vega gave another stiff laugh at the comment, getting along, giving his much smaller stack a couple taps against the edge of the crates. Then, giving his cards a quick count, he shook his head, setting the stack down on the boxes again, before holding up his hands to let Mov know he was finished with the game.

"I think you've pretty much won this hand, Gordo," Vega told him, pushing himself up off the crates with a tired, oddly eager-sounding grunt. "I'm not even gonna try for a comeback." Then, dusting his dirty hands together, he jerked his head in Mov's direction, offering Shepard a conspiratorial, half-puckish smirk as he handed the alien over. "He's all yours now, Commander," he told her, cheerily, before adding in a lower voice, "Good luck."

Shepard frowned at the ominous send-off, but quickly turned to face Mov anyway, waving a hand to indicate for him to follow her towards the elevator. "Come on," she told him. "We've got a couple open rooms available. I'll take you up to the crew deck and the navigation floor and show you around. Let you pick which one you like best."

"Ah, the illusion of choice," Mov answered, musingly, pushing himself slowly up from the floor, before beginning to follow her towards the elevator, moving at his own leisurely pace. "Thrilling." Shepard said nothing in response to this, only pushed the button to call the elevator down to their level before stepping back again to wait for its arrival. She was never sure what he expected her to say to these bizarre, lofty, psychoanalytical cogitations of his, or if he even felt a response was necessary, as most of the time she figured he just did it to hear himself speak. She was spared having to think too long on this, however, as the doors of the elevator soon slid open with a soft ding, and she was quick to step aside, indicating for Mov to go in first, which he did with no argument, sidling judiciously into the small enclosed space as if it had been made with him in mind.

Shepard tried hard not to wince as the elevator groaned under his substantial weight, the metal framework creaking in agony as he settled into place against the back pane of the enclosure. She wondered quickly how much weight the elevator was built to withstand, unsure if the structure would be able to hold her weight in addition to Mov's, or if it might be wiser for her to take a second trip up after he had already had a chance to get off on the crew level. But, running a quick mental
check of the elevator's capabilities, she noted that the lifts had been built to withstand the weight of at least three party members at a time, with the inclusion of krogan party members kept in mind, so if Wrex or Grunt were eight hundred pounds each, and she and Garrus made up another three-fifty or so together, then that still meant Mov's thousand-pound weight would probably not cause the elevator to break if her hundred-fifty were added to it. Stepping carefully into the elevator alongside Mov, she selected the third-floor level button, before stepping back and waiting with bated breath as the doors slid closed and the lift began to rattle into motion.

It took a moment for the elevator to begin its ascent, but once the initial shuddering passed and the upward climb began, it quickly settled into a smooth rise, and Shepard let out her held breath in a low, relieved exhale. She had never had reason to doubt the Normandy's capabilities before, but this was also the first time she had had a yahg on board, and she was reminded starkly that it had been at least a year since the last time the ship had been taken in for standard repairs. She knew a majority of her neglect to the ship was due to the fact that she had simply not been able to afford anything more than basic upkeep for the past three years, but she still figured that, now more than ever, she could not stand to skimp on necessary safeties. She made a quick mental note to get the ship looked at the next time they happened to stop by the Citadel, but her attention was quickly drawn back to the present as the elevator finally reached the crew level, the lift settling to an uneasy stop as the doors slid open with another soft ding, allowing the two of them to exit onto the community floor.

No sooner had Shepard rounded the corner of the elevator shaft when she heard the sound of soft footsteps fast approaching, and she looked up in time to see Liara rushing over, her blue eyes wide as she stared at her friend's haggard appearance. Her entire face was flushed as pale blue as if she had just seen a ghost, and her mouth hung open in shock as she passed her gloved hands over Shepard's bandaged face and shoulders, seeming unable to even touch her out of bewilderment at how battered and bruised she looked. "Not looking so hot, huh?" Shepard asked, half-joking, but Liara did not return her amusement, her eyes flashing sharply as she turned them up towards Shepard's face again, upset.

"I told you not to go to Parnack," Liara insisted, clearly trying hard to keep her voice from shaking. "I knew something awful would happen to you. I knew you should never have gone down to that awful, terrible pla—" But the last word died quickly in her mouth as Mov rounded the corner of the elevator as well, taking his time, coming to stand dutifully behind Shepard as he waited to be shown the ship's available rooms. Liara's face turned immediately ashen at the sight of the massive alien, her hands frozen, mid-gesture, her lips drawn tight, her eyes so wide in her pallid face Shepard felt they might be at risk of falling out. She glanced back quickly to see what Liara was looking at, before turning around to Liara again, holding up a hand to get her attention, realizing she had to diffuse the situation fast before it had the chance to turn ugly.

"Liara, this is Mov," Shepard said, speaking quickly, indicating over her shoulder towards the yahg. "Mov, this is my friend and the ship's resident history specialist, Doctor Liara T'Soni." Mov gave a polite inclination of his head towards Liara at the introduction, but Liara did not return the gesture, seeming barely even able to move as she stared up at the new arrival. Then, lifting an unsteady hand, she pointed limply towards her office door, her gaze flicking anxiously between Shepard and Mov, as if afraid to take her eyes off the new crewmate for more than a few seconds at a time.

"Shepard," Liara entreated, her quiet voice strained. "Can I… talk to you privately, for a moment?"

Shepard frowned a bit at the invitation, unsure what Liara wanted, but did as she was asked regardless, moving away from Mov to stand beside Liara instead. She had known from the start that Liara would likely object to Mov's presence on the ship, but she had hoped that her friend might be willing to listen to reason on the matter. As soon as she reached Liara, however, the asari quickly shooed her into her office, making sure the door closed securely behind them before turning to look
back at Shepard again, her expression severe. "Shepard, what have you done?" Liara hissed, pressing her back to the door, making a quick glance over towards the surveillance screens to ensure no one was listening in on the other side. "Not only did you go to a planet full of yahg, you—you brought one back with you?! What were you thinking?! Were you thinking?"

"Is there a problem, Doctor T'Soni?" Glyph inquired, floating up to greet Liara, but she quickly waved the drone away again, clearly in no mood to answer his cheerful questions.

"This was reckless, Shepard," Liara scolded, pointing a furious finger at the floor. "Too reckless. Even for you. You know you're too busy managing the Normandy to monitor that thing's behaviour yourself, and your crew can't be expected to keep a constant eye on it—"

"Mov," Shepard corrected her, shortly. "His name is Mov."

"I don't care what his name is!" Liara hissed, drawing a sharp diagonal cut across her body with her hand. "I want to know what happens when that thing isn't under constant surveillance! Do you just intend to allow it full free run of the ship – unsupervised?"

"Look," Shepard answered, curtly, unable to help feeling a bit irritated by Liara's accusatory tone. She knew full well how sensitive Liara was about yahgs, having nearly been killed by one while trying to save her friend Feron from the clutches of the Shadow Broker, but she also could not help feeling she was being unreasonable about their current situation. "I don't like it any more than you do," she told her, honestly, her short tone starting to soften again. "But he helped us, so I agreed to let him come on board the Normandy for a little while. We'll see how long it actually lasts." Folding her arms, she looked down at the floor, letting out a short, hard, tired huff, before looking up at the video monitors again, scanning over each one, looking for familiar faces. The Normandy seemed like a ghost town compared to the last time she had watched its activity from Liara's monitors, back during the War, and she could not help her gaze from drifting almost instinctively to the gun battery, as if expecting Garrus' familiar form to suddenly appear there. Letting out another, softer breath, she shook her head, tearing her attention away from the monitors again, before looking back up at Liara once more, less defensive this time.

"If he does something wrong, even one wrong move, he's gone," she told her, evenly, hoping her reassurance would do something to ease Liara's mind. However, Liara's frown did not budge at her words, and Shepard knew she could not really blame her for her scepticism. She was having difficulty believing her own conviction on the matter as it was – despite his apparent sophistication, Mov was a massive, dangerous creature, and it would take more than just a couple people with guns to get him to leave the Normandy if he was intent on causing trouble. "I didn't really have much of a choice in the matter, Liara," Shepard added, honestly, trying hard not to sound as exasperated as she felt at this fact. "I didn't know what else to do. There were monsters down there. Big monsters."

"One of which you just brought back with you aboard the Normandy!" Liara shot back, indicating again in frustration towards the sealed door behind her.

Shepard frowned at this, opening her mouth to speak, preparing to counter Liara's argument, before quickly deciding against it, letting her mouth snap shut again, realizing the matter was not worth fighting over. No matter what she said in response, Liara would be sure to bring the topic back around to Mov, and no matter how much she tried to justify her actions, Liara would always find some way to punch a hole through her rationalizations. Holding up her hands at her sides, Shepard dropped her gaze to the floor, shaking her head in defeat. "Fine," she said, quieter. "It doesn't matter. Nothing I say will change your mind. But the fact of the matter is, Liara, there's a yahg on board the ship now, and there's nothing we can do about it. I told him he could be here, and..." Taking another deep breath in, she held it, unsure where she was going with her statement, before letting her hands
fall back to her sides again, too tired to argue anymore. "We just… need to try to get along," she finished, letting her breath out again in a long, weary exhale. "For the crew's sake. And… for my sake."

Tucking her hands in her hoodie pockets again, she paused, expectantly, before a flicker of motion drew her eyes back over towards the surveillance screens once more. Mov was attempting to find a place to sit in the mess hall outside while he waited for the two of them to return, and, pulling one of the small, silver, human-built chairs out from under a table, he inspected it for a moment, pressing down on it with one hand to test its supportability, before tucking it back in again with a quiver of his ears and instead moving over to sit on the floor beside the stairs to the gun battery. He watched Doctor Chakwas through the window of the medbay for a moment, seeming intrigued by her work, only to find his observation cut quickly short as she pressed a button at her desk, closing the automated medbay windows, sealing him outside. Shepard suppressed a soft, cynical laugh at this, looking away from the mess hall camera again, only to find her eyes drawn once more to the surveillance vid of the empty gun battery.

She had no idea what time it was on Palaven right now, but she still could not help wondering, if she were to send a vid message to Garrus, if he would even be awake to receive it. It had been so long since their last communication that she had completely lost track of the time difference, but she knew she could not really be blamed for her lack of punctuality. She had been working hard to field assignments to support both David and the Normandy, and though she found herself feeling a bit badly about her lack of communication, she also could not help realizing that Garrus had made no apparent effort to contact her in that time, either. She knew he had to be as busy as she was with his duties as a post-War rebuild advisor, but it still seemed odd that he would not at least send an e-mail checking up on them after all his heartfelt rhetoric about missing out on David's life. Looking away from the gun battery again at this thought, she instead shifted her gaze to the cargo bay, watching for a few moments as Vega sat in his cubby-hole, cleaning his armour, buffing all signs of the hellish Parnack jungle out of the sturdy material as carefully and lovingly as if it was made of precious metals. Then, turning her gaze up towards Liara again, she let out another, more world-weary sigh, before jerking her head in the direction of the mess hall, indicating that it was time for the two of them to rejoin the crew.

Liara lingered a few steps behind Shepard as she made her way back through the office doorway, keeping a close watch over the Commander's shoulder as Shepard reentered the mess, causing Mov to look up at her expectantly from his seat near the gun battery stairs. "Mov, you'll be taking the council room," Shepard informed him, straight to the point, indicating towards the elevator. "It's on the navigation floor. We'll have to move some stuff around, but I think it's the only available room big enough to keep you from feeling cramped." And to keep him away from Liara and Rahma, she figured, but she did not feel it was necessary to say so to his face. She had an idea he would figure out soon enough how few people on the Normandy seemed to enjoy his presence, but until then she felt it was best to keep him where people were least likely to run into him on accident.

"I don't mind cramped spaces," Mov answered, honestly, seeming not to get the hint, his ears giving an intrigued flick as he stood up from the stairs again, standing once more to his full, imposing height. "You might remember my house. I'd be happy to take any other spaces you have available, to leave the council room open for use. The hangar, perhaps, or the gun battery—"

At this, Liara let out a high-pitched, incredulous scoff, causing both Shepard and Mov to look over at her in surprise. "There's no way you'll be rooming in the gun battery," she told him, bluntly, folding her arms over her chest and shaking her head. "That's heavy volatile weaponry, carefully calibrated to the ship's specifications. The only people allowed in there are engineers and weapons specialists. We can't risk the guns being tampered with, even accidentally." Shepard frowned at this last statement, knowing full well that accidental tampering was not what Liara was really concerned
about, before turning her attention back to Mov, watching him warily, waiting for his reaction to this roundabout accusation. To his credit, Mov did not react, merely continuing to stare at Liara as if she were talking about a slow-dripping faucet in the community washroom. His ears quivered faintly at the sides of his broad head as he considered how to respond, until, finally, he took a deep breath, before suddenly letting out a low, rolling chuckle, the sound causing Liara to instantly bristle. Her blue eyes grew wide as she stared at the yahg, her affronted expression as if this small sound was, to her, the equivalent of nails on a chalkboard.

"You're funny," Mov told her, languidly, causing her to prickle even more at the offhanded remark. "Liara, is it?"

Liara scowled at this, clearly resenting the way her name sounded coming out of his mouth. "Don't call me that," she insisted, shortly. "Only my friends can call me Liara. We are not friends."

"Then what should I call you… Liara?" Mov asked, drawing out her name at the end of the question, no longer even trying to hide the fact that he was actively attempting to get on her nerves. Shepard frowned at his goading, but said nothing, hoping the situation would diffuse itself before it would be necessary for her to step in. She had been guilty of intentionally heckling Liara before, herself, but while her bothering had always been in good fun, something about Mov's provoking seemed contemptuous, almost menacing. Liara seemed to notice this as well, and puffed out her chest, a faint, purple blush rising to the tops of her cheeks at the unspoken challenge to her authority.

"It's Doctor T'Soni," she answered, sharply, making no attempt to hide how much he was bothering her. Shepard had never seen Liara show this much open hostility before, even with Javik's most nettling barbs, and she had to wonder if perhaps she had been holding back on her vitriol this entire time, or if Mov had simply managed to get under her skin in a way no one before ever had. "Or nothing. In fact, I would prefer you don't call me anything."

Mov paused at this last addendum, his spined ears quivering in thought. "Point taken, Doctor T'Soni," he finally answered, evenly. Then, turning his eight black eyes back to Shepard again, he gave another offhanded flick of his ears, casual as ever before. "The council room will work just fine, Commander," he told her, conversationally. "Wouldn't want to accidentally tamper with anything... important." She could see his top four eyes flick back over towards Liara as he said this, checking for a reaction, before they quickly returned to Shepard again, not wanting to give the asari the satisfaction of knowing he cared what she thought of him. Liara pursed her lips at his answer, annoyed, but said nothing in response, keeping her arms crossed tightly over her chest, likewise refusing to react. Shepard could feel the temperature in the room start to drop the longer the two faced off in frigid silence, and she wondered if it might be appropriate for her to intervene, to keep the situation from escalating. She was spared having to make that call, however, when she heard the sound of the central elevator arriving again, the doors sliding open with a soft, cheery ding, making all three of them look up towards the sound, momentarily distracted from their chilly stalemate.

Traynor's flustered tittering preceded her into the mess hall even before she appeared around the edge of the elevator column, and she shifted David more securely against her hip as she shuffled hurriedly over to stand beside Shepard. "Sorry we're late," she apologized, out of breath, not even seeming to notice the standoff as she hoisted David distractedly against her hip again. In fact, she seemed to somehow not have noticed the yahg in the room at all, a fact which Shepard found equally baffling and impressive on the young yeoman's part. "We... got into a bit of a pickle. Had to get it fixed up before we came."

"I hurt my foot," David clarified, matter-of-factly, pointing to his injured foot. His left sock had been removed, and had been replaced instead by a purple-stained white-cloth bandage, relatively fresh from the looks of it. He sniffled softly as he lifted his foot higher in the air, making it easier for his
mother to see his injury. "Stepped on something sharp," he added, his voice fading out as he bundled his face closer into his chest, apologetically. "Didn't mean to cause trouble. I'm sorry I stepped on it."

"Ohh! Honey," Traynor fretted, reaching around to secure his leg around her waist again. "It's not your fault at all!" Then, letting out a clipped, worried sigh, she looked up at Shepard again, patting David nervously on the back, before shaking her head, seeming as frazzled as if she were dealing with her own child. "Poor little thing," she told her, speaking in a lower voice. "He keeps apologizing to me for hurting himself, as if it was his fault. If anything it was my fault, really. I should have paid better attention. I turned my back for one second while he was bathing, and…"

Patting David's back again, she started to rock him gently back and forth in her grasp, before letting out another short, restless huff, seeming to be letting out her anxiety in the form of constant, restless motion. "He managed to pry up the shower drain while I wasn't looking," she explained, indicating towards David with a nod of her head. "He wanted to see where the water went, and ended up cutting his foot on the edge of the hole. I should have been watching him, I'm so sorry, Shepard—"

"Come here, sweetheart," Shepard sighed, reaching out to pick her son up under the arms. Pulling him over to her hip instead, she pressed a reassuring kiss to his forehead, fussing gently with his fluffy hair before brushing the longest pieces out of his eyes. Then, patting him reassuringly on the back, she let him rest his head against her collar-bone as she looked up at Traynor again, her expression tired. "Don't beat yourself up, Traynor," she told her, honestly, watching as Traynor wrung her hands, continuing to glance anxiously between Shepard's face and David's bandaged foot. "He's a kid. Kids are curious. Hopefully this just means next time he'll know better." Looking down at David again, she petted back his dark down, causing him to look up at her again with bright, baleful eyes. "Now you know better than to go pulling things apart when nobody is looking to make sure you're safe, right?" she asked him, expectantly.

David made a face at the question, scrunching up his nose, before letting out his breath in a short huff and shaking his head like a dog clearing water from its ears. "I just wanted to see where the water went," he answered, hoarsely. "It just goes and goes. But the hole never seems to fill up." Then, seeming to get an idea, he looked up at Shepard again, his blue eyes wide. "Maybe it's a black hole," he whispered, more to himself than to her. "It's black… and it's a hole… and it sucks things in…"

"The physics involved in sustaining a functional black hole – even just a microevent, such as what you're suggesting – aboard a civilian vessel like this one would be unfathomable," Mov cut him off, bluntly, causing Shepard, David, and Traynor to all look his way, a bit dazed by his high and mighty tone. "Not to mention that the entity itself would be completely catastrophic… and technically scientifically impossible, at least of yet. It would require the ability to fabricate a space-time vacuum, which would necessitate a post-scientific mastery of dark matter…" Pausing in his spiel then, he allowed his words to trail off, his ears giving a few wary, musing flicks as he stared back over at the three of them, seeming to realize for the first time that he had perhaps said something out of the ordinary. "Was he joking?" he finally asked, still not seeming to understand the problem, pointing a clawed finger at David. "Was that his idea of a joke? If so, it's quite amusing. Bizarre, but amusing. I've never been very quick on the draw on absurdist humour. Forgive me for failing to understand it sooner."

Shepard faltered at the end of his speech, unsure exactly what there was left to say, before she suddenly felt a small tug on her jacket, and she looked down to see David staring at her, his expression intent. "Mama," he whispered, as solemn as she had ever seen him, before pointing warily over her shoulder towards Mov. "That's a big krogan."

"I'm not a krogan, young man," Mov answered, loudly, causing David to jump in response, taking a sharp, startled gulp of air. Then, his eyes growing wide, he clamped his mouth shut, letting out a soft squeak, before curling up quickly against his mother's chest, burying his face in her jacket as he tried
to stifle the start of a hiccup. "I'm a yahg," Mov continued, watching with partially confused frustration as David wrapped himself tightly around his mother's torso, grounding himself. "We're two very different species. Nothing alike. I'm..." Stopping himself then in his own pontification, Mov paused, frowning, before leaning to one side to try to see under Shepard's arms, watching as David hiccupped again, curling closer against his mother's side. David whined softly as he clasped at Shepard's jacket, his legs wrapped so tightly around her waist she could feel him squeezing her organs, but she only let out a soft, patient sigh, rubbing his back as he gave another shuddering hiccup, this one accompanied by another soft whimper and a short, weak cough.

"Is he having difficulty breathing?" Mov asked, curiously, causing Shepard to look up at him in frustration as she dutifully massaged David's ribcage through his clothes. "Your... little turian friend, here? Is he suffocating? Choking on something?"

"He has the hiccups," Shepard answered, sharply, in no mood to explain further. "It hurts. Everything hurts."

"Tell him to hold his breath," Mov suggested, judiciously, indicating again towards the boy. "Thirty seconds, or as long as he can. That always worked for me."

"If he tries to hold his breath for thirty seconds he'll literally die—!" Liara started to argue, but Shepard quickly cut her off, turning to give her a sharp look.

"Liara," she interrupted, causing Liara to look up at her again, her blue eyes still flashing with indignation at Mov's suggestion. Making a wary face, Shepard shook her head, hoping to indicate that it was not worth it to fight, but Liara only seemed to bristle more at the implication, her plum lips drawing into a hard, piqued line. Shepard knew what kind of person Liara was – good-hearted and loyal, but stubborn and protective to a fault – and she knew that if it came down to it, Liara could handle herself in combat, even against a yahg like Mov. However, she was in no mood to clean up the aftermath of a biotic battle in the mess hall, especially when David was already upset enough as it was. "Why don't you get David a glass of water?" she suggested, indicating towards the kitchenette station with a jerk of her head, before massaging David's back again as another hiccup caused him to give a pained shudder against her.

Liara seemed unenthused by this suggestion, but straightened her posture regardless, taking a deep, calming breath as she glanced at Mov, and then at Shepard, seeming intent not to look at the yahg for any longer than absolutely necessary. Her gloved hands were still curled into fists at her side, but she seemed less anxious to use them now, a detail which Shepard figured was probably the closest thing she could count to a win in the situation. She watched as Liara moved stiffly over to the sink, grabbing a sterile metal cup from the still-steaming dishwasher, before turning on the filtration system to run a glass of water and crossing back over to Shepard again, holding out the cup for her to take. Accepting the cup from Liara with a nod, Shepard attempted to pry David's vice-like grip away from her neck, before moving the cup up to his mouth and indicating for him to drink it. David whined at the offered water, pursing his lips, but quickly changed his mind as another hiccup shook his body, causing him to give a small, choking sniffle as he took the cup, downing the water. Liara watched him intently as he drank, her expression softening a bit as he gave another hiccup, before Shepard handed the metal cup back to her, indicating for her to return it to the kitchen. Then, looking back up at Mov again, Shepard patted her son's back gently, staring intently at the yahg as she waited for the hiccups to stop.

"You have to stop doing that," she told Mov, firmly, causing his eight beetle-black eyes to widen, his smaller, lower spines giving a faint, indignant quiver as they began to peek out from under his bony chin. "You have to stop psyching people out like that, and—" Glancing down at David again, she sucked in a short, incensed breath, before cupping her hand across the back of his head, making sure
he was nestled safely into her shoulder before going on. "If you antagonize my son, I will get rid of you so fast it will make your ugly head spin," she hissed at Mov, watching as his ears flared out at the sides of his head, vibrating in irate surprise. "I don't care what kind of promise I made to you. He's more important to me than you are. All of my crew is." Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Liara's posture straighten, her shoulders squaring with self-satisfaction as she stood with her hands tucked dutifully behind her back, listening to Shepard tear into Mov as she watched on in silent, tight-lipped delight. "We're still close enough to Parnack that dropping you back there would be no problem," Shepard added, seriously. "And whether we do it by shuttle or airlock is entirely up to you."

At this, Mov's dark eyes narrowed, his ears giving a tentative flick as he stared her down, disbeliefing. "You wouldn't really throw a living crewman out the airlock," he challenged, speaking slowly, but it was clear from his tone that even he did not entirely believe his conviction.

Shepard scoffed at his self-assured response, shifting David a little higher against her hip. "Wanna try me?" she answered, her good humour gone. "I had a crewmate a few years back who was very invested in that as a solution. I can't honestly promise his methods didn't rub off on me."

For an instant, the threat hung, heavy, in the stagnant air of the crew deck, with neither Mov nor Shepard willing to back down from the dubious stare-off. Then, finally, Mov raised his ridged brows, blinking a few times as he straightened his posture, choosing to take the high road. "I apologize, Commander," he told her, his deep voice drawling, making it hard for Shepard to tell if he were being sincere or derisive. She wanted to believe her negative outlook on his behaviours was merely a result of her own adverse feelings towards him, but she also realized she could not honestly put it past him not to respect and insult her in the same breath. "I had no idea the child was your son. Had I known, I would have shown better conduct. I suppose I simply expected your son to look… more…"

"Human?" Shepard guessed, short on patience.

Mov hesitated at the guess, his webbed ears giving a few quick, tentative flicks. "Well… yes," he finally answered, seeming unsure what other options there were on the subject. "I wasn't aware you had adopted. My apologies, Commander. That's quite commendable of you."

"I didn't adopt," Shepard answered back, shortly. "David is my son. Maybe you can use your extensive and superior knowledge to help you figure that one out." Not bothering to wait for an eloquently indignant response, she turned away from Mov, starting to head towards the central elevator again, giving David another reassuring pat on the back as she did so. "I have to make a call," she informed the three still standing in the mess hall. "Don't make me come back up here. You two, Liara and Mov— you're already on thin ice. Mov, Traynor will take you to the council room. And Liara—" Pressing the elevator call button, she turned to look back towards Liara again, giving her a sharp, knowing look. "Play nice," she told her, frankly, causing Liara to give a few surprised blinks in return.

"No promises," Liara answered, honestly, her quiet voice clearly strained.

It did not take long to get David down to sleep, tucked into the warmth of his mother's bedsheets, but Shepard still found she could not help but linger, sitting on the edge of the bed and watching as his little chest rose and fell with his breathing. Despite how calm and peaceful he looked, it still felt odd to watch him sleep, as if she could feel an impending sense of dread creeping on, a morbid inkling at the back of her mind that these moments were not made to last. She knew full well that these years were only temporary, the years of her son's innocence – a few fragile, fast-moving moments barely hanging on by a thread – and she knew that if she did not hold onto them tightly, they could easily
slip away forever. Reaching out a hand, she gently brushed her son's soft, downy bangs away from his face, tucking them gently behind one of his ears before retrieving her hand to her lap again. When she had been pregnant, Miranda had predicted her baby's lifespan to last barely five years at most, and though she had almost forgotten about this while struggling through David's first, most difficult years, it had slowly begun to burrow itself back into the recesses of her mind ever since the passing of his third birthday. It was no secret that David's medical issues made his life difficult at best, but the thought that he might not make it past five, even with all the time, effort and devotion she had put into giving him the best life she could possibly manage, was almost too much to stand, even for a war-hardened soldier like Shepard.

Letting out a soft sigh, Shepard looked up and over towards the nightstand, noting the slightly lopsided elcor plush standing watch at the edge of the table. Despite her melancholy mood, she could not help a small, bittersweet smile from turning up the corners of her lips at the sight of it, and she reached out, attempting to straighten him, pushing one of his legs back so he stood up tall at attention. "Keep an eye on him for me, Nexus," she told the toy, brushing a thoughtful finger over the larger of Nexus' mismatched button eyes. Then, letting out a soft, sad laugh, she let her hand fall back to her lap again, her attention turning back to David as he shifted slightly in his sleep. It was a ridiculous notion and she knew it, the idea that she could somehow protect her son forever just so long as she never let him out of her sight – life gave leeway to no one, no matter how cautious, and the concept of never being apart from someone was fanciful at best. Still, in that instant, as he slept there peacefully against her pillows, she felt almost afraid to look away, as if something terrible might happen to break this tranquil moment as soon as she turned her head.

It took great effort to tear herself away from David's bedside, but, finally, she managed to push herself up off the edge of the bed, moving across the room to instead drop down into her roomy desk chair. Tapping the vidscreen to wake it up, she selected Palavan's comm signal, setting it to connect, before leaning back in her chair again and waiting for the systems to sync. It did not take long before she found herself staring at the call waiting screen, its infuriating pattern of three repeating dots flashing in a row against a yellow screen as it waited for someone to pick up on the other end. Thirty seconds went by without any answer, and then a minute, and Shepard found herself suddenly worrying as she tucked her legs up into her chair, wondering if perhaps her internal comparative clock was so off that she had managed to call in the middle of the night on Palaven. Then, finally, just as she was about to give up on the call, she heard the tentative beep of someone accepting the transmission on the other end, and she found herself staring at a startled-looking Garrus, still settling down into his seat on the other side of the comm.

Garrus looked confused, almost dishevelled, and Shepard could not help worrying again if perhaps her call had pulled him out of bed. Even so, he blinked a few times as he stared at the vidscreen, his mandibles hovering, tentatively, quivering faintly at the sides of his chin, still a bit too surprised at the sight of his caller to manage an assured dip or tap. "Shepard," he finally commented, breaking the uneasy silence, still seeming stunned to see her staring out at him from the other end of the vidcomm. "You look awful. Did something happen? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Garrus," Shepard assured him, reaching up a hand to gingerly touch her fingers to her tender cheek. "Just got a little banged up on my last mission is all." Then, letting her hand drop back to her lap again, she gave a small, weary smirk. "Thanks for noticing, though," she added, half-jokingly. "I was afraid we might go one whole conversation without you mentioning how terrible I look."

"I…" Garrus faltered at this jab, seeming unsure if she were being serious or not, before quickly realizing she was joking and letting his gaze fall down to his lap, half-embarrassed. "Sorry," he answered, giving a soft huff of tired laughter. "You just… caught me a little off-guard, is all. I wasn't really expecting you to call." Then, looking up again, he frowned a bit, the hard plates of his
brow drawing together in a furrowed line. "How long has it been since the last time we spoke?"

"It's been a while," Shepard answered, keeping her voice even, not wanting to let on too easily exactly how much that fact bothered her. "A couple weeks, at least."

At this news, Garrus faltered, his blue eyes widening as his mandibles opened out from his chin, hovering in startled suspension for a long, unsettled moment. Then, seeming to remember where he was again, he frowned, giving a short, grounding shake of his head, before looking up at Shepard again, his mandibles twitching anxiously against his jaw as he tried to reconcile what she was saying. "Has it really been that long?" he asked, his voice lower now, as if afraid someone might overhear and recognize his incompetence. "I... I'm sorry, Shepard. I didn't mean to go for that long without contacting you two. I guess the time just... got away from me." Sitting back in his chair then, he paused, considering a spot on his desk just to one side of the vidscreen, his frown deepening as his mandibles gave another few pensive dips and taps against his chin. "Out here, the days seem to kind of... flow together, sometimes," he added, more to himself than to her, seeming lost in thought. Then, returning his attention to the vidscreen again, he let out a short, reticent huff of breath, before leaning forward, resting his arm on the desk, and beginning to drum his fingers thoughtfully against its polished surface.

"Listen, Shepard," he told her, speaking up again, sounding much more matter-of-fact now. His tone was strangely clipped, almost defensive as he spoke, and Shepard could not help but notice the way he kept forcing himself to look at her rather than glancing away, nervously. She could tell he was feeling anxious about talking to her, as much as he was trying to hide it behind a front of proficiency, but she decided against mentioning these telling mannerisms, figuring there would probably be an explanation later on when he was feeling less put on the spot. "I wanted to call you. I really did. But I'd just... hoped to wait until I had better news. Things..." Stopping then, Garrus hesitated again, his voice trailing off, before letting out a deep sigh, finally letting his gaze drop from the vidscreen, unable to maintain eye contact anymore. "Things are bad here," he told her, truthfully, his voice lower this time, as if he resented even having to say it. "Something... really bad has happened. I'd hoped we'd be able to clear it up before I contacted you, so I wouldn't have to worry you about it, but..."

"What's wrong?" Shepard asked, worriedly, sitting up a bit straighter in her seat. "Is it Solana or your father?"

At this, Garrus looked up quickly, his eyes wide again, startled by the question. "What? No," he answered, hurriedly. "No, Solana and my father are fine."

"So then what is it?" Shepard pressed, still anxious despite her relief that Garrus' family was not in immediate peril. "What's happening? Tell me, Garrus."

"It's... hmm." Garrus sat back in his chair again at this, frustrated that he seemed unable to formulate the words he needed. His plated brow furrowed into a hard frown as he thought, his dogged gaze settling on his hand still half-curled on the desk as his mandibles gave another few anxious, telling tics against his tapered chin. "First of all," he finally began again, speaking slowly, treading cautiously as he tried to find the right way to explain his situation. "Let me start by saying that... up until now, our primary effort has been on restoring Palaven. That's where the worst of the damage was. The Reapers... basically demolished every last bit of our homeworld." Shepard nodded in understanding, having already been told as much beforehand, but did not press him, allowing him to figure out the next part of his explanation before moving forward. "There was hardly anything left to build on," Garrus continued, speaking a bit more assuredly now, clearly starting to get a better idea of what he wanted to say. "It's been a long struggle trying to piece together what little we could, and salvage what could be even remotely fixed. The Reapers destroyed damn near everything. It's a
nightmare out there. But we were making progress." Here, he paused, watching Shepard's expression for a moment, before suddenly looking down again, his hand curling a bit tighter on the desk as he stared at it, looking anywhere but at the vidscreen. "Or… so we thought."

Shepard frowned at this addendum, uneasy as to where this story could be going. "What happened?" she asked, apprehensively, forcing herself not to worry too much until she knew what the actual problem was.

Garrus took a deep breath in at the question, his expression muddling as he did so, making it difficult for Shepard to tell what he was thinking as he paused, trying to figure out how to continue on. "Well, while we were cleaning up on Palaven, we found… husk remains," he finally answered, his speech slow again, tentative. "Badly biodegraded, but… we could still tell what they were."

"That doesn't seem that unusual," Shepard reasoned, sitting back in her own chair, trying hard not to let on how relieved she was at the news. She did not want Garrus to feel as though she were discounting his concerns – she knew well the frustration that came with one's worries being casually dismissed – but at the same time, if the only thing going wrong on Palaven was the discovery of husk remains, then that meant Garrus and his team were not in any real, immediate danger. Folding her arms over her chest, she stretched one leg out in front of her again, getting more comfortable as she settled in, regarding the vidscreen. "The Reapers hit Palaven pretty hard," she added, matter-of-factly. "It makes sense that there would be husks there."

"Right, yes, there would be," Garrus returned, nodding along, distractedly. "Normal husks. But these weren't normal husks. They were… different." Stopping again, he paused, wavering on his point, before tucking his chin in faintly towards his chest, his mandibles giving short, irritable quirks at the sides of his jaw as he let out a low, soft thrum, his brow furrowing in a worried scowl, as if debating whether he even wanted to continue onward with the conversation at all. Shepard frowned a bit in return, saying nothing, but unable to help wondering what could have gone so wrong to cause him to hesitate like this. Then, finally, after what felt like an eternity of waiting, Garrus took a deep, readying breath in, before leaning in towards the vidscreen again, his expression frighteningly solemn. "Shepard, I… I didn't want to be an alarmist, but… I swear I saw the remains of a salarian husk," he told her, his voice lower this time, barely loud enough for her to hear him over the vidcomm. "Maybe even a quarian, too. That one was too badly degraded to be completely certain, but… it definitely didn't look like anything I'd seen before."

Hesitating again, Garrus fidgeted with his hands folded together on the desk, his mandibles giving curt, restless dips at the sides of his chin as he stared at her, clearly fighting to keep his expression unmoving. "I hate to think it, but… is it so crazy to think the Reapers might have been experimenting towards the end of the War?" he pressed, shrugging, opening his hands towards the screen before quickly folding them in front of him again, nervously. "Seeing what other species they could utilize? Salarians, quarians… elcor, volus, vorcha… who knows what other husks they might have made towards the end? Things were getting desperate on both sides, and we… weren't exactly keeping watch. It's not unheard of that we could have overlooked something like this." Having said this, he paused, staring at Shepard expectantly, as if hoping she might have something positive to add to lessen his fears about the whole situation. "The Reapers were using all the other spaceflight species to make husks," he added then, reasonably, though it was easy to tell the topic still made him anxious, as much as he was trying to hide it. "So I guess it… makes sense, in a twisted sort of way."

"I guess," Shepard agreed, noncommittal, trying to tame the inflection in her voice so as not to let on the way her heart had clenched when he had mentioned the possibility of quarian Reaper creatures. If the Reapers had managed to create quarian Reaper creatures, that meant they had found a way to override the quarians' naturally weak immune systems with a synthetic substitute, thus allowing them to live and roam freely without their suits. And if what Garrus had said was true, that likely also
meant this process came with the added side effect of the quarians becoming horribly disfigured and indoctrinated, as all Reaper creatures were. Shepard was reminded abruptly of the conversation she had had with Tali towards the end of the War, about how the geth were assisting with the quarian reclamation of Rannoch, and how Tali had optimistically described the geth helping the quarians' immune systems to become stronger in a shorter period by using synthetic upgrades and faux viruses. The process had seemed hopeful at the time, almost miraculous, but now, thinking back on it, Shepard could not help remembering that the geth had been adapted with Reapertech upgrades during the course of the War. If the quarians were now allowing the geth upload access to their suits, with the goal of artificially strengthening their immune systems…

She quickly stopped herself mid-thought, pushing the disagreeable idea from her head, forcing herself not to let her paranoia get the better of her. She knew full well that Tali and the rest of the Admirals were intelligent enough to know what they were doing, and that if there had been any hint of foul play, they would have stopped it long before any real, irreversible damage had had a chance to occur. Looking up at Garrus again, she quickly levelled her expression, not wanting to let him know just how much his revelation had shaken her. He was already feeling anxious enough about telling her what was happening on Palaven, and any indication that she was just as worried would likely make him stop sharing altogether. "It's all over now, though," she added then, optimistically. "So…" Stopping again, she faltered, her voice trailing off, before a faint, troubled frown creased her brow, and she leaned forward towards the desk once more, trying to figure out Garrus' expression. It had changed to something between guilt and uneasiness, and he shifted in his seat a few times as she watched him, as if he could barely contain something he was simultaneously too troubled to share.

"…What?" she asked him, apprehensively, knowing she would likely regret the answer.

Garrus wavered at the direct question, the quick, irritable twitching of his mandibles giving away how uncomfortable he was at the prospect of answering. "Hm," he finally responded, shortly, turning his gaze quickly downward again. "It's… nothing, Shepard. Nevermind. Forget I said anything."

Shepard's frown deepened at this non-answer, and she pursed her lips in frustration, wondering if Garrus honestly expected her to accept that as a real response. He knew she disliked getting the runaround as much as she disliked being lied to, though she figured he had probably learned to default to the former after realizing how terrible he was at the latter. That was one thing she had noticed David had gotten from his father – he had never been able to lie to her, no matter how hard he tried, a fact she was simultaneously amused by and grateful for. "Garrus," she told him, frankly, causing him to look up again at his name. "I'm not stupid. I can tell when something is bothering you. It's obviously important or you wouldn't be so upset about it." Sitting back in her chair again, she folded her arms over her ribcage, offering him a reassuring shrug. "What's wrong?" she asked, hoping her casual body language might help him relax a bit as well.

Garrus blinked a few times as he considered her request, seeming to be debating whether or not it would be best just to tell her and get it over with. Then, after a while, he let out a short, soft huff, looking down again as he twisted his hands in front of him on the desk. "I never could keep a secret from you," he told her, letting out a low, hoarse half-laugh, sounding more frustrated by this fact than amused by it. "You were always much better at that than I was." Shepard faltered at the subtle addendum, but decided against drawing attention to it, not wanting to divert attention away from the matter at hand. Over the years Garrus had gotten better at not making cracks about her keeping her pregnancy a secret from him, but every so often he would say something like that, something just slightly off from the norm, and she could not help but wonder if it had been an intentional dig. "You know Manae, our moon?" Garrus began again, tentatively, causing Shepard to forgo her current train of thought to focus on what he was saying. "You remember it was our secondary military outpost, and the last of our home bases to fall to Reaper control?" Having said this, he paused, looking up at
her expectantly, waiting for her to nod in agreement before he continued on. "Well, we didn't really have a chance to do recon on it until recently," he explained, still speaking haltingly, as if walking on eggshells, testing to see how much he could reveal before one or both of them became too uncomfortable for him to continue. "And when we went back…"

He stopped, his sentence trailing off, his mouth still open as if to form words, before he finally shook his head, closing his mouth again and looking back down at his desk, unable to say any more. "I don't know what to say, Shepard," he told her, honestly, speaking in a low voice. "I didn't want to have to tell you this. It's… not what you want to hear."

"Tell me, Garrus," Shepard pressed, trying hard not to get annoyed with how much he was making her work for this information. Whatever was going on over there, it had not been enough of a disaster to reach galactic news networks just yet, which had to mean it was either something benign he was only paranoid about telling her because he thought it might upset her personally, or something horrific the turians were working overtime to hide every trace of from public exposure. "You know I care about your well-being," she told him, causing him to look up again at her earnest tone, an odd, almost guilty expression in his blue eyes as she said it. "It's important I know what's going on over there."

Garrus wavered at her reasoning, clearly knowing what she said to be true, before finally letting out a hefty, anxious sigh, finding no reason to put her off any longer. "We… found husks on Manae, Shepard," he told her, gravely, working hard to retain eye contact as he said it. "Live… husks. And not just any husks. Cannibals and marauders. And… brutes."

Shepard blanched at this news, swallowing back her quickly-beating heart as her mind was filled with vivid images of the hulking monstrosities. She could clearly see their lifeless, glowing eyes and long, snake-like vertebral necks, watching as they swung their massive claws in front of them like bulky, grotesque anchors as they bowled their way over the battlefield, ploughing down any poor soul who happened to get in their way. She also remembered too well the recurring nightmare she had had all throughout her pregnancy, of giving birth to a brute, the same brute the Leviathan had pulled from her darkest retention to torment her with when she had gone down to the depths to try to win its favour. She felt her gut give a subconscious twist at the thought, the taste of bile rising fleetingly to the back of her throat, before she quickly forced it down again, lifting a half-aware hand to rest it reassuringly on her stomach. Then, closing her eyes, she shook her head, forcing the horrific thought from her mind, before taking a deep breath and opening her eyes again, looking back at the videscreen, meeting Garrus' worried gaze as he stared out at her from the other side of the monitor. "How, though?" she pressed, trying to return quickly to the conversation, not wanting to give him time to worry about her. "How is that even possible? Husks are supposed to biodegrade after a few weeks, or… a couple months, at most…"

"Human husks are, yes," Garrus answered candidly, nodding along in solemn agreement. "And human husks do. But cannibals, marauders, and brutes… they've found a way to keep themselves alive. For… apparently, years."

"What about banshees?" Shepard asked quickly, feeling the familiar sense of panic bubble up again at the thought. Though the brutes had been bad, the banshees had probably been the worst of the Reaper creatures, with their black, cold, soulless eyes, their gaping, screaming mouths, their impossibly long, misshapen limbs and swollen torsos… it made her sick to even think about it, and about Liara's expression when she had come face-to-face with one behind the glass at Sanctuary. The way she had gone deathly pale as she stared at what the Reapers had done to one of her own, at the monstrosities that awaited her people if they failed in their mission…

"We haven't seen any banshees yet, thank spirits," Garrus answered assuredly, cutting her morbid
train of thought short. "Hopefully they were all too insulated to develop into cohabitational populations like the other Reaper creatures and they all died out after the War. But the rest of them, the marauders, the cannibals, the brutes… they began to… to…"

"Cooperate," Shepard finished, solemnly, the thought acrid on her tongue.

Garrus exhaled sharply at the word, as if he could barely stand even hearing the notion voiced out loud. "Exactly," he answered, gravely. "Or, so it would seem. The marauders have learned how to make makeshift armour plating out of pieces of other Reaper creatures, which keeps the creatures from succumbing to the wear and tear of the elements, and… well, as long as they have a consistent source of nutrition, a… I guess, replenishing source of homogeneous organic material…"

"As long as they keep eating each other," Shepard translated, her expression unmoving.

"Right," Garrus returned, shortly, before pausing, his mandibles giving a short, disgusted twitch as he realized how casual his tone had become. The subject was, unfortunately, one both of them were familiar with, considering their history with the Reapers, but it just seemed strange to be conversing about it with such flippancy. "But it doesn't even have to be each other," he finally went on, pushing past his discomfort on the matter. "They've been eating… corpses. The flesh of the dead. Our dead. As long as they keep… processing, organic material, then… their bodies keep circulating… whatever it is Reaper bodies circulate." His mandibles gave another few methodical, pensive dips and tics against the sides of his chin, tapping out a thoughtful piece as he watched Shepard, as if hoping for some reaction to the news. "It's like the human Reaper we saw in the Collector base," he added, pointing a finger towards her, remembering suddenly. "The humans whose bodies were being liquefied, turned into that… grey organic substance… with the intent to pump that organic sludge through the human Reaper's veins. Like blood, except… not blood. Not exactly."

"I remember," Shepard answered, giving a solemn nod in return.

"Well, the same is true of the Reaper creatures," Garrus went on, dropping his hand to the desk again. "The cannibals were the first to figure it out, but the others… caught on. They take care of one another, Shepard, they… collaborate their efforts for survival. And it's working."

"How long can they last?" Shepard asked, leaning intently forward on her elbows towards the vidscreen, her brow furrowing. "It's been three years since the end of the War…"

"I don't know," Garrus answered, frankly, shrugging his plated shoulders. "I doubt all pockets of Reaper creatures left over after the War maintained themselves as well as these ones have. They weren't made to be intelligent like the Reapers were. Without constant upkeep and nutritional resource, they'd easily die out in one… two, three months, provided they weren't killed by one of us first." Pausing to think then, he rested his hand in front of him on the desk, the pad of his thumb rubbing absentmindedly against the inside of his second finger. "The Reapers, though… they lived for hundreds of thousands of years before we took them down," he added, a bit more concernedly. "Who knows how long these things could last with the proper care and environment." A cold, uncertain silence fell on the conversation after this, with neither Shepard nor Garrus meeting the other's eyes, both too lost in morbid, pensive contemplation to think of how to continue. Then, pulling his hand from the desk again, Garrus let it drop back into his lap, before taking a short, sharp breath inward, the quiet sound pulling Shepard quickly back to earth. "I told you it wasn't something you wanted to hear," he told her, soberly.

Shepard frowned, chewing the inside of her lip, considering how best to respond without unintentionally upsetting or patronizing him. "No," she finally answered, candidly. "No, it's not. But, I'm glad to know about it. It's good to… keep informed. Even if it's not the best news."
Garrus' expression did not move at her answer, the only thing indicating he was thinking about what she had said the soft, discerning tapping of his mandibles against the sides of his chin. "Hm," he finally grunted, noncommittal. Then, leaning back in his chair again, he let out a deep, tired sigh, propping his elbows on the wide armrests and settling more comfortably down into his seat, his demeanour becoming much more casual as he regarded her through the vidscreen. "Speaking of which, how is David?" he asked, sounding only too happy to change the subject.

Shepard hesitated at the question, tempted for an instant to point out the unfortunate associative topical segue, but decided against it, not wanting to bring any more unpleasantness into the conversation than they were already trying to leave behind. She glanced over at David before answering, making sure he was still asleep, before settling down a bit lower in her chair and tucking her hands into the pockets of her hoodie. "David's doing fine," she answered, honestly, keeping her voice as impassive as possible. "He… hurt himself earlier today, but it didn't seem to be too bad an injury. He had another episode, too, but we got it cleaned up. He seems okay. Not too upset about it, anyway." For a moment, she considered telling him about Mov and the hiccupping episode, but decided against it for the time being. The hiccups, while painful, had cleared up soon enough, and she figured Garrus was already worried enough about what was happening on Palaven without the added stress of knowing she had brought a yahg on board her ship with their three-year-old son.

"Another episode?" Garrus asked, his plated brow furrowing a bit in concern. "Are you still giving him quarian formula?"

Shepard hesitated again, hurriedly working to convince herself that the question was not a personal attack. It was difficult to navigate a conversation about David when every little question felt like a challenge of her parenting skills, but she figured that was likely more her fault than anyone else's. She had a tendency to get defensive, she knew, especially about things where she knew she barely any idea of what she was doing. "For the most part," she finally answered, truthfully. "Gardner's been working to figure out some other food he can keep down, too. It's a slow process, but… progress is progress."

"Have you tried giving him turian food?" Garrus suggested, holding up a helpful hand. Shepard said nothing in return, unable to help noting how quickly he seemed prepared to jump in with the proposal. "We have these things here on Palaven – you can probably get them by order on the Citadel," Garrus went on, not even seeming to notice the half-suspicious look she was giving him. "They're dietetic snacks for soldiers, not really filling but full of nutrients. Turian soldiers tend to get preoccupied and hyperfocused and sometimes forget to eat as a result, which is… obviously, bad for their health." Pausing then, he considered a moment, his mandibles giving a few pensive tics, before suddenly giving a soft laugh and shrugging his broad shoulders, self-consciously. "We can't really help it," he added, honestly. "We're a very… determined society."

"I've noticed," Shepard answered, amused.

Garrus looked up at her pointedly at this, his expression tickled, before looking down at the desk again with a deep, fond chuckle. "Hm," he answered, grunting, good-naturedly, before taking a big breath in. "Yeah. It's a curse." He paused again, considering her teasing for a moment, before letting out his breath again in a long, drawn-out exhale and raising his plated brows, looking up at her again and clearing his throat, softly, thankful for the repartee. "Either way, these things were created to ensure the soldiers still get their daily nutrients even when they don't have time to sit down for a full meal," he went on, returning quickly to the subject at hand, seeming eager to tell her all about it, as if knowing all the facts might help convince her better. "Like… carrying a bag of hagran seeds. You can eat a couple whenever you have a moment of downtime without having to worry about it being a… whole, big thing." Shepard had the urge to point out that the type of seeds he was referring to were also turian fare, and so held absolutely no meaning for her as a comparative element, but she
decided against it, settling down further into her chair as she let him continue his pitch. "They're sort of grainy, admittedly, and they don't really taste like anything, but they're small enough that he can space them out over time and still get the nutrients he needs," Garrus added. "And, who knows, maybe ingesting a little at a time will do his stomach better than a whole meal all at once. Maybe that's part of the problem."

"Maybe," Shepard answered, noncommittal, storing the suggestion at the back of her mind. If they ever managed to make it to the Citadel again in the near future, she told herself, she would be sure to ask about it in the nutrition store in the shopping plaza. If nothing else, she figured it would be a good prospect to keep in mind for future reference.

Garrus nodded along as well, seeming unsure what else there was to say now that he had finished telling her about turian snack food. "Right," he answered back, awkwardly, easily reading her lukewarm reaction to his suggestion. Then, lifting his chin again, his mandibles gave a few broad, attentive tics, his plated brow furrowing thoughtfully as he remembered something she had said just a bit earlier. "So – how did David hurt himself?" he asked, concerned. "Clearly he wasn't too badly injured, or you'd be more upset about it."

"Cut his foot," Shepard answered, shortly, folding her arms. "Trying to find a black hole in the shower drain."

At this unexpected answer, Garrus let out a soft, surprised laugh, turning his blue gaze downward, before shaking his head and looking back up at Shepard again, his jagged mouth twisted in a wry, toothy smile. "That's my boy," he chuckled. "So where is he now? Taking a nap?"

"Sleeping," Shepard confirmed, giving a half-attentive nod. Then, pausing, she chewed her lip, her gaze moving up towards David again, her expression twisting as she found her train of thought wandering, debating for a moment whether to let on to Garrus what she was thinking. She did not think it was necessary to add any extra weight to his already-heavy burden of worry, but at the same time she figured he would probably be able to relate to how she was feeling. As she looked down towards the vidscreen again, however, she felt almost lightheaded, as if reality had somehow altered in that moment, and all that was left was the two of them, having this conversation. "Is it strange that I miss him even though he's just… barely ten feet away?" she finally asked, realizing Garrus was likely the last person in the world to judge her on her thoughts. Garrus seemed surprised at the question, his plated brows raising a bit, and Shepard took a quick breath in, continuing before he could have a chance to answer. "I mean… I never get to see him," she added, honestly. "I'm always out on assignments. And when I do get back, he's always asleep. I know he's a growing boy, and he's sick, so sleep is important, but… is it selfish that I want to be able to spend some time with my own son?"

Huddling tighter into the folds of her hoodie, Shepard pulled her feet up into her chair again, letting out a soft, weary sigh as she stared at the vidscreen, feeling the ache of the day's trials causing her muscles to creak with every motion. "I'm tired of this, Garrus," she told him, her voice quieter, worn down by the weight of merely existing. "I'm tired of working all the time. And I know you must be tired of it, too. You haven't actually seen David in months. Only over vidcomm. I know you miss him, too." Letting out another, slower sigh, she frowned, her rouge lips drawing in a hard, unhappy line as she watched Garrus' expression, hoping for some sort of reassurance, but he only stared back sympathetically, saying nothing, his mandibles twitching softly in silent agreement. "This… isn't normal," she added, frankly, shaking her head. "We shouldn't have to miss our own son. We shouldn't have to work so hard that we don't even get to see our own child growing up."

Garrus frowned a bit at this final line of reasoning, his mandibles giving quiet, attentive taps against the sides of his chin, before he finally let out a soft, solemn release of breath, leaning forward a bit
towards the vidscreen and folding his hands in front of him on the desk again. "But what are we
going to do about it?" he asked, evenly, doing his best to play the voice of reason. "We can't just
quit. Either of us. I have to help rebuild Palaven, and you... have to support your crew." Having said
this, he paused, considering pointedly, as if wondering if there were a better way he could have
worded her responsibilities. "And both of us have to help pay for David's meds," he added, quickly,
not wanting to allow the awkward moment to linger. "That's an expense that isn't going away
anytime soon. If we stop working, we won't be able to afford those."

Shepard nodded along with his explanation, knowing full well he was right. "I know," she
answered, truthfully, doing her best to hold back a disappointed sigh. "It was just... a nice thought.
Finally being able to be a family. ...You know."

"I know," Garrus answered, honestly, and Shepard could tell he was telling the truth. Another
silence fell over the conversation at this, one Shepard found she barely had the will to fight. At least
in the silence she did not have to hear the disappointment in Garrus' voice, or the emptiness in their
promises to one another to try to keep in better touch, or try to see one another at some point when
their responsibilities allowed. No matter how hard they worked, their burdens never seemed to
lighten, and although they both tried their hardest to stay optimistic for the other's sake, she could tell
it was growing more and more difficult for both of them to keep from simply falling apart. Finally,
after what seemed like an eternity, Garrus cleared his throat, gently, breaking the encompassing quiet
and causing Shepard to look up again, not even having realized that her attention had started to drift.
"I should... probably go," he told her, quietly, his mellow voice barely above a hoarse, sad whisper.
"I have... paperwork to fill out, and you have..." He trailed off, swallowing the rest of his statement,
his blue eyes flicking momentarily to somewhere over her shoulder before returning once more to her
face, as if hoping to see David standing somewhere in the background. "You have... your own
responsibilities to attend to," he finished. "Things to do, missions to... complete."

"Fires to put out," Shepard returned, offering a tired, half-cynical smirk. Then, her weary smile
fading a bit, she leaned in forward towards the vidscreen, folding her arms on the desk and resting
her chin on her crossed forearms with a soft, longing sight, staring wistfully up at his image on the
 glowing monitor. "I miss you, Garrus," she told him, quietly. "I miss being with you. I miss...
touching you. Hearing your voice."

"You're hearing my voice now, aren't you?" Garrus asked, tilting his head forward a bit, curiously.

A small, half-embarrassed smile touched Shepard's lips at the practical question, and she closed her
eyes, letting out a soft exhale as she angled her face downward, giving a short, half-aware shrug of
her shoulders. "I guess," she answered, noncommittal. "But it's not the same as hearing it in person. I
miss just... having you around. Not even necessarily having you with me, just... knowing where
you were. Little things I never really thought about before, that... I guess I took for granted."
Opening her eyes again, she looked up into his face once more, watching as his mandibles dipped
and tapped thoughtfully at the sides of his jaw, his avian eyes soft and understanding as he stared
intently back at her, listening to her speak. Then, taking a deep, solemn breath, she straightened in
her chair again, glancing over towards David to make sure he was still asleep, before looking back at
Garrus again, regaining her stoic composure. "I'll... let you sign off now," she told him, quieter. "I miss being with you. I miss... touching you. Hearing your voice."

"You're hearing my voice now, aren't you?" Garrus asked, tilting his head forward a bit, curiously.

Garrus hesitated before answering this time, his mandibles moving in slow, distracted tics as he took
in a long, thoughtful breath, staring at the vidscreen. "Yeah," he finally answered, giving a curt,
awkward bob of his head, before letting out his breath again in a regretful huff, looking down
towards his folded hands on the desk once more. Shepard could tell that it was as difficult for him to acknowledge that it was time to go as it was for her, but she said nothing, not wanting to make it any harder than it already was. Garrus paused another moment, considering the surface of the desk, before his blue eyes strayed upward again, moving to rest somewhere just over the top of the monitor, finding it hard to look at her when he knew it was nearing time to say goodbye. "I'll try to… do better, about keeping you updated on Palaven's progress," he told her, clearing his throat, his professionalism sounding forced, almost choked. "And you'll… try to… keep me up to date on everything going on over there?"

At this, he looked down at the vidscreen again, making hopeful eye contact with her, making it obvious exactly what he was talking about. Shepard nodded in response, understanding. "Yeah," she told him, quietly. "Absolutely. Every little thing." Having said this, she offered him a small, sad smile, the gesture feeling almost forced, before letting her expression settle again, not wanting to be disingenuous. Then, moving her fingers to her lips, she pressed a soft kiss against her fingertips, before turning her hand around to press the kiss gently against the vidscreen. "See you around, Garrus Vakarian," she told him, quietly, before reaching over to disconnect the call, sending the screen to black.
The funds from the search and rescue mission on Parnack had barely cleared by the time the Normandy docked at the fueling depot, and Shepard could almost feel the credits draining through her fingers as she watched the fuel gauge rising slowly on Joker's navigation monitor. Letting out a short, anxious sigh, she leaned her elbows against the pilot's headrest, causing Joker to look up and back at her, understanding, before returning his attention to the display once more. "Look on the bright side," he pointed out, attempting buoyancy as the needle crawled up past the halfway mark. "At least we won't have to fill up again for a little while after this."

"Provided we don't have to do any long-distance intersystemary travel," Shepard added, deadpan, causing Joker's mouth to twist to one side in response. He knew as well as she did that the price of fuel had increased exponentially since the end of the War, and that no matter how full they got their tank at each stop, it never seemed to stay that way for long. Shepard had suspected for a while that the fuel companies were diluting their product to keep supply in line with demand, but she had never seen fit to look too closely into the matter. It was simply too much trouble to seek out one small source of dishonest business practice when so many, much larger examples existed almost everywhere she looked.

"Commander?" Traynor's young voice suddenly came through over the intercom, causing both Shepard and Joker to look up at the sound. EDI did not react, likely already aware that the call was about to happen, instead calmly continuing to type commands into her co-pilot computer. "Commander, there's an incoming communication request on the war-room holocomm," Traynor informed her, and Shepard could not help but frown a bit at the twinge of worry she could tell the yeoman was attempting to hide in her tone. "Alliance channels. It seems important. I patched the request through, but… I wouldn't dally. Whoever it is seems to be short on time."

"Alliance?" Shepard repeated, confused, looking down at Joker again as the intercom cut out once more. "The Alliance hasn't contacted me in… years. Not through official channels. What could they possibly want from me?"

Joker paused, considering, before finally responding with a wordless shrug, clearly just as confused about the matter as she was. Letting out a soft sigh, Shepard patted the back of the pilot's chair, half-reassuringly, before starting to turn away from the cockpit to head towards the former war-room instead. Back in her military days, she could always guess that if a call was urgent, that usually meant one of two things: either she had caused a problem and now had to fix it, or someone else had caused the problem and she was now, somehow, the only one qualified to go deal with it. These days, however, she had no idea what sort of urgent Alliance matter would constitute a call to her, personally – she was three years retired, and had thought herself to be off any and all official Alliance radar. Most days a call like this would set her mind racing, but at the moment she found her mind so full of other thoughts that the gravity of what might be waiting in the holocomm room could barely find purchase. She was so caught up in her own thought process that she barely noticed as she passed by what had once been the war conference room, until a sudden, large movement within the glass-panelled room made her suddenly stop, double-taking. Turning on her heel, she hesitated at the sight of the room, wary, before slowly starting to approach the glass to take a better look inside.

The large council table that had once stood in the middle of the meeting-room floor had been collapsed, just as Vega had suggested, leaving the room looking conspicuously bare, but Mov seemed to have done his best to accommodate the empty space. A small pot of dirt Shepard assumed had come from Parnack's jungle sat by the massive, starry window, with a shelf of books pushed up against the far wall, a tiny display made up of only what he could carry in the leather knapsack now
lying empty in a corner of the room. As she stared in at the meagre display, Shepard found herself feeling suddenly watched, and when she looked up again, it was to find Mov staring back at her through the glass, his beady eyes fixed on her, unblinking, his ears giving a faint, thoughtful quiver as he watched her, waiting for some reaction. "I see you're admiring my collection," Mov observed, frankly. His voice was muffled by the glass, and as he stood to his full height from his mattress, coming to stand in front of her, she could not help feeling a sudden, unnerving twinge of familiarity at the sight, though she could not quite place if it was the yahg or the cage which made her more unsettled. "You're welcome to come inside," he told her, his voice rumbling, causing her to blink a few times as she looked up at him again, pulled back quickly to the present. "Take a closer look. I don't bite."

"Neither do I," Shepard answered, bluntly. She knew he was trying to keep her on her toes, but she had no intention of playing his games, and his little pseudo-threatening comments did nothing to warm her to his supposed charms. Nodding towards the bookshelf, she tucked her hands in the pockets of her hoodie, frowning a bit as her eyes moved over the titles printed on the spines. "I can get you a better shelf for those," she told him, attempting diplomacy. "Maybe a glass case, to keep them safe. I can't promise everyone on this ship is as careful as they should be."

Mov gave a long pause at the offer, his ears flicking back once before continuing to quiver, before he finally let out a long, low, drawn-out hum. "I like my books where they are, Commander," he answered, glancing over at the shelf now, himself, considering it as his webbed ears gave another thoughtful flick. "I can access them easily there. And if your son would like to read them, he's welcome to access them, too." Having said this, he turned his attention back to Shepard again, his ears quivering even more noticeably now as a visible eagerness appeared in his eight black eyes. "I chose a shelf low enough for him to reach," he added, matter-of-factly. "If you ever allow him onto this level, he's welcome to visit me back here if he chooses."

Shepard frowned at his offer, untrusting, unsure where this sudden, apparent change of heart had come from. She suspected he was trying to get on her good side after her thinly-veiled threats of an airlock-gearied demise, but she still could not help finding his focus on David a bit unsettling, even menacing. He had nearly torn Vega limb from limb for simply picking up one of his books back on Parnack, yet now it seemed he was willing, even eager, to share them with a presumably heavy-handed toddler. "I'll pass the message along," she told him, speaking slowly, hardly bothering to try to sound convincing. "Though I doubt David would be interested in the same… subject matter you seem to be. Being… three."

"One should never underestimate the vigilance of children," Mov returned, cryptically, starting to turn away from the glass towards his makeshift mattress again. "They are often far more observant than we give them credit for. I doubt David is quite as clueless as you assume him to be, Commander. A child like David… sees and understands far more than you realize."

Shepard's frown deepened at the addendum, unsure if he was being condescending or not, before finally giving a short, sharp shake of her head, dismissing the comment entirely. "Right," she answered under her breath, too tired to think of any other response, before turning away from the glass as well and starting to head towards the war-room again. She cursed herself silently for ever agreeing to let the alien on board her ship, making a mental note that, once she was through dealing with whoever was on the comm, she would start looking for viable planets where she could most easily drop off a yahg.

The incoming message light was flashing on the comm panel as the door of the holocomm room slid open, allowing Shepard to step inside. She paused a moment as she passed through the doorframe, noting the faint, poignant chill still lingering in the atmosphere of the tiny space, making the hairs on
her arm prickle ever so faintly as she moved to stand in the middle of the floor. A light array of dust mites drifted through the stagnant, dimly-lit air as she glanced around the circular enclosure, a technological mausoleum, frozen in time, untouched since the days of the Reaper War. Looking down, she could still see the faint scuff-marks from where she had anxiously scraped her boots across the floor while talking to Anderson, Hackett, and the Council, terrified that one of them might find out her secret and eradicate her from the war effort altogether. The thought made her realize suddenly how long it had been since the last time she had used this particular holocomm – that had been more than three years ago, but the terror those conversations had instilled still rang fresh as she stood in this room again, preparing to talk to whoever was waiting on the other end.

Looking up towards the comm panel again, she could barely contain a sense of almost melancholy dread as she reached forward, pushing the button to accept the incoming request, before stepping back to wait with bated breath for the call to come through. The holographic display fizzled blue static as it fought to solidify an image of the caller, every so often showing fleeting glimpses of a rigid pair of shoulders, or a long, locked pair of legs. Shepard figured the holocomm probably needed a minute or two to warm up again after such an extended period of disuse, but it took only a few seconds for the image to finally settle into a tall, semi-solid figure standing at military attention in the middle of the holo-pit. Shepard felt her heart skip a beat at the sight of the messenger, but kept her expression impassive, not wanting to let on how much seeing anyone from her old military days still affected her.

"Commander," Hackett greeted her, his usual short, clipped introduction somehow welcoming to her ears.

"Admiral," Shepard returned, just as shortly, offering a quick nod of recognition as she tucked her hands behind her, straightening her posture respectfully. Military training ran deep in her blood, and though she knew she was no longer obligated to stand to attention for her former superior, it still felt right to offer him some level of respect. "What can I do for you today, Sir?"

"I've got an important assignment I wanted you to take on, Commander," Hackett answered, candidly, his bushy brows furrowing over his hard blue eyes as he said it. One thing Hackett could always be counted on for was getting straight to the heart of any matter. "I know you're not affiliated with Alliance networks anymore, but when the mission came up it automatically made me think of you."

"I appreciate that, Sir," Shepard returned, truthfully, allowing her stance to relax a bit as the conversation continued. "What's the mission, if I might ask?"

"You may," Hackett answered, matter-of-factly, offering a sharp nod in return. "The mission is a search and rescue operation. The daughter of one of our officers has gone missing from the housing units on the Citadel, and we fear she may have been abducted by slavers." Shepard's brow furrowed instantly at the mention of slavers, but she tried to keep her expression impassive as Hackett pulled up a projected diagram of the galaxy to float beside him in the holocomm display. "There have been a rash of refugee abductions similar to this all across the galaxy, with young people going missing – primarily children – all from family-populated areas such as Triton, Invictus, and Virmire," Hackett explained, pointing to the diagram, where several points had begun to spring up, showing the number of reported kidnappings across the various segments of the galaxy. As Hackett had mentioned, there seemed to be an alarming amount of reports in and around refugee-heavy areas, but Shepard could not help noting that a few were showing up near less obvious areas as well, such as Rannoch and Erinle. "We fear she may have been taken in the latest stretch of the slavers' operation," Hackett continued, waving a hand to collapse the diagram out of sight again. "We suspect these particular slavers' base is somewhere in the Arrae System, presumably on the planet Gellix, but that's as far as we've been able to trace them. We were hoping you might be able to look into it for us, and
hopefully take care of the situation."

Shepard nodded in understanding, unable to help noting how eerily familiar this whole situation sounded, and it took her barely another moment to realize that it reminded her strongly of the situation Liara and Miranda had told her had happened to Oriana and Matilda. They, too, had been kidnapped while in the company of refugees, and the mention of the slavers' specific interest in children was a telling connection between the two. However, unlike Hackett's wards, who had been stolen directly from refugee camps, Oriana and Matilda had been targeted by pirates while on refugee-specific transport, making Shepard realize that, while the events were inarguably similar, she would do well not to get her hopes too high that she might find Matilda along with these other children. "I'd be happy to look into it, Admiral," she told him, tucking her hands assuredly into the pockets of her hoodie. Then, hesitating a moment, she frowned a bit, before adding, tentatively, "...If you don't mind me asking, Sir, what made you think of coming to me instead of simply handling this issue internally?"

"The Alliance is under a lot of scrutiny right now, Commander," Hackett answered, frankly, not bothering to tiptoe around the point. "We've been under tight surveillance since the end of the War, and I'd like to keep this incident out of official channels, if possible." Shepard nodded along, trying to keep her expression impassive at the mention of inspection into the Alliance's activities. It was heartening to know that Hackett still trusted her with this sort of information, even though she was no longer an active part of the Alliance, but she still could not help worrying that she might have been part of the reason they were under such intensive investigation in the first place. "With the government checking up on our every move, it would make the Alliance look bad right now to admit that one of our officers' children was kidnapped right out from under our nose by pirates," Hackett added, his lined brow furrowing solemnly, his steely eyes hardening as his scarred mouth drew into a thin, pensive line, as if the very thought of being possibly reprimanded for his actions by a superior was unthinkably objectionable to him. Shepard realized suddenly that she had never really considered the idea that Hackett might in fact have superiors, as he had always been the highest-ranking official she had ever reported back to during her time in the Alliance, and she found herself wondering what kind of person one would have to be to cause someone like Hackett to tread so carefully to avoid displeasing them.

She did not have long to think, however, before Hackett suddenly spoke up again, intent on moving the conversation forward. "In addition to that, I suspect the mission will probably be bloody," he added, drawing Shepard sharply back to earth, cutting her train of thought short. "It always is with slavers. But in this case there may also be deaths of minors involved, and quite frankly I'd prefer not to risk that coming up in official reports."

"Understandable, Sir," Shepard returned, nodding again, trying to keep her expression from wavering at the mention of the possibility of child deaths. She had been at war, out on the frontlines, and she knew how collateral damage worked, but she still could not find it in herself to justify the deaths of children as anticipated casualties. She promised herself silently that she would try to prevent as much of that from happening as she could on this mission, but she also knew well that she could not let her idealism get in the way of completing the operation as a whole. As much as she hated to admit it, she knew that going out of her way to avoid the death of one child was not worth potentially forfeiting the lives of hundreds of others in the process.

"Hm," Hackett answered, shortly, seeming satisfied with the explanation he had given. "So you know, we'll be happy to pay you for your time, Commander. We don't expect you to do something like this for nothing. We'll wire the funds into your account beforehand, in case you need to stock up on supplies before heading out to Gellix."

Shepard faltered at the offer, pausing halfway through casually leaning her weight onto her back foot
to blink a few times, wondering if she had heard him correctly. Then, finally, she shook her head, scuffing the heel of one boot absentmindedly against the toe of the other. "I couldn't ask you to do that, Admiral," she told him, honestly. "I'd be happy just to help the Alliance."

"I'm sure you would," Hackett replied, straightforwardly, seeming completely unfazed by her refusal. "But regardless, you're doing us a service. Consider it a regular contract commission. Payment for services rendered."

Shepard hesitated again, unsure what there was to say to this. "Thank you, Sir," she finally answered, willing her voice not to waver as she spoke. "I appreciate that." Shifting her weight again, she readjusted her posture, moving back to even footing as she tried to think of some way to conclude the conversation. She had never been good at small talk, and she knew how much Hackett hated it, but she felt awkward leaving the meeting hanging where it was. Suddenly, she remembered something, and she looked up at Hackett again, expectantly. "How is Admiral Anderson doing?" she asked, hoping the shift in subject did not seem too jarring to the Admiral.

Hackett's expression did not budge at the question. "Anderson is doing fine," he answered, matter-of-factly, as if he had been expecting her to ask all along. "He retired after the War, like you did. Got awarded a Purple Heart for his service. He and Kahlee moved back into that apartment on the Silver Strip, the one you gave them."

"They gifted it to me first," Shepard pointed out, honestly. "I just thought they could put it to better use than I could."

"Hm," Hackett answered, seeming to have no opinion on the matter one way or another. "Either way, they seem to be doing fine for themselves, as far as I know. Nothing groundbreaking to report. Though – Anderson was just asking about you the other day, come to think of it. Wanted to know how your son was doing." Having said this, he paused, lifting his scruffy chin a little, as if expecting to see David hanging around in the holo-pit somewhere behind Shepard. "I told him he was probably doing fine," he added, thoughtfully. "But if there's anything specific you'd like me to convey, I'd be happy to pass it along to him next time we have a conversation."

Shepard shook her head at the invitation. "No… nothing specific," she said, not wanting to weigh Hackett down with extraneous information. If she ever got the chance to speak to Anderson herself, she would have plenty to fill him in on about how David was doing, but she figured Hackett had enough on his plate already without trying to remember little personal details about her son's life. "He's doing okay."

"That's good to hear," Hackett returned, giving a short, accommodating nod. Then, taking a deep breath in, he took one last look around the vidcomm room, before turning his stark attention back to Shepard again, fixing her with an intensive stare. "I'll put through a command to wire the funds for the search and rescue operation into your account," he told her, directly. "I look forward to your success in this, Commander. Godspeed. Hackett out."

Shepard could barely remember the last time she had travelled within the Minos Wasteland cluster. There were no alien homeworlds here that she knew of, and no major commercial stops, which made the cluster ideal for anyone looking to disappear but not much else. Of all the planets within the cluster, she had been to only two that she could remember, both within the last months leading up to the final conflict of the Reaper War – Aequitas, to investigate the disappearance of a group of Alliance-affiliated miners, and Gellix, the planet she now found herself returning to. Her trip to Gellix had been an unexpected detour prompted by a distress signal Traynor had picked up, which had revealed a group of deserters on the run from Cerberus, including her former crewmate, Jacob Taylor. That rescue mission had been one of the last times Shepard had heard from Jacob, apart from
getting to see him fleetingly during her farewell bash on the Citadel. After that, he had disappeared into his own life, his own agenda, far removed from Shepard and all the unexplainable things going on around her.

"Commander," EDI interrupted her train of thought, causing Shepard to blink a few times as she was pulled sharply back to the present. Turning her head, she looked down at the AI, who was seated neatly on the shuttle bench, her hands resting pensively against her elegant metal knees as she stared up at Shepard, as if waiting for a response. "Commander," EDI said again, seeming unfazed at having to repeat herself. "I said I am detecting electronic signals up ahead. Communication signals."

"What does that mean?" Shepard asked, her brow furrowing a bit at the mention of communication signals. The last time she had investigated an anomalous signal coming from one of the planets in the Minos Wasteland, it had turned out to be a Reaper trap, with Shepard and her party being attacked by dozens upon dozens of angry, mindless Husks before they even had a chance to draw their guns.

"It means we are on the right path," EDI informed her, setting her mind a bit more at ease. "I set us on a course towards the most densely populated of the raider camps. Statistically speaking, it is most likely our abductee would have been taken to this general population camp, rather than one of the specialized smaller camps." Blinking a few times out of habit, EDI turned her gaze to the external display, watching the blue-line mountain range tapering out across the screen. "They seem to be designated for other uses, and do not have nearly as much air traffic coming in and out as regularly," she added, matter-of-factly. "It seems likely that this camp would be the holding destination for all incoming detainees."

"I hope you're right," Shepard answered, more to herself than her party, before tightening her grip on the overhead handlebar as the Kodiak gave a faint rattle, rocked by the winter wind. Frowning at the unexpected turbulence, she glanced over her shoulder towards the exterior display, watching for a moment as the rugged landscape trailed lazily across the screen, noting how the miles of untamed, desolate terrain seemed so deceptively innocent-looking from the relative safety of the Kodiak. "What can you tell us about the planet, EDI?" she suddenly asked, turning her attention back to EDI again, hoping the AI might have some insight into how best to approach their current objective. EDI looked up in interest at the question, her expression keen, as if she had not anticipated being asked for her input, but was only too happy to give it.

"Gellix is a levo-amino garden world," EDI informed her teammates, obligingly. "Technically it is classified as being turian-controlled, but the environment and resources of the planet are not suited for dextro-amino inhabitants."

"It looks cold," Vega observed, frowning as another snow-capped mountain range began to creep across the screen on the external view.

"Turians hate the cold," Shepard added, nodding in agreement. "Makes sense they wouldn't want to stay here. Not sure what would make them want to claim it in the first place."

"Land for land's sake?" Cortez suggested, glancing over his shoulder towards the crew before returning his attention to the controls. "They probably wanted it so someone else couldn't have it. Makes sense… in a basic sort of way."

"Perhaps in an irrational, emotional sense," EDI returned, seeming unfazed by the interruptions. "However, fiscally speaking, it was a disaster. The turians attempted to profit from the land-claim by converting portions of the planet into penal colonies for humans. When that endeavour failed, a handful of ambitious mining companies tried to set up operation, hoping there might be more viable assets underground, but they were also thwarted by the planet's slim resources." Turning her silver eyes to the external display, she watched as the mountain range stretched on and on across the
screen, her expression unmoving as she considered the monotonous landscape. "Now the planet has been all but abandoned," she told them, still speaking informatively, almost disinterestedly. "The mines have been cleared out, the equipment left to rust… and with the post-War economy, it seems the turians cannot even sell the properties they built prisons on for construction purposes. The prison buildings are still standing, but they have also been abandoned."

"Abandoned prisons sounds like the perfect place for slavers to keep abductees," Shepard pointed out, causing Vega's brow to furrow even further in silent, solemn agreement.

"An abandoned prison on some snow planet sounds like the last place I'd want to be abducted to," Vega answered, before giving a quick, sympathetic shiver at the thought.

"Commander, I'm reading a populated area coming up," Cortez suddenly reported, causing Shepard to look up at the announcement, attentive. "It looks like some kind of camp… I'm reading scattered groups. I can bring you in a little closer, but if we don't land soon they're sure to detect us."

"Put us down here," Shepard instructed, moving to the front of the carriage to lean against the back of the two piloting chairs, getting a better glimpse at Cortez's screen. "We'll walk the rest of the way. Better not to take any chances going in. Three warm bodies are less likely to be picked up on their radar than an incoming vessel."

"Two warm bodies," EDI corrected. "My body is synthetic. It will not be picked up by their thermal radar."

"Even better," Shepard answered, nodding in agreement, before turning her attention back to Cortez again. "We'll keep in radio contact to let you know if we run into any trouble," she told him, solemnly. "We're basically flying blind here, so… keep an ear out. We might need rescuing sooner than anticipated if things go sideways."

Cortez nodded in understanding, his solemn expression unchanging as he turned his attention back to the controls, pulling back on the manual steering to coax the Kodiak into a shaky landing. The shuttle wavered in the chilling wind as it hovered a few feet above the desolate, snowy landscape, the carriage door giving a deep, faint groan and crackle as it broke the sheet of ice that had formed on its exterior, before it finally popped open with a hiss to let the three inhabitants out. Shepard was the first to leap down into the snow, forcing herself to keep her composure as her boots sank into the soft snowbed nearly up to her calves. Then, turning back, she watched as EDI jumped down into the thick snow, unfazed, followed quickly by Vega, who stumbled a bit as his feet sank a full ten inches further than anticipated down into the powdery snowbank. "Good luck out there, Commander," Cortez told Shepard, leaning back between the two piloting chairs to get one last good look at the ground team before they started out towards the compound. "Let's get that little girl home safe to her family."

"That's the idea," Shepard answered, soberly, pulling her gun from its maglock.

The formerly abandoned penal compound EDI had identified as their destination had been converted by its overtakers into an effective fortress, and as Shepard crouched low behind a line of rocks, peering out around the side to take stock of its defences, she could not help noting that almost every inch of the compound was crawling with mercenary watchdogs. Ducking back behind their snowy cover, Shepard pulled her Avenger in towards her chest, letting out a sharp huff as she stared at the hazy grey sky, trying to figure out the best way to get in without being detected. Busting down the front door had always been her preferred method of attack, but with only three of them against hundreds of mercenaries, she knew that was far out of the question. She hated the idea of going in blind to a situation with such fragile life at stake, but she figured that was probably part of the reason
Hackett put her on the mission to begin with. Even with the odds stacked impossibly against her, she almost always seemed to find a way to work around the problem and prevail, but even that thought seemed like small reassurance compared to what she knew she stood to lose if she failed in this particular mission.

Sparing another glance around the edge of the rocky outcropping, Shepard ducked low as she suddenly heard the sound of an approaching shuttle, watching from cover as a bulky, paint-stripped vessel descended heavily onto the landing pad of the slaver compound. As she watched, the hangar door of the vessel slid open, allowing a mixed group of human, batarian, and asari raiders to exit the vehicle, followed by a large, frightened-looking huddle of prisoners, all different ages and species, their hands locked tightly in front of them with high-tech laser cuffs. Shepard was familiar with those type of cuffs; they were safe for proper use, and their lightweight structure made them relatively pain-free if applied correctly, but they were nearly impossible to break out of, something she was certain these pirates and mercenaries were well aware of when choosing to use them.

"So what's the plan, Commander?" Vega asked, keeping his voice low, drawing Shepard back to the moment, making her realize she had still not managed to come up with a sufficient plan of attack.

Ducking back behind the line of rocks again, Shepard hesitated, trying to think of a satisfactory way to answer, before finally giving a curt shrug of her shoulders, shaking her head and jerking her gun over her shoulder towards the compound. "Go in, find the girl, get out," she returned, realizing that was not much of a response. "I'm not sure how we're going to get in, but every building has got to have weaknesses somewhere. All we have to do is figure out the most logical way to exploit them."

"Scans of the facility show there is an entrance around the back of the main penal holding structure," EDI informed them, her eyes flickering staticky white as she searched for readings on the area. "It seems to be less heavily-guarded than the front of the compound. With the facility boxed in almost completely on three sides by mountain ranges, it stands to reason they would think to guard their exposed side most effectively."

"Lucky for us we don't mind a bit of climbing," Shepard answered, checking her heat sink to make sure it was fresh. She had put in a new sink right before boarding the Kodiak to head down to the planet's surface, but it always made her feel better to double-check right before heading into combat. "How much resistance can we expect to be waiting for us on the far side of the main structure?"

"Scans are showing three armed guards," EDI reported, giving a thoughtful bob of her head as her readings came back in.

"That's one for each of us," Shepard joked, trying her hardest to stay optimistic. She realized that getting inside the compound was only one small hurdle, and after that lay the much larger task of finding the kidnapped girl, releasing her, and then escaping the facility with minimal casualties or harm to the other innocent prisoners. Even so, she knew how important completing this mission was, not only to her, but to the Alliance, and she realized that there was no way she would allow herself to let Admiral Hackett down.

"What about the other kids?" Vega suddenly asked, causing Shepard to look his way again, surprised. "What's the plan for them?"

Shepard frowned at the pertinent question, holding her breath for a moment as she tried to consider a possible, satisfactory solution, before finally letting her breath out again in a long, discouraged exhale and shaking her head. "Get out as many as we can, I guess," she answered, frankly, hating the taciturn response even as it came out of her mouth. "I don't know how many we can realistically expect to smuggle out without being detected. We're not exactly working with a huge search and rescue budget here." Vega made a face at her stiff, practical answer, appearing unsatisfied with the
outcome, before quickly looking away again, seeming to realize that there was no other way she could have responded in their current situation. Shepard knew how much of a soft heart he had, especially when it came to children, but she was also aware that the idea of going above and beyond was only as practical as the resources they had available to them. Making one last check around the edge of the rock outcropping to ensure no one had spotted them yet, Shepard shifted back onto her feet, before indicating for Vega and EDI to follow as she began to slowly skirt the rocky ledges towards the back of the penal facility.

Shepard kept low to the snowy ground as she moved, keeping her Avenger clutched tightly to her chest as she attempted to pick the path of least resistance through the treacherous slopes that ringed the facility on its remaining three sides. As they finally crested the backmost mount, she peered out over the top of a high snowbank, checking to see where the three armed guards were standing relative to their position. All three stood attentively at the back door of the facility, watching the rocky mountainside for any sign of approaching adversity, and, ducking back down behind the snowbank again, Shepard let out a sharp, readying huff, preparing herself for the task ahead. "We need a way to take them out that doesn't cause too much disruption," she observed, causing Vega to look up at the instruction, listening intently. "We don't want to draw attention to ourselves before we absolutely have to. If we could find some way to split them up, take them out one at a time, that might work best, but..." Pausing again, she pursed her lips, her brow furrowing as she tried to think of how they could possibly accomplish that feat. "EDI, any ideas?" she asked, turning to look back at the AI.

EDI blinked a few times, considering the question, running figures in her head as she tried to come up with a possible solution. "I can download a program that will disguise our voices to sound like batarians," she finally offered, looking up at Shepard again, helpful. "If I can figure out how to tap into their headset frequencies, we can use that program to lure them away from their guard point one at a time under the pretence of being called away by a superior. Then you can subdue or eliminate them as you choose once they are separated from the main point of defence."

"That's..." Shepard faltered, unsure how to respond to EDI's plan for a moment. While it was tactically brilliant, it was also frighteningly devious, and she could not help feeling a bit intimidated by how easily the AI had come up with something so chillingly conniving right off the top of her head. "Good idea, EDI," she finally answered, offering an eager nod. Scanning the environment around the back of the facility, she noticed several stacks of shipping crates that had been left piled up near the edges of the adjoining buildings, providing a perfect cover for the execution of their plan. Indicating again for Vega and EDI to follow, she began to make her way down the mountainside towards one stack of metal crates, careful to move slowly and make as little noise as possible so as to avoid detection until it was absolutely necessary. Finally reaching the stack of crates, Shepard ducked quickly into cover behind the pile, taking only a moment to steady her pounding heart before pulling up her omni-tool and holding it over to EDI to download the program she had mentioned. EDI's silver eyes rolled back in her head as she quickly downloaded the required software, before touching a finger to Shepard's tool sensor and copying the program easily over. Once she had finished, she ran a quick scan, her eyes flashing momentarily white, before she looked up at Shepard again, blinking a few times, adjusting back to the present.

"I have tapped into their radio frequency, Shepard," EDI informed her, matter-of-factly, seeming pleased with herself at the announcement. "I have transferred it over to your omni-tool, so you should be able to access it there as well. To speak to them, simply select the channel, then open the software that allows you to disguise your voice." Shepard hesitated at the instruction, unable to help feeling a bit nervous about the whole situation. She knew full well that if she did even one thing wrong, it could blow their whole operation, but even so she had no intention of letting her teammates see her falter. Quickly regaining her composure, she pulled up her omni-tool menu, selecting the icon for the hacked communication channel before opening the newly-installed voice altering software
and quietly clearing her throat, preparing to speak into the tool.

"Hey," Shepard barked, clipped, doing her best to sound like a gruff batarian slaver commander. She could hear a faint echo of her own altered voice bouncing back to her through the channel audio, and she could barely hide a small, cheeky grin at the sound of her voice pitched down to an acidic bass. At this sharp command, all three mercenaries standing guard at the back entryway looked up in confusion, exchanging startled looks, all seeming equally surprised at having been addressed while they were busy standing duty. "Boss says he saw something suspicious over by the crates at the back of the East building," Shepard instructed, glancing over expectantly towards EDI and Vega, who nodded back silently, indicating that they were ready to take down the first mercenary who approached. "I need one of you knotheads to go check it out. The other two stay on duty. I figure one of you morons is enough to deal with whatever it is." Then, disconnecting from the channel, she collapsed her omni-tool again, pressing her back flat against the line of boxes, holding her gun at the ready as she listened for the sound of armoured footfalls crunching in the snow.

Shepard held her breath as she waited for the mercenary to approach, the sound of her heart pounding hard and fast in her ears as he began to move around the exterior of the crates. She could hear him pausing every now and again to look around for some sign of whatever he had been called over to investigate, and she could feel sweat beginning to bead on the back of her neck as she clasped and unclasped her fingers anxiously around the sleek line of her weapon, waiting for him to make his first appearance. As soon as the first sliver of his bulky form began to emerge around the edge of the crates, Shepard quickly lifted her weapon, stepping forward towards the unsuspecting slaver and smashing him squarely in the throat with the butt of the gun before he had a chance to react. The mercenary choked, dropping to his knees, his hand reaching up to grasp for his windpipe, and Shepard took the opportunity to smash him in the back of the head, knocking him unconscious in the snow at their feet. Vega quickly shuffled over to stand over the mercenary, looking down at his sprawled form, nudging the batarian once with his foot before looking up at Shepard again, raised brows clearly visible through his snow-fogged visor.

"Brutal, Lola," he commented, though Shepard could tell he was obviously impressed.

Not bothering to respond to the compliment, Shepard grabbed the mercenary up under the arms, starting to drag him further behind the stack of crates before setting him down in a niche in the pile just out of sight of passers-by. Then, turning back to her companions, she pointed to the mercenary's distinctive armour, still out of breath from the surprise attack and dragging the heavy body. "Help me get him undressed," she prompted, shortly, urgency obvious in her tone. Vega hesitated, seeming confused, but Shepard quickly shook her head at his confusion, swallowing hard as she fought to catch the last of her breath. "We need his armour so EDI can put it on," she explained, crouching down to start undoing the straps of the mercenary's armour. "That way we can use that voice altering software and everyone will think it's still him." Shepard made a face as she fumbled with the fastenings of the mercenary's armour, noting that it was much bulkier than anything she had ever worn, and she could not help strongly suspecting the model was probably something painfully outdated he had bought on the cheap just for the sake of staying alive.

"James and I can pretend to be prisoners," she went on, grunting as she finally managed to undo the first of his forearm guards, setting it aside in the snow before starting to work on his elbow-guard, the next piece up his arm. "That way we can get inside without having to sacrifice our gear. EDI can tell the other two guards that she caught some stragglers trying to make a break for it, and she was given instructions to bring them back to the holding cells."

"Won't it look suspicious if we still have our gear?" Vega asked, crouching down to start helping Shepard undress the unconscious mercenary.
Shepard hesitated, setting the elbow-guard aside to join the other pieces they had managed to undo so far, before offering a short, honest nod, pulling off the mercenary's armoured glove and setting it down in the pile as well. "Probably," she returned, matter-of-factly. "But if we drop our armour, there's no guarantee we'd be able to get it back before we have to leave the planet. It's a risk, but..." She paused again, her brow furrowing further as she pried off the detachable shoulder-guard, before starting to move on to the clasps at the side of his chest-plate. "We just don't have enough disposable income to afford sacrificing important gear," she admitted, speaking in a lower voice, feeling almost ashamed to acknowledge this fact out loud. It was no great secret to anyone in the crew that the Normandy's funds were running low, but it still made her feel self-conscious to admit that they could barely manage to stay afloat in food and fuel without the added cost of replacing armour that had been left behind on missions. After a bit more struggling with the outdated armour, they finally managed to pry the remainder off, and they quickly tucked the mercenary out of the way of the wind before starting to reassemble the armour on EDI's much smaller form. "Let's just hope they don't know their buddy well enough to question him coming back three inches shorter," Shepard mumbled, tightening the forearm straps just enough that the guards would not slip off EDI's slender arms.

"I believe they will be more interested in my prisoners than my height, Shepard," EDI answered, fixing her with a knowing, silver stare. "This line of work is not likely to breed a spirit of sentimentality. I doubt many of them even bother to learn one another's names."

"I hope you're right," Shepard sighed, finishing tightening one last strap on EDI's chestplate before giving the armour a final, hopeful pat. Then, picking up the helmet from the snow, she handed it to EDI, watching as the AI slid it on over her head, completing the look of a bulky batarian pirate. The disguise was nearly perfect, save for a few awkward overlaps, but Shepard figured if she had not known that it was EDI under the armour to begin with, she might never have known the difference. "Now, listen," Shepard instructed, causing both Vega and EDI to look up at her, listening attentively. "We only get one chance to get this right. If they buy it, great, but if they don't... we'll play it by ear from there. Just remember, whatever happens, happens, but our main priority is getting that little girl out of here alive. Everything else is second to that."

"Right," Vega agreed, shortly, nodding in understanding.

Shepard nodded back at the motion, half-distracted, before glancing back towards the facility again, taking a deep, solemn breath, holding it, and then letting it out in a long, drawn-out huff. "It's now or never," she commented, quietly, more to herself than her teammates. Then, indicating for Vega and EDI to come along, she crossed her wrists behind her back, before stepping out from behind the crates and starting to move towards the back door of the facility where the two remaining batarian raiders still stood watching guard. It did not take long for the two barians to catch sight of the odd, mismatched company heading their way, and they stiffened a moment, unsure what was happening, before finally seeming to notice EDI in the mercenary armour and settling down a bit, their rigid shoulders slowly starting to relax as they watched their apparent comrade approach, leading the two in front of him with his gun pointed squarely at Shepard's back. Shepard held her breath, barely daring even to breathe as she waited for EDI to make the first move, praying that the voice alteration software would work and they could get through this checkpoint unquestioned.

"Caught these two trying to escape," EDI informed the mercenaries standing guard, and Shepard could feel a wave of relief wash over her at the sound of her perfectly altered voice. "Apparently they were trying to sneak off-base. Stupid humans. Guess they thought nobody would find them hiding among those crates."

The batarian guards paused at the explanation, both staring at EDI as if they did not quite buy her story, but neither seemed to have a good enough reason to doubt her. "Hm," the first batarian finally
grunted, looking scrutinisingly first at Shepard, and then at Vega, before turning his attention back to EDI again, as if still trying to figure out whether to believe her version of events. "Seems unlikely they'd be trying to escape. Not into this weather. Too damn cold." Shepard could sense Vega stiffening beside her, every muscle tensing as he prepared to fight, but he stayed blessedly composed, waiting to see what the batarian raider had to say next before springing into defensive action. "You sure they weren't just leftovers?" the batarian asked then, causing Shepard to falter at the terminology. "They just set out a new batch yesterday. Could be some of them. Might've snuck back on-base thinking it'd help them last longer."

"Leftovers wouldn't be stupid enough to be caught on-base," the second batarian cut in, shaking his head, causing the first batarian raider to look his way instead. "Besides, they can't be leftovers. Look at their clothes. They've still got their armour."

At this observation, the first mercenary's attention snapped quickly back to the two prisoners, giving them a quick once-over before looking over at EDI again, now more suspicious than before. "Why haven't they been stripped?" he demanded, indicating towards Shepard and Vega with his still-drawn weapon. "They should've been stripped at the waypoint. Their armour and weapons should be in the cache with the rest of the confiscated gear."

EDI faltered at the question, unsure how to reply, but Shepard quickly cut in over her, saving her from having to come up with an explanation. "The Alliance doesn't stand for blackmail," she hissed, taking a threatening step forward towards the two remaining guards. "They're gonna get us back, and they won't pay a cred of your dirty ransom. You picked the wrong colony to mess with, buddy. My husband—" But before she could finish her statement, EDI had cracked her upside the head with the flat side of her weapon, causing her to stop short as she staggered, stars forming in her vision as she fought to regain some semblance of her composure. The two guards snorted in malicious laughter at the show of violence, and Shepard quickly retreated, taking a step back to stand obediently alongside Vega again, dropping her gaze to the snow. She knew the attack had been a necessary act to uphold their façade, but it still stung like hell nonetheless, and she blinked a few times, shaking her head to try to clear it of the ringing sound still reverberating in her smarting ear.

"Quiet, prisoner," EDI snapped. Then, looking up at the two guards again, she jerked her weapon in the direction of the facility, indicating for them to step aside so she could walk her captives through. Seeming convinced of her authenticity now, the two mercenaries gladly moved out of the way, one of them entering a code on a nearby keypad to open the facility door for them. Shepard and Vega shuffled in first through the now-open door, keeping their eyes glued firmly to their feet, followed closely by EDI, shoving her weapon into the small of Vega's back, but as soon as they heard the door hiss shut behind them again, Shepard let out a heavy sigh of relief, feeling her hands unclench behind her from the anxious fists she had not even realized she was making. Coming to stand at attention beside Shepard, EDI stowed her weapon thoughtfully against the length of her bulkily-armoured arm, lifting her head at attention, her mannerisms now unmistakeably her own. "I am running a scan of the facility's layout, Shepard," EDI informed her, still speaking with the voice alteration software, and Shepard could barely hide a small, amused smirk at how strange it sounded to hear EDI's stiff, helpful speech coming out in such a gruff bass tone. EDI stood still for another few moments, collecting whatever data she could, before finally turning her helmeted gaze back to Shepard again, clearly finished with her search.

"There is what appears to be a large containment area in the heart of the facility," EDI informed her, sounding as excited as Shepard had ever heard her. "I believe this is where the prisoners are being kept. My scans are incapable of picking up the exact number of detainees but the cages holding them are very large."

"Any way to tell if this is the building where the children are being kept?" Shepard asked, hopeful,
though she knew it would be foolish to get her hopes too high. The fact that EDI had a layout of the facility at all meant they were spared from going in blind, but it never hurt to try to get as much information as possible before delving into uncertain danger.

EDI shook her head at the question. "Not with any degree of certainty," she answered, honestly. "It is not outside the realm of probability. However, without conclusive knowledge about the exact demographic makeup of the prisoners and the layout of the other facilities it is impossible to know for sure until we actually enter the containment area and see for ourselves."

"Fair enough," Vega answered, nodding along, though Shepard could tell he was not completely pleased with the answer. Considering the circumstances, she found she could not really blame him, but she said nothing, not wanting to stir the pot of doubt any more than it had already been stirred. Letting out a soft sigh, she took a quick look around the facility entryroom, trying to determine which doorway would most likely take them down the path of least resistance, before finally deciding on the middle door, figuring it had to be the straightest route to the heart of the facility.

"Let's get going," Shepard prompted, indicating towards the door with a jerk of her head, causing both EDI and Vega to look up at the command. "The sooner we get to the holding cells, the sooner we figure out what's going on in this nightmare facility. With any luck that's where the children are being kept, and we can get the girl out with minimal resistance. If we do encounter resistance, though…" Hesitating, she trailed off again, unsure where she intended to go with this ominous statement, feeling Vega and EDI's eyes on her as they waited for the end of her proposition. "…Let's just hope we don't encounter resistance," she finished, not wanting to think about the alternative. "Hackett's depending on us to come back alive. I'd hate to disappoint."

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