Second Star to the Right

by IncreasingLight

Summary

Sara Ryder isn't prepared to be Pathfinder, and Liam Kosta is not an idiot. This is the story where one enthusiastic geek reminds the other that the unknown can be fun as well as scary. Deals with grief, families, overwhelming responsibility, impulsivity, misunderstandings, huge mistakes and the consequences thereof, and a Liam Kosta who probably, in our century, would have been diagnosed with ADHD.

And for the record, that's just fine. He's perfect the way he is. This isn't about 'making him better'.

Has all the spoilers, as well as extra scenes, because, as always, Bioware can't show everything.
Chapter 1

Sara’s first vivid memory of Andromeda involved Liam Kosta being sucked out of an exploding shuttle, with no time to worry about his safety.

Worrying about Kosta was pointless - he’d be fine. His reaction to zero-g had been to flip end over end, and laugh his head off. He probably laughed the whole way down.

Her kind of guy. One of the biggest draws of the Andromeda Initiative had been the potential adventure of it all. Her last career consisted of guarding Prothean researchers and the artifacts of their attention. At least she had it better than Scott. The artifacts were interesting. Guarding a Mass Effect gate? Not so much.

Mind you, adventure was one thing, but waking from the cryogenic chamber, shaky and disoriented, only to be launched into zero-g, and then told that her brother was brain-live but in a medically induced coma, only to get tossed out of an exploding shuttle while enroute to the death trap of a planet that was supposed to be their new home… Two seconds into that very long fall, she knew one thing.

She needed stability. Not the excitement that had fueled her trip to Andromeda until that minute.

Stability was a hard thing to find. The wind jerked her around like a cheap carnival ride, and lightning struck a rock right next to her head as she tried to engage her jump-jets - which failed. Because of course they did.

Sara had no choice but to rely on her wits and what remained of 600 years out of date Alliance and Pathfinder training to save herself from the effects of gravity. Hard to do while dodging floating rocks.

Life really sucked balls sometimes. And if that wasn’t the understatement of the last six centuries she didn’t know what was.

She survived the first fall thanks to SAM and the quick application of Omni-gel on the cracked visor of her helmet. How many corners had the Initiative cut? Or was it just age? 600 years could potentially have a lot of impact on improperly stored gear… she forced herself up from her knees, carefully checking for further damage.

Kosta climbed over the cliff, panting - and if he wasn’t laughing, he didn’t seem worse for wear, other than a little stiffness as he jogged towards her. "All right, Ryder?"

"Yeah," she grunted, and started scanning for… well, everything. With enough luck, they’d find tracks… "Are your comms working?"

"Nah, too much interference," his voice lilted pleasantly in an accent that sounded vaguely London based. "Electrical storm is blowing in."

"Shit," she sighed, and turned to face him, looking up at the cliffs surrounding them. "Any idea where the other shuttle went down?"

He lifted his chin towards the distance. "That way. Looked like they were hit, but intact. I’d say they’ll be fine. Maybe if we get closer, we’ll hear them? Not sure about Fischer, Greer, or Kirkland, though they couldn’t have gotten far."
“Right,” she swung down her pistol, checking the safety. “I don’t suppose you enjoy a good hike?”

“Lead on, Ryder,” he waved her forward. “I’m sure your Dad is worried.”

She cast a glance at him, “He’s not playing favorites.”

His answer was slow, “I didn’t say he was, did I?”

“Right.” She rolled her shoulders. “Sorry. Just… I know that we’re the new kids. The rest of you had a lot more time to… get to know each other. During training. We were brought in late, Scott and I.”

“It’s all good, Ryder. I’m glad you’re along. Bit lonely, if I was out here on my only-own.”

That almost made her laugh, but instead she took off a brisk trot towards the direction he indicated, through a narrow pass.

“‘The Lost World’,“ she heard him mutter, and then she did snort. “What, have you seen that vid?”

“Try me again, Kosta. With something harder,” she teased.

“You coming on to me, Ryder?”

“Dream on,” she flushed. “We’ve only just met.”

“You might work fast.”

“No one works that fast.” She upgraded her opinion of Liam Kosta - he was definitely nice guy. She had always been a sucker for a nerdy flirt. She stopped at the edge of a precipice. “SHIT!” she barreled into him, tackling him to the ground, landing on all fours over his prone body. “Kosta, those are…”

“Aliens,” he breathed, staring into her eyes through the visor, excited. “First contact. Already. Friendlies, or…”

She knelt, and peeked over the rock that hid them both, not bothering to move away from between his legs. “That’s Fischer,“ she whispered, as if they could hear her. The next moment they kicked him, and a surge of anger filled her. “And no, they aren’t!” She lifted her pistol and shot the creature in the head.

“Nice shot,” Kosta complimented from underneath her, wiggling away on his ass to draw his own gun.

“Thanks,” she shouted, and did it again, all her years of rangetime adding up to something real in the field, calm focus settling over her limbs. Electricity arced out from the man next to her, and she grinned. “And you’re a Techie!” She took a moment to wink at him. “We’re going to work well together. Watch this, and prepare Overload.“ She cast a Singularity and left one of the enemies swirling. “Shoot!” She yelled at him, and he tapped his Omni-tool, and whooped when the creature fell. At that point, they turned as one and fired at the remaining alien - some sort of heavy, by her guess - hitting him in the head and thigh.

Kosta snorted over the comms. “I don’t suppose you can tell people it was me that got the headshot?”

“I don’t lie about my skills to impress boys. Might have had a few more dates if I did. Dad’s a
retired N7 - there was no way that his daughter wasn't going to know how to defend herself. He used to take me to the N7 range on the Citadel when I was still in pigtails.” She was already scrambling over the rocks that blocked them from Fischer, pushing to reach him, and activating her medi-gel in case he was out. "I'm better with a rifle than a pistol."

“I knew I liked you.”

“Slow down, Kosta. Let’s see where the day takes us, right?” She stood, after seeing the man comfortable. “We’ve got to find Cora and the rest.”

It took a while to reunite with her father. Sara was troubled, turning with the rest to her father for the guidance that they craved - surely he, as the human Pathfinder, would have the answers. Why wasn’t this world the way it should have been? What were the robots? And the aliens…

Her father seemed to have a better idea than anyone else - so sticking with him, as distracted and preoccupied as he was, as much as he demanded from all of them, equaled the best bet for survival. Survival was her driving desire. They all needed to find a way to fucking live here. They left the Milky Way knowing it was a one way trip.

That drive to live lasted only as long as the second fall.

Strictly speaking, she didn’t survive. Somehow, that was the difficult part to deal with, as she woke in the Hyperion’s SAM node, scared and confused, with Kosta still at her side - and too bewildered to ask why he had stayed. Heleus had already killed her once - she had lasted for less than 24 hours out of the stasis pods.

So much for her training. At least there was a familiar face, and a couple familiar voices…

“You were clinically dead for 22 seconds, Sara.” That from an ever so helpful SAM. “Your heart stopped, but I was able to revive you.”

“That’s kind of obvious, SAM. How’s Dad?”

The silence from the group that had gathered in the Node lasted forever. “No… first Scott, and now….” Her father had died, in their first day in the cluster. If he couldn’t survive, with all his training… “Everything was fine. He… how - why?”

Even if her brain hadn’t stopped functioning, gasping for breath on a hostile planet was as 'near-death' as it got. In her imbalance, she wanted to laugh and sob and fall to her knees and never get back up.

“You’re the new Pathfinder, Sara.” That did send her staggering, back against the wall. “Your father transferred my consciousness to you, just before he gave you his helmet.”

“No, that’s Cora. I’m not. I’m just… a recon specialist. Scott and I… we’re just scouts. That’s it. We didn’t get the training, we don't have the experience - I'm only 22!”

“You father transferred SAM to you, not to me,” Cora’s voice was soft. “You’re the Pathfinder.”

“He saved your life, the only way he could,” that was Kosta, voice quieter than it had been on the planet. “And I think you’re up for it.”

“I can’t…” her mind whirled, and she slid down the wall to sit on the floor, feeling about two inches tall. “I can’t do this. I can’t take his place.”
Two days later, and she was still stuck in that headspace - a darkly sarcastic version of her usual enthusiastic self, grieving and cursing the position her father had put her in, alternating her time between sitting by Scott, silently begging him to wake up, and wandering the parts of the Hyperion that were still accessible after the crash.

Hey, not everyone fell out of an exploding shuttle, lived, explored a new planet, died, and then somehow still managed to tell about it all in the same day after waking up after a 600 year nap. She was entitled to some sarcasm and bitterness.

Even the vids wouldn’t try to tell that story. Too far-fetched. “You are our last hope,” she gasped out, trying to laugh.

“She, your oxygen levels are decreasing.” SAM’s voice snapped her out of her own head, hands fist so tight into her palms that her nails had split the skin. Her Omni-tool whirred, administering medi-gel automatically. “You are on the Hyperion, in the Cryo Bay. You are safe. Breathe.”

Her head twisted around, body shaking as she leaned on the interactive mural on the Hyperion, aware that various doctors were eyeing her with clinical worry, and newly thawed patients were whispering to each other about the Pathfinder’s lack of control. She held her breath, counting to seven with SAM, and breathed out to a count of four, and inhaled again to a count of eight, repeat, repeat, repeat… until she had found a semblance of calm and her shoulders ached from released tension.

She whispered, knowing he didn’t need her to say it aloud, but… needing that tangible connection instead of just talking to herself in her head. “It’s not insanity, if the voice in your head is real, right, SAM?”

“You are not displaying any sign of mental illness, Sara.” SAM gave one of his long pauses. “Mental trauma, on the other hand… would you care to speak about the loss of your father? Or of your experiences on Habitat 7?”

“What’s to talk about?” She slammed her fist up against the mural, and the display rocked precariously. The Initiative had definitely cut costs, and not just on her Pathfinder equipment. Behind her a female doctor hissed her worry at Dr. Carlyle - Harry, she corrected herself, because you didn’t get to experience death with someone just to get to call them ‘doctor’ - only to have the man soothe her with a few words. “Everyone was depending on him. Not just me! He was the most valuable person on the Hyperion! All these people…” disappointment was the least of their problems. They were going to die out here without him.

“You are grieving Alec. I am familiar with the emotion. Your father grieved your mother. But you are also not sleeping well, or caring for yourself as you should.”

SAM could be such a master of the obvious. “You think? I lived through something that will fuel my nightmares about falling for the next century.” At least. If she lived that long. Odds weren’t good at the moment… “Kind of hard to sleep after that.”

“I will not allow you to die, Sara.”

“That’s reassuring. Shall we count the ways I could kick the bucket out here?” She ticked off her
fingers, counting mentally. The aliens, the killer robots, the lack of training for the position in which she found herself, the dark energy cloud on the other side of the hull, the not-so-golden world of Habitat 7 - and no Dad to take point instead.

“Your father wanted you to live, Sara.”

That final sacrifice was just like her father. He seemed to not hold on at all, until it was obvious he had been holding too tight to everything. He had moved them to Earth for her mother’s sake, leaving his hard-won N7 career, devoting his life to a science that his colleagues and superiors reviled him for… she loved him, but had to admit he had a bit of a martyr complex.

“I would say that was an accurate assessment,” Had SAM always been so… meek? “Your father was all too prone to sacrifice his own interests in favor of your mother’s well-being. It does not surprise me that he did the same to preserve you.”

“Gee, thanks, Dad. Didn’t know that it was Christmas. And here I didn’t get you anything…” she muttered.

“I am sorry if I’m a burden, Sara,” SAM’s voice in her head was still out of place, but getting more familiar. She wasn’t sure if she was okay with that.

“You’re not a burden, SAM,” she contradicted. “We need you. But I didn’t sign up for this. None of us did.”

She stared empty-eyed at the informational mural on the Hyperion, not seeing the propaganda, the changing idyllic pictures of golden worlds just waiting to be colonized and tamed. She saw only the blackened, twisted lace of the dark energy, and crashing ships, and Kosta’s outstretched hand, begging for her to reach him, and her last name over her comm in his voice as he was ripped away.

And then the new world wheeling past her, Kosta freefalling into floating boulders into an atmosphere more grey than blue until she lost sight of him entirely, lightning frying her nerves, while she tried not to vomit into her shiny new helmet…

The helmet broke. Somehow, that seemed like a symbol.

She touched her Omni-tool, “SAM… do you think we could hack the mural’s program…” so that it would reflect reality, instead of the lies, she didn’t quite finish.

“I find that inadvisable. Others might find the images soothing.” She sighed and let the pictures stay. Children playing on beaches. Desert landscapes - otherworldly, yet still familiar. Comforting lies. “Perhaps consider it art, Sara, instead of propaganda?”

The artist who had accepted the commission obviously didn’t have as good an imagination as whoever or whatever had designed Habitat 7. “They’re missing giant luminescent mushrooms, lightning storms, purple skies, floating rocks, and…” aliens. Once again she didn’t finish aloud.

Even she wasn’t stupid enough to bring up the monsters waiting under the bed to people who had been sleeping for six hundred years. They all deserved to sleep at some point - though who knew when that might be as they scrambled to hold the Hyperion together long enough to limp into the Nexus. Sleep certainly wasn’t an option for her at the moment. Every time she closed her eyes she saw her father gasping out his final instructions to SAM, or rocks tumbling towards her head.

She wondered if there was a last message of love for her in there somewhere. If there was she had been unconscious for it.
She closed her eyes anyway, trying to focus on memories of home. But there were no pictures of the Milky Way in her mind anymore - they were all blocked out by the horror of Habitat 7. There were no familiar constellations to trace and remember the myths behind outside the windows of the Hyperion. There was no Dad. No Scott. Even Cora - her father’s second, and someone she thought she could count on - was butt-hurt that her father had made the choice that would save her life. It’s not like she had wanted to be the Pathfinder. Worse, Sara couldn’t even tell Cora why her father had made such a rotten choice, because the commando wouldn’t understand why her father had created such a powerful AI.

How powerful SAM was had eluded her, until she had woken up in the SAM node, with Kosta watching over her with sunken eyes, and woken up to the knowledge of 22 seconds of clinical death.

She didn’t understand why her father had done it, despite SAM offering what he knew that wasn’t encrypted. He had made SAM for her mother, he had always claimed. How an illegal artificial intelligence could cure her mother’s eezo based disease, she had no idea. She was a soldier, not a scientist. Nothing but a grunt. The grunts were supposed to die in the first wave - like the ancient Redshirts from the old Star Trek vids.

Her father had wasted a lifetime of work, because Mom died anyway. And so did Dad, after traveling 600 years away from everything familiar. And now Scott was laye prone on a hospital bed with tubes peeing for him, feeding him, and monitoring his goddamn brain activity. “This day is shit.” She said aloud, and heard a muffled sob from a bed behind her, and she winced, regretting her vent.

She had forgotten she wasn’t the only one grieving. But how the bloody hell was she supposed to be the Pathfinder, if she was more lost than any of them?

She pulled away from the mural, alone and drifting, spinning in one of her own singularities made up of dark thoughts, grief and near-despair.

Harry called after her, “Pathfinder, if you need to talk…” but she raised her hand in farewell and left the Cryo Bay. She always had someone to talk to, thanks to SAM. But even if she needed someone that wasn’t an AI, she wouldn’t pick Harry.

~SS~

She drifted aimless for days, as they limped toward the Nexus. Harry came to check on her, frowning at how she hadn’t bathed. “Washwater shortage,” she excused herself, knowing it was true. “I’m setting an example. Showers can wait until the Nexus.”

“Have you eaten?”

“Can’t keep anything down.” He scanned her, turning her skin orange.

“Shock, no doubt. You don’t have a virus, and the rest of your readings are normal,” He handed her a bottle of water. “Stay hydrated, at least, Pathfinder. For me.” But the good doctor was called away, and she was alone again. There was no time for anyone to babysit the new Pathfinder. She had to take care of herself.

“SAM, did the doctor scan my brain?”

“Yes.”

“Was he lying to me?”
“No. You are in shock, but are not at risk at this time.”

Despite everything, she felt a little better. “Well, that’s something.”

“However, I believe your attitude would improve if you washed and ate a protein bar. Your blood sugar is low.”

“Duly noted, SAM.” She uncurled herself from the chair, noting her shaking hands. “Point me in the direction of the showers and the mess?”

“I have added two navpoints to your map, Pathfinder.”

“Thanks.” At least having SAM meant never being lost again.

Maybe it wouldn't be all bad.
Chapter 2

Liam Kosta wasn’t stupid. Nor did he lack personal discipline. Both of those options had been real fears of his, back when his parents had been having ‘confidential’ conferences with teachers and headmasters about his poor school performance, frequent fights, and ‘lack of focus’. A dozen generations ago he would have been written off as a lost cause, and even now, with his parents pulling for him every which way they could, he was still ‘the angry kid’.

The many fights were more about the fact that he gave a shit, than about anything else. He spent most of his time fucking angry that he was disappointing his parents, letting himself down when he knew he could do better than the grades he was pulling down, not to mention disappointing the teachers that cared enough to work with him, and he hated bullies with what he thought of as a righteous passion.

That there had always been bullies meant precisely shit. Things should change when they weren’t right.

His parents had agreed, when he managed to explain what was going on inside his head, and within the walls of the school, and pulled him out, and placed him in another, one more hands-on and less busywork heavy. He had done well enough there to gain admittance to engineering school - only to lose interest when things became less hands-on and more theoretical.

He knew from independent reading that Tesla, way back in the day, wasn’t reading up on theories people had already proven. Instead he was building his coils, and observing, and writing down what he saw (and falling for pigeons in a romantical way, but… well, nobody was perfect.). The difference between science and fooling around was writing it down, not studying theory until the equations dribbled out your ears.

He had pages of his own notes on mass effect experiments - nothing groundbreaking, but solid stuff - by the time he was fourteen, proving that when he was interested in something, he could have plenty of focus. But in the end, engineering just wasn’t for him. He loved the physical work, but hated the frustration that came with learning crap that other people had already proved, and in the internship he managed to land, he felt… isolated. Like he wasn’t helping people. In the end, when he decided that a higher education wasn’t for him, his parents had backed him.

He knew his Mum worried he had some sort of Peter Pan complex - never growing up, and all that. His propensity to take off in the evenings to jump off buildings in his jump-jets - a physical reminder that there were laws to the natural world that everyone was subject to - didn’t help. Her worries probably had something do with why he had tried law enforcement, since there was no way he was going to pass the bar exam. What was more ‘adult’ than being a police officer, right?

His Dad knew it was a mistake before he did. The corruption behind the force - more bullies intimidating the little guys - meant he lasted a mere two years, spurring his Mum into a full-on freak-out about him job-hopping like skipping rocks across a pond, but there was no way he could stay, not when the vigilantes were more effective at stopping the bad guys than the people on the right side of the law. Especially when the ‘good guys’ were taking bribes to look the other way while Red Sand and creeper drifted into the Citadel like dunes at the seaside.

His encounter with Archangel had proved once and for all that enforcement wasn’t for him. And yet… he still wanted to be on the right side of the law. He was caught in the middle between wanting an honest life, one that let him sleep at night, and making a difference for the civilians that kept getting themselves caught in other people’s problems.
What he really wanted was a new start - a new beginning, where everyone would start from scratch, and do it right. Where biotics weren’t feared, and aliens weren’t viewed with suspicion, and bullies were taken out before they became a problem.

Yeah, he was an idealist. And when did that become a bad word? Never, that’s when.

The Andromeda Initiative seemed like the perfect opportunity. He said good-bye to friends and family, and signed up - his wide selection of skills meant that Alec Ryder hand-picked him for the highly competitive Pathfinder Team training. It sounded perfect - enough variety to keep him from getting bored, and making a real difference in the lives of thousands of people who wanted the same thing he did. A better future.

He had never seen his parents so proud of him as he shipped out. That was the sort of thing that he could get used to, if only his parents had decided to come along… but no such luck. They were too wrapped up in trying to make a difference in the world they knew, instead of making a new one from scratch.

He turned away from his last view of Earth, and focused on the distant Moon Base. Faced his future instead of his past, hoping that maybe, just maybe, he had finally found his place in the universe. It had been a long time coming.

And now, here they were on the other side of everything, and everything was still absolute shite, except for… her.

From the first moment he had seen her in the med-bay he was hooked. Catching her eye and waving at her like he was the exact idiot people had accused him of being… but she had smiled back. Great smile.

She had fallen out of the sky and into his life, just like an angel. And he knew exactly how much it had hurt. Lexi had barely finished lecturing about taking it easy for the next few weeks. Head injury, after colliding with a floating rock back on Habitat 7.

He winced mentally at the cheesy cliché, before he glanced back at the woman talking to Lexi, low and serious, her eyes creased with pain and fatigue. If he had ever bothered to picture an angel, she would probably have been six feet tall, with his Mum’s tidy bun made up of tiny braids and kind eyes that crinkled up when she smiled. Maybe holding an Asari sword, like a comic rendition of a Justicar. He wouldn’t have imagined short curves, or ill-advised blue hair, or a neck tattoo like lace around a naturally tanned throat, or eyelashes that went on forever, or a scent like strawberries that permeated even through her sealed armor in the doomed shuttle that had led to their fall.

Yes, Mum, I was distracted by her scent, and that probably cost me the split second to keep myself from being sucked out of the shuttle… his Mum was great, but even she would have frowned at that. He had to do better, for her, if not for everyone else.

She made him crave fresh fruit. And it was better not to think about something that impossible. He had already made a fool of himself, asking her out for a drink at a bar that didn’t even exist at the broken down hull of a space station that was the Nexus. In his defense, it was the result of a semi-logi-cal ‘Anything has to be better than the Hyperion and Habitat 7’ idiocy/optimism that was his way of trying to stave off his own despair. She had enough for both of them, right now. It was his job to help her out, to keep the Pathfinder moving.

His mouth got him in the worst trouble. Her face when the tram ride had resulted in darkness and a lone tech working on a panel, instead of champagne and celebrations, had riddled him with guilt. He had raised her hopes, only to land her in even worse dilemmas.
He had known that the Ryder twins were new additions to the Pathfinder team, that Alec had included them in the Initiative at the last minute - barely enough time to go through the training. But knowing that the first Pathfinder had a daughter and a son, was a hell of a difference between meeting someone like her.

She was a prickly sort of funny. Possibly an adrenaline junkie… she used jump jets like she was born to them, and when they malfunctioned, she was able to still make a landing without causing any damage to anything but her visor. No way she picked that up in the last few months. She’d been using them for years, he’d bet his last beer on it.

He had absolutely no intention of taking it easy, and letting his head heal. No way was he going to let the Pathfinder go to Eos without him tagging along. She was too much like him to be truly cautious. Not to mention that he really wanted to get to know her better.

And there was the sticking point. Attraction. A million and one pictures flickered through his head, from everything from a bee pollinating a daisy, to magnets sticking to opposite poles, and black holes sucking down entire galaxies, to more graphic, specific pictures involving him dipping her backwards and kissing her in front of screaming thousands…

His Mum would say he watched too many vids. His Dad would say there was absolutely no question that he watched too many vids.

He knew better than to act on it. It would never work. They were destined to be living on a small scout ship, for one thing. And crazy busy - she was going to be doing the work of four Pathfinders, and hunting the missing Arks besides. It was not a good plan to even think about starting something when they were trying to find a home for a hundred thousand people, more than three quarters of which were missing entirely, according to Nexus leadership. That sort of thing would have to wait. Indefinitely, at the rate the Initiative leadership moved.

Speaking of which… she was talking at the VIPs right now, and he really should have been paying attention to how that conversation was going instead of eyeballing the Pathfinder for a potential flirtation.

Oops?

Mind you, the Nexus leadership was a fucking joke, but then… governments usually were, in a crisis. Liam had loads of experience with working around bureaucracies with HUST-L, his old crisis response team. He glanced back at her, and watched her fingers twitch against her thigh from through her Omni-tool, as if it was taking all she had not to just unleash a Throw at ‘Director’ Tann. The salarian was a glorified accountant, for fuck’s sake… with no qualifications whatsoever. Whereas, Sara Ryder had done a damn good job surveying Habitat 7 - he knew, he had been there as she played with weird ass alien devices.

‘Course, he had seen worse. At least Tann probably wasn’t committing genocide… and the books were probably balanced. Unless they weren’t - all depending how honest an accountant he had been.

He almost wished she’d do it, depose the officious jerk and start something from scratch. But that was probably a bad idea. God, wouldn’t it be something, if he had to be the reasonable one? He snorted at himself, and Cora glanced at him, an eyebrow raised. “Nothing,” he muttered, “Just… the Pathfinder looks pissed, right?”

Cora sighed back. “She doesn’t have the luxury of being pissed. She’s completely unprepared for this. She’d better step up and fast.”
“She didn’t ask to be Pathfinder, Cora. You don’t grudge Dr. Ryder saving his daughter’s life, do you?”

“Of course not, but I…” Cora shook her head. “Tell her to meet me outside the Tempest, will you? I’m not quitting, not over this, and not now, especially after Greer and Fischer opted out… but… I need some time.”

Liam nodded, glad that he wasn’t having to deal with the shock of being passed over. He was the junior member of the Pathfinder team - the only more recent additions that of the Ryders themselves. Of course, that mattered not at all, now that Fischer and Greer had ‘retired’, and with Kirkland dead…

He jerked back to attention as Tann left, and Ryder clenched her fists, once, and then twice, as if controlling her impulse to zap him - he was familiar with that impulse, too - before she turned and marched away, in what looked like no particular direction, shoving her palm under her eye as she walked. It took him a minute to follow her, lost in his own thoughts, and in a better impulse than electrocution he grabbed a datapad out of the top of his crate of personal belongings and sprinted after her.

Kosta found her staring off into the artificial sky, tucked under a staircase out of the way. “Hey, Pathfinder, ever read this?” he handed her his datapad, and pretended not to notice as she blinked the tears that were at the edge of her eyes away.

She wasn’t the only one who was crying in her down time. He woke up every night crying for his Mum, like he was six and having the night terrors that had haunted his childhood.

The night terrors were real, out here.

“The War of the Worlds?” She asked, confused. “Yeah. Who hasn’t?”

Liam’s goofy grin made her lips twitch. That was fine. If he had to play the clown to get her back in balance, he could do that. “Like… everybody? Wells wasn’t exactly popular after First Contact. And here I thought I’d made a smart choice.” He picked the book nearly at random, after scrolling through his sci-fi section on the walk over… but she didn’t need to know that. It was a better choice than the dystopian fiction, at least. Or Shipwrecked…

He wouldn’t be watching any sort of survivor vids for a while, unless it was for research purposes.

Sara snorted, and then did smile, one too wide for conventional beauty. “You did meet my Dad, right? Didn’t you say he picked you, especially? Do you honestly think he let ‘popular’ effect his purchase of reading material for his kids?” Her fingers tightened on the datapad, long and thin, with broken nails and bruised knuckles. Hardworking hands.

She’d lost her Dad. Maybe her brother, too. Even her mother’s death sounded like a recent thing, not something she had been able to deal with before climbing into a cryo pod and sleeping for six hundred years.

He had no idea how to help her, and somehow he wanted to do exactly that - protect her from the darker thoughts whirling through all their heads. Liam scratched the base of his scalp and backpedaled. “Right. My bad.”

She bit her lip, something like regret in her eyes. “I liked Wells. I thought he was… interesting, if archaic. I’ve seen the old vids, too… Dad found the ancient black and white one, even. Scott…” she looked down, “Scott hated it. Dad made him sit and finish it with us. Said it would help us
understand xenophobia."

Liam’s face lit up. “I tried to find that for years - asked Santa for it every bloody Christmas for like… forever. Kept getting notes that even Santa couldn’t work miracles in my Dad’s handwriting.” They laughed together, but it hurt, somehow, like a muscle that hadn’t gotten enough exercise. “Don’t suppose you brought it?”

“Somewhere…” Sara waved her hand around. “Somewhere my Dad’s whole collection of movies and books lie waiting on a datapad, waiting for me to find them.”

Liam moaned slightly, “God, I could use a movie break. Favorite way of checking out, you know? Pop in a movie, sip a beer, pop a bag of crisps, and…”

“And forget your troubles,” Sara’s voice wobbled. “Yeah. Yeah, I get it.”

“Loads of troubles to forget,” Liam cleared his throat. “Look, I know it’s all gone ass-end up, Ryder, but… but it’s gonna get better. I did crisis response, back on Earth and the Citadel…”

Sara’s voice was harsh, “Guess I know now why they thawed you.”

“They thawed me because your dad picked me for the Pathfinder team. We were some of the first out of the deep freeze. And… this isn’t a crisis,” Liam shook his head, “This is a disaster. HUST-L would have called in the big guns on the Kett and concentrated on cleanup, settlement, and refugee relief.” They were silent for a few moments, grieving a universe that had bigger guns than the Pathfinder Team. “Glad they did melt me, considering so many of us opted out when Habitat 7 turned out unbreathable and zappy. Of the original team, it's just you, me and Cora left, right?”

“Left, Right, Left, Right, Left… we’ve got to march out of here ASAP, and get to work,” Sara grinned, skull-like and painfully, and he wasn’t prepared for the sudden change in conversation topic. He winced inwardly, realizing she didn’t want to talk about the people they had lost to retirement and death. “Wait, you were on a crisis response team named ‘Hustle’? Like the ancient dance? Did you all get up and…” she danced a few steps half-heartedly, rolling her hands, and quirking out her knee to one side.

Liam choked, “God, if you only knew how old that joke was…” Old memories of Mazzy and goddamn Hammond hazing him by telling him he’d be required to perform for refugee morale streaked across his memory and twisted in his gut, even while bringing a half smile to his face. Would all his memories be so bittersweet?

“At least 600 years, right?”

“The dance is more like 900.” His eyes, worn and shadowed underneath, squinted in humor. “Your technique isn’t bad, though it’s more like…” He broke out into the dance, turning around and swinging his hips almost obscenely in her direction, peeking over his shoulder at her while humming the song.

Had she checked out his ass? He blinked, surprised, but there it was, the flick of her eyes back up to his face.

Well, shit, that would make things more difficult than they needed to be. He was used to one-sided attraction - usually on his side. He grated on most people, he was all too aware, and had the tendency to scare women away by over-the-top gestures. But sometimes it came from a too grateful young lady that he was helping out at work… safe enough to flirt because it could never be acted on. He had morals, if a lack of impulse control. He didn’t bring it home.
But if she was interested back…

Shit, she was his boss. Not cool, Kosta. Not cool.

His mouth didn’t listen to his head though. Never had.

“See something you like?”

~SS~

Sara covered her mouth with one knuckle, trying to hide her laugh and the knowledge that she had totally checked out his ass and been caught doing it - she was grieving her father and her brother, not chatting up a guy in a nightclub, she chided herself - but gave up, all her willpower lost in her other struggles. “Christ, Kosta… I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Disco lives, Ryder, and so do you,” he raised his eyebrows at her. “And I got you to laugh. You’ve got a nice one. There’s gonna be enough tears, while we try to set this right.” He punched at her arm, and she rocked back, swaying slightly. “Hang in there. Your brother - he’ll make it. You’ll see. Gotta have twin Ryders running around, to get us all confused which one we’re supposed to be talking to.”

“That’s easy,” her smile didn’t creak around the corners this time. “I’m Sara, not Ryder.”

Liam shook his head, his face shutting down. Sara frowned, confused at the difference in animation from just a few seconds before. He seemed almost - stern. “Nah, you’re the Pathfinder. We can always call him Ryder.” He turned to go. “See ya ’round, Pathfinder.”

Sara grasped his sleeve. “Kosta…” he turned back, and she tipped her head sideways, letting the fall of her bright blue hair hit her shoulder. She bobbed her head awkwardly, “Thanks. I… needed this. And thanks for your help, back on Habitat 7… I couldn’t have survived without you. None of us would have.” She waved his datapad at him, before handing it back, having forgotten she was still holding it. “Mind if I borrow the book? I could use something-”

“Familiar?” Liam nodded when her lip wobbled. “I’ll send you the data file.” He grinned, “Check your email. I’ll send you a few. Maybe a few myths? The more far out the better, am I right?”

“I don’t really want anything to do with flying leading to falling, you know?” She tried to laugh. “Avoid Icarus for me?”

“Sure thing. Brought loads of books. And vids… Data didn’t cost weight to ship.” He backed away, like he didn’t really want to go, slow, in the direction of the tram.

“Nothing like escapism when you just can’t escape?”

“You said it. Meet you at the Tempest? Cora’ll be there too. Told me to say something.”

He had a nice smile. And a nice ass, confirmed as he spun on his heel and jogged off, heading back to retrieve his crate of personal belongings to move to their new ship. White pants hugged the muscles, just loose enough to leave something to the imagination.

But she wasn’t thinking about that. Shit, she… she was probably supposed to be his boss. Not a good thought, Sara.

She’d have to see if she could get SAM to zap her before her eyes drifted down the next time.
“I am incapable of performing that particular function, Sara.”

“Worth a try, SAM.” She sighed, “Worth a try.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

So it's a little early to have to post a NSFW warning - and it's not really. Just the Tempest is a small scout ship, and that shower stall is tiny...

So there's nudity here, is what I'm saying, and mixed showering. It sounds naughtier than it is.

Just a handful of people trying to figure out how to live together without tripping all over each other.

It was another week before he, a towel slung haphazardly over his hips, caught her trying to wash out the poorly thought out 600 year old blue dye in the Tempest's showers. “WHOA!” He turned his back. “What are you…” The smell of strawberries hit him like a ton of bricks and his stomach growled.

The only things in the cupboard were reconstituted beef stew, dried noodles, and Vetra’s dextro-protein. He was sick of ramen, to the point where he had actually tried to eat a bite of the Turian’s food. The flavor and texture was great - until his throat started swelling. Lexi’s lectures - administered along with the antihistamines - were still echoing in his ears. Stupid… but he always did learn the hard way.

He would kill for one single strawberry. Size didn’t matter.

“Showering? As one does? Hopefully?” She laughed at him. “Give it up, Kosta. I doubt you’ve never seen a pair of tits before. I ran across your collection of Hanar porn in the cargo hold. Tentacles, everywhere. That’s way more alien than what you or I’ve got,” she teased. “And I gotta get all this blue crap out of my hair.” Her face, laughing and bright just a moment before, shut down, cold, drawn, and focused.

No one could be that stressed out about hair dye. Therefore, it wasn’t about the dye at all.

But first, the crucial misunderstanding. “It’s not porn. It’s art. Those are classic movies on that datapad. And Suvi’s gonna rip you a new one, using up all that water…”

“It’s all recycled,” the Pathfinder argued right back. Arguing was better than her being tight and professional. And naked. Arguing helped him ignore the naked. “And I’ve got a hack. Kallo gave it to me. Unlimited warm water in the showers.”

He hated her then. Just a little bit. For half a second, maybe. “I knew you were getting preferential treatment with the fancy room but… that’s just not fair.” She threw her shampoo bottle at him with her biotics. It was already mostly empty - how long had she been in the shower? - but still hit his thigh like a brick. Girl had talent. “Ouch.” He rubbed his thigh. “I probably deserved that.”

“You think? Knock it off, Kosta.” He picked up the bottle to hand it back, and noted the brand.

Point three hundred and six for the superiority of the Milky Way over Andromeda - the availability of decent hair care products. Wrapping his head every night only went so far. Once his carefully
preserved bottles were gone, it would be Initiative issue only. Guess he would have to get used to being less pretty, find a local alternative… or shave his head.

She tipped her head back to rinse the latest lather out, and he averted his eyes away from her chest.

Distraction. He needed a distraction. “Why are you getting rid of it, anyway?”

Sara closed her eyes tighter against the suds. “I dyed it Initiative blue before we left. Used the good stuff - and cryo kept my hair from growing at all…” her voice broke. “It was about the dream, you know? I don’t… I don’t want to lie to myself, or anybody else anymore. There is no dream, just the nightmare. So… the blue’s gotta go. And I don’t want to shave my head. Too vain.” He stared at her in the mirror, eyes locked on her face, watched her open her eyes just to look away. “I know, it’s dumb. I look too much like Dad to be vain.”

She looked a bit like him, but… not that much. Her dad wasn’t cute. At all. And he wasn’t just saying that because the man had intimidated the hell out of him. “I like the blue. Kind of sorry to see it go.”

“Thanks?” Sara hesitated, and sighed, evidently willing to start over. “There are two shower heads in here. Or are you gonna wait out there until I’m done? I’ve been in here for a while, and it’ll probably be even longer. I think cyro genetically bonded this dye with my roots or something…”

“Are you coming onto me, Ryder? If so, I’d like to be romanced first - a sunset might be nice - and those metal walls look damn cold. I’d pick a better spot. Someplace… warm. And comfortable.” His laughter let her know it was a tease, and she relaxed.

“Sunsets are easy to come by, in space.“ She snorted, “I won’t have to warn you my eyes are up here.” She flipped her hair forward and scrubbed underneath, bent over as far as the limited stall allowed. “Just think of me as one of the guys, Kosta.”

Fat chance of that. He shrugged, “High opinion of me, there, Pathfinder.” But he stepped inside, eyes still averted, and tossed his towel onto the chair on the other side of the wall. It slid to the floor - a counterpoint to her tidy bundle of towel and basket of toiletries. “Silly to wait, I guess, long as you don’t mind. How about sharing that hack, though?”

Sara flipped her hair back, hitting him in the arm in the close quarters. “Only if you tell me the dye’s finally washing out.”

Liam reached out and touched a strand, limp and dripping, and to his educated eye, bluer than ever. “Sorry, Pathfinder. Somebody’s still living the dream, even if it’s just your hair.”

She groaned, flipped off the water, and slipped past him to reach her towel roll. He sucked in, to help her avoid unwanted contact, but her breasts still grazed his back, warm and wet from the shower. “Well, shit. Time to give up, I guess. It’ll have to grow out on its own.” She sniffed, “Guess you’re taking a cold shower. No hack for you!” She said it like the soup guy in the old sitcom, and he chuckled at her weak joke.

“I’d own it, if I were you.” He grinned, “I don’t suppose you brought a bottle? I could do mine… as a show of solidarity. Think baby blue would offset my eyes?” He batted his thick lashes winsomely.

She snapped her towel at his hip in reply, before wrapping it around and tucking it securely between her breasts, a motion which he absolutely wasn’t watching her complete. She grabbed her brush and started detangling. “Didn’t bring another bottle. The chemicals wouldn’t keep for six hundred years. I’d fry your gorgeous locks right off - if it hadn’t evaporated away. I’ll keep an eye out, though.
Misery loves company. Your corkscrews would look great in bright blue. Maybe I'll talk the whole squad into it... a morale building exercise?" She thought a moment, "Those of us with hair, anyway. Maybe Vetra could just change her face paint... Lexi's already a natural blue. Suits her, though." She wrinkled her nose up in the mirror. "Blue's not my color. What was I thinking?"

He tried to ignore the fact that she called his hair 'gorgeous'. Still his boss. But he'd skip going bald, all the same. Just as well - his head was funny shaped, and it was hard enough to shave his face with an Omni-tool. He had perpetual five o'clock shadow on his upper lip, and he was pretty sure his sideburns were slowly disappearing, even if he had programmed the length himself. "I'll give you a beer if you can get Cora on board."

"Deal." She paused, "Wait... you have beer? There's nothing like that in the galley..." her lips curled up, and he grabbed the shower head to adjust it upwards, into his face, just to stop himself from kissing that ramen-detesting look away.

Liam, what the hell do you think you're doing? He rubbed the back of his head, feeling his Dad's backhand, even as he heard his Mum's throaty laugh. He took his time, and set the spray to fit his height, before he answered.

"What do you think I used my weight for? Besides the couch. Everything else I figured I could get here, or it's data. We're months and months away from microbrews. And that's if the hops survived the journey, and if there's a brewer who knows how to use them. When the beer is gone..."

"Kosta, I may just love you."

"Careful, now, that way lies trouble, ma'am?" He tried the honorific on, and then made a face, just to make her snort-giggle. "Sorry, Pathfinder. Don't take the lack of respect personally?"

"No offense taken. Too young to be a ma'am, anyway," she paused, "and if I don't love you, I love your beer. Watch it close, Kosta, or I'll steal it away from you. It wants me, it just doesn't know it yet."

"Sounds more like lust to me. What we have is the real thing." He winked and leaned out of the shower, grabbing for his own supplies, and noted her eyes drifting down and snapping back up, and a ruddy red on her cheeks unexplained by the warmish water and steamy room. "Seriously, though, stop by sometime. I'll share the love."

She was definitely checking him out. Maybe she just had wandering eyes?

He tried to be bothered by it, and failed. And if he returned the favor, tracking her figure as she left... well, he was only human. And shit, that bum, framed tight by the nearly too-short towel... but she had left smiling, instead of one step away from tears. Picking a fight had worked.

He was always good at finding trouble. Sara Ryder qualified.

"Sorry, Mum," he muttered to the shower wall. "I know you tried to raise me right."

In his mind he could hear her sigh in resignation, accompanied by her careful pat on his cheek, like he was still five years old with skinned knees. Just be careful, Liam. I don't want you getting hurt.

He always got hurt, eventually. Mum knew that better than anyone.
“Hey, Pathfinder! Wanna give me a hand?”

Liam couldn’t sleep in the bunks anymore - his nightmares were keeping the others awake, and no one could blame him for wanting a little privacy for the tears he couldn’t stop, right? He really didn’t want to have yet another heart-to-heart with Lexi over coffee in the morning. That meant it was past time to find his own space.

Ryder seemed a little less than amused, though, when confronted with the necessity of moving the key piece of furniture.

He had to sleep somewhere.

“A couch. You really brought a couch. I thought you were kidding in the shower - but then I saw your post.” She sighed, and took up a position on the far side, and lifted. “Are you turning the Tempest into a frat house? Filled with furniture only suitable for tomorrow’s trash pickup?”

“It was new when I shipped it. 600 years affected all of us,” Liam thought the couch hadn't been this heavy in London, but it might have been that she hadn’t engaged her biotics yet. She flared them out, and together they shifted the couch to face his pleasantly large display. “That’s 90 percent of my weight, right here,” he grinned at her in thanks.

“It’s… nice?” she lied.

He didn’t mind. “More comfortable then it looks. Sit down, and I’ll spot you a drink.”

She tilted her head at him. “Can’t. I’m here on business. The Pathfinder can’t be drinking on the job.” She sounded exactly how he remembered Alec Ryder. Hard to tell from her body language whether she was sorry or not.

He remembered her lusting after his beer, though. So…

“And here I thought this was just a social call?” His accent shifted to mock a higher born accent from his native London, and she laughed, knocked clear of her unconscious imitation of her Dad. He relaxed, seeing a bit of the Sara Ryder he recognized from her more unguarded moments. “You’re always working, Pathfinder. You have to relax sometime.”

“Well, I did want to see if you still needed a hand to get settled.” She threw her hair back over her shoulder and looked up at the ceiling. Oh, this was rich – she was blushing. Liam couldn’t even remember the last time a girl had talked to him and flushed. Primary school, maybe? “With the couch, on the board? You asked for biotics. Suvi’s out of practice, Lexi wouldn’t touch this thing with a five meter pole and five liters of disinfectant spray, and I couldn’t see Cora unbending enough. Probably against the Asari code or something, to use biotics out of the context of defense… so… here I am.”

Liam snorted, enjoying her babbling justification of her presence, “Right. Probably. Wouldn’t know, myself. I’m the human equivalent of a bug zapper. Can’t move a couch with that.”

Oddly, that made her face light up. “There are some pretty big bugs on Eos. You’ll see when we get there. I’ve been doing my homework while you’ve been messing with interior decorating.”

So she was planning on taking him with her on the first planetfall since Habitat 7? He had to pretend
to adjust the angle of the couch slightly to hide his smile. It would feel good to get off the Tempest – nice ship, but small quarters chafed at everyone, not just him. “Useful’s good. I can do useful. Now, are you gonna tell me why you’re really here, or what?”

Her eyes dropped to her Omni-Tool. Guilty. She might have been looking for an excuse to talk with him, but she had business, all the same. “How did you know…”

He shook his head at her. “Been through a ton of interviews to get this far. One more on the road? No problem.”

She glanced down at her Omni-tool. She had the longest eyelashes. “The Nexus recommended I get to know my new team. I’ve already interviewed the rest…”

“That’s a compliment, and not the opposite. Still - unless you’re going to space me out the airlock, I’m here at least until we reach Eos.” He slammed himself down on the couch. “So… shoot. But use blanks, will you? I’m tender, underneath.”

She laughed, hesitating, and then perched herself on the opposite arm of the couch, like she was afraid to get too close. “All right. Why did you join the Initiative?”

Liam stared for a minute, weighing his responses against her behavior. The way she was trying to assert her authority was endearing, but also as fake as shit. This woman had taken charge when they crashed on Habitat 7 like she was born to the field - and that after she had fallen through the sky and destroyed her visor. Why was she fidgeting and fumbling about asking a few questions? Maybe she performed best in a crisis?

He could understand that, and pulled his eyes away. *Just the truth, Liam,* his Dad’s voice warned. *That way you don’t have to remember what you told to who.*

“Lots of shit back on Earth and the Citadel. Stuff I couldn’t change. I believed in a new beginning.” He glanced at her, and noted the tears in her eyes. That was it, then. She needed someone who didn’t get discouraged. Someone who didn’t stir up shit, or make her feel bad about the position she was forced to hold up. That wasn’t Cora, Vetra, Gil, or Suvi. And Kallo was too absorbed in his ship to be any real moral support. It would have to be him, if she’d let him. He took a deep breath and told the simplest version of the truth he could manage. “I still do. I have to. We’re in it. As for skills - officially, I’m down for Colonial Security. But… consider me… kind of a jack of all trades, unless you need a biotic. Cora’ll do for that. I’m a decent tech - as long as it doesn’t get theoretical. Better at practical skills. Not going to be arguing with Kallo on the bridge about mass effect theory, but I can help Gil find useful work-arounds. And I can help Vetra maintain the armory - if she’ll let me.” He paused, and allowed, "She won't let me."

“You’ll do… whatever?” Her voice might be dry and sarcastic, a little more of her father showing, but her eyes were brighter. “I’d bet most everyone on the Tempest is pretty flexible, given what we’re up against,” the hope in her eyes was a good sign. “But, yeah. I told you, I was crisis response. That means I was responsible for everything from search and rescue, feeding displaced people, to defending embassies from angry mobs. I’ve jury-rigged water filters in my time with HUST-L, fought off looters, and dealt with most of the shit that comes from people having their homes destroyed by natural disasters and in other people’s wars.”

Her Omni-tool fell to one side, her list of questions ignored for the moment and she slid down to sit properly on the couch cushion. “Kosta – despite what Tann and Addison gave me, I still don’t really know what to expect once we land on Eos. There are settlers that haven’t been accounted for,
unknown threats – you might just be the most important person on the team, with those skills.”

He had to stifle his urge to brag, to try to impress her. *Just the facts, Liam,* his Dad’s voice reminded him. “Nah,” he scoffed, instead, and aimed a compliment at her. “That’s you.” He popped off the cap of his beer, and sipped. “But your Dad thought I’d be useful, I guess, since he tagged me for the Team.” The beer tasted good, sitting there on his couch, and even better with her. He could go for more talks and beer with the Pathfinder. It’d be better if she’d have one, too - friendlier, less like a job interview, and more like… getting to know each other over a drink. “So just point me where you need me, and I’m there.”

She flushed, and he grinned, wondering what she was thinking about. Hopefully something a little less prim. Prim didn’t suit her wild blue hair or neck tattoo. Idly, he wondered what her daddy had thought when she showed up for Andromeda like that. The Alliance didn’t go for wild hair colors or visible tattoos, from what he had seen. “All right then.” She cleared her throat and properly consulted her Omni-tool, straightening her posture. He sighed mentally – she was already back to acting like the Pathfinder. “Family?”

“No one here. Mum, Joelle. Dad, Calvin. Both lawyers. Didn’t have the patience, myself, so I figured I do enforcement. Dad knew it didn’t fit before I did. So I ended up with crisis response. Best years of my life.”

She laughed at that, like she was supposed to, and another of the walls she’d put up fell. “You’re talking like an old man.”

“Hey, you ever seen another 659-year-old human that looks this good?” He flexed his bicep, pleased at the way the muscle bunched. All those pushups paid off. He’d been doing a lot of them since he woke up. Few better ways at dealing with frustration and disappointment than burning it off through exercise. And it helped the sleep problems. A little.

“Nope,” she glanced at him, up through those eyelashes. His gut clenched. There she was again – that was Sara, slightly tilted eyes and long lashes. “Can’t say that I have. But you couldn’t have been long in either.” He took another sip of his beer. Flirty was way better than primly professional - even if it was dangerous.

Crap, he had to dial it back again, or he’d start flirting back, hard, and they’d really get in trouble. “Longer with HUST-L. Two years as a cop.”

“Right,” she consulted her Omni-tool, and bit her lip. His eyes tracked the movement, wondering if it was on purpose or… shit, she was talking again. “So… did anyone you care about come over on the Hyperion or Nexus? Because I have some authority to have people thawed for morale purposes if you’ve got a significant other or friend.”

“Nah.” A lump wedged in his throat, even while he wondered if she was fishing to find out if he was single. Her cheeks were still red - but weren’t they all single, mostly? Gil wasn’t wrong about the Initiative being a glorified dating service. Families were few and far between and repopulation was going to be a huge issue, especially now that so many people were lost. He tried to stay upbeat about it, but that now familiar stab of missing his folks and friends hit him all at once. “Nope, I’m alone.”

Her hand extended, a chagrined look on her face, but it stopped before she could touch him, jerking back abruptly to land in her lap. “I’m so sorry…” She had reached out to comfort him. Alec hadn’t come off as the huggy sort – but Liam would even bet against Gil that Alec’s daughter was.

He could use a hug.
But not from his boss. Great idea, Liam. Mentally, his mom sighed. Sorry, Mum...

To deflect the urge he rolled his shoulders, and shifted so that he didn’t have to look her in the eyes, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. “Don’t be. I knew what I was signing up for. I’m here for the adventure. Second star to the right – that’s me. Hope we can take out a few Kett Captain Hooks.”

“Doesn’t that make you a Lost Boy?” Her lips twisted, but Liam awarded her two points for recognizing the reference.

“Hope not. Rather find myself here than get lost, wouldn’t you?” He watched her for a moment, and then threw it back. “Why did you come?”

She frowned, “Excuse me?” Now she was almost insulted – but even insulted was better than prim and professional.

“Hasn’t anyone asked you? Why did you come?”

“Besides the fact that the only family I had left had already signed up?” She fiddled with her Omni-tool, not meeting his eyes, face hard and bitter. “I wanted to do something different. Meet different people. Go new places. Back in the Milky Way, there weren’t enough options for people like me to do much.” He raised his eyebrows, and she kept talking, “Biotics – half curse, the way people act around you, and half gift.” He nodded, and she continued, “Both sides add together until it’s pretty much just the Alliance, right? I wanted… out.” She rolled her eyes. “Goes to show I know shit-all and shouldn’t ever be trusted with important decisions. Guarding archaeological digs was boring, but it’s fucking safer.”

“Adventure,” he summed up, hiding what must be a demented smile with a sip of beer. Her cussing sounded exactly right. That was all Sara, not the Pathfinder, or Alec Ryder’s daughter.

Cora would have a hard time with Sara Ryder, when she finally got to meet her.

“Sort of. I was hoping to meet better people. People who could put old grudges aside in favor of building something new. I think I’ve met a few. Maybe.” Those eyelashes again, and she had abandoned her list of questions in favor of playing with her overly blue ponytail, her eyes hard and angry and hurt. He wished he didn’t understand.

“Who?” he snorted, wondering if he was asking who had hurt her, or who she’d met that thought the same way. “Tann? Addison?”

“Fuck those two,” and Liam choked on his next sip of beer, as she kept going, “But Kesh is great, and Kandros is a nice guy just trying to keep order in a bad situation.” She was quiet before she continued, “People like you.” She waggled her head back and forth, trying to temper the compliment, even as her cheeks stained an even darker red. “Optimists.” She hissed it like a naughty word, averting her eyes. “People that wanted to try again, and make something… better. People who thought we could do it, if we try hard enough.”

Her use of the past tense made him wince. “You wanted to start over and do it right, huh?” She nodded, shy. “Don’t be embarrassed. Ask around. There are more like us than you’d think.”

The small smile she passed his way felt like a reward. “You sound like you believe that.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

They talked long enough for her to exclaim at the time, and she never did have a beer… but that
night, as he shuffled his way into a comfortable spot on his couch, folding an arm over his bare chest and tugging a blanket over his boxers, he couldn’t help thinking.

Sara Ryder was a dreamer. Just a broken one, still searching for a new vision.

A dreamer like him.

His Mum would have loved her. He squeezed his eyes shut, imagining them meeting. His Mum’s patented third degree, famous for breaking hostile witnesses on the stand. His Dad, quietly handing her undiluted scotch from his personal stock with an expression of sympathy while she turned red at his mother’s increasingly intrusive questions - questions designed to trip her up every third sentence.

He would have had to break into the conversation, before Sara Ryder ended up confessing her deepest, darkest secrets to his parents, with her tongue loosened by 30-year-old scotch.

His parents’ good cop/bad cop routine was epic.

A few tears trickled out of the corners of his eyes, and he tried very hard to think about something else. It didn’t work. It never did.

One of these nights he wouldn’t be crying himself to sleep. He’d process his grief, and move to acceptance. At least… that’s what Lexi claimed. Maybe then he’d feel comfortable enough sharing the bunkroom with the rest of the crew. Idly, he wondered if the Pathfinder was crying, too, all alone in that massive room of hers. Maybe he’d ask, if he got a chance.

Maybe she only needed someone to ask if she was all right.

She had more to cry about then he did. His parents had lived long and happy lives, back home. They hadn’t died in violence and pain like her Dad, or by a long drawn out illness like her Mum…

London was pretty safe, after all, as long as you stayed out of the shady areas. Nothing much could touch them, there. Cold comfort, but comfort all the same.

He’d take what comfort he could find. He hoped Sara had something like it.
Chapter 5

Sara couldn’t sleep after the ‘interview’ with Liam. She had tossed in the too-wide, too-empty bed, kicking the blankets to the floor, and pulling the sheet up on the corner so that it untucked from the military grade grooming it had received that morning.

She swore every night that she wasn’t going to make her bed first thing, desperate to break away from her Alliance roots, but she did it by rote – like she did everything before her first cup of coffee.

Out the window the blackhole in the Eriksson galaxy swirled idly – even that barely perceptible movement irritating to her current restless mood.

The bed was in ruins now, and so she paced instead, talking to SAM on their private link, barefoot, in sleeping shorts and her sports bra. “God, Sam, I’m such an idiot. He’s a member of the crew, and I was… flirting. And not subtly, because God forbid I do anything classy. I practically told him he was the perfect man and threw myself at him when he said he was single. What the hell am I thinking? Am I that desperate?” She sat down on her desk, shaking a bit with anxiety, planting her feet against the ever so slight thrumming of the Tempest’s drive core. The vibration was soothing on her toes and the balls of her feet.

“I’m given to understand that amongst organic creatures such attraction is common.”

“Not like this.” The admission was hard to make, even to the AI stuck in her head. “I’m his boss, right?”

“That is… somewhat accurate. Your father considered himself his commanding officer, that is certain.”

Sara rolled her eyes, “Dad was always someone’s superior officer, even when he first met Mom. I’d imagine it was a hard habit to break.” She bit her lip. “Fraternization regs. Do they exist in the Initiative?”

“That is likely how your father would see this situation, from a professional standpoint. From a personal point of view, he would likely disapprove of Liam Kosta as a potential partner for his daughter due to…”

“Fuck Dad’s point of view.”

“I cannot perform that function.”

“Sometimes you’re such a machine, SAM.” She slammed her palm down on the edge of her desk. “Look, as Pathfinder… if Tann and Addison have to do as I say, everyone is my subordinate. In a way.”

SAM’s voice was ever so slightly disapproving, at least in her head. “I don’t think everyone has to follow your orders, Sara. The Initiative structured the Pathfinder section to function as a team.”

“That’s not what I meant, SAM. I’m not going to start flouncing around like the princess of everything. But how am I supposed to make friends, or,” her last conversation with her mother flitted into her head and drifted right back out as soon as she could make it leave, “-or make connections here, if I’m supposed to be the Pathfinder all the time?” She snorted, “I can’t even be polite to Tann for more than ten minutes.”
“Your average time before making a sarcastic comment to Director Tann is 6 point zero three minutes.”

“You would keep track,” Sara broke down, slumping, and laughing, before pressing her palms of her hands into her tired eyes. “What should I do, SAM? I can’t keep – making it awkward like this. First the dance thing, then the shower, and now this… ridiculous conversation, he’s going to think I’m insane and pathetic. Probably not in that order.”

SAM was quiet for a long time - long enough for Sara to consider that he might be communicating with other members of the crew. “No where in Initiative protocol does it say that the Pathfinder Team should function as an army. I would suggest speaking with Dr. T’Perro and Cora Harper. Either might have insight into how you might best… transition from your father’s legacy to your own. ”

“Legacy?” Sara paled. “SAM, that makes me sound like some kinda hero.” Her stomach clenched. “Oh, God. I’m not a hero.”

“If you succeed, I find it likely you will be remembered as such.”

Sara lurched back to her feet and ran to the bathroom. “I think I’m going to throw up.”

When she finally stopped emptying the contents of her stomach, and visited Lexi in the med bay, the doctor was calm, understanding and professional.

As well as no help whatsoever, as she had a whole list of other things that needed to be accomplished with the Pathfinder’s permission. Sara might have been avoiding her. “At this time, I have to ask if there is any way you can be pregnant.”

Sara choked. “Lexi. Please. You’re in charge of my hormone blockers. With all the scans and tests, you’ll know if I’m pregnant before I do. And has anyone from the Tempest had sex in Andromeda yet?” She paused, before continuing, “Don’t answer that. If somebody’s getting some, I don’t want to know.” She scowled, “It’s Vetra, though. No one can resist that sexy Turian voice. She’s probably got lovers lined up back on the Nexus with offerings of electronics and dextro-protein.”

“Sara, just answer the question.” The doctor stood before her with a tray with three needles, lined up precisely, and a fourth perpendicular to the rest. No doubt it made sense to her.

“Of course not.” In a quick succession, Lexi updated three vaccine boosters - including one for smallpox which Sara knew had been eradicated in the early 1900s on Earth. Better safe than sorry?

But Lexi had no useful advice for a lost Pathfinder, despite SAM’s dubious help with requesting guidance. “I think the best thing you can do is… be yourself,” Lexi finally offered, looking unsure. “No one expects you to be your father…”

“Except Cora,” Sara corrected brittlely.

“That is her problem, not yours. And I’m sure Cora’s more than willing to help you…”

“When Cora and I finally made peace, she told me to read the books by this Asari Huntress, Sarissa something or other,” Sara muttered. “A book list longer than my forearm. With titles that sounded like poetry. I don’t do poetry. She’s a total fangirl.” She paused, “Not like that’s bad, but Asari Huntresses are not my thing.”

Lexi injected her a fourth time. “Cora’s training taught her to think Asari have all the answers.”
“And I’m too young to have any answers at all,” Sara, woozy after the last shot, laid back on the med bay bed. “I get it.”

“Not at all. It’s just your answers will be different from those that Cora would expect from a mentor.”

“And therefore wrong,” Sara stressed, covering her eyes with one arm, simultaneously trying to ignore the way the bed tilted dizzily. Like a buzz without the fun of getting drunk first. “Lexi, are my stress levels elevated? What about my brain functions? Are they impaired from when I was dead?”

“Your cortisol levels are higher than recommended levels,” the doctor admitted. “But all the humans on board are in a similar situation.” Lexi sat down on her stool and turned to face her desk. “Your brain functions read normal. You’re not going insane, Sara, and your brush with death has not impacted you physically.” She reached for her datapad. “I’m going to send you some simple directions for basic yoga exercises. They’ll help break down lactic acid in your muscles and should help the stress as well. Both will help you rest.”

Sara sighed, and swung her legs off the bed. “Thanks, doc. I’d better try to get some sleep, while there’s still a few hours before we orbit Eos.”

Lexi nodded, and waved her out without turning back, absorbed in drafting the email.

Sara left the med bay, but didn’t turn towards her room. Instead, she climbed the ladder to the bridge, her arm and leg muscles moving stiffly around the vaccination sites. “See, SAM? Told you that talking would be no help whatsoever.” She snorted softly, “Yoga. Right.”

“Her recommendations are scientifically and medically sound.”

“The one time I tried yoga I ended up more frustrated than when I started,” Sara argued, marching over the walkway to the bridge. “If I have to tie myself in knots to get some fucking sleep, we should just get out a Twister board.”

SAM was quiet for a moment, before asking, “Sara, what is a Twister board?”

Sara clenched her jaw, “Look it up, SAM.”

“Very well, Pathfinder.”

“It’s a game, SAM. A stupid, silly game.” She leaned against the door to the bridge before she let herself in, second guessing herself. Kallo would be awake, even if Suvi was still sleeping, and she didn’t want to deal with the questions about her informal attire. In no vid ever, did the commanding officer of any ship show up on the bridge in their jammies. “We don’t have time for games.” She turned around and headed back to her room, descending the ladder far quicker than she had climbed.

“Then I would suggest you attempt the yoga.”

“Can I say ‘no’, or will you just wake me up early to do it in the morning?”

“I could function as an alarm clock if you like.”

“Save your processing power. I’ll get up on my own.”

“As you prefer, Pathfinder.”

“Screw you, SAM.” She banged on the entrance to her bedroom door until it opened - one of the
few things on the Tempest that didn't work reliably.

“Also an impossibility.”

“I’m so going to have Gil design a sarcasm meter for you.” Sara fell onto her bed, feeling strangely better despite her continued embarrassment and frustration. “At least I know I can’t hurt your feelings, right?” She sat up. “SAM, if you have humor, do you have feelings?”

“I am unsure how to answer that question.”

“Right, forget I asked.”

“Deleting the last query from my archive.”

Sara, with a sigh, got out of bed, and fixed the corner of the sheet, and caught hold of the covers on the floor, billowing them out over the bed, before climbing back in. “I wasn’t serious, SAM.” She stretched out spread eagled under the comforter, one arm above her head. “I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings.”

“Apology accepted, Sara.” A few minutes passed in silence before SAM prompted, "You have new email, Pathfinder."

"It can wait 'til morning, SAM."
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

When I say 'sporadic posting', I mean sporadic. I am aware I just posted a chapter yesterday, and yet here I am posting one today, as well.

But they're done, so why should I make people wait, just so I get comments?

Mind you, if you want to comment, go ahead. Because this story is turning out to be damn cute, and I wanna share it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sara wasn’t sure what she had expected from Eos. Kett, certainly. She’d been prepared for bodies abandoned in the sand, thanks to Vetra’s recounting of the disaster of the early colonization attempts, and struggled with the idea of radiation strong enough to penetrate her armor, thanks to SAM’s heads up back before they landed. She’d lived with someone with a terminal illness for years - and she knew enough to know that radiation poisoning wasn’t the way she wanted to go.

She’d seen those vids, thank you very much. Lexi assured her that it was treatable, but… no thanks.

Somehow, despite Suvi’s excited theories back on board the Tempest, she hadn’t really expected to see more of the odd robots they had encountered on Habitat 7. “Exterminate… Exterminate…” she muttered in a robotic monotone, as she scanned the remains of their latest firefight.

Liam choked out a laugh, and surprised, she glanced at him. “I’d kill for a sonic screwdriver right now. Solve all our problems, right?”

“I want a TARDIS. Fuck the screwdriver.”

“It’d probably tingle.” Her giggle turned into laughing gasps, until she had to stop scanning for a minute until she could breathe again. “What, Pathfinder? Something I said?” Liam winked at her through his visor.

“Grow up, you two,” Cora ordered over their helmet comms. “Pathfinder, can you do what your father did? Make it… work?”

“SAM can…” her voice was thoughtful, and she stepped towards the console in the middle. “But he’s missing glyphs to decrypt the instructions.” She scanned around, underground, overhead… only to find what she was looking for far above. “Shit.” Her palms grew damp in her protective gloves.

“What?” Cora sounded annoyed. An all-too-familiar tone of voice, since they’d left the Nexus. “What’s the problem?”

“I found a glyph,” her voice shook. “But it’s at the top of that… pillar.” She swallowed. “I’ve got to go up there, don’t I?” Her breath rasped in her chest. “Oh, God.” She wasn’t sure if she was praying or cursing – maybe Suvi could tell her the difference.
“You’re the one with the scanner, Pathfinder,” Kosta was calm.

“It’s just really… high.”

“You’re scared of heights?”

“And if I was?” She focused on him, angry and defensive. “Tends to happen when you’ve fallen out of a shuttle only to bounce off rocks while having your jump-jets fail… and then dream about it every goddamn sleep cycle since.” For a moment, she could only see streaks of electricity while earth and sky exchanged places in the reflection on her visor. She caught herself on the console before the flashback made her fall. Too late to avoid nausea. She swallowed, hard. She couldn’t clean her helmet out here. No water. Too much radiation. *God, Sara, don’t throw up.* “Makes me… sick.”

“Oh.” Cora sounded less judgmental, if still dismissive. “That’s easy then. I’ll catch you if you fall. No trouble to use biotics for that…”

“And I’ll spot you,” Liam announced practically. “I’ll be right behind you, all the way.”

It took her a few tries to jump to a place where she could climb, and then the column’s surface was slippery against her boots and gloves as she struggled to reach a place where she could read the glyph. She sighed, sweating inside her armor as she tried desperately to scan too far away – just to avoid more leaps. Her suit’s temperature control kicked in, chilling her sweat against her under armor. “I’m going to have to use the jets,” she blurted. “Scanner won’t reach.”

“It’s okay, I got you,” Kosta’s voice was so damn soothing. “Cora’s right below. You’ve got a safety net.” He paused, “Do you want me to jump you over?”

She wished she could see his face better – tell if he was mocking her or not. Instead, she closed her eyes. “I haven’t been jumped over something since Dad first took me out.” She opened her mouth to admit that she did – but stopped, not sure if her reasons were valid. It was just a little jump… she’d done way scarier before… everything.

“I have the nightmares too. Probably will for the rest of my life. Been around enough vets to know PTSD when I see it. Nothing to be ashamed about. That day was mostly shit.”

“Only mostly?” Her voice shook, her sarcasm harsh. “Why aren’t you falling apart then?”

“My jump-jets didn’t fail. My visor didn’t break. I had a long fall tempered with thrusters, caught myself on a cliff, and flew up like a superhero to where you landed. I got off easy.” He laughed and kept going, “And I know Cora won’t let me splat. Her barriers were almost the coolest thing that happened on Habitat 7. Like something out of *Harry Potter*. Bet they’d hold off a dementor.”

“Thanks, I think,” Cora announced, humor in her voice for one of the first times Sara could remember since her father had died. “Can we get on with it?”

“So… we think happy thoughts and jump?” Sara tried to steady her voice, but her heart hammered in her ears. “SAM, are my jets functioning?”

“They are, Pathfinder.”

“Don’t forget the pixie dust, Wendy.” Liam snorted and checked her equipment deliberately. “Jump-jets are good to go. Remember to engage ‘em, and we’re golden.”

“Got it,” she whispered, and opened her eyes. “Geronimo?” Liam’s choked laugh even made her try
“How about on a count of three?”

The first jump was the hardest, but his arms around her middle grounded her, and she made the last one herself, Liam following as close as he could, catching her when her foot slipped on the glossy metal. “Got you,” he whispered, helmet close to hers. “You all right?”

“Yeah,” she held his forearm though, as she scanned. “SAM thinks this one means ‘Entropy’,” she read aloud from her display.

“I don’t detect any more glyphs, Pathfinder,” SAM announced on the open channel.

“Then down we go…” she glanced down and stepped backward. “I hope there isn’t any more of these…” her voice sounded rough in her own ears, sucked breaths echoing in her helmet.

Instead of waiting, Liam looped his arm around her waist and leapt straight down, engaging his own thrusters to slow their descent. “Easy does it,” he announced.

“Right.” Sara slipped out of his grasp, hoping her blush didn’t show up through her visor, and wandered to the console on shaky legs. She hadn’t blushed so much since she was twelve. A side effect of cyro, maybe? The Pathfinder shouldn’t be so… vulnerable, but at the moment she couldn’t bring herself to care. It was over. At least for now. “SAM?” She asked, aloud.

“Decrypting.” A solid beam of blue light lit up the sky, and pointed in a random direction. “I believe there are more of these monoliths, Pathfinder.”

“Great,” she huffed insincerely, and braced herself on the console for strength before shoving herself back to turn and face the others. “Guess I’d better get used to jumping again. Look out for some good practice spots, Kosta?”

“Here to help, Pathfinder.” She met Liam’s eyes, and he grinned at her through his helmet, saluting with two fingers. “I do whatever, remember?” She opened her mouth, ready to thank him, until she was knocked down by a very excited Asari.

“How’d you do it?” The green eyes peering into her own were way too excited, her smile too cheerful for anybody marooned in Andromeda. With Liam’s comments about *Harry Potter* running through her mind, Sara’s thoughts leapt to comparing the Asari to the house-elf Dobby. Similar eyes, she thought, dazed. “You’re supposed to have to cycle through the possibilities… but you… you just did the impossible.”

Sara sat up, scooting away, and rubbing the back of her helmet to check for damage. “My SAM unit figures out the probabilities and functions. He does the work, not me.” The next thing she knew she was committed to exploring the rest of the monoliths, and reciting the details of their experience on Habitat 7.

She didn’t get a chance to thank Liam until they were back in the Nomad, navpoint locked in for the next monolith provided by the ever-eager Peebee. The Asari had opted to scout ahead in her purloined shuttle. Despite her gratitude, Sara didn’t come up with much more than a muffled, “Thanks for that,” with an accompanying touch to his arm.

“Don’t mention it, Pathfinder.” His smile warmed her. “It’s what I’m here for, right?”
It occurs to me - belatedly, that I should be sharing the various pop culture references for those who might be unfamiliar. To give the credit where credit is due.

So, in this chapter, Sara refers to Star Trek when she speaks of the radiation poisoning vids. It's in one of the movies. I'm going to avoid spoilers, but that might be a little hard.

Obviously, Doctor Who is the 'exterminate', 'sonic screwdriver' and 'TARDIS' reference. Come on, Liam Kosta is a nice British boy. He's going to know all (by his time) 200 Doctors. ;) 'Geronimo' is a quote. I'll try to avoid 'Allons-y'. Thankfully, you don't have to deal with my tortured version of French in this fic.

Also because Liam is British, he'd be fully familiar with J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. As well as everyone else in the Milky Way. Because they're fabulous.

A little less well-known is the wonderful J.M. Barrie, who wrote Peter Pan. Pixiedust, happy thoughts, Lost Boys, and pirates. What's not to love?
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Liam was glad he was regulated to the backseat when they climbed back into the Nomad after the monolith, and that the Pathfinder’s attention was focused on her new baby – the machine itself.

When she found it she had actually bounced, recited off about fifty specs with Gil over the comms, and then purred while touching it like a lover, all the way down its bumper and underneath, as she shoved herself backwards underneath to check out the undercarriage. She came up, only after Cora ordered her to, dusty and with her blue hair muted with sand, but grinning like a madwoman.

He had managed not to ask if they needed to be left alone. Just barely. His Mum would be proud – but then she probably would have crawled underneath with the Pathfinder, and discussed gearing with both the Pathfinder and Gil.

He was too shook up to banter the specs himself, as the Pathfinder continued her conversation with Gil over the link to the Tempest, even now, after the monolith and her flashback. Later, maybe, but right now he was the one feeling dizzy.

Thanks to her trauma, he knew what Sara Ryder’s body felt like. He hadn’t liked the way she shook under his hands, mind you, that was all wrong. But his arm around her waist and his helmet against hers… he wanted to do that again, and again, and for a far better reason than that she feared falling. Better yet, he’d rather hold her with the armor off and no helmets at all…

He hunched forward in his seat, helmet off, elbows on his knees, and ran his fingers up under his hair. He had to switch these thoughts off. Maybe once they got this ‘vault’ SAM and Peebee talked about up and running they could go back to the Nexus. He’d met one of Kandros’ APEX members there, and she seemed nice enough, and not too dismissive of him not being able to hack it with C-Sec… told him he’d been smart to get out before he screwed up.

That was kind of his life story, really. Getting out before he cocked things up.

But he wasn’t really interested in that girl, whatever her name was. It said a lot that he couldn’t even remember – he wasn’t normally bad with names. Someone else had caught his eye first – however ill-advised - and, damn it, it wasn’t like he was going to be around the Nexus much. The Pathfinder Team was a full-time job. He didn’t need someone to fill free hours with – he didn’t have free hours. None of them did.

The Pathfinder was doing just fine by the second monolith – that Asari, Peebee, seemed to be cut from the same cloth. Liam hoped her fear was just a short-lived reaction to stress, and not long-lived trauma. Trauma changed people, and the Pathfinder (always said in his head now, with capital letters and everything to maintain an appropriate distance) had done enough changing since Habitat 7 already. Of course, the second monolith had a lot less jumping around like a cricket and a lot more Remdoku puzzles…

She had laughed at his name for them. Cora hadn’t. Just groaned.

By the third, she didn’t really need him to spot her. She insisted all the same. Guess he’d have to make himself useful in another way, once she got her jump-legs back.

The Pathfinder had made a face at Cora’s lack of sense of humor about the silly name, and moved on
with the job, climbing back into the Nomad and patting its steering wheel like a good dog. “Where to now, boy?” She chirped at it, before engaging its navigation program. “SAM?”

“The vault’s navpoint is being uploaded, Pathfinder.” There was a pause, “I believe it to be subterranean, at least in part. My information is incomplete.”

“We’ll map as we go, SAM. No reason we can’t take it over more than a day,” back behind the wheel of her car, she was fearless again, driving them back along the narrow cliff and down towards the navpoint by one of the huge lakes. Liam adjusted his harness as she drove off the edge.

Evidently her fear of heights did not translate into a fear of cliffs while strapped into a vehicle. She wasn’t afraid of jumping the Nomad whatsoever.

Cora hadn’t been paying attention. “SHIT! SARA!” The woman screamed, but Sara just smiled at her… and nearly rolled the vehicle while her attention was elsewhere.

“What? I got this…” She was insane, and Liam cackled from the back seat as she took a series of dunes at full throttle, all six wheels off the ground, bounding happily like some sort of rabbit.

“Oh, God, I’m going to be sick,” Cora moaned.

And Sara braked, immediately. “Cora?” She tightened her hands on the wheel. “Do you get… carsick?”

“Just go…” the commando groaned. “Go back to the Tempest, please. I’ll switch out with Vetra…”

“Done,” Sara engaged the throttle again, but took it easier this time, keeping to established tracks rather than blazing her own trail. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Cora was already crisp again. “I’ll get something from Lexi to help. I won’t let this get in the way of our work, Pathfinder.”

Sara didn’t let the Nomad completely go after that – not until Vetra was harnessed in, ready for action. She grinned at the Turian, “Check your straps, and hold on. Both of you.” And she blasted off, leaving sand clouds behind her. She flew off down to the lake, engaged the agility mode with a closed fist on the dash, and started doing donuts on the shoreline, her face behind her visor gleeful and childlike. “Don’t tell Gil!”

Liam couldn’t stop laughing, even when Vetra cursed them both. “Damn it, you two, aren’t those Kett?”

“Think they can hit us like this?” Sara screamed over the whine of the engine.

“Yes!” Vetra yelled. “And Gil hasn’t installed the upgraded shields yet!”

“Fuck them!” She caught Liam’s eyes in the mirror and grinned. “All right, Vet, we’ll kill some Kett. Just for you.”

“Your priorities are skewed, Pathfinder,” Liam teased. “Donuts in the Nomad are way more important.”

“You’re a cop! Cops like donuts, right? And I’m just having some fun,” she protested, as she squealed to a stop in front of the outpost. “I haven’t felt this relaxed since I woke up.”

“Shame we had to stop, then,” Liam offered, lightheartedly as she pulled up against a rock to add to
their cover. “I was just getting into it.” He wobbled out of the Nomad, head spinning, and nearly fell, before Sara grabbed his arm and shoved him back against the Nomad’s door with a grin.

“You dizzy or something?” She was damn close, and she was touching his chest. She seemed to realize that, backing away a step, just before she swung down her assault rifle, and flipped off the safety, and checked her ammo load. “Wouldn’t want you to spew, Kosta, if you can’t handle my driving.”

“You drive like a dream, Pathfinder,” he laughed aloud and she took two steps back, grinning.

“Should we kill some Kett?”

“Might as well, since we’re both here,” she peered out from behind the Nomad’s back wheel. “Looks like they know this is one of the areas with lower radiation.”

“Good,” Vetra huffed. “I’ve a little aggression I need to get out.” She flipped up the sights on her sniper rifle and laid down underneath the Nomad. “Anointed on my nine, lined up and ready to fire, Pathfinder.”

“Then fire, Vet.”

“Don’t call me Vet.”

Sara pouted, “You’re no fun.”

“Vetra’s short enough.”

Liam had his own aggression to work through, but the fight didn’t last long enough to burn it all off – mostly thanks to Drack and Sara’s enthusiasm. “How the hell did he get out here so fast?” He asked, but nobody answered. He suspected Vetra had sent him a message, before leaving the Tempest, but… well, he’d never be able to prove anything.

All too soon, he had to climb back in the Nomad, this time sharing the backseat with a grumpy Krogan, and he was stuck, once again, remembering her body against his and how he absolutely could not, ever, under any situation, touch her like that again.

If he did, it would give too much away.

Chapter End Notes

Sara’s asking if Liam's gonna spew is a reference to 'Wayne’s World'.


Chapter 8

The crew was growing. Sara wasn’t sure that was a good thing. The Tempest was designed for a small scout team – and they didn’t have enough bunks. Cora had actually gone so far as to call a Team meeting to work it out – only to discover that, much like Liam, the newcomers had already worked it out on their own. Drack was in the kitchen, Peebee in an escape pod.

Cora had also drawn up schedules for everything from showers to laundry – and everyone had instantly shouted her down, except for Suvi, who lamented, when outvoted, that she liked patterns. “No reason why you can’t make your own,” Sara offered, and Suvi smiled.

“I’ll do that, Pathfinder.”

Sara was left with the final order – that everyone just try to get along. Liam had saluted, “Sure thing, boss.”

She winced at the title. Somehow, that was even worse than Pathfinder.

Suvi – of all the sweethearts – left whispering to Kallo that she could talk to Gil for him – and Kallo turned her down. “I don’t think it would help, Suvi. But thanks.”

Sara couldn’t read Gil’s poker face, but he had to have overheard.

Drack wandered down the ramp assuring everyone, “If there’s one thing Krogan are known for, it’s getting along.” Admittedly, they had gone through a thousand years of bullshit and genophage after they tried to take over the galaxy, so… maybe Drack had an argument. It did take them an absurdly long time to decide to rebel against the Salarians after being uplifted...

Sara found herself with a need to review Krogan history.

But with this number of wildly divergent personalities in a very small ship, there were going to be clashes. It was just a matter of who lost it first – Kallo, over Gil’s devil-may-care attitude about redesigning ship systems was Sara’s bet – but she barely knew the new members.

Peebee was… interesting. Intelligent in an alarming fashion, with the sort of natural armor that meant you could say anything to her and it would just roll off, as well as what seemed to be a natural aversion to other Asari - or at least doctors. Those two having an explosive confrontation would probably be the long odds… both seemed inclined to let sleeping dogs lie. Especially since Lexi had willingly offered her opinion that Peebee’s choice of living quarters was a sign of an inability to commit, and Peebee herself wasn’t exactly inclined to answer personal questions.

Sounded like a wise choice to Sara. That escape pod looked pretty damn cozy, all things considered.

She still wasn’t sleeping too well, and now that they were packing up and getting ready to map the rest of Eos, she felt it. She grabbed an extra cup of coffee out of the dispenser and climbed the ladder one handed, absurdly pleased when she managed not to spill it.

Liam eyeballed her from where he was waiting at the loadout bench, leaning backwards, legs crossed, and mouth twitching. “Hidden talent there, Pathfinder.”

“We’ve all got to be good at something, right? Missed my calling to be a barista.” She chugged the coffee, ignoring the way it burned her tongue, and then set it down on the top of the metal cabinet, enjoying the soft ‘snick’ of the magnet on the bottom as it locked in place. “So… who’s with me
“Up to you.” Liam was already half suited up. “I’m here, though. Everyone else is still grabbing
breakfast.”

“Get your gear and ammo, then, Kosta. Early bird gets the worm, and all that crap, right?” She
flipped up her Omni-tool. “I’ll ping Drack to meet us at the Nomad.”

Drack wouldn’t be the problem. He was friendly with Vetra, and he was like the best grandpa in the
galaxy. All the war stories, and all the sense of humor that was lacking from so many other members
of the crew.

Sara picked his brain all the way out and back.

“I don’t recommend lighting yourself on fire as a useful tactic, though.”

“Other ways of intimidating with fire, better ones.” She adjusted her steering to align better with the
cliff face. “Incendiary ammo works just fine. So do grenades. Scott told me about this thing he did
in the field with laying charges, and then setting them off with biotics... I’ve been meaning to try
that. Let the Kett be the ones who burn.”

“I knew you were fun, Kid.”

The other new member of her team, currently purring underneath her feet, used a lot less words, but
made a lot more noise. She fell in love with him at first sight.

She’d been following his development since before her mother died, but she never thought she’d get
to drive him. Even in Silva’s expedition, there was no budget for a beauty. In some things,
apparently, the Initiative hadn’t skimped.

Yes, all in all, the Nomad was the perfect squad member. It didn’t fuss about changes to the
Tempest’s engineering, didn’t make excited noises at pitches that hurt her ears about Remnant or
random volcanoes on uninhabitable planets, didn’t try to tell her she should be more like her father
and/or an Asari huntress with every other breath (and if someone would draw her Dad as an Asari
Huntress, she would really appreciate the laugh), didn’t fight the idea of an AI linked with her brain,
and didn’t try to play poker with her.

Behind the Nomad’s wheel, she was powerful. Behind its wheel, she wasn’t an imposter. Behind its
wheel, she was The Pathfinder – said in a gruff tone like Batman.

But Sara wasn’t alone in her love of the machine. She was exclaiming over a few scratches one
ight, and Gil set her aside, calmly, and went to work with a soft chamois cloth and cooing voice.
“We’ll get this baby fixed right up, Pathfinder. No worries! She’d love a new paintjob, wouldn’t
you, my lovely? What do you think, purple?” Gil grinned, already contradicting himself, with the
fire of passion in his eyes, “No... we’re going platinum!”

He couldn’t be dissuaded to choose something more camouflaged to Eos, so she left them alone. She
was the driver, but it was obvious that Gil was the lover. The Nomad had to come home to him.

She shouldn’t have felt so lonely that night, wrapped up in her sheets and staring at the stars outside
her window, fighting the urge to make her way back to the cargo bay to sleep behind the wheel of
the six-wheeler. But she’d be in Gil’s way there. No doubt he’d be up all night making sweet love to
the machine.

The Nomad would have been a perfect stress-reliever while out on missions, except for the fact that
Liam, when shut up in the newly acquired six-wheeler, tended to start uncomfortable conversations with the rest of the Team. Every morning, Liam showed up even before she did, ready to roll out and get on with their mission for viability. Hard to tell him no, when he was half-suited up, and already checking his equipment.

But his conversations - Drack shut him down the first time he tried to start telling stories. The Krogan had a thing about getting attached to kids, because they all ended up dead. Reasonable, considering he’d outlived every single contemporary through a lethal combination of luck and skill. Peebee and Liam were a little better in the close quarters - though he didn’t see anything wrong with calling her out on her lack of commitment to the Initiative.

Sara could care less about permanence. Peebee was the only Remnant expert, besides herself. Who cared about her long-term commitment? As far as Sara was concerned, Peebee could leave tomorrow, if she didn’t get along with the rest of them – as long as she helped clear Eos’ vault first.

It was out of character for Liam to be so belligerent, when he was so determined not to ‘bring home’ his opinions about the rest of the team back on the Tempest. What was so different about being an ass in person versus gossiping?

Then again, at least he wasn’t a ‘behind your back’ kind of guy. She could appreciate somebody who could handle confrontations – even when he seemed to go looking for them. Heaven knew she couldn’t, didn’t, wouldn’t.

It took precisely one Nomad ride before Sara made SAM promise to sabotage the ignition if she ever tried to take Vetra and Liam anywhere together again. She found herself echoing her father, “Don’t make me turn this fucking car around!” They were worse than her and Scott had ever been.

Liam had laughed, and apologized – to her, not Vetra. That wasn’t okay in the least. Vetra had sighed, scowled, and looked out the window, into the dust-tinted horizon of Eos. “He started it,” the woman muttered. Sara wrapped her tense fists around the steering wheel and kept driving, glad that their destination was close, and resisting the urge to tell one or the other to keep their hands to themselves.

The only one Liam didn’t seem to feel the need to challenge was Cora, and that probably had something to do about her status on the team - she was Sara’s second, though Sara’s version of the Pathfinder Team was turning out to be a lot more casual. They were missing about half the people her father thought necessary, and with the exception of Cora and Kallo, none of them were very hung up on regulations.

She did feel the lack of a full company - Drack was their only real heavy, though Liam and Vetra could take up some of the slack – but never, ever together. A problem, for a biotic like her, and a problem, given that Drack had prosthetic issues that Lexi required his presence to fix. Sara considered training with larger guns, but she didn’t have the upper body strength to hold them steady. Plus she knew from experience that the recoil hurt her boobs – no matter what plate she wore, the bruises would ache something awful. She’d be able to handle a sniper rifle, with a few more pull-ups and range time, but anything large and heavy was out. Besides, she had an excellent sniper in Vetra – she couldn’t hope to match her, probably even with SAM’s help.

But given that Liam kept showing up, ready and willing to head out first thing, it seemed like her team was always Liam plus one. It was Liam plus Drack, while they mapped Eos and placed mining drones for a desperate Nexus. It was Liam plus Cora, as they killed Kett encamped too close to the site destined to be their outpost. It was Liam plus Peebee, while they looked at Remnant sites. And then it was Liam and Cora again, while they struggled to clear the ground of debris, and shifted scavenged supplies from the failed sites for the inbound outpost team.
It should have come as no surprise when Lexi mentioned, during what was turning into her every-
other-day checkup, that she might have a word with Liam about his treatment of the other members
in the field. Sara grimaced. “The Initiative doesn’t have an HR department to handle interpersonal
issues?”

“What’s the human phrase: ‘The buck stops here?’ The buck stops with you, Sara. Liam’s isolating
people.” The doctor hesitated, and tempered her request, “He’s not xenophobic. I think - I think it’s
a defense mechanism, or perhaps just grief and regret funneling into dedication. It can be a good
thing, that dedication, but he’s questioning everyone else, and they’re taking it personally.”

“How am I supposed to fix it?”

“Just talk to him. He’s… inclined to impress you.”

Sara blinked, “Who, me?” She couldn’t quite stifle her smile, even as her guts clenched painfully.
Technically, that… wasn’t good. On several levels. But it felt good.

She wanted to impress him, too. No luck, of course, as she’d been acting like an idiot since they met.

“Don’t play the innocent, Sara. We’ve all noticed you two… making friends. That’s fine. We all
need people we can talk to. But you take him everywhere, and you can’t play favorites. Not out
here. Not with our survival on the line. And some of the others could use a day off the ship.”

“Shit,” Sara dug her fingers into her hair and leaned back. “I didn’t intend…”

“I know. And you’re not. Yet. That’s why I said something,” the doctor tapped her on the shoulder
and she automatically extended her left arm for a shot, rolling up her short sleeves so that Lexi could
reach the larger muscle. It came a moment later with a stab of pain and a cool feeling to follow. This
one was for tetanus, then. And it was a little scary she could tell the difference, based on the way it
made her arm feel two seconds later. Ah well, at least she wasn’t breaking bones like Kosta – just
tearing her hands open on rusty, sandy sheet metal while trying to hoist it off his body – too heavy
for even her biotics to handle, but she found that out too late.

She waited a moment before asking, “How’s Liam’s arm?”

“It’ll be fine, as long as he doesn’t put too much stress on it. He’d break fewer bones if he took a
little more care, and gave himself a little more downtime.” Lexi paused, and then grabbed her other
arm, and immunized her against diptheria. “Though that’s perhaps too much to ask for someone of
his… enthusiastic nature.”

Sara had never imagined that she would have to be the one to tell Liam, of all people, that he needed
to ease up. Who was she to talk? Oh, yeah, the Pathfinder, that’s who…

Being the Pathfinder kind of sucked, when you were bad at confrontations. As she passed the
Nomad, on her way to the cargo closet Liam had claimed, she had the sudden urge to hide in it and
not come out until all the fights were over with. She could sneak out at night and snitch cookies
from Vetra’s office… or maybe she could bribe Drack with something – he could bring her food
when the others weren’t looking.

Instead of chickening out, she powered through, and knocked on the outside wall rather than just
wander through the open door. Time to be a fucking adult. Like a boss.

God, she hated that word.

“Pathfinder,” Liam greeted her easily, with a friendly grin. Not in too much pain, then. That was
good. Couldn’t have him – people – hurting. But it also made this harder – the arm would have been an easy excuse to tell him to stay in for a few days while she let Vetra take up the slack.

“So, Kosta…” she flicked her fingers inside her Omni-tool, her biotics restless. “How’s the arm? You need some time off? Anything for pain?”

“No fear. Lexi had me fixed up in about a minute, just like the collarbone last time.” He was staring down at some special project - arm plating, she thought. “That’s not why you’re here, though. Go ahead. It might not look like it, but I’m paying attention. Swear.” He turned the screwdriver twice counterclockwise, and checked the flex of the joint.

“Right.” She took a deep breath. “So… what do you think of the Nomad? Pretty nice ride, am I right?”

“The Nomad?” He frowned, and glanced at her sideways. “So that’s it. Vetra ask you to have a word? Thought she was more direct than that. Kind of thought she’d be in here with a talon to my balls telling me to keep my mouth shut about her side job.”

“Lexi, actually.” Sara slumped. “She’s asked me to intervene in a few… interpersonal issues among the crew. You’re not the only one struggling-” she rushed to assure him, but he broke in before she could finish.

“Not surprised. Stress and grief bring out the worst in all of us. Me, particularly.” He set the tool down deliberately, as if he was trying to control his muscles, and shut his eyes. “And I know, I’m out of line. Everyone out here with you has just as much hanging on our success as I do. Vetra more than most. She’s got her sister back on the Nexus, you know?”

“Yeah.” Sara looked down. “So… can you lighten up?”

“I’ll try.” He glanced up her, and frowned, his forehead wrinkling. “You’re not going to start leaving me behind on the Tempest, are you? With the arm as an excuse?”

He was too clever by half. “Not if things change. And not if you’re really healed up.”

“The arm’s fine. I need to get out. I get a bit… pent up, being in the Tempest all the time,” he grimaced. “Nomad’s worse, and better. I mean, in the car, we usually end up getting out at some point, right? But the small space… and all the straps pinning me down… it makes me - twitchy.”

“Cabin fever in the Nomad?” Sara laughed, and then felt bad. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have laughed.” She paused, “Don’t like being tied down, hmm?” She regretted the comment as soon as it left her mouth, but Liam choked out one of his little laughs.

“It’s not an excuse, it’s a reason,” he sheepishly grinned. “As long as I get out and run around enough, burn off the excess energy, I’m good. The work on the outpost has been good for me – and I’ll be more careful. No more heavy lifting on my own, promise. And I’ll apologize to Vetra, if it helps, but…” he shrugged, “But damage has been done. I’m sorry for making this harder on you.”

“I can’t have you sniping at each other constantly. Gil and Kallo are bad enough, and they don’t get Nomad rides.”

Liam fidgeted with the armor project again. “There have been a lot of arguments lately. People picking at each other… There was a two hour argument the other day, and no one knew how it had started. Cora was one step away from fetching you to settle it, before Gil backed down. But… I had an idea about that. I was thinking… movie night?”
“Movie night.”

“Right. Bit of bonding over a vid - escapism at its best. Forget everything we’re fighting for. Bad or good, doesn’t matter. Just a bit of - down time. Where we aren’t all working like crazy, stressing out over all the lives on the line.”

Sara stared for a minute, thinking, and flexing her fingers to move the muscle in her arm. She sighed, “Mind if I sit down?”

“That’s what it’s there for, Pathfinder.”

She knelt on his couch, folding her arms along the back to face him better. The tetanus shot in her arm twinged as she moved, but she relaxed, and the pain went away. The couch might not be comfortable, but it was… familiar. “That does sound like a good idea. Got a film in mind?”

“Nah. I was hoping that the next time we stopped at the Nexus to restock we could download a library. I don’t think any of us really want to watch Kallo’s soap opera vids, right? And I assumed you hadn’t had a chance to pick up your Dad’s things, yet.”

“Not yet, no.” She looked away, eyes prickling. “Couldn’t face his room on the Hyperion for too long. Got what I needed from there and… ran.”

“Understandable,” Liam cleared his throat. “Not a lot of time to process anything.”

“It’s worse than that.” She sighed, the arm muscle tensing again. “I’m hearing things. Things other than SAM. It’s… unnerving.” She flipped back around intending to leave, aware she was probably oversharing, but babbling, like a dam had been broken. “SAM and Lexi both say I’m not crazy, but I’ve been hearing things since before we landed on Eos. My Dad’s voice. It’s… bad.”

“I’m hearing echoes of my Mum everywhere. Glad it’s not just me. Lexi told me it’s just grief, and my brain trying to fill in for the things I miss most. My Dad was the strong silent type, so I don’t hear him as much.” Liam snorted, “Just feel him hit the backside of my head when I’ve gone and cocked something up. Like my arm, trying to show off, when I damn well know Cora’s biotics could have lifted that metal in a moment – and without you tearing your hands open on rusty metal.” He frowned, “They’re okay, right?”

“One tetanus shot later, I’m fine, and the shot came without a lecture, so you know I’m good.” Liam nodded, seriously. “But knowing that you’re – hearing things, too? That’s… reassuring,” she smiled, a real smile. “Thanks for telling me. I know we’re not supposed to interfere in other people’s grief, but… I’d rather know, you know? I wish everyone would talk about it more.”

“Getting me to shut up is the hard part. Talking’s the least I can do.” He glanced back at his project, fingers tapping against the worktable. “Thanks for not spacing me at the first complaint. I’ll do better.”

Sara shook her head, “I wouldn’t do that, Kosta. You’re handling things pretty well, all things considered.” Sara squeezed her eyes shut, “Vetra’s… not. She’s worried about her sister, and she doesn’t really do ‘hobbies’. Unless you count finding hard to find stuff. Mind you, it’s paying off for us, so I can’t complain about her dedication.”

“What?” Sara blinked.

“What? Do you have a hobby? How are you coping with… things?” He took a breath, deep enough for her
to see under that jacket of his, and asked, “Are you all right? Besides your hands. What are you
doing, with your downtime? You look… tired.”

How did he always manage to throw her for a loop with what should be a simple question? She
shrugged, hoping it looked nonchalant, but her eyes stung. “Most of my hobbies involved the
outdoors. Getting a bit of that, thanks to the job. Funny how doing it for work makes it the opposite
of fun… I did some recreational jump-jetting. That’s out of the question now, thanks to Habitat 7.
I’ll probably never jump again without shaking like a leaf.” His eyes softened, and she looked away,
words coming out in that same flood, “I spent all my money back on Earth refitting an old
hovercycle. Nothing fancy, but something to get me around, did a little racing…” she glanced back
up and flushed. He was still watching her, “I miss that. A lot. Scared my Mom to death, the way
I’d tear around. Got a few too many citations to keep her comfortable - she was always threatening
to take it away. Never had an accident, though. Sold it, when I joined the Alliance. No point
keeping something that I’d never use.” She grimaced, “Did you tell Gil I was doing donuts in the
Nomad? Because I got a scolding you wouldn’t believe about the stress I put on the engine. It was
either you or Vetra.”

“My lips are sealed. At least - as long as you take me next time. I want to go jump some more
dunes. Love the feeling of catching air. All six wheels off the ground. Like flying.” He laughed,
“So you’re an adrenaline junkie?”

“Maybe? Dad… Dad was a bad influence, Mom said.” She smiled, catching his eye and shifted
backward on the couch again, sitting on her knees. “Of course, that was after the time I ended up
with a fractured leg because he swore it should be possible to combine jump-jets and ice skating.
Scott and I tried to make it work, and… neither of us are born engineers. Skated right into a boulder
at top speed. We were old enough to know better.”

Liam chuckled, “Now that? That sounds like fun. Count me in if we find an ice world. Pretty sure I
could come up with some sort of ice skate attachment for our armor. But I can’t believe Alec Ryder
was foolhardy. No way.”

“Ask Cora, if you don’t believe me. Dad loved his rushes. Drove my mother insane. Scott tried to
be the down to earth one, but mostly failed. He couldn’t fight me, too meek, so I dragged him along
every time I was bound and determined to get in trouble. Misery loves company.” Sara grinned at
him, and turned to go, feeling infinitely better. “Feels good to talk about them, Kosta. Thanks?” She
tilted her head at him and waved her way out of his space, feeling like the most awkward thing ever.

Talking to him shouldn’t make her feel like she was still wearing pigtails.

“Anytime, Boss.” Her shoulder hunched up at the nickname. Being the boss was worse than feeling
like she was twelve – at least with him.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

THIS IS THE SECOND CHAPTER OF THE DAY.

I posted two yesterday, as well. So if you were confused, that was why. So go back four chapters and see what happens.

I’ll do better about letting people know when I do that. Sporadic writer is sporadic.

The door had barely shut behind her before Liam flung himself to the floor, and started pushups, the up and down momentum alternating with blaming himself for everything. “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” he chanted, in time with the motions. “God, Kosta, you’re such a tosser. She probably thinks you’re an asshole. What made you think picking a fight with Vetra in an enclosed space was a good idea, huh? Vetra knows people that could have you killed. Hell, she’d probably have Drack do it. Drack’d do it for free. You know Vetra’s one of his favorites…” His thoughts trailed off, remembering that the Pathfinder was one of Drack’s favorites too.

Drack would not approve of some of his thoughts about their boss. Alec Ryder would have spaced him by now.

The pushups weren’t working, and his fractured arm was aching in a way that meant Lexi would be warming up a lecture as soon as he went to ask for painkillers, so he sat up, stripped off his too-tight jacket, tugged off his itchy shirt, and crossed his arms, and started crunches, legs crossed at the ankles and hovering in the air. What he wouldn’t give for a punching bag…

A half hour, and a few too many sets of 50 sit-ups later, his brain wasn’t quite so self-critical, knowing that he had messed up, but that there was stuff that could be done. He’d go see Lexi, tell her about the cabin fever in the Nomad, see if she had any advice, and the next time he was out on a mission with Vetra, he’d ask about her sister instead of picking a fight – or try to make small talk to distract himself. Maybe that would help…

Of course, at this point, she’d probably take it as an attack on her parental fitness. “Shit,” he said aloud, and laid down, slamming his head into the floor hard enough to make his eyes water. “There’s no running damage control on this.” He’d made Vetra feel like shit because he felt like shit. “No easy fix.”

His Mum’s voice echoed, Nothing easy is worth much, Liam.

“Yeah, Mum, but that makes everything worth doing for me,” he muttered. “Other people? They get more right by accident.” He swung his legs around beneath him, and still frustrated and upset, grabbed his towel and headed to the showers.

Of course, because that was the sort of day he was having, the Pathfinder was there. He’d been trying to stagger their times, despite everyone – minus Suvi - rejecting Cora’s carefully drawn up and color-coded schedules, but he’d missed what he was starting to think of as his ‘slot’ to self-judging sit-ups. “Sorry,” he muttered, not looking her in the eyes as he settled his gear, and turned the tap.
“For what?” Sara’s eyes were shut, and she was propping herself up against the shower wall, letting what had to be hotter water than he ever got pound her back. The steam billowed, but he could still see the shape of her underneath. He yanked his eyes away with a silent ‘Sorry, Mum.’

He really needed to quit perving over the Pathfinder. His Mum would hate it, and Drack was going to fucking kill him in his sleep if he found out what he’d been up to. “I’ve been trying not to run into you here,” he admitted. “Didn’t seem… gentlemanly.”

She snorted, “Kosta, it’s a small ship. We can’t all tiptoe around each other forever. Shower when you need to. I’m not going to let Cora take over the bathroom, or she’ll have us all peeing on schedule.”

“True enough. Still… least I can do is let you shower on your own. Everybody demands your time, and…”

“That’s the second time tonight you’ve said ‘the least you can do’.” She flicked her eyes open at him, their true color obscured by the steam. “You’re too hard on yourself, you know that?”

“What?”

“You heard me. Look, Vetra’s awesome. She’s a wonderful big sister-slash-parent, way more involved than my dad ever was. I loved him, but that’s the truth. She’s the reason we have all that delectable ramen to alternate with the beef stew - she finds us stuff that she can’t even eat, just to be nice. But you’re just as valuable. I wouldn’t have cleared the vault without you.” She wrinkled her nose as he finally stepped under the spray. “You smell like sweat. You didn’t smell like sweat half an hour ago. Are you okay? Is the arm worse? Should I call Lexi?” He tried not to see the wrinkle of worry on her forehead – it made the guilt worse.

“Just trying not to think,” he muttered, and turned on the water, hoping she’d drop it. He started soaping up and dunked his hair under the water, fully realizing he’d have to do a full treatment on it. Worth the waste of product, if it meant that he could hide some of his embarrassment at his lack of self-control.

“Kosta,” she sighed and corrected herself. “No, this is not a last name situation. We’re talking in the goddamn shower, and when I’m naked, I’m not the fucking Pathfinder, I’m Sara. So…Liam. I sympathize with your frustration. Lexi’s got me doing goddamn yoga and trying to meditate. It’s not working.” She turned and slumped against the wall of the shower backwards, leaning her head back. “Every time I try, SAM interrupts to tell me I have new email or to try out a joke, or Suvi calls down from the bridge to inform me she’s found a fucking crater, and could the Pathfinder please come to the bridge to launch a probe? There’s got to be a way to do that by remote…”

He laughed, despite his dark mood. “Suvi’s great, right?”

“Enthusiastic,” Sara qualified. “I can’t believe she likes patterns enough to embrace Cora’s shower schedule.”

“Nothing wrong with enthusiasm.”

“Then quit being so hard on yourself. You’re more enthusiastic than her. Just not about… craters. Thank God. One geology geek is enough for one ship.”

He grinned into the shower spray. “Right back at you, Ryder. I’ve never seen anyone get that into driving. Sheer willpower got you up that last cliff-face. Thought Drack was going to shit himself with fear. Bet he wasn’t the one to teach Kesh to drive.”
She smiled, a full smile, and he felt himself relax, despite having a heart to heart with his boss while starkers. “Point taken. I’ll… ease up on myself if you will.” She flipped off her water, and turned to face him, carefully not touching. “And try to apologize to Vetra. I can’t guarantee she’ll listen, but…”

“Will do. Your job’s hard enough, Pathfinder. You don’t need me making it worse.”

“Thanks,” She slipped past him on her way out, and smiled as she wrapped herself up in her towel. “And, Liam?” She tilted her head back at him around the corner. “I’m glad somebody’s thinking about making less trouble instead of more.” She flipped her Omni-Tool on her wrist and punched in a code. “So… there. Have an endless hot shower on me.” She winked at him as she left, eyebrows raised, ever so slightly provocatively. “Don’t ask. I’m going to ping Vetra to come with us tomorrow, assuming she’s free.” Her eyes dropped again, before she grinned and disappeared. “See you then!”

Liam gaped after her, the water’s steam puffing upwards, already about ten degrees hotter than it ever had been before. He shut his eyes and leaned back against the metal wall, muscles relaxing in the heat, and the pain of his arm subsiding.

She always knew just what to say and do to make it better. Shit, that was a problem.

“You’re perfect,” he whispered into the spray, and then coughed as the water garbled his words.
Their next trip back to the Nexus, there had been some changes. There were people everywhere; colonists getting ready to head to Prodromos, and an increased staff that hopefully meant people weren’t still working 60 hour shifts.

While the group walked through the docking area, rubbernecking like tourists, a group of colonists whispered about a bar, and Sara groaned with longing, before requesting, “SAM, navpoint for the Vortex, please.”

SAM was at his most officious. “Pathfinder, Addison and Director Tann request your reports before…”

“Can’t they wait? Alcohol would help those conversations along, SAM,” She whined, and chuckling, Liam slapped her on the back.

“Tough luck, Pathfinder. I’ll keep a barstool warm for you, if you wanna meet me later? I’m going to the pub.” He jogged off easily, a smile on his face that made her want to toss something at him. Something harder than a shampoo bottle. Maybe one of the crates on the far wall…

She stifled the impulse. “This is so unfair,” she grumbled. “Our first shore leave in a month and I have to work.”

“Work before play,” Cora chirped, way too cheerily. “I’ll go head off Tann, if you like, so you can talk to Addison?”

Sara scowled, “How come you get Tann?”

“Because you can’t stop being sarcastic to him, and I can’t authorize unfreezing colonists. But I know for a fact that our resources are largely responsible for the improvement in the station, and we should have a few bargaining chips lined up, since we set another outpost. I’ll point that out, if he gets feisty.”

“Addison is a… pill.” She reluctantly substituted the politer word, knowing they were surrounded by hopeful colonists that would spread gossip without thinking.

“She’s been dealing with the worst-case scenario for too long, that’s all,” Cora sighed. “Look, Sara… you’re going to have to deal with her. She’s the head of colonist operations. You’re in charge of starting colonies.”

“I know,” Sara glanced down, “I’m not a spoiled shit, Cora. I’ll suck it up and do my job.”

“Good,” Cora grinned, and nudged her shoulder, “Go get ‘em, Tiger. I’ve got your back.”

Vetra hummed, “And I’ll tackle Kesh. Not literally, mind you. Pretty sure she could take me in a
fight, unless I play dirty.” Drack snorted. “Quiet, old man. Any special requests? I’ve a few things
that I can barter with her… electronics, mostly, but looking around, that might get us pretty far…” In
the distance, several consoles snapped and crackled, and panels short-circuited in arcing zaps.

“Mint toothpaste,” Sara blurted.

“What?”

“I hate the tasteless crap the Initiative sent with us,” Sara flushed. “Please? Just one tube. I’ll use my
own credits, if I have to. Just… see if you can find me some?”

“I’ll… see what I can do,” Vetra offered, in great confusion, as Peebee slunk off the ship behind her,
disappearing into the group of people almost immediately, and Drack lumbered forward eyes wide.
“Drack, you with me?”

“If you’re headed for Kesh, yeah,” muttered Drack. “My Rushan’ll keep me from murdering
Spender.”

“Please don’t destroy the Nexus,” Sara deadpanned. “They’re the only place we can get Galaxy
Scout cookies until the kids are thawed and a parent with a combination of cooking and marketing
abilities starts a troop.”

Drack snorted, “Don’t tell Kesh. She’d probably become a den mother if it meant a constant supply
of Galaxy Swirls. A Krogan with a sweet tooth is not a pretty sight.”

“She already knows. Kesh has her priorities straight. She’s just gotta find a father,” Vetra muttered,
mandibles twitching, and sauntered off, Drack by her side, eyes narrowed at Vetra’s comment. “See
ya later, Pathfinder.”

“Sure thing,” Sara sighed, and walked off in the direction of the tram, feeling very alone in a space
station full of people. “SAM…” she hesitated, “Are there any updates on Scott?”

“No,” SAM said after a moment. “But I believe some of your father’s memories have been
unlocked. If you stop by the Hyperion’s SAM node, I believe you’ll be able to witness them. And I
would recommend a visit to your father’s room, as well. I believe an encrypted journal is
accessible.”

“After Addison, and Tann, I suppose,” Sara kicked at a passing crate. “Ouch.” SAM’s silences were
as pointed as his speech. “I know, SAM, just venting my feelings.”

“I fail to understand how it helps to injure yourself. You have fractured your toe. I have sent an
injury report to Dr. T’Perro, and she requests you attend her later so that she can perform the
necessary repairs.”

“A physical demonstration of frustration helps.”

SAM was quiet for a moment. “I have noticed that Liam’s blood pressure significantly decreases
after he works out for more than half an hour. This causes no damage beyond sore muscles.
Usually.”

“Exercise options on the Tempest are a bit… lacking. And don’t start with the yoga thing again.”

“Might I suggest to Vetra the purchase of a punching bag for the cargo hold?”

Sara leaned back into the wall of the tram. “God, SAM, that’s brilliant. Everyone can use it.”
“Sending her a message now.” The link was quiet for a moment. “She says it will mean less toothpaste.”

“Tell her this will be better than toothpaste.”

“She says she can get you 25 tubes of toothpaste and a punching bag to be delivered at a later date - and wants to know if that will be enough toothpaste to last until the next shore leave. I do not believe she understands the purpose of toothpaste. She wants to know if it is made from teeth – and how they flavor it with mint.”

“I’ll explain later. Tell her she’s fucking amazing, SAM, and that 25 tubes will last me a few years.”

“Complying, with the deletion of the expletive.”

“Don’t censor me, SAM.”

"As you say, Pathfinder."
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

A longer chapter today, to make up for the shorter one yesterday.

Thanks everyone who's been commenting! You've made my week. :D

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Liam sipped his questionable beverage slowly, trying to make it last, as the barkeep, Dutch Smith, eyeballed him, one step away from belligerence. Despite his intention to relax, he felt a bit like the cop staking out the bar for trouble - but so far, the deadliest thing at the Vortex was the chemist/bartender's bad attitude. He caught the eye of the Asari, Anan, behind the counter, and she shrugged and smiled, way too accepting of her partner's rudeness.

He’d been here for a while, and the glasses were clean, the drinks were potable, though he’d been too nervous to try the green one - he didn't trust anything named after a mythical creature - but something was missing. He turned and leaned back against the bar. They had a stage, the music wasn’t live, but you could dance to it – assuming you had rhythm. The ambiance spoke more of desperation than fun times, but as it was the only place that he knew of to get a drink in Andromeda so far, it would have to do.

And damn it, he needed to drink. It'd been the longest month of his life so far.

“What was this called again?” He asked the Asari.

“A ‘Dirty Squirrel’,” she called back, serving the next customer.

To his left, the doors - working slow, on limited power, he suspected - swished open, and a familiar fall of blue hair entered, staring around her with something like awe. He grinned, and waved her over. “Pathfinder!”

Her face lit up, and she bounced over, while he tried to ignore the somersaults in his gut. It was nice to see her happy. Maybe things had gone well with Addison and Tann? She could use a break from the constant pressure.

“What are you drinking?” She called out over the beat of the music.

“A squirrelly something or other,” he laughed. “It doesn’t really taste like nuts. Not those nuts, anyway. You’d have to tell me whether they taste like the other kind…”

She laughed at his weak joke, wrinkling up her nose, and slid up on the stool next to him. “Can I actually order things? No rationing?”

“Yes!” He grinned, and waved the Asari over. “Barkeep’s like Drack on his bad lung days, but his partner… hey, Anan!”

“What can I get you, sweetheart?” Anan smiled and leaned up against the bar.
“Whatever you’ve got!” Sara beamed at her. “I’ll try anything. First day off in… God, has it been that long?” her words trailed off. “A month and more. We’ve been on Eos.”

“Oh, honey, I’ll get you a sampler,” The Asari patted her hand and winked. “I’m sure your young man will see you home.”

Sara flushed, red blotches forming under her neck tattoo, and Liam stared into his drink. “Sorry,” he muttered.

“For what?” She turned to him.

“She thinks we’re here together.” Too late he realized that most of the other patrons had paired up, some of them openly necking in the booths. They were the only ones at the bar itself.

“Well, you did tell me you’d save me a stool,” Sara teased. “And I helped you move your couch. Didn’t you promise to pay me back in beer… or whatever?” She lowered and raised her eyelashes, slowly. “I could go for… whatever.”

He blinked, unsure if she was flirting with him. “Um, yeah. Yeah!” As she turned back, he told Dutch, “Add whatever she’s drinking to my tab.” His pulse throbbed in his ears for a minute, as he tried to be a little less happy about what she’d just insinuated. The man just grunted, and moved away from them both. Liam turned back, and sipped. “Free drinks for Pathfinders. I’ll see to it.”

Her smile was worth the hit to his credits. “Awesome, Kosta. I blew all my creds on upgrades for the Nomad on the way here. I could hear Gil’s delight through my Omni-tool.”

“Here’s to being broke, then!” He lifted his drink. “Least you’ve got a nice car!”

“No better cause!”

The Asari returned with a full tray, and with an honest-to-God squeal, Sara tipped up the first glass on the tray and drank, closing her eyes until the lashes hit her cheeks. “Ack…” she coughed, and set down the glass. “What was that?”

“A ‘Tall Moose’,” the Asari smiled. “Dutch isn’t any good at names.”

“What, like that old ‘Supernatural’ epic?” She worked her tongue, trying to clear her palate. “Takes some… getting used to. I think I prefer the Green Fairy.”

Liam snorted, “If you can find Absinthe in Andromeda, Pathfinder, I’m yours forever.”

She made a face, “I don’t like the taste of anise. Besides,” she swiveled her stool to face him, that damn blue ponytail draped over one shoulder, just obscuring the Initiative emblem on her hoodie. “Aren’t you more a beer and peanuts guy?”

He stifled his groan at the thought of peanut butter. Another thing to miss… “Beer stored best. Fragile liqueurs or whiskey would have needed too much packing and special storage. Whiskey, especially – it has to be aged in a cask. Wooden cask. There might have been tears, if one broke.” She looked vaguely impressed. “Um, Dad was a scotch aficionado?” He cleared his throat, “I apologized to Vetra by giving her three beers. She likes sweeter stuff, so she made a trade - bought breakfast cereal. I got the email from her while I was sitting here. I didn’t even realize Turians had breakfast cereal,” he admitted sheepishly. “Did you know they made dextro-marshmallows?”

“No!” She beamed at him, “Thank you for trying,” and lifted her next glass, eyeing it worriedly. “I’m a little scared to try this after the ‘Moose’.”
“That looks like what I had,” Liam grinned. “It didn’t kill me. A ’Dirty Squirrel’. But don’t expect it to taste like nuts. Think more…”

But it was already going down her throat. “Better!” she slammed the glass down next to him. “It tasted a bit…”

“Like gin?”

“Yeah, kind of! I think it might be a tribute to James Cagney. You know ‘You dirty rat…’ only a squirrel.”

He lifted his eyebrow. “Right. He never said that, you know. In Taxi, the quote was actually, ‘Come out, you…”

She cut him off. “ ‘Come out, you dirty yellow-bellied rat, or I’ll give it to you through the door.’” Liam’s mouth went dry, and he swallowed a huge gulp of his own drink, coughing away his surprise. “I’d take another one of those,” her cheeks flushed and she tried to wave down the bartender, only to have him turn his back deliberately. She pouted at the slight.

“Why don’t you finish your last drink first?”

She turned again, and grinned. “Where’s the fun in that?” She fiddled with the glass, her face pensive. “Besides, I just had to put up with Addison telling me that the outpost we put on Eos was too little too late. Despite all the mining probes, despite all the resources, all the salvage… she said we’re all still dying.” Her voice broke and she buried her face in her hand. “I’m failing, even before we’ve really begun. There’s a ton of stuff that we just can’t fix on Eos – mostly the Kett - until we see if the radiation clears.” She pulled her hand away, letting him see the worried lines on her forehead. “God, Kosta, what if it doesn’t clear? SAM can’t be right all the time, can he? What if the Kett attack our scientists – Bradley can’t protect all of them, right? What if I’ve made a horrible mistake?”

Liam reached out and touched her arm, what little willpower he had ripped away with the potency of the ‘Dirty Squirrel’. “That’s bullshit. You’ve managed more in a matter of weeks than they could handle in more than a year.” He traced a small circle on her wrist, marveling at how soft she felt.

“What would it cost her to say a simple ‘Nice job? Keep it coming?’” Sara muttered, picking up her last drink, but not tasting it. Just as well, as it was exceptionally green. She didn’t seem bothered by the color.

“Why are you looking for approval from her, anyway?” Liam snorted and then smiled, and shook her arm so she’d look up at him. “Hey, Pathfinder.”

She gave him a look. “I’m not the Pathfinder when I’m drinking.”

“Nice job. Keep it coming. Cheers?” He lifted his glass.

And then she smiled, and lifted her own. “To Prodromos?”

“I’ll drink to that,” Anan called out. “To Prodromos!” She shouted, and everyone in the bar cheered. Not quite everyone, but even Dutch unbent enough to mutter a quick, “Yay,” turning away before anyone but Sara, Liam and his partner had noticed. Anan nudged him teasingly as she went to refill drinks already lining up for refills, and to adjust the music to play louder. A few people moved to the dance floor to try to dance.
Liam watched Sara blush, clear up to her far too blue hairline, and hide her smile. “There you go,” he shouted over the cacophony. “That’s who really matters. Addison’s just the one in charge. These people know what’s worth celebrating.”

She shoved his arm, and smiled again, crooked and sweet. “Thanks, Liam.”

“Don’t ever question if you’re making a difference, and we’ll call it even.” She’d used his first name again. And it sounded damn good – even when he wasn’t starkers.

Fuck, he didn’t need to think like that.

And then she drank, and he watched her pupils expand. “Shit…” she collapsed into his chest. “That’s strong!” She spun around on her stool, “Hey… I bet between us we could reprogram Avina to cuss out Tann!” She stood up, and her knees crumpled. “Whoops!” She grabbed at him, giggling. “Better yet, let’s teach it to say ‘Addison Sucks!’”

“Um… last one needs a bit of dilution,” he tossed at the bartender. “Come on, Pathfinder – maybe we should get you back to the Tempest?” Anan nodded thoughtfully, but Dutch groaned. “Get her out of here before we have to mop. Again.”

“Liam…” Sara whined. “Don’t ruin my fun! I’m fine!”

“Sure you are, Ryder.”

She beamed at him. “You called me ‘Ryder’. You haven’t really done that since Habitat 7. Well done, you!” She shoved at him, her hand slipping off his shoulder.

“Hard to think about you as the Pathfinder when you’re drunk off your arse,” Liam sighed. “Come on, let’s get you back to the Tempest, before you hurl.”

“Have to pay, first!” She chirped. She lifted her arm, and missed her Omni-tool with her fingers.

“I got it, I said,” He shifted her against one side and tapped out a hefty tip to the two owners, while she blinked up at him, and tried to stand on her own. “Shit, Ryder, you’re heavy.”

“Shut up,” she slurred. “Rude.”

“You’re all muscle,” he corrected, and she nodded.

“That’ll work.” She tried to worm her way behind him.

“Where are you going?”

“Don’t want to go back to work. I wanna dance. Or sing. They’ve got a stage!”

“Oh no,” Liam tugged her back. She pouted, but took his hand. “You won’t like who you are if you dance drunk. Someone will take pictures. Trust me.” He’d heard a reporter and cameraman were looking for the Pathfinder. She didn’t need to deal with them like this.

“You know you want to,” she wheedled.

“Oh, no,” she said, but he was not going to let those rumors about the Pathfinder start. She grumbled, and leaned against him, trying to climb the stool. “What the fuck are you doing now?”

“Piggy back ride. If you’re determined to haul me back to work, you can carry me.”
“I’m not carrying the Pathfinder through the docks on my back!”

“You’re not?” She shifted back and swayed, and he had to grab to keep her upright. “Bummer.”

He sighed, “Fine,” and knelt. “Climb on.”

He lifted her up and took off, slow. Dr. Camden in Hydroponics lifted his eyebrows, but just shook his head at the two of them when she waved. “Hi, Camden!”

He hunched down, and walked faster, ears burning as they passed whispers and giggles, Sara waving every once in a while. And then he saw Vetra, leaning up against the rail, watching them restock the Tempest. “Vetra! A hand here?”

Vetra jerked away from the railing in a second, her eyes wide, and mandibles twitching. “Shit, Kosta, what happened? Is she sick?”

“A Leprechaun punched her at the Vortex.”

“What’s a leprechaun? Nevermind, we got this,” Vetra moved around to his back. “Come on, Pathfinder, let’s get you back home.” She lifted the woman down, setting her on her feet, only to watch her buckle under her own weight. Sara was conscious, by the random giggles, but just barely. “Has she eaten anything since this morning?”

“I don’t know,” Liam grabbed his hair, looping his arm around her back. “She had a… bad day, I know. Addison told her we…” he glanced around, and whispered the rest, “that we were all dying.”

“Shit,” Vetra hissed. “I hate that bitch.”

“You and everyone else,” Liam coughed. “But let’s get Sara out of this. I heard that a couple of reporters were looking for her. She doesn’t need them to find her like this.”

They hauled her through the hatch, and paused at the ladder down. “This isn’t gonna work,” Liam sighed. "Ideas?"

Vetra climbed down, and held out her arms. “Drop her.”

Liam eyed her. “No offense…”

“Liam, if I wanted to kill her, I wouldn’t have come on board in the first place. We’re all trying to keep her alive. She’s going to keep all of us alive. I can take her weight – I can still lift Sid. Now, drop her.”

Liam let her fall, and Vetra caught, without even a grunt. He slid down the ladder, fast, asking, “SAM, can you open the door?”

The door opened, and SAM echoed from his terminal in the corner. “The Pathfinder will be fine. I’m speeding up her liver function. She will be dehydrated, but functional, in approximately four hours.”

“Shit, SAM can do that?” Vetra sounded strained, and dumped her on the bed sideways. “Help me get her up to the pillow?”

Liam nodded, a pronounced line between his brows, lifting Sara’s arms and dragging her upright. “SAM…”

“She’ll sleep, eventually,” SAM announced. “I would recommend someone staying with her,
however, in case she needs to vomit unexpectedly.”

Vetra groaned, “Liam was with her when she bought the drinks. Let him pay the price.” She backed towards the door. “Good luck?”

“Thanks for everything,” he drawled at her as she turned and the door shut. “I mean it,” he sighed.

Liam settled himself in her desk chair, and leaned forward, rubbing his scalp through his curls. “Shit, I’m glad I didn’t try the Leprechaun,” he muttered, and Sara giggled madly. “You’re supposed to be sleeping, Ryder.”

“SAM’s too bossy,” she complained, sitting up. “I want to… she swayed, “Lay down,” she finished lamely and collapsed back on the bed. “Did Dutch try to kill me?”

“Nah, you drank too much,” Liam laughed. “Just dial it back next time. And no more Leprechauns for you.”

“I’m a Leprechaun, heh heh heh,” Liam groaned, and she rolled over on her side. “Why are you in here?”

“SAM said someone should watch you, Vetra bailed, and Lexi’s off ship.” Liam sighed and looked her in the eyes. “Have you eaten today?”

Sara pursed her lips. “No. Are there cookies?”

“Lexi gives us calorie counts and meal plans for a reason, Ryder.”

“You’re not the boss of me,” she pointed at him, and her finger drew her attention. She wiggled it randomly. “I’m your boss. That’s the trouble, ain’t it?”

“It’s trouble, all right.” Liam gave up. “I’m gonna find you a snack and some water.”

“Check the carafe by the table,” she waved him over. “Usually some in there.”

Liam wandered over and looked down. “You have a whole, uneaten package of Galaxy Swirls over here.”

“Help yourself!” She waved. “Kesh likes me,” she bragged.

Liam opened the package but pressed two into her hands. “You first.”

Sara made a face, but bit. “Not hungry,” she muttered around the cookie. “Not right, when I have cookies, and the Nexus is starving…”

“They’re not starving,” Liam took a cookie. “If anything, they’re doing a hell of a lot better than before. And cookies aren’t going to help. Hydroponics is working overtime, Pathfinder.”

“Let them eat ramen!” Sara crowed randomly. “I’d donate my share…”

Liam couldn’t help himself, and laughed. “Mine, too.”

“Okay,” she smiled crookedly, “That feeds… two people anyway.” She sniffed. “Sorry you had to carry me home drunk. Scott would be ripping me a new one for being a burden.”

“How does that work?” He asked, confused, before admitting, “I don’t mind, though. You getting sauced that fast was… pretty funny. And Vetra and I might have bonded a bit. Especially since I
didn’t beg her to stay to help you toss your cookies. ‘Cause that’s going to happen, just about any minute.’

“Ugh, that’s horrible,” Sara laughed, and wobbled her way upright again. “Don’t want to lie down.”

“Eat another cookie?” Liam held out the sleeve. “I miss being able to eat an entire sleeve of these at once.”

“Don’t let Lexi hear you say that,” Sara warned, and held her head. “Ugh. I don’t…”

Liam darted for her, “SAM, get the door,” he ordered, “and the bathroom, too, please?” He dragged her briskly as she peddled her feet uselessly against the floor trying to walk.

They made it to the toilet, and Sara gagged helplessly, as Liam held her ponytail back. She rocked back on her heels, and leaned against the wall. “Oh, God.”

“Yeah, that’s right, it’s all his fault,” Liam said dryly. “Any more down there? Or you want your toothbrush?”

“ Toothbrush,” Sara held out her hand and waved her fingers around, as if expecting him to slap it into her hand like a scapel. When it didn’t happen, she opened her eyes again and looked over her shoulder. “You know, I heard biotics are supposed to metabolize alcohol faster, but I swear, it doesn’t work that way for me. Three drinks? It’s even worse with SAM.” She snorted, “Hell, I can’t even get drunk now. The only thing that happens is the hangover – and that’s fast.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “I’m sorry, Liam, I just…” she curled up against the wall, and laid her head on her knees. “I keep making a fool of myself in front of you.”

“No fools here, Ryder,” Liam sighed, and crouched down. “We all get drunk to puking with our mates at least once, right?”

She smiled, “Are we friends, then? Not just… your boss?”

He laughed, “I’ve never held my boss’ hair while she upchucked before, Pathfinder. Guess there’s a first time for everything?” He stood up, and held out his hand, “Come on. Let’s get your toothbrush. And then we’ll go back to my room, and we’ll watch a vid or something until Lexi gets back and can rip you a new one since Scott can’t – and start you a drip, if you need it. And then we’ll watch another until Cora comes to tear you apart with her biotics…”

Sara groaned. “Can’t I just stay here?”

“Nope, gotta face ‘em sometime. Besides, you owe Vethra a massive ‘thanks’ for catching your drunk ass at the bottom of the ladder.”

“No one is going to let me forget this, are they?” She put her hand in his, and he tightened his, just a little bit.

“What’re friends for?”

Chapter End Notes

In no particular order:
I have my own theories about the names behind the drinks. 'A Tall Moose' - gotta be a reference to Supernatural. And if you haven't seen Supernatural - what are you doing reading?

The Green Fairy is what they called Absinthe in Moulin Rouge. Pretty sure the 'Leprechaun' beverage is a side-handed reference to that. Especially given the effect it has on Ryder.

"The Dirty Squirrel" is maybe a reference to James Cagney's black and white movie 'Taxi', in which he really didn't say, 'You Dirty Rat.' Work with me on this one.

The other Leprechaun references are both a tribute to the really horrible horror film called (no joke) 'The Leprechaun', and also to 'Wayne's World', in which Wayne teases his best friend about how much that movie scares him. "I'm a leprechaun, heh, heh, heh," is a direct quote.

Also, I may have unilaterally decided that Turians have a version of 'Lucky Charms' breakfast cereal, and that it's Vetra's favorite. Just to keep up with the leprechaun theme. I'm sorry, not sorry...

I think that's all of them.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Possibly three chapters today - because I like breaking them when I switch POVs.
Definitely two, at least.

It was a stupid idea. Liam hesitated over the terminal, the mixture of pictures and quotes fitted together like puzzle pieces that didn’t quite go, but...

But she needed inspiration. She needed to feel like she was making a difference.

So did he. This was the best idea he had. And it wasn’t much.

He stared down at the theme on the first page - ‘Frontier’ in a script that reminded him of the American Old West. Pictures of Eos, some of the settlers at their outpost, including Bradley, but with cowboy hats photoshopped onto their heads, grinning into the camera. Sunsets and sunrises over the rock formations, sand dunes, lakes, and one particularly good one of the Nomad parked on the middle of the natural rock arch. She was standing next to it, just a thin line of woman in black armor standing by her car, at the top of a new world.

SAM had taken that one via a satellite. It was surprisingly artistic, given the AI’s other photographs – mostly aerial mapping, overseen by Suvi.

It was a strangely personal collection of shots – ones he’d taken himself, and selected from SAM’s database. Looking at the finished product, compiled to fit in a tidy slideshow, with attachments to the originals, if she wanted to save anything. If. He stopped breathing for a minute, nervous as hell.

That was the problem - he was showing too much of the way his mind worked. It felt like he was asking her if she wanted to save him. Too much, too soon. In a hurried blur, he attached extra links to a couple of old spaghetti westerns, an Asari documentary about space exploration, and some Turian historical drama that was on his ‘to watch’ list, and typed up a quick note.

It was better this way, even if it was more confusing for her.

The night before, all he could see when he tried to sleep was her bright eyes and her rueful smile as she leaned up against the bathroom wall, and then her curled up on the med bay bed, as Lexi hooked her up to a drip, scolding the whole time.

Least she hadn’t gotten a shot for nausea. Lexi’s ‘I jab you with needles because I care’ routine was getting really old.

They still never got to watch their vid, but… he’d waited with her and the doc instead, as they got her rehydrated and fed – with Drack’s help. In a domestic frenzy the Krogan had whipped up a fast version of something Ryder had called ‘Chicken and Dumplings’ that looked mostly like flour balls and chunks of unidentifiable meat, interspersed with reconstituted carrots and potatoes.

He’d had some. It was surprisingly filling, for how much it looked like soup.

Lexi had thanked him for taking care of her. That felt really good, like he was responsible, or
He refocused on the screen again. He’d debated and fussed about it all day. If it wasn’t any good, he should just let the Pathfinder decide. So finally, Liam smiled, softer than his usual wide grin, and hit send.

He hoped she’d like the email. If so, there was more where that came from.

If not, he could take a hint.

Shit, it still felt personal.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Second chapter of the day. Without the one prior, this one will make no sense.

There might be one more.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sara scrolled through picture after picture of Prodromos colonists, and the scenic beauty of Eos, with the music he had attached - a song called ‘Home’ that sounded like nothing Liam Kosta would never listen to in a million years - playing in the background of the slideshow.

She’d finally put it on repeat, because she couldn’t see the pictures, blurred as they were through her tears. She wiped them away and kept watching.

It wasn’t the pictures, not really. It was that he had thought to do something for her at all – and something so beautiful. Her first outpost. Their first home - almost. Home for a few people, anyway. Something to be proud of.

And he’d done this after she had drank herself into sickness over a stupid conversation with someone she was accountable to, made him carry her through the Nexus docks, threw up in front of him, and generally made an ass of herself.

Again.

She wiped her tears away, just in time for the slideshow to stop at the picture of the Nomad on the arch, and her breath stopped. “SAM, when did Liam take this picture?” She touched the outline of herself.

“I took it via satellite,” SAM informed her. “I believe it to be Liam’s favorite. He spent approximately three hours today during his work hours cropping, adjusting the angle and the tint until he included this version.” SAM paused, “He complimented me. Said it was art, not science.”

Sara swallowed, her throat thick. “Where’s Liam now?”

“He’s at the research station.”

“Wonderful,” Sara flung her hair over her shoulders, and looked down at her barefeet, sleeping shorts, and her Blasto tank over a sports bra. “How do I look?”

“You are wearing a Blasto shirt. Your hair is blue. Your eyes are grey. You look ready for bed.”

“Just say I look beautiful,” Sara instructed.

“Beautiful is subjective.”

“SAM…”
“Very well, you look beautiful.”

“Thanks, SAM!” And she was out the door, and climbing the ladder before she could second guess herself, the metal rungs cold against the exposed skin of her feet. She slipped through the door to the science center, glancing around.

He was by one of the terminals, typing away, despite the late hour, with his back to her. “Kosta?” She asked, voice soft.

He spun, guiltily, and dropped his datapad. “Shit! Pathfinder… I’m…” he stared at the Blasto on her shirt blankly.

“You’re up late.”

Chapter End Notes

The song referenced here is Philip Phillips 'Home'. And Liam Kosta wouldn't like it, but he would recognize its appropriateness for the situation.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Third chapter of the day. Don't say I never gave you anything.

The next chapter, though, needs a lot of work. So there'll be a gap in posting. I'm working on it, I swear!

“Couldn’t sleep…” he blinked at her as he picked up his datapad, taking in her bare feet, loose hair, shorts and Blasto tee. “Nice shirt.”

She laughed, “It’s my favorite.” She flushed, and smiled, “I wanted to thank you for the pictures. I… cried.” Her eyes did look puffy and red-rimmed.

“I cry every night.” He cleared his throat, “That’s normal, right?”

“For me it is,” Sara admitted, but smiled a little wider, “But these were good tears. Happy ones. First happy tears in Andromeda.”

“Good,” Liam shifted from foot to foot, wanting, but scared to ask. He swallowed and plunged. “Look, I was thinking about starting a vid, after I finished here. Interested? If you can’t sleep, anyway.”

“Yeah,” Sara’s smile was even wider. “One of the westerns you recommended?”

“Um… not so much,” Liam admitted. “I was thinking something completely unlike the Kett. Nothing to do with fighting.” He was only awake because he’d had a nightmare in the first place.

“Okay…” Sara turned and leaned up against the wall. “Watcha have in mind?”

“A preview of a rom-com that I was thinking about for movie night?”

Sara grinned, “Liam Kosta, you watch romances?”

“Well, it’s Hanar. Best film studios in the Milky Way. Look at how many people love Blasto,” Liam gestured at her shirt and cleared his throat. That was becoming a habit. “So… you in?”

“Hell, yeah,” Liam set the datapad down, and she fell in next to him.

Two hours later, the screen was nothing but iridescence. “What the hell?” Liam frowned, “This was supposed to be the uncut version.”

“Weird, Kosta,” Sara was curled up under his blanket, her toes peeking out in his direction, and he had never seen anything so cute. "It's been five minutes of glowy shit." 

“It was mislabeled,” he groaned. “Unfair.” He clicked it off and faced her. “So… thoughts?”

She pursed her lips up together, “I don’t think Gil will enjoy it, and I don’t want Kallo to cry at the ending. Better keep looking. What are the other options?”
Liam shook his head, “Aren’t you going to sleep tonight?”

She tucked a string of hair behind her ear, “Um… honestly? Probably not. Not like I have to report to the Nomad at oh-six-hundred. Still having the - dreams. And there’s the crying…” She took a deep breath, “Look, you don’t have to lie about your own tears to make me feel better.”

“No lies.”

“No shit?” Her voice broke, “Because I…” she wiped her eye with his blanket, and he couldn’t bring himself to protest. “I’m crying nearly every time I’m alone. I’m screwing up, all the time. Addison’s angry, Tann’s angry, Cora’s angry, Lexi’s angry, you’re angry…”

“I’m not angry.”

“The hell you aren’t,” she shifted to face him. “You call me Pathfinder when you’re pissed off. I was Ryder while I was drunk, and then you realized how irresponsible I was, and started calling me Pathfinder again. Because you were pissed that I got pissed.”

He groaned at her attempt at British slang. “First of all, don’t try to talk like me. Doesn’t sound right with your accent. And for the other thing - you are the Pathfinder. Respect, and all that?”

“Can’t you just call me Ryder? Even Cora sometimes unbends enough to call me Sara.”

“She knew you before,” Liam hesitated, “All right, Ryder. I’ll try. I’m gonna slip, though.” If she needed that connection… “Okay, here’s the deal. I’ll call you Ryder when we’re… hanging out. Like this. Where people won’t see me calling you by your name and get the wrong impression.”

“What kind of impression would they get?” She was leaning towards, him, his blanket fallen away, and mischief sparked in her eyes.

Shit. He pressed his hands into his legs so that he didn’t grab her right there. “Don’t go there, Ryder. You know what I’m talking about. We’re mates, right? But you’re still in charge.”

She huffed, and sat back. “I know, I know. I’m behaving…”

Liam snorted, “Misbehave all you like, as long as it’s just me with you. I’m not gonna criticize. I cock things up all the time.”

Sara rubbed her eyes. “No, you don’t. In the field, you’re all like ‘BAM!’ and ‘Zap!’ You don’t ever flinch. You throw yourself in front of bullets meant for me, and trust your shields to save you. You don’t drink too much in public, and you do good things for everybody. You’re way better than I am – just a little reckless, maybe.” She yawned, and hid her mouth. “God, I guess I am tired.”

“Better head to bed then,” Liam advised.

“Can’t I stay here?”

He hesitated, imagining her stretched out on top of him, head nestled in his shoulder. “I… don’t think that’s a good idea, Ryder. The comfort couch is only big enough for one.”

She smiled, and his gut clenched a little in instant regret. “Sorry, I forgot for a minute that you moved out of the bunks.” She stretched, and a line of skin showed under her arms from the gaps of the tank. He tried not to stare. “Thanks for the invite, Kosta. Oh, and I loved the email. Send me more? As many as you have time for. SAM said you took a long time on this one – especially the last picture.”
He had about fifty lined up, that he’d probably never send. It was cathartic. “I’ll see what I can do.”

She left, stumbling in her fatigue, and he watched the back of her legs beneath her shorts before standing up and rearranging his bed for the night, trying very hard not to think about running his hands up and underneath them.

“Sorry, Mum,” he muttered. “Least I didn’t do it?”

That night, his blanket smelled like strawberries, and his dreams were really fucked up – when he managed to sleep at all.

He blamed it on the fatigue, when the next day, he opened a new file, heavily encrypted it, and put the picture of her and the Nomad in first, and a picture of Blasto in second. Afterward, he leaned his head back, and groaned, and deleted the entire thing.

That sort of thing was just creepy.

But this wasn’t getting any easier, either. She was the only friend he’d made in Andromeda. And he wanted her, even worse now that he’d seen her dressed down, out of the Initiative fatigues or her armor.

“What do I do, Dad?” Liam whispered.

But for once, both his parents’ ghosts were silent.
“Pull up the navpoint, SAM,” Sara instructed, trying to feel confident about their unknown destination as they left the last system they needed to survey before following the coordinates from the vault’s star chart. “Kallo?”

“Received, and plotted.” The Salarian’s fingers danced over the controls.

Sara grinned, and instructed, “Engage,” to Liam’s amused snort in the background. “Shut up, Kosta,” but she grinned at the confirmation, that once again, they were on the same wavelength.

“Didn’t say nothing, Captain Picard.”

“Does that mean I’m Geordie?” Gil’s voice echoed in the back, next to Peebee’s escape pod. “Liam, think you could make me a visor?” He paused, “That would be so cool. He could see in infrared and ultraviolet…”

“You can’t?” Vetra seemed truly surprised. “Huh. It’s a wonder humans ever made it off their planet. What was it called, ‘Dirtball?’”

Liam snorted, “Exactly right.” The ship jerked, in time with Kallo’s sudden course correction. “Uh… Kallo? What was that about?”

Kallo cursed in some untranslatable fashion, “We’re on a collision course, with unknown objects! I can’t…”

“Make course corrections! SAM!” Sara braced herself against the rail of the display. “I am!” Kallo had never sounded so impatient.

“Collision is imminent,” SAM informed her.

“All stop! Now!” Sara ordered, grimacing at the inertia as the Tempest’s engines cut out abruptly, and her display showed what had to be the largest Kett ship anywhere. “Shit. What is that?” She backed away, subconsciously wanting to put distance between herself and the enemy, however pointless.

“Kett ships,” Suvi whispered, as if they could hear her. “A dozen? No. More…”

“Pathfinder,” Kallo warned, “They’ve got us pinned against the Scourge.” Sara glanced at the Salarian – who blinked. You knew you were in trouble when you could tell that your Salarian pilot was nervous…

“They are scanning us, Pathfinder,” SAM informed them all.

“Fucking scan them back!” Sara ordered, lips trembling. The silence on the bridge was deafening. “What, should I have said, ‘please?’”

A Kett face snapped up on the display, and Sara turned to face it dead on. “Where is the one who activated the Remnant?” It demanded. She felt rather than saw Liam approach to stand next to her, flanked by Cora on the other side. “Their DNA signature is there. Answer me.”

“You’re the one in my way,” Sara gritted her teeth. “Who are you?”

Chapter 15
Suvi gasped, “They’ve locked navigation!”

Kallo’s mouth stretched tight. “We’re being steered into their ship!” Both science officer and pilot frantically tapped at their consoles, trying to restore functionality.

“Just tell me what you want,” Sara approached the screen, trying to look authoritative.

If a Kett could sneer, it did. “I won’t explain what you can’t understand.”

SAM spoke softly on their private link. “Sara, I have almost regained control of the ship. I need a few more seconds.”

Sara pressed her lips together, “Nobody tells me I’m too dumb to learn something.”

“Enough! Your defiance is naïve and reckless.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Sara taunted. In the background, both Lexi and Cora sighed.

“This day marks the beginning of your greatness.” The Archon’s face flickered out, replaced by the sight of several smaller Kett fighters being launched in their direction.

“Like hell it does,” Liam muttered behind her, inching for the weapons closet in Sara’s peripheral vision. “We’ve seen what they do to prisoners. Drack?”

“One step ahead of ya, kid,” Drack pulled a Krogan hammer out of – somewhere. “Let’s get what we need. You and Cora meet them at the airlock, Vetra and I will cover the cargo bay. Peebee – you get the Pathfinder and noncombatants to your escape pod.”

“Like hell I’m-” Sara started, but never finished.

“Done,” SAM announced, and the Tempest’s engines soared, the best noise Sara had ever heard. “I’ve plotted a potential path through the Scourge. Sending navpoints to Kallo.”

“Do it! Kallo – get us out of here!”

“Enemy destroyed!” Suvi announced, watching one of the fighters hit the Scourge dead on. “Damage to aft sensors…” Red lights lit up her console and Sara winced.

“I don’t like those colors, Suvi…”

The Salarian’s hands whirred over the controls, as fast as a hummingbird’s wings. “Plotting now. Pathfinder…”

“This will be tight,” SAM advised. The ship kicked back into movement, pivoting precisely and diving directly into what looked like the black lace of the Scourge.

“If you can’t fight it, use it! Just go!” Sara yelled, holding onto the railing of the navigation system, just in time for the Tempest to kick into what amounted to overdrive, while the ace pilot managed evasive maneuvers too twisty for the artificial gravity to keep up. “Go! If we’re having trouble, so are they!”

She heard Liam and Drack hit the wall of the weapon’s loadout closet. “We’re good!” Liam yelled. “Speak for yourself,” Drack grunted in pain. “Lexi… damn it, I’m gonna need a hand.”

The medical officer darted sideways. “Liam – help me!” Together they hauled him through the
bridge doors. “I’ll Lift him down,” the doctor ordered, just as the ship grated up against something that had the lights flickering. “He can’t handle ladders. Oh, Goddess,” the Asari muttered, her tone angry, as they nearly pitched off the edge. Sara started to let go of the rail to assist. “STAY WHERE YOU ARE,” the doctor ordered in a dire tone. “One injury is enough. We’ve got this.” They disappeared around the corner, and Sara braced herself.

Another explosion rocked the ship and the lights flickered again. “Kallo…” Vetra begged.

"Shut up and let me drive!"

Gil disappeared next, talking to SAM aloud, “SAM… what’d that hit? We don’t just lose power!”

Sara failed to hear the AI’s response, “Cora, follow Gil! Your barriers! If the eezo core is leaking…”

“Got it!” Cora yelled back over the engine’s whining.

“What can I do?” Peebee asked, eyes wide and glassy with fear.

“Use your biotics to help with Drack,” Sara demanded. “If we live through this, I want our Krogan in one piece, not several! Kesh will kill us all if he goes like this!”

Peebee floated herself down the ladder, and Kallo cursed – the translators not working for some reason. Possibly because they had invented them to not translate, Sara rationalized, as her body fought to stay upright. “Kallo? I need some good news…”

“Almost through.” His voice was too tight for comfort.

Several explosions off to the port side rocked her sideways into the rail. That was going to leave a mark. “God, what was that?!?”

“More enemy ships impacting the Scourge!”

“We’ve got to land!” Gil’s voice had never sounded so panicked. “Pathfinder…”

“Kallo?!” They shot out into open space.

“YES!” Kallo threw up both hands and then looked more sheepish than a Salarian had ever managed before. “Sorry. Too soon?”

“We’ve got a planet!” Suvi announced, voice relieved. “Sensors are damaged, but I think we’re at the vault’s coordinates.” Her voice was awed. “We’re being contacted! Pathfinder – look!”

Several ships came alongside, and Kallo patched a voice through the comms, the query evident, if not the words. “Pathfinder, say something,” the Salarian urged.

“We are humans from the Milky Way galaxy,” Sara declared, hoping her legs would support her. She straightened up. “We come in peace. Our ship is damaged, and we need to make repairs.” Her voice shook. “Please, we mean no harm.”

The voice barked out something crisp, but the ships directed at them formed an escort. “I believe they intend to allow us to land,” Kallo’s shoulders relaxed. “They’ve sent us a navpoint.”

“Thank God,” Suvi murmured.

“Another first contact situation?” Liam’s voice echoed over the comms. “Drack’s fine, Pathfinder. Lexi and Peebee have got him. Should I get back up there?”
Before she could answer, a translated voice came over the link, “You are cleared to land. Your crew will stay on the ship while repairs are made.”

“Yes, thank you,” Sara slumped against the railing. “Thank you, so much.”

Kallo showed the level of his skill as he drifted the ship into the docks. “Gil?” Sara asked, her voice shaking. “How bad?”

“Bad, but not unrepairable,” Gil announced, back to his cheery self. “I’ll have a work around in a couple of hours, Pathfinder. We’ll get back to the Nexus, no problem.”

“Right,” Sara thrust up her chin, trying for some bravado. “I guess I’d better go meet the locals, huh?”

“There’s no way you’re going out there alone,” Vetra mandibles fluttered, her jaw tense.

“Try to make a good first impression, kid,” Drack huffed over the comms. “Don’t worry about me. Lexi’s just fussing.”

“SAM, download First Contact protocols,” Sara ordered, dropping down the ladder to her room. “I’m going to change. Something tells me that Blasto is a little informal for this event.”

“I told you to wear your fatigues,” Cora reminded her from engineering. “You never listen. We could meet anyone out here, and you decided to wear workout gear. What will the Kett think?”

“I don’t know, I think it was a bit like giving him the middle finger, myself,” Liam chuckled over the comms. “But this, Pathfinder? It’s just the most important thing ever. No pressure. Definitely lose Blasto.”

Sara laughed as she jerked her clothes off. “If this goes badly – if I get eaten alive, even if it’s hilarious – please destroy the vids?” She pulled on her Initiative fatigues in a hurry as she dashed back up a deck. “I don’t want to become Andromeda’s first meme.”

“Too late, Addison’s that, with her ‘tired face’.” Vetra seemed to be suppressing laughter now that the worst was hopefully over.

“Don’t worry, Pathfinder, I got your back. Unless it’s just that funny, anyway.” Liam sounded more stressed than anything reassuring.

“Good to know,” Sara reclimbed the ladder, and approached the airlock, her breath coming short, and tugging down on her shirt, trying to channel Captain Picard. “Right. Let’s do this.” The airlock opened and she emerged, into a cloudy day on a brand new planet and a half dozen strangely familiar rifles pointed at her head.

Shit, they were carrying Kett rifles...

It took a while for the translators to kick in, and Sara shifted awkwardly, hands in the air while the locals scanned her – and her ship. “I could take my shoes off, if it would help,” she offered. Words would help, if they had translators.

She was marched away after a moment, and she elected to leave her hands elevated, her eyes wide as she took in the space around her. Transparent canopies spread overhead like leaves, purple trees and lush vegetation interspersed with more practical structures. The sound of running water was everywhere – and suddenly Sara wished she’d taken a moment to pee before she’d exited the Tempest. “No potty break any time soon,” she sighed to SAM on their private link.
“You should have thought about that before you left.”

“Good one, SAM.”

“It was not intended as a joke.”

“Yeah, Dad created you, all right. He program you with ‘Dad’ jokes, too?” SAM didn’t answer.

She looked upwards towards a small group of what must be authorities at the top of a small set of stairs. “I am Paaran Shie, governor of Aya. We are the Angara.”

“Hello,” Sara somehow managed not to stammer. “I’m Pathfinder Sara Ryder, with the Initiative.”

"My programming suggests this would be an appropriate time for a 'Dad' joke, Pathfinder."

Not now, SAM.

"Very well, I will wait."
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Second chapter of the day - won't make sense without the one before it!

Liam paced back and forth on the bridge, looking through the vidscreen at the city below them. “Yeah, it’s pretty, but will they kill her?” He directed the question over the comms, wide open to try to provide everyone a better idea of what was happening outside.

“She’s ready. She’s not the same scared little girl from the Hyperion,” Cora assured him. “Besides, I thought you said she was up for it? Changed your mind?”

“That was before we knew there were aliens other than the Remnant and the Kett,” Liam temporized, bracing himself with both arms against the navigation center. “Those were both enemies. She’s a fighter, not a diplomat, right?”

“These didn’t kill her outright,” Suvi mentioned, in a very small voice. “They already seem… friendlier.”

“I will be transmitting pictures shortly,” SAM announced. “After the Pathfinder clears them with their military and government entities.”

“Great, complicated politics,” Vetra muttered. “Just what Andromeda was missing.”

“The Nexus is complicated,” Peebee contradicted.

“Yeah, but if you don’t like something, you know just who to yell at, and where their office is. Unless you’re Tann, you don’t even have guards.”

“I don’t like it,” Liam stressed, rubbing his head. “Someone should have gone with her. An escort, or something… she’s all alone out there on an alien world.”

Peebee scoffed, “She’s a big girl, she can take care of herself, right, Drack?”

“I’m not getting in the middle of this,” Drack moaned. “My leg’s killing me.”

“If you took proper care of your prosthetics…” Lexi started.

“No body likes a nag, Doc.”

“I am not nagging. I’m your physician. It’s my job to tell you how to take care of yourself!”

“Tell that to your dietary restrictions. You told Kesh not to let me have cookies.”

“Can you just shut up?” Liam’s outburst surprised everyone. “We should be paying attention.”

Peebee rolled her eyes, “Unless there’s an explosion, I seriously doubt we’ll know anything until they frogmarch up the gangplank.”

“And even then, odds are ten to one Ryder caused it,” Gil laughed over the comms.
“Shit,” Liam whispered, “We should be guarding Gil and the cargo bay…” He turned to go.

“Aw, Kosta, I didn’t know you cared!”

“Hold up,” Cora grabbed the back of his collar. “We’re staying right here. SAM will tell us if there’s trouble.”

“Oh, yeah,” Liam tried to relax. “I… forgot. Sorry SAM. You’ve got this?”

“The Pathfinder is doing an exemplary job. Her touch of bravado has impressed Evfra, the military commander leading the resistance against the Kett. And the governor, Par…”

“Shit, they have a Resistance?!” Drack groaned. “Doc, let me up.”

“You are not marching off this ship and joining an alien Resistance. I’ll strap you down if I have to.”

Suvi stifled a giggle. “SAM, what about the civilian government?”

“The governor seems cautiously optimistic. I believe that Evfra is going to ask for an Angaran attaché to be assigned to the Tempest.”

“Shit,” Liam grinned, “Another crewmember?” He laughed, “Where’s he - or she - going to sleep?”

Cora groaned. “Didn’t we just have this conversation? I seem to remember being outvoted.” She shook her head, “Look, if they’re not going to attack, I have a few leads to follow up on regarding the Asari ark. Come and get me if we need to make a quick getaway.” She left the bridge, but not without saying, “SAM, tell Sara ‘good work’ for me?”

“Yes, Cora.”

One by one the others relaxed enough to go back to helping with repairs, or other tasks. Liam drifted away from the vidscreen, too, but only to pull up a blank email, and start a ‘First Contact’ theme, complete with Heinlein’s Starship Troopers, a series of books about a prison colony called Freedom’s Landing, by Anne McCaffrey, the latest vid version of Sagan’s Contact, an Asari documentary called How They Must See Us, and vintage pictures from every single first contact with Milky Way races – except the Batarians, because that hadn’t gone right at all. He felt kind of sick, just looking at the pics. At the last minute, he included Shakespeare’s The Tempest, for a touch of culture. He typed up a quick note to go with, hoping that the theme wasn’t too dark to inspire.

It was going to be a hell of ride, their Tempest, with a new guy on board.

He’d been waiting his whole life for this – the nerdy kid with his head buried in a book of hard sci fi. He might just be the luckiest bastard in the universe, getting his wildest dream come true.
Chapter 17

Sara’s eyes shone as she stared down over the edge at the waterfalls and lush vegetation. “Aya’s so beautiful.” She swallowed a lump in her throat. “Wish I could show the Team…”

“It is unwise to push the limits of a first visit, Sara. This is their planet, we should abide by their rules. My scans show the balance of Aya is extremely delicate.” SAM replied on their private link, as the governor politely thanked her for the compliment.

“I know,” she sighed, pulling herself up from the balustrade. “But surely there’s something I could take back… to show them? We could use a little inspiration.”

“Pictures, perhaps?”

“Liam would like that…” his emails full of aesthetic themes were one of the highlights of her position – he’d been sending nearly one a day since ‘Frontiers’. His desperate enthusiasm was infectious - it had started to reignite her own excitement about Andromeda, something she had been sure was dead after Habitat 7. “Maybe he could put something together about the Angara for the Nexus? Or about us for the Angara? Replace those horrible propaganda slides, too... show everyone what 'home' might really look like, when we find it.”

“That seems reasonable,” SAM agreed.

Her next question was for her escort. “Can I take a few pictures, or would that offend you?”

“That would depend on the pictures,” She said after a moment. “Nothing that would compromise security, if you please.”

She grinned at her, “I was hoping to get pictures of plants and waterfalls. And maybe some of you, and the rest of your people?”

…I see. Not of me, but others, if they give consent.”

“Go ahead, SAM. Avoid pictures of VIPs - I don’t want them to think we’re profiling them. Keep it light, okay?”

This first contact scenario had already gone far better than the last.

Back at the Tempest, safely in orbit, but with another crewmember she hadn’t been expecting, she wandered down to the cargo bay, flicking through her Omni-tool. “Liam!” She found him on the upper level, talking to Jaal, the Angaran’s face telling her everything she needed to know about the awkwardness of the situation. She frowned for a moment, wondering what, exactly, Liam had been asking of the man. “Jaal, you’ll want to see these, too…” she climbed the ladder and positioned herself between the men. “Look…”

Liam whistled, “These are great…” She flicked through to one of a woman selling produce. “Oh, god, is that fruit?” His voice was pained and he grabbed her arm. “Something like a melon?”

“Yes,” she grinned. “I bought some to share. The crate’s down in the cargo bay. SAM says its edible - though Vetra shouldn’t touch it - and Jaal is partial to it. So don’t hog it,” she backhanded his stomach. “It’s a delicacy, even to the Angara. Special occasions only. We won’t be back to Aya for a while. I’ll explain later. It has to last.”
“No fear,” he released her arm, and put his hand behind his back. “Wish I could have gone along. Don’t suppose they have a pub, do they?”

“We do…” Jaal frowned. “I think. That word didn’t translate quite… right. A place of drinking, of food, and companionship?”

“I wasn’t allowed in the city, after I met Evfra,” Sara clarified. “So I don’t know. These are just the docks. The fruit lady came to see the alien out of curiosity, and so I bought the melons on Jaal’s recommendation. The other traders wouldn’t sell to me. No trust.” She shrugged, "I'll have to earn it."


Sara beamed, “That’s what I thought, too!” She tapped her Omni-tool urgently. “Liam, I’m giving you an assignment.”

He groaned, “What, like homework?”

“For the Nexus,” she smiled, in what she hoped was a winsome way, “I want you to take these pictures and make something of them. Something to show them all that Andromeda can support life. But…” she paused, “But make sure you show that Aya is for the Angara… I don’t want people asking when they can move in. It’s a small place, and the Angara severely limit visitors. Even residents are cycled through - when one leaves, another can arrive, and there’s a lottery to keep it fair.” She smiled up at the Angaran. "Maybe Jaal can help you?"

"I would be happy to assist."

"Got it,” Liam nodded. “Send the pics to my email. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Already done!” She backed away. “Team meeting in 15 – Liam, you’re in charge of seeing Jaal settled, since you got here first – show him around, try to find him a place to sleep? But I want everyone to meet Jaal properly – before I explain what we’re going to have to do next, and I don’t want to explain more than once.”

"That sounds… ominous."

"Jaal, fill him in, if you'd like." Sara rolled her eyes, "I know that there will be a few people arguing we shouldn't take the time, but this helps both the Angarans, and the Initiative, if we do it right. So God damn it, we're going to do it right."
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Second chapter of the day! Go back one, if you missed it!

Liam was trying not to make snap judgements like ‘Angarans look weird.’ He had a million and one questions, from ‘Why are you pink?’ and ‘What do you call those flappy things on your neck?’ to ‘Is that cape thing ceremonial?’

He knew Jaal had to have them too. But how did you manage to ask stuff like that – what if being pink had some sort of stigma on Aya – like an early childhood illness causing discoloration? And was that huge notch in the flappy neck thing an old injury? Looked like scarring…

But he had the Pathfinder’s approval to ask, right? Sort of - she’d given him homework – fun homework, yeah, but still homework. And if he was trying not to think about her goofy smile while she introduced them all to Jaal formally, well… he was chuffed that she’d picked him to show him around. That showed some level of trust, right? She trusted him – she didn’t trust just anybody.

Liam, your infatuation is showing, his Dad warned him with a chuckle.

“Shove off, Dad,” he murmured, and led the Angaran into the cargo bay.

“Pardon?” Jaal asked, startled.

“Sorry, just, uh – talking to myself.” Liam’s face heated. He’d have to watch that a bit more closely. “So, Jaal Ama Darav,” he paused, wondering what to ask first. “Can I call you ‘Jaal’ or should I be more formal?”

“Jaal is fine.” The Angaran peered around at the Team cautiously while they worked. Trying not to stare, but wanting with every atom of his body to do just that. Shit, Liam could see the questions forming in his mind. They were certainly an… expressive people, the Angarans.

Liam got that, all right. “Feel free to stare, man,” Liam suggested. “We’ve got to be the weirdest thing you’ve ever seen, right?”

“Yes. You are.” Jaal shifted uncomfortably. “I do not mean to cause offense.”

“No worries, mate. You’re crew, now, like the rest of us.”

“Mate?” Jaal’s neck ridge things seemed to inflate. “I am not… comfortable with that intimacy.”

“Shit,” Liam cringed. On second thought, maybe the Pathfinder had too much trust in him. He was already botching this up. “No, in this context, it means ‘friend’. Not… sexual.”

“Oh. I believe I understand.” Jaal’s eyes relaxed. “This is… a relief.”

“What, you gotta girl back home?”

“…No.”
“A guy then?”

“No.”

Liam cleared his throat, feeling every single iota of awkwardness about this. But his mother’s voice echoed in his brain.

*People are people, Liam, no matter what they look like.*

So he persevered. “We’re pretty friendly – if you’ve got a question, ask. We’ll answer. Peebee’s our expert on the Remnant,” he waved a hand at the smaller Asari on the balcony.

“Peebee.” The Angaran made it two separate words. “An interesting name.”

“Don’t tell anyone, but her real name’s Pelessaria,” Liam snorted, “Hates it though.”

“Why?” Jaal’s eyes seemed so… innocent. “To hate one’s name…”

“Dunno. Just – reasons. We’ve really just met. She’ll tell me when she’s ready.”

“You do not know each other well?”

“No, she joined up just before we activated Eos’ vault.”

“I see,” Jaal relaxed a little. “I am relieved. I thought you were all – mates. It feels strange, to be the outsider.”

“None of us know each other really well, except maybe Vetra and Drack,” Liam explained. “Most of us only woke up about two months ago, just before we reached the Nexus. Vetra knew Drack’s granddaughter back in the Milky Way, but they’re the exception, not the rule.” He pointed at Vetra and Drack in turn as they passed, climbing the ladder to the hallway. “And Lexi’s the ship’s doctor…” the Asari waved. “Watch out. She’ll be wanting you to do a voluntary physical so she can see what makes you tick.”

“Ah, the Nexus is your… space station,” Jaal supplied. “I look forward to seeing it.” He paused, “Makes me tick?”

“How your biology works, so she can keep you healthy. It’s how she shows she cares. Don’t worry. It doesn’t hurt – much. And I look forward to showing you around,” Liam grinned. “I’ll spot you a drink at the Vortex.”

“Vortex?” Jaal’s eyes went wide. “That sounds… dangerous.” Liam walked him through the bunkroom and loo, waving at the amenities, and hoping they needed no explanation.

“It’s a pub,” he reassured him, and opened the door to the galley. Someone had already placed the crate with the melons on the counter, waiting for someone to unpack them into the fridge. Jaal brightened at the familiar food and then wilted again.

“Ah. I am having trouble with translations. I assume they will improve, as we talk.”

“And I’ll try harder to use better words,” Liam ran a hand through his hair. “If it makes you feel better, the Pathfinder and I come from the same planet, and we still confuse each other with slang. Different sides of the planet, growing up on the Citadel instead of on Earth – makes things hard.”

“No. It doesn’t,” but Jaal laughed. “It must be an incredibly complex language. I look forward to learning it.”
“Same here, mate,” Liam slapped him on the back without thinking. “Sorry – that’s one way we show comradeship.”

Jaal eyed him, “We do this,” he offered his elbow at an angle. “Now, you do the same, and we – cross them.”

Liam grinned, and did it. “Like this?”

“Yes. Sort of. Firmer, with more determination. Now say, ‘Be strong and clear.’”

Liam frowned, “What’s being clear got to do with anything?”

“That’s… complicated. It has to do with the way we metabolize sunlight.” Liam’s eyes widened as he grinned. Jaal recoiled, “That is an alarming expression. Are you going to attack me?” Jaal seemed to be joking.

Liam hurried to explain anyway, “Nah, I just… fuck, I’m curious.”

“I hope your use of ‘fuck’ is another idiom.”

“It is,” Liam laughed. “It is. No fear, Jaal.”

“No fear’?”

“It’s a reassurance.”

“Oh!” The Angaran brightened visibly. “That is good to know. I will practice.” He grimaced. “How is this?”

“Don’t force it, man,” Liam shook his head. “Just be yourself.” They reached the bridge. “Um, did you happen to see if the Pathfinder came up here?”

“Ah.” Liam walked through the doors. “So Suvi’s our science officer…”

“I will have many questions,” Jaal blurted out before Suvi could say ‘hello’.

The woman tucked her hair behind her ear, looking eager. “So will I. It’s nice to meet you… Jaal.”

“And Kallo’s our ace pilot,” Liam waved at the other side of the bridge. Jaal blinked slowly at the man. “I’m Salarian,” Kallo offered dryly.

“You are so… diverse,” Jaal wondered aloud. “So many different people – Salarian, Asari, human, Kro… Kro…” he shook his head. “I don’t remember the word.”

“Krogan,” Liam supplied. “And Vetra’s a Turian.” He kicked back against the nearest wall. “And if the other arks ever show, we’ll have Quarians, and rumor has it, Hanar and maybe Drell, too.”

“It is… overwhelming,” Jaal’s eyes welled up with tears. “I’m afraid… it is too much.”
Liam exchanged a quick look with Suvi. “Suvi – what about the science lab? Okay if Jaal bunks in there? I think… I think he could use some space, you know? And Cora’s in and out of hydroponics at all hours.”

“Of course,” Suvi beamed. “I did wonder if I’d need to move out of my bunk to make room for our friend. I could sleep up here easy enough, with a mattress…”

Kallo snorted, “You’ve already made it your space, with your little stuffed toys… we wouldn’t want to inconvenience you. If anyone is sleeping on the bridge, it’s me.”

“Aw, Kallo, you’re sweet,” Suvi enthused, as Liam waved Jaal out and across the landing towards the Research Center. He cleared his throat, continuing his spiel. “Other than that, it’s really only Cora and Gil, and you can meet them later if…”

“I’ll be fine,” Jaal breathed gently. “I just… so many peoples, together. The Angara have only met the Kett, and the Remnant. Neither are…” he shook his head. “There are stories, of my people traveling like yours. I wonder if they are true, now. How much we’ve lost to the Scourge.” He drooped, oddly plant-like in that moment. “I apologize for the insult.”

“No need. No one’s insulted,” Liam clapped him on the shoulder again. “Go on. This is the Sci lab. If you want, you can make it yours. If not, we’ll find you another place.”

“I did not bring… stuffed toys.” The Angaran laughed low. “Do adults have such things?”

“Um… yeah, sometimes,” Liam admitted. “Not me. But yeah.”

Jaal mused, “Then again, I still have the dissected body of my first pet, so… we all hold onto things that hold personal meaning.” He trailed his fingers over the glass covering the bodies of the insects in the observation lab. “This will do fine. It is… not unlike my room at home, on Havarl.”

“That we do.” Liam raised his eyebrows, “You dissected your first pet?”

“He died of natural causes, first.” Jaal frowned, “I did not kill him.”

“And you kept him?” Liam laughed, “Love to meet him, sometime. So… meeting is upstairs in about five. I’ll get Vetra to find you a camp mattress and stuff…”

“I brought my own bedding. And food.”

“Cool. Pathfinder might want to hear about what you’ve brought on board. Don’t worry about sharing, or anything – we can’t all eat the same stuff, so the Angaran stuff can stay for the Angaran.” Liam frowned, “Oh, we’d better set you up with an email account.”

Jaal shook his head, “Can it wait? I… need to find some balance.”

“Sure, sure, didn’t mean to…” Liam rubbed his head again. “Sorry. I come on too strong. I’ve got some stuff to do right outside. Just… find me, when you’re ready, all right? Or not, if you don’t want to. It’s all good.”

“Thank you, Liam,” Jaal inclined his head. “Stay strong and clear.”

“Right back ‘atcha, mate.” Liam smiled – closemouthed this time – and backed away, mind spinning, and already writing his next email in his head. There would be a lot to say. Might take a couple of days.
By the time they returned to the Nexus, a less nervous and newly enthusiastic Jaal in tow, the punching bag – and a pyjak - had found their way into the Tempest’s pending deliveries. The pyjak was cute, and the punching bag was a huge ‘hit’, though Drack had to be told that it wasn’t up to Krogan Hammers. Even Peebee was seen punching and kicking at it, in some Asari version of kickboxing joined with biotics, muttering something about ‘that bitch on the Nexus’, before disappearing back into her escape pod of a makeshift bedroom to tinker with Remnant remains.

Sara hated to ask. The last thing she needed was to make Peeb think she was fishing to find out if she was with anyone. The Asari was just a little too emphatic about not needing anyone, and working better alone.

And… she was feeling sorry for herself. But there it was - Sara was always alone. The others had the option of hanging out in the bunkroom with the others after hours – but she felt forced to retire to what felt like a massive amount of empty space. The last thing she wanted was to end up… alone-r. A loner. She giggled to herself.

“What’s so funny?” Cora asked from where she was cataloging their new equipment.

“Nothing.” Cora wouldn’t like puns – and this one would probably have Lexi drawing up a new psych profile. Sara sighed. Without Scott, she was forced to laugh at her own puns.

Scott loved her puns.

The hardest part of this job was how often she felt alone. Even when Scott was posted halfway across the Milky Way, they could still talk, and email. This felt like he was gone-gone – even with Harry’s link. And she had fucked that opportunity up, big time.

Just as well that they’d stayed only long enough to introduce Jaal, update Tann on the Angara, argue with Addison about their progress (again), before confronting Spender and receiving vague threats in return before taking back to the skies. The Nexus was full of assholes disguised as people.

She might have hummed the Firefly Theme as they took off. ‘You can’t take the sky from me’ was just a little too appropriate.

She was trying not to think about never getting to talk to Scott again, as she pummeled the punching bag, hands wrapped and chalked. The bag rocked against its mooring, creaking ominously, but stable enough, both Gil and Liam had assured her.

At least most of the interpersonal issues had tapered off, as the Team began to mesh a little better - apart from Gil and Kallo, who frequently snarked over the comms over the differences between blueprints and reality.

It shouldn’t have been this hard. Sara had settled into a comfortable routine, in which the loneliness was – mostly - held at bay. Work all day, surveying planets and anomalies while the Tempest was in transit, interspersed with frequent updates to Tann and Addison about progress and their perceived lack of it, answering emails in the evening, before making her rounds of the ship to talk to people that waved her down while she tried to jog around the cargo bay balcony with her headphones on her head. The music helped drown out the loneliness – and SAM seemed to like the patterns. It took 20 laps to make a half mile by his calculations. She was considering taking up parkour – just for variety.
At least Liam always seemed up to her stopping by when she couldn’t take the lack of silence in her head any longer, calling up a vid for a ‘preview’ for his movie night plan, only to end up dismissing whatever as ‘rubbish’ or ‘bland’ before trying something completely different. They had watched his entire collection of Hanar ‘classic’ movies, making fun of the romance scenes.

“Pfft,” she’d laughed at the penultimate scene of the Hanar version of *Juno*.

“It’s beautiful!” Liam shoved her with his foot. “As if you could do better?”

“Could if I wanted to,” Sara bragged.

“Prove it,” he’d grinned at her across the couch, and paused the vid. “I dare you, Ryder. Go on, impress me.”

She’d climbed up on her knees, facing him and stared until he blinked, and then closed her eyes, opening them only to gaze back down into his. They watered a little bit, and she blinked the tears away. “Look…” she paused for effect, and then froze, realizing that saying the damn line was going to be harder than it should be. She leaned in, despite her sudden misgivings and… shit. His lips were only a breath away, when she declared in the softest voice, “You’re like the coolest person I’ve ever met and you don’t even have to try.” She breathed gently, staring at his mouth for a long moment, before shifting back to his eyes.

He’d murmured, “Shit, you win,” and she’d turned bright red and scrambled off his couch and out of his closet with a stammered excuse.

It’d taken a half an hour to make her heart stop beating too fast, and she’d avoided the cargo closet for two days afterward, in favor of extra workouts to take her mind off of… things.

She wasn’t sure when his wide smile and earnest enthusiasm had made her guts start melting faster than the Angaran ice treats that Jaal had introduced to them after hearing about ‘ice cream’ on the Nexus. Seemed like they always had. And all that metaphor did was remind her of Liam, eyes closed, sucking on the frozen melon juice-sicle with a smile like a six year old’s.

Shit.

She spun around, doing a roundhouse kick at the bag, and coming back down to bounce on the balls of her feet before taking advantage of the bag’s momentum to land a punch, backed up by biotics. “Nice one,” Drack grunted from the balcony above, as she stopped for a second, to still the bag’s rocking by hugging it.

Looking at it logically, not staging a confrontation with Liam made sense. She had enough to do, with the burden of her job. The fear of playing favorites if she got involved with a member of the crew was a big deal. She didn’t really have time to ‘date’. Neither of them did. This job was about survival. Survival trumped making personal connections.

Besides, he probably wasn’t even interested, she had told herself a million and one times. He was just a naturally flirty person, like… Peebee. Or Jaal, who didn’t realize that he was flirting at all. Compliments from the Angaran flowed like water. Apparently Angarans didn’t… store them up and release them one at a time, when the timing was right, in his culture. You told a person up front that you admired them, and why, or why you hated their guts, so that you could get hurt, yell, and work through it.

Her father would have isolated the Angarans in about two minutes with his patented N7 objectivity. She snorted, and turned sideways to hit the bag sideways, three times in quick succession with the
side of her fist, and jumped and spun again, only to block with the other arm. The bag groaned its protest at the abuse. So maybe she’d done something right, after all, just being herself?

Personally, the Angarans were onto something. She found their transparency refreshing, after all the veiled hints from Spender and the other ‘authorities’ on the Nexus. Stupid political bullshit, all of it. If it hadn’t been for Liam and Jaal meeting her in the Vortex afterwards to make her laugh at Jaal’s experience in the newly built Cultural Center, the whole trip would have been a waste. Hearing that he was delving into Asari history made all the other crap worthwhile.

She’d managed to not get drunk this time. One drink, in public, laughing in a booth with friends. That was acceptable for the Pathfinder. Drinking with friends.

Friends. She’d been over this a million times. Despite her better self’s advice to either avoid Liam or tell him what was going on in her head, she kept showing up at that damn cargo closet with that damn couch that was way more comforting than comfortable, and ended up staying longer than she intended, for no particular reason, saying things she didn’t mean to say, and slowly digging her way into a feelings hole that she couldn’t boost even the Nomad out of.

And she didn’t want it to stop. She had so few ways to decompress – losing Liam to a crazy infatuation might just tip her over the edge into insanity.

They tended to pop in a vid, and ignore it in favor of talking. Sometimes they’d talk about Earth, drawing in Jaal, and sometimes even Vetra, if she was around and interested. But as the woman hated The Couch with a passion usually reserved for her favorite dextro-cereal, they were usually alone - the others either more introverted, or involved in the lengthy list of projects that always needed someone crunching numbers or mending hard-used tech. Liam was often busy too, but he seemed adaptable - capable of working and chatting with a vid in the background.

She struck the bag with her palm in a claw formation, seeing the Archon’s flat face instead of the leather, and fantasizing about breaking his miserable excuse of a nose, but even that distraction didn’t last long enough.

Liam was just… terrific. Always there when she needed him, and making himself busy with other things when she didn’t. But more and more, she found reasons that she needed him around. She hammered at the bag with her biotics in a rapid succession of pulses, feeling the rhythm of the now closed-fist punches through her shoulders.

The exercise was clearing her mind – and she stopped for a minute, to slow the bag’s swinging and come to grips with the facts, resting her cheek against the leather.

She was playing favorites, just like her Dad had, with getting her and Scott on the Pathfinder Team at the last minute. Worse, she had a crush on a member of her team, and it was affecting her efficiency as Pathfinder. There were reasons the Alliance had fraternization rules, and she was a perfect fucking example of every last one of them. Except the sex ones. Mores the pity. If she was going to make bad decisions about interpersonal relationships, it would be nice if she was at least getting some…

Focus, Ryder. She could justify Liam’s presence everywhere - whether they were fighting Kett, or dealing with scared ex-colonists, or dismantling Remnant, or talking her through a particularly bad jump at the latest set of monoliths. And unlike anyone else except for Lexi, who didn’t inspire confidences with her bedside manner, he was always there to listen when she just couldn’t deal with the pressure of being Pathfinder.

Sara didn’t want to use him, to take him and his skills for granted. He deserved to know that she was
infatuated - but also that his skills went beyond her… feelings. That she wasn’t keeping him with her just for the eye candy.

Such eye candy, though.

With that, she went into full biotic mode, choosing to try lifting herself up to do a series of kicks she’d seen Peebee attempt a few days ago on Cora’s advice. She managed to land three of the seven before sinking back to ground, panting hard, the bag squeaking in its tether.

“Not bad for a first try!” Cora offered.

“Thanks.” She stopped the bag again, her mind made up. She had to say something. Tonight. She would drop by, be something approaching endearing, and tell him that she liked spending time with him, that she admired his dedication, tell him that she wouldn’t let her feelings impact her professionalism any longer, and… then suffer through his embarrassment, his rejection, and kindness.

She rolled her neck, and headed for the showers. She’d just rinse off, change into something a little more official looking than Blasto plus sports bra, and talk to him.

How hard could it be?

The shower didn’t take long enough to figure out what to say.

Shit, she was already rocking back and forth on her heels in front of his closet, and she didn’t have a script ready. Maybe she could throw herself on the mercy of an old movie? “‘Play it again, Sam,’” she whispered, choking.

“Play what again, Sara?” SAM asked, just in time for Liam to pop his head around the corner at the sound of her voice.

“Who’s misquoting Casablanca?” his face lit from inside, as if he was genuinely happy to see her, and she lost any chance of keeping it cool as her guts pooled into something resembling Angaran nutrient paste. “Hey, Pathfinder! Something you needed? Haven’t seen you around.”

Shit, he’d noticed her absence. “Just stopping by,” Sara made a face at herself, curling her lip, as she entered. “For… not much. Showing some interest…ugh.” She hid her face behind her hand. “This went better in my head. Not much better, but… better.”

Liam snorted, “Bad opening, Pathfinder. You’re infinitely better than that.” He didn’t seem shocked, as he chuckled at her.

Oh, God, he already knew. Him being sweet was even worse than him dealing with the shock of her confessing her ill-timed attachment.

Only one thing to do. As Dad said, ‘If you can’t fight it, use it.’

“Screw it, I’m owning it,” she thrust up her chin. She could face Kett, she could face the Scourge, she could face him - the closest thing to a friend she had in Andromeda, and she was fucking going to ruin it by liking-liking him like some thirteen-year-old. All because he was fucking nice. “Forgive me, I slipped and fell into a swamp of my own feelings. Give me a second and I’ll boost myself out. Though… maybe I should have just sent you a note by Omni-tool, and let you pick an option…” Her self-mocking sarcasm had always worked before…

“What?” His confused face brought her babbling up short.
“What, didn’t you go to public school?”

“Um… no. State school is where the normal kids go, assuming that’s what you meant. Public schools would have kicked me out, but Mum and Dad pulled me before they could do it. Ended up at an academy dedicated to hands on learning, specializing in science and the arts. Only reason I graduated, honestly. Rotten student.”

That explained a lot. “Oh.” She flushed, embarrassed at her ignorance. “Well, whatever school, surely note passing in class is universal?”

“Um… sure.” He smiled at her, and instead of making her feel better, her stomach sank. She wasn’t sure if she could handle him letting her down easy. The Tempest had never felt so small. It’s not like she could hide in her room for days like after her last… disappointment.

Her voice was tight, and sounded offended, even to her ears. “I should have just sent you an email. Told you that we needed to talk.” She sighed, “But that sounds ominous. You’re not in trouble. This isn’t about me being the Pathfinder. It’s about me being Sara. This is her fault, not yours. Crap, I’m shit at this.”

“I knew it.” His voice deepened, and he shifted a bit, looking over his shoulder at the open door to the bay where Gil could be heard cooing over ‘his’ precious baby. “Look, interest returned. Let’s bank that for another day?”

“Could you be less convincing?” Sara forced her hands to her sides.

“Just… I don’t want Gil and Suvi gossiping about - us - over tea and Galaxy Scout Cookies.”

“Cookies?” Maybe she’d be able to eat her feelings later, instead of hide in her room… Angaran ice treats weren’t filling comfort food. God, she could eat an entire pint of ice cream… “There are cookies again?”

“Yeah, didn’t Vettera tell you? She pried the last crate out of Kesh’s hands back on the Nexus, in return for finding her something Krogan and alcoholic. It’s for medicinal purposes - so that she doesn’t hit Tann over the head with her granddaddy’s old hammer.” He shifted sideways. “But gossip aside, we’ve got a lot on our plate, until after we rescue the Moshae.” He wandered around behind her, to dig in a crate. “Go on, sit down,” he bent down and fished out two bottles. “Here. We need this.” He hit the door panel on his way back through the room, and it slid shut.

“Oh, God, Liam…” she moaned, and took both. “Is this your beer?”

“What else would it be? You’re worth losing two.” He grinned at her and her brain stopped as a frisson of what felt like electricity hit her stomach. “Sit down, Pathfinder. I’ll pop in a vid and…” he cleared his throat. “We can hash this out.”

“So far so good. She sounded professional, and semi-competent. Now for the hard part, “And I didn’t want… how I felt to get in the way. You’re not clueless, I figured that you’d figure it out… so I figured,” she laughed at her own repetition, the sound desperate to her own ears, “That I’d get it out of the way so you could turn me down, and we could get back to normal. Without my sinkhole of feelings deeper than anything Drack can brag about on Elaaden.”

She handed him his beer as he settled in his far corner, but he stared at it without opening it. “I sort of
knew already. Like I said.” He seemed more confident, now that the door was shut. “You like me.” He nudged her foot with his and smiled even wider.

That smile was going to break her. “I don’t like hiding the truth about things. Much to Tann’s despair. You should have heard the interview I gave that reporter.”

“You’re honest. That’s… cool.” He sounded like he was making up nice things about her, damning her with faint praise.

“And… now it’s awkward,” Sara tried for a laugh. “Sorry, Liam… you’re not interested, so I’ll drop it. I… you’re a friend. My only friend, really. I don’t want to fuck that up.” She glanced down at the bottle in her hands. “You were too nice to me for too long, is all. I’ll get over it. It won’t be the first time, and probably not the last,” She handed back her unopened beer, but he didn’t take it, so she sat it on the crate he was using for a coffee table instead. “Thanks for not telling me you see me like the little sister you never had. Means a lot.”

“Shit, don’t take it there.” He met her eyes, and she blinked, having never seen him so serious, his warm eyes worried - almost panicked? “No… no, I’m… interested. Didn’t I say that? Yeah. For sure. But… it’s a small ship, you know?”

“True enough.” Sara shifted, bringing one leg up to face him better, “I suppose a bad breakup would make for misery?” He was still making his excuses. Expected, despite the odd look of worry.

“Yeah, especially since we seem to keep showering at the same time. I could do without more shampoo bottles being flung at me with biotics. Bruised the bone.” His exaggerated wince made her laugh, despite her despondence. “Couldn’t tell Lexi how I got that one – and she said since I wouldn’t confess that I’d have to heal the hard way.”

“I could switch times…” she offered, reluctantly. She vastly preferred showering at night, and getting the grime of whatever planet off before she climbed between her sheets. Not to mention the obvious attraction… “You should have told me you were injured.”

“Don’t go slamming on the brakes before we even start the engine. I like showering with you. A lot more than I should.” He looked away, guilt in the lines of his face.

“Oh. Right.” She flushed, a distant hope blooming in her cheeks, “Same here.” He glanced back up and smiled. “I’m sorry I hurt you, though.”

“No real harm done. Let’s just… table it. It’s all right, maybe, if we sort of know we’re into each other, and then… see what happens? Without making it all something out of primary school?” His eyes crinkled up at the edges when he was trying not to laugh.

She laughed instead, and finally opened her beer. “You’re mocking me.”

“Damn right I am.” His eyes were warm as he drank his own beer. “You’re never going to win anyone over with your pithy speeches, Ryder.”

“The Angaran didn’t complain. And Addison loved my speech on Eos – the only time she ever approves of me. But all right, I can drink to being adults,” she shifted in her seat to face him more directly, drawing her other leg up to sit crosslegged on the couch. “Start a vid, then, and tell me more about your parents. Your Mom sounds awesome – like Wonder Woman, but in court.”

He grimaced, “That’s the dull stuff.” He swallowed another sip of beer, eyes dark with some internal decision. “I’m gonna show you something.”
Liam set the beer down on the table behind the couch and tapped up a picture on his Omni-tool, his heart beating so hard that his fingers had problems finding the keys. The picture appeared – fuzzy in places, with his dad’s thumb in one corner. He always was a rotten photographer – half his childhood photos had his Dad’s thumb in them - but that thumb made him miss them more than ever. “There. British-made, back when that mattered… a proper petrol burner…”

“You have - had - a car? A real car?!” Sara leaned in to look. “Wow. That’s… really special.” Her smile was soft, wistful and almost fond, looking at his car.

His mom had looked at the car like that, back when they first bought it. A whole flood of memories of his Mum in torn jeans and braids wrapped back in a kerchief to keep them out of moving parts, telling his Dad to hand her a 10mm wrench, to move the light to the right, or telling him to fetch three locking nuts, hit his gut. “When my parents knew I was leaving, we packed up the family car that we spent all our weekends wrenching on, and shipped it to Andromeda,” his parents had hoped it would keep him out of trouble and the gangs all too common around London. It had worked – a physical reminder to repair and make things better instead of destroying them. “Something to do on the weekends here - not that we have weekends…”

“We should have weekends, though. Someday we will again.” Sara leaned back and took another drink, eyes closing like it was the best beer she had ever tasted, instead of just generic swill. “Didn’t it weigh too much?”

Liam laughed, “Would have, but it wasn’t on the Nexus or Hyperion. We wrapped it up and shoved it in the right direction with a little help from some friends.” He winked.

Sara’s eyes lit up, “You mean it’s still out there? Now?”

“Give or take a few hundred standard light years.”

“That’s…” her eyes filled with tears. “God, Liam, that’s sweet. Just knowing it’s coming. It’s like… faith. Even if you never see it again, it doesn’t matter.”

“Yeah?” She nodded and clinked her beer with his when he offered. “Cheers, then. What’s the funkiest thing you brought with you?”

“Um… I brought my stuffed bear. He’s named Clarkson, after that really ancient British Top Gear host. I have my Companion Cube pillow. I left that with Scott, back at the Nexus.” Liam snorted, as Sara wracked her brain. “Don’t laugh. It’ll never leave him. It doesn’t have legs. But that’s not the strangest thing. I… brought my favorite dress and some nice shoes – even though I’ll never have
a reason to wear them here. Mom told me I should, before she died. She didn’t make many suggestions like that. Reminds me of her, if nothing else.” She shrugged. “All a bit boring, really. I brought a lot of data - pictures of my Mom and friends back home. Didn’t have too many of those I felt like keeping - kinda burned the bridges in the Alliance when I announced I was going with Dad… he’s a bit of a pariah back that direction. N7 operative leaves the Alliance to pursue illegal AI research makes for trouble. Son and daughter follow the same path, minus the N7 designation, only to blaze a new trail following their dad on a wild goose chase to Andromeda instead of burying themselves in dead-end assignments…” she made a face. “Why did I ever wonder if I was making the right decision? Even all the crap we’ve been through is better than that political bullshit.”

“I knew your Dad was an N7, and you’ve claimed he took risks, but he was a troublemaker, too? Really?” He sipped his beer. “Goddamn, he might just be my hero.”

“That’s what Mom always claimed. He was an N7 when they met, and she told me he had that ‘bad boy in uniform’ vibe.” She colored, belatedly realizing that maybe she had the same taste in men as her mother… “And after he… left, lots of people thought SAM crossed the line…” she stopped talking, self-conscious about the AI hearing her talk about him. “Sorry, SAM.”

“No offense taken, Sara. I am aware of your father’s troubles dealing with my creation.”

“What, really?” Liam shook his head. “He was a fucking genius. You and SAM have saved us over and over.”

“Geniuses are rarely appreciated in their time. Before Andromeda, after he left the Alliance, Dad had a hell of a time getting funding. We were in dire straits for a while there, before we moved away from the Citadel. It got a little better back on Earth - lower cost of living. I still got a part-time job until I finished school - and then I left home and joined the Alliance.”

“Why the Alliance?”

“Biotics,” she flared them out and noticed he didn’t recoil. “I needed training, and implants were freaking expensive. Especially the ones my Mom designed. That story is a bit like Cora’s, I guess. My Mom was a biotic, too, but her research was crazy experimental, and she flatly refused to use me as a test subject... Not surprising given her disease. So… soon as I could I joined up. Got the training I needed, got a paid job to take the burden off Dad when Mom had to quit work ‘cause she got too sick… I was young, but not the youngest in my boot camp. Scott was that.” She paused, “Mind you, the Alliance almost didn’t take us at all, because of Dad. Tainted by association. Like I said, political bullshit.”

“Wankers, the lot of them. So, you’re the big sis?”

“By a whole minute. But he won the genetic lottery, lucky bastard.” She wrinkled up her nose, and hid it behind the bottle. “Though at least I ended up guarding research instead of a Mass Effect gate. We called each other daily, there at the end, after his latest dumped him in favor of her career - Alec Ryder’s kid was a dead weight she didn’t want to deal with professionally, and neither of us were going to split ties with Dad, not when we were losing him so soon to Andromeda – even if he and Scott didn’t… get along. Not after Mom died.”

“What about you? Leave anybody pining in the Milky Way over their lost chance?”

Sara snorted, “As if. Scott’s the pretty one, not me.” Liam opened his mouth, but she rushed on before he could say anything. “But then Dad pulled his strings and here we are. I don’t think either of us hesitated for long - I didn’t have anybody to stay for, and Dad didn’t ask for anything. It… meant a lot to me that he wanted us along at all. Scott, though…” she looked away, “Scott always
felt like he had to prove himself to him. Their relationship was never – great.”

“You make my story sound dull. I wish I could tell you I was running from my past, or something wicked like that. But it’d be bullshit.” Liam stared at his hands. They were covered with little nicks and scrapes. Working hands, like hers. It felt like a sign. “Truth is, I had a good enough job, and good friends. My Mum and Dad were great. Miss ‘em like crazy.”

“I miss mine, too. Dad was more distant than I would like, but… but he was what we had. Mom was always there. Until she wasn’t…”

He smiled. “You’ve still got your brother. If I had sibs, I don’t think I could have left.”

“Sort of, you mean.” Her forehead creased into worried lines. “I dumped on Scott, first chance I got. Told him everything that had gone wrong last time we were on the Nexus, via this crazy link Harry set up with our SAM implants.” She covered her mouth and Liam had to restrain himself from giving her a hug right there. “I sent him into a seizure. I might have hurt him… ruined his recovery. I used to be able to tell him everything - we had each other, when we had nothing else, after Mom died and Dad sunk himself into the Initiative. I thought he’d understand, but… I messed up. Harry won’t risk letting me talk to him again.”

“Dr. Carlyle…”

“He was on Habitat 7 with us. Better call him Harry.”

“Harry’s the best. He’ll take care of him. If Scott’s like you, he’s way stronger than anyone realizes.” Liam flipped sideways. “Come on, lets watch a vid.”

“I’ve got Dad’s, now. Finally braved his room on the Hyperion for more than a couple minutes.” He watched her shoulders tighten with the memory. “Talk about hearing voices. He left a whole set of logs for us in case the worst happened. He said… he said he wished he had told us he loved us.” She choked. “Why didn’t he?”

“Hey,” Liam touched her knee, unable to restrain himself any longer. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Sara wiped her eyes. “Told Lexi. She says I’m fine – just hitting a new stage of grief. Anyway, I got his library, after I quit crying.” Liam pulled his hand away, fingertips still warm. “Wanna have a look?”

“Now you’re talking.” She clicked a few keys, scrolling down, and then landed on something that might work.

“There. Perfect,” her smile watery, “After our first day on Havarl, Reptilicus sounds like just the thing, right?”

He stared at her, nodding in approbation. “Not bad, Ryder. I was thinking Jurassic Park – Turian version. Because Havarl is just one velociraptor away from a Jurassic fun-fair. But I’m not watching Reptilicus without the MST3K group in the background, snarking away. Your Dad have that version?”

“Ugh, no? You don’t watch MST3K for anyone but Felicia Day,” Sara wrinkled her nose, “The old series is just dumb – she made it about a million times better. But the velociraptors are too sympathetic in the Turian version. After Havarl, I don’t want to cry over lizards dying… But if you don’t want a really bad D-list horror movie, we could watch the Krogan one, instead. I like the way they use them as mounts… and I love the happy ending.”
“Sounds perfect.”

She shifted over for a better view, and he laid his arm on the back of the couch behind her.

With a little imagination, it almost felt like he was holding her closer.

The vid was a total loss, all his attention boiled down to the barely-there warmth coming from her body. Sorry, Mum. I guess I’ve fallen for my boss.

She was so… earnest. Unfiltered. Her halting confession made her want to scoop her up and kiss her until neither one of them could breathe. He wanted to send her a million poems that he had been storing away that reminded him of her – it wasn’t creepy, he’d decided, as long as it wasn’t pictures of her. So he’d collected them - stories of people that overcame the worst odds and succeeded, an entire damn file full of things that were the same blue as her hair – from forget-me-nots to late summer skies to the color of the ocean off the coast of Greece. He wanted to take a picture of her neck tattoo - just the tattoo and those lips, so fucking kissable, with the beauty spot on her cheek just off the left corner of her nose…

And yet he slammed on the brakes. Stupid? Only time would tell.

Experience said everything, he justified. Time after time, he had thought his interest was returned, only to have the object of his affection tell him he came on too strong. Tell him that he was smothering them.

He wanted this to work. Just the fact that she felt the same way felt like a miracle; her confirmation that he wasn’t crazy, that the attraction was two-sided, had hit him harder than her biotics ever could. It was all he could do not to bounce on the couch, limiting himself to his foot jigging in excitement. She lifted her hand, and for a moment, he thought she was going to hold his ankle, but instead she just shifted backwards a little, so that his fingers just brushed her shoulder and the end of her ponytail, and put the fist in her lap.

For the first time in his already-rather-long-for-a-human life, he was going to take this slow. Slow and sweet. They were already vid and beer buddies. They could talk - that was new. Most of the time women wouldn’t follow the leaps in his logic, would roll their eyes as soon as he mentioned Hanar based film production, or laugh at his cheesy, inefficient visual way of trying to communicate the way he felt about things when his words just wouldn’t work.

He couldn’t just leap into this, expecting that she’d be up for anything and everything.

‘Leap’, he almost laughed. He wanted to send her a whole folder of pictures that involved leaping. But not today. Not even tomorrow. Fuck, not even next month.

He wasn’t going to flood her email with ‘Thinking about you’ messages. That would be a mistake for sure.

Damn it, he wanted to. But for now, he’d rest his arm on the back of the couch, where his fingers barely touched her shoulder, and try not to look down at her neck, and try not to imagine working a mark into strawberry scented skin.

Okay, so he’d already failed at that last one.

But he would not scare Sara Ryder away.

Being this close… if she kissed him, he was gone. But she didn’t make a move. He was way too disappointed about that, as the vid wrapped up and she said good-night, backing away, her eyes
flicking to his mouth like she was thinking the same thing.

He’d never felt temptation like this.

Maybe they could figure out something to do together besides clear vaults, or kill Kett and Roekaar. Dating opportunities were a little thin on the ground in Andromeda. He’d have to give it some thought.

There had to be something, right?

Chapter End Notes

So many references. We had Juno in the last chapter, but this one...

British Top Gear - not the new one, with that guy from 'Friends'. No, I'm talking Jeremy Clarkson, Richard Hammond, and James May. I like to think that 'Goddamn Hammond' from Mass Effect is a reference to Richard Hammond... and that's definitely what Sara ends up naming her space hamster. Because they call him 'the Hamster' on the show, dammit. /end side rant

Portal and Portal 2 - if you haven't played these puzzle games, you've wasted your gaming life. The Companion Cube never leaves you. It doesn't have legs.

MST3K - Mystery Science Theater 3000. Okay, I might lose a few readers here. The original series is horrible, but Felicia Day's new version on Netflix is something hilarious. The worst of worst movies turned into torture devices. Reptilicus is just the first movie in her remake. Watch it and groan.

Jurassic Park - When Liam wrote his email about the Jurassic fun-fair... yeah. The Krogans would have domesticated the velociraptors. The Turians would have mourned every lizard that died - too close to them evolutionary-wise. I have an entire page of notes about how the different species would react to Jurassic Park. What that says about me worries me a little.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Slightly NSFW towards the end. Don't get too excited, though. It's not time for that scene yet. Patience, young Padawan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Havarl was eerily beautiful, in an ‘even the plants are trying to kill us’ way.

Sara stood on one of the Remnant pillars on their way to the monolith, taking a break from jumping and hauling themselves up in the slightly higher gravity of the planet and looked up at the star-studded skies, full of the migration of what Liam, despite Jaal’s irritation, had dubbed ‘space whales’.

“Hey, do you ever wonder why we’re here?”

Jaal, in response to Sara’s question, merely looked puzzled and confused. “Aren’t we here to recover the missing Havarl scientists and restore the active function of the vault?”

Liam stepped forward, knowing this was his chance. “‘That’s the big question, isn’t it?’” Sara bounced in excitement and expectation, and he grinned back. “‘Why are we here? Are we the product of some cosmic coincidence, or is there really a God… watching everything? You know, with a plan for us and stuff. I don’t know, man, but it keeps me up at night.’”

“That’s beautiful, Liam,” Suvi enthused via her link from the ship. “I had no idea you had such deep thoughts about creation.”

Jaal blinked, and replied, “I’m touched by your honesty, Liam. I, too, often question my faith. Perhaps we could discuss it later, back on the Tempest. Over coffee, perhaps? I like your coffee. A great deal.”

“Um, yeah, Jaal, uh, see…”

“‘No, I mean, why we’re here, on this planet, in the middle of this box canyon.’” Sara butted in. “Sorry, Jaal. Didn’t really think about the impact this dialogue would have on you. Or Suvi. Sorry, Suvi – I’m not making fun of you – you don’t have to justify your beliefs. It’s a quote. From a vid. An old one, but a classic, about two warring armies that have bases in the middle of a box canyon.”

“Was the canyon of tactical importance?” Jaal frowned, and looked out over the Roekaar fighting the Remnant just below them. “Still. Appropriate. Liam, I don’t suppose you have a copy of this vid?”

“It’ll take a few days to get through them,” Liam admitted. “Red vs. Blue went on for years. Based off a video game – though it was a lot more than that. They lost the plot a bit there in the middle with an AI tracking his girl down through his own memories…”

“A game? A vid based on a game?”

Liam coughed, “Yeah. About invading aliens. See, they made this Halo ring… to sort of jump start life, in order to make them habitable for their species, with the ultimate goal of taking over? It’s a
“…very appropriate, indeed. I would like to play this game. It might give me insight into both the Remnant and the Kett… as well as your culture.” Jaal narrowed his eyes, “Also, it might help with the inside jokes between you and the Pathfinder. I’m beginning to feel as if I’m missing things.”

Sara snorted, her helmet tilting sideways. “Kosta… tell me you brought the classic *Halo* games? Because I need to play PVP with Jaal. Need. Desperately. Shit, it never even occurred to me to bring copies of my games… I wonder if Scott did…” her words trailed off.

Liam rolled his shoulders, trying not to get defensive. “Yeah, Pathfinder. I have them. We’ll have to get Jaal an Omni-Tool, and I’ll have to figure out how to connect the pad to the display… unless you all want to play on separate datapads. Not as much fun, if you ask me.”

“No problem, I’ll make one for him myself, soon as we get back,” Sara sounded way too cheery. “After we activate this thing and save the scientists, we’ll head back to the Tempest and get this started. Getting too late to try to activate the vault today, anyway.”

Back on the Tempest, Liam found himself moving faster than he’d like after leaping around a canyon all day in heavy gravity, killing bugs bigger than his head, and creatures with natural armor even bullets didn’t want to pierce. He couldn’t stop now, though, considering Ryder’s excitement about the possibility.

She was way into this. Even more than the idea of movie night, and that said a lot.

He was addicted to seeing her happy. Even if it wasn’t about him. Yeah, he was jealous as hell about the whole thing. And Yes, Mum, he knew that wasn’t okay.

But why hadn’t it occurred to him to challenge her to a game? They could have been doing this weeks ago, instead of ignoring movies while he blathered on and on about nothing…

“Come on, Kosta!” She was bouncing in his spot on the couch. She was back to wearing that Blasto tank again, with a different colored sports bra peeking through the edges, her hair still damp on the edges from her (their) shower. This time the bra was the same blue as her hair. It was hard to miss.

Trying not to look at where she was bouncing was making him grumpy as shit.

“Look, I’m having to juryrig some connections, here. Besides, we should think about this - don’t you think we might… you know, offend the Angaran, with how human-centric they are?”

Sara stopped bouncing, just for a moment. That helped his focus and he worked faster, before she started up again. “Oh. I didn’t think about that. But he wanted to play…”

“These games are about killing aliens. A lot of aliens.”

Sara twisted her mouth into a frowny sort of pout. It was way too cute. “Let’s let him decide. We can give him cultural context… we hadn’t made first contact when they were made.”

“Um… right.” Liam sat back on his heels from where he crouched in front of his display. “Cultural context. Like, ‘They shot first’?”

“Well, they did… but it was a misunderstanding. And the Turians still think it was nothing more than a police action, right?”

“The only difference between a ‘police action’ and a war is which side of the guns you’re on. The
people with more guns? Call it a ‘police action’.”

“Which side are you on, anyway?” Sara winced, “Don’t you think honest discourse is less likely to cause offense than hiding stuff about the bad things we’ve done? We didn’t know better – and it did last only three months until the Citadel stepped in.”

Liam sighed, and kept working. “Probably.”

“And Halo is fictional. It’s not like we’re shooting Turians and Asari and Krogan…” her words trailed off. “Though we’ll do that, if we have to. Oh, God.”

“You keep calling upon this deity,” Jaal announced solemnly at the entrance to the room. “What is the trouble? Liam, I thought your family was secular? You often start to say ‘Holy’ and then your words trail off before you’re finished.”

Sara exchanged a glance with Liam, and admitted, when he waved at her to start, “Liam is worried you’ll take offense at humans shooting aliens without trying to talk to them first. The games are like that.”

Liam snorted, “Right, it’s all me wanting to give peace a chance.” Sara glared at him. “You shot the Kett first, Pathfinder.”

“They were hurting Fischer! That’s against every rule about prisoners of war any of our cultures came up with back in the Milky Way…”

“You still shot first.”

“But the Turians…”

“We’re not talking about the First Contact War!”

Jaal interrupted. “This game is not a historical document. It is fictitious, yes?”

Sara nodded, slowly. “But the Milky Way was full of other species. Humans were just… isolated, for a long time. A lot of us are… still isolationist, unfortunately. There was a war – the First Contact war. Turians and Humans. And humans came out of that with a big black mark against our species – because we didn’t know better.”

Liam cleared his throat. “We just don’t want you to have a rotten opinion of us, based on our… entertainment. We shoot aliens for fun – but it’s not because we hate them. We want to make sure you’re okay with that.”

Jaal settled himself down next to Sara on the couch, taking up the whole center cushion. “So do Angara. It is amusing to kill things that aren’t real.” He thought for a moment, “And the occasional Fiend. I like a challenge, much like Drack.”

“Right…” Liam drawled. “No worries then. Keep in mind the Covenant isn’t real, and we’re… good to go.” He rocked back on his heels, “That should be it, then. Pathfinder, do the honors?” A few taps to her Omni-Tool, and Sara let out a shriek of joy that made Liam’s ears ring.

“Kosta, you’re a genius.”

Yeah, he smiled. He couldn’t help it.

An hour and a half later, the translators weren’t picking up some of the obscenities falling from Jaal’s
lips, and Liam was laughing his head off as Sara – now with a severe handicap – shot Jaal’s avatar in
the head just as he respawned, only to have her do it again, but this time, to him. “Shit, Ryder! You’re a menace! How’d you know I was spawning there?”

“Sorry, not sorry!” Sara laughed. “I forgot how much I love this game. Scott and I would play all
night…”

Liam’s character respawned again, and crouching, he looked all around. “Stop hiding, you arse!
Come out and fight me like a…”

“Woman?” Sara grinned, and popped out of cloak, only to use the butt of her rifle to pick him off
again. “Nah. This is more fun.”

“You’re scary. Wait.” Liam paused the game and shifted sideways to see her face better. Jaal jerked,
as if surprised that the game had stopped so abruptly, but stayed leaning forward. “Are you cheating,
Ryder?”


“SAM, is Ryder cheating? Be honest.”

“Cheating is a strong word,” Sara warned.

Jaal’s eyes went round and wounded, glistening slightly, “You are using your AI to defeat us in
honorable battle? I must protest!” And then he laughed, “That would explain some of your shots. I
was ready to inform Evfra of your superior skills, recommend he hire human mercenaries, and tender
my resignation. Tell me – do you use this game as a training simulator?”

Sara pouted, “Cat’s out of the bag, SAM. Guess I’m on my own now.”

“I apologize for any assistance I may have offered, Jaal, Liam.”

“I know it’s not your fault, SAM,” Liam shook his head at Sara, but resumed the game, lips
twitching.

After Jaal left for his bed, his scores significantly improved, Liam turned off the game, and narrowed
his eyes at her. “Gil said you beat him at poker on our last trip to the Nexus.”

“Ummm…” Sara looked at the ceiling. “Yeah. About that… SAM monitored his biorhythms so that
I could pull it off.”

“You’d better tell him the truth.”

Sara squirmed in her seat. “I don’t want to.”

“Didn’t figure you for a cheat, Ryder.”

“I’m not! But SAM’s a part of me, and… look, do you honestly expect me to not use him?”

“It’s a game, not… life and death! Just don’t play if you can’t win! You don’t see me playing – I’ve
got plans for my creds.” Liam laughed, “But yeah, I guess I understand. And Gil’s been a lot
more… humble lately. I heard him talking on the vidcom to his Jill and even she commented on it.
Sounds like he’s been growing up.” He leaned back against the couch, an arm extended on the
back, and poked her shoulder with a single finger. “No more cheating, though. Or I’m taking my
toys and going home.”
“Not unless I have to.” Sara temporized. “I mean, not just to win a game, but life or death. Cause that happens.”

Liam frowned, “When? When has that happened? Besides Habitat 7-” Sara was quiet. He didn’t like that quiet. “All right, don’t tell me, then. But… I think we need to figure out something with Jaal – a way to bridge these little confusions about what’s going to offend him before we trip over them.” He shifted in his spot, drawing up his knee to face her even better. “Ryder – SAM keeps you alive every day, doesn’t he? By cheating? By playing probabilities?”

Sara nodded, glancing up at him through those damn eyelashes.

“Don’t worry about it, then.” Liam nudged her shoulder, and then ran his hand down her arm to hold her hand. “It’s not a bad thing. I’m… glad he’s keeping you safe.” His callouses from where his armored gloves rubbed against his trigger finger were pronounced against her softer skin and cooler hand.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Liam squeezed her hand and then let it go when she didn’t squeeze back. His hand felt cold and empty, and she balled hers into a fist. “Yeah, I am. We’d be lost without you.”

“We,” Sara sighed. “Right.” Her shoulders drooped.

“Anyway, I’ll give the situation with Jaal some thought, and let you know what I come up with.”

Sara stood, and threw her ponytail back over her shoulder. “Right. I’ll let you get some rest, then.”

“See you tomorrow, Pathfinder.”

“Bright and early, Kosta. Another day of Jurassic carnival fun, tomorrow.” She backed out, holding his eyes with hers. Liam stood up, and walked to the door to watch her go, and fought the urge to go after her, to kiss her goodnight, to bury his hand in that fall of too-blue hair, to ask her to stay with his forehead against hers. She only turned on her heel just before she was about to bump into the Nomad. “Night?”

“Night.” He leaned up against the doorframe, preventing it from sliding shut, ignoring the desire to go after her. She looked like she was getting over her infatuation, at least. Keeping her distance from him, sitting right up against Jaal while they played…

Jaal was a nice guy, and a hell of a lot better of an investment than he was. Good family, local ties. Support. Pathfinder could use that kind of pull…

He made up his bed for the night, convincing himself it was for the best.

~SS~

He stepped into the shower, and she was there. ‘Hey, Liam,’ she grinned at him. ‘Couldn’t stay away?’ She wrapped her arms around his neck, pressed up against him everywhere, slick and warm. ‘Hoped I’d find you here.’ She rose up on her toes and touched her lips to his. He slid his hands down to her arse and held her closer, and deepened the kiss, turning to push her against the chill of the wall. She arched up against him, and he groaned into her mouth.
He pulled back from her, panting, wanting to say something of everything he’d been thinking, but her eyes shifted to just behind his ear and she screamed. A red laser dot appeared in the middle of her forehead, and he turned, slapping his bare hip for a pistol...

He bolted awake in a sweat, panting and swinging his legs free of his twisted blanket, to plant his feet on the chilly floor, grounding himself in the moment. Rubbing his scalp with his fingers to clear his head, Liam sighed. “I’m on the Tempest,” he whispered. “In the cargo closet I sleep in. This is my couch – the one I brought from home. There are no Observers on the ship.” Sometimes the repetition worked, like Lexi said it should. But for once, it wasn’t the Remnant that disturbed him the most – it was the dream’s situation, and the company.

The dreams were getting a bit too real for comfort – it’d be a while before he’d be able to close his eyes while he showered. But at least this one had given him an idea. He pulled over his datapad and pulled up the experimental designs he’d made for Jaal’s armor, convinced he had a solution for the culture gap between them and the Angara.

He tapped out an email to the Pathfinder, still bleary with lack of sleep.

A cultural exchange. That’s what they needed. Not the stuff like ice cream and vids, but of the stuff that really mattered – the stuff no diplomat would ever think to ask. The things that made them vulnerable.

He knew where he was at his most vulnerable, and it wasn't while he was sleeping.

Chapter End Notes

If you haven't heard of it, 'Red vs. Blue' is by Rooster Teeth, a self-described 'online gaming community' that is known for its use of Machinima (I think I've spelled that right). They have a fabulous animation series called RWBY that everyone should watch. And a fantastic anime podcast/video club called 'Fan Service'. In short, they are awesome, and deserve new viewers.

They did a great episode on one of their shows called 'Backwards Compatible' that dealt with the fighting styles in Mass Effect. Yeah. They do stuff like that. They're fun. Go watch them. You won't regret it.

Everyone knows 'Halo'.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

NSFW - at least if your employer objects to nudity. There might be a few places that's socially acceptable...

Sara leaned up against the Research Station the next afternoon, her mind not on the project in front of her - despite its relationship to her current predicament. The ship hummed contentedly underneath her, soothing to her troubled mind - whatever Gil's latest redesign was, it felt like the Tempest liked it just fine.

She wasn't sure what she had done. One minute Liam was holding her hand, telling her he was glad SAM was keeping her safe, and the next he was calling her Pathfinder.

For a moment, she thought maybe he’d kiss her, when he followed her to the door, but… maybe he was mad about the cheating? Yeah, it was hard to resist when SAM offered… but it amounted to showing off. She wanted to impress him, and it was stupid. Possibly the stupidest idea she’d had since she got to Andromeda, and that was saying something.

She could try to fix it, by making up the equipment that he’d requested particularly for his cultural exchange with Jaal by email that morning. She’d hand-deliver it, and ask if they could talk… and apologize. Even offer to make it up to Gil, by letting him beat her at poker fair and square, with no SAM to interfere.

She bounced through the door of the cargo bay with Liam’s special armor, not looking up. “Hey, Kosta, here’s that armor you requested…” she glanced up, whooped, and turned around. “Oh, God, Jaal… I’m so sorry.” Is Liam in the closet, SAM?

SAM replied, on their private link, “Liam’s physical location is currently in the cargo bay storage area, as is yours. I request a better explanation.”

“There’s a naked man in his room! In what galaxy is that not evidence of someone being gay?”

“A colloquialism, I see. Perhaps you should ask for an explanation as well? Due to crew privacy limitations, I am not at liberty to reveal his extranet searches. I do not ask, I do not tell.”

“Oh, God,” Sara repeated, looking at the ceiling, only then realizing that SAM had seen all of her searches.

“…Pardon?” Jaal glanced between them. “Have I done something to be shunned? Why are you calling on that deity yet again? Suvi has tried to explain, but I don’t think it translates.”

“You’re…” Sara waved her hand, and laughed, haltingly, her voice husky. “If this is for my benefit, I’m benefiting. You two should sell tickets. I’d see that show. More than once.” Behind her, somewhere, Liam was silent. Not laughing. Oh, God, he was gay, and she had walked in on him and Jaal. What’s worse, she’d thrown herself at him…

Her memory of the prior night played out, colored with her new information. They had been pressed together rather close while they were playing - she’d left after Jaal, but Jaal could have come back –
they’d played late, so it’s not like anyone would have noticed…

Why hadn’t they locked the door? *Why hadn’t they shut the goddamn door!* She didn’t realize she had vocalized the last until Jaal replied.

“Oh,” the Angaran seemed on the verge of his low laughter. “I didn’t realize that nakedness was taboo in your culture. Liam, you should have told me, you bloody…” He paused, “Why is it an insult to insinuate someone is bleeding? Because it suggests lack of skill in battle?”

No one answered him. “Damn it, Kosta, you told me this was a cultural exchange!” She couldn’t help getting angry, even as her eyes welled up with tears. She bit her lip, forcing them back. This happened, every damn time… “This is not a cultural exchange.”

“It is a cultural exchange! And you need to up your insults, my friend.”

“Fuck over.” Jaal laughed, with triumph.

Liam chuckled, and Sara’s stomach twisted at the sound. “Try again, mate. ‘Off.’ Fuck off.”

She had to try to regain control of the situation or she’d be schooling them both in foul language. “Liam Kosta, you’d better not be telling me that you stripped your friend - a fellow crewmember - for shits and giggles.” The cussword slipped out before she could stop it. She couldn’t decide whether or not that would be an improvement over… a sexual cultural exchange. “The way this ends with someone getting punched!” Or their heart broken, but that was already happening.

She barely knew Liam, in the grand scheme of things… it shouldn’t hurt this much. But as Jaal had already told Cora, ‘The heart wants what it wants.’ She closed her eyes, and tried to listen to see if Jaal was dressed yet.

She couldn’t hear a damn thing over the drive core directly overhead.

“‘Shits and giggles?’ Is that an idiom, or do you have a physical way to mix the two? Why would anyone want to?” Liam snorted, and Jaal, sounding far more strict, continued, “Pathfinder, I didn’t realize that this wasn’t… sanctioned. I beg your pardon for my unprofessional behavior.”

“You weaseling Adhi! You can’t get out of this that easy…” Liam sounded almost impressed while Sara choked at the epithet. “Let me explain, Pathfinder. We didn’t know how to insult each other. We’ve avoided misunderstandings before we even…”

“We’re having a misunderstanding right now!” Sara expostulated, still facing the door. “Are you dressed? Can I turn around?”

“Yes, of course.” Confused, she turned, and shaded her eyes again, but not before a healthy glimpse of Angaran genitals. Jaal frowned, “Were those mutually exclusive questions? I apologize. Judging by Liam’s behavior on board, I didn’t think clothes were a necessary tool while in your domestic quarters. I often end up bathing with other members of the crew… of both genders.” He thought for a moment, “All genders? Asari are… not strictly female, or are they?”

“Right. Sometimes they aren’t. The clothes, I mean, not the Asari… culturally, they - the Asari, not the clothes - tend to align themselves with human ideas of femininity, though I believe that to be an accident of culture, not for our benefit, but they can be fathers as well as mothers… they’re monogendered.” Sara dropped the hand, bright pink behind it, opting to stare at the ceiling. “But… maybe you should ask Lexi about that, before I screw something up. I didn’t specialize in alien anatomy, and it’s her culture.” Liam was laughing at her now, nervously, but still laughing. She narrowed her eyes at him, “This is your fault, Kosta. You’re not wiggling out of trouble that easy.”
“Not even trying, Pathfinder.” She pressed her lips together, in an attempt to squeeze back her tears. Just another sign who she was to him…

“I will take my leave, then,” Jaal looked between the two of them. “Enjoy your evening.”

“That’s right, Jaal, leave, and let me take the fall,” Liam, despite everything, was still laughing. Infuriating. Sara pressed her lips together and glared at him. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“You, too, Jaal.” Sara managed to push out, as she watched one shapely blue butt leave Liam’s room with a level of nonchalance she wasn’t sure she would ever possess in or out of clothing, turning to follow him like a sunflower follows the light. As soon as the door was shut, she spun back, folding her arms. “Talk fast, Kosta.” Sara’s eyes locked on his, like Kallo onto a flight path, shoulders shaking. “And make it good.”

She tried very hard not to stare at his chest. That would not help whatsoever.

She failed. It was a very nice chest, and the way his waist angled into his pants… the belt just low enough to tease at the small hairs under his navel… She released a shuddering breath. He was almost prettier this way then he was in the shower. No one should look that good in white pants.

She was a bad, bad woman. And a worse boss. And a failure as a Pathfinder, when she couldn’t even keep a crewmember from being sexually harassed… and now she was doing the harassing. She didn’t even want to blink.

She should resign. Her father would never have found himself in this position...

“Sara, you asked me to remind you that you’re his boss, when your eyes wandered.”

“Not now, SAM.” Her voice cracked, but her eyes rose upward.
“Not now, SAM.” Her voice broke, and he wondered what SAM had brought up that wasn’t important enough to deal with right at that moment. She couldn’t even look him in the eyes – her gaze hovered at navel level – as if she was staring right through him.

Shit. He was going to catch it, now. ‘Weaseling Adhi’ was too weak an epithet. He’d have to ask Jaal for something stronger to call him. Liam shifted his eyes and moved towards his shirt - a worn out relic from Earth that claimed ‘Campers Suck’ in cracked red print that was nearly illegible. He reached for it, only to have her voice crack like a whip.

“I didn’t say to put on your shirt.”

On reflex - how many times had his Mum used that tone of voice? - he raised his arms like she was holding her pistol. “Right. My bad.” He took a risk and laughed again, low. “We were trying to maneuver around each other like… landmines. We didn’t know where they were, and so… armor for answers, diffusing them before they could blow up. Jaal was on board from the start, I swear, whatever that pink and blue bastard insinuated.”

She stood there like the avenging angel of Jaal’s honor, and he was momentarily glad that she had no idea what he had dreamed about last night. He took a deep breath, and smelled strawberries, accompanied with that all too familiar stab of longing.

The blanket didn’t smell like her any longer, and he couldn’t figure out a way to make it happen again. The last few times she’d hung out with him, she’d ignored the blanket draped over the back of the couch entirely.

He might have left it there, hoping she’d wrap herself up again. The dreams he’d had after the first time were way better than the nightmares.

Not that having a blanket that smelled like her mattered, if the night before was any indication.

“Explain… naked.” Her voice cracked again.

Or not. Better to not explain that it was their early conversations in the shower that had given him the idea. Their vulnerability there had helped break the ice – he’d thought it might work here, too. But she wasn’t unaffected. Was it him or Jaal? “I’m not naked.”

“That’s not an improvement.” Her full lips twitched – maybe trying not to smile? “I could forgive a lot if you were naked, too. Though I’d probably have something to say about you leading me on - even though you haven’t. Not really. You’ve kept an appropriate distance. Very professional of you, since your… attention was elsewhere.” Her voice fractured yet again, and his heart broke with it. “But I can’t have you taking advantage of Jaal that way. We don’t know enough about Angaran… personal relationships. You could hurt him.” Her eyes wobbled away from his at last.

Hurt Jaal? His eyes went wide, and dropped to her hips, shifted sideways, one hip thrust out. Arms crossed over her chest… his Mum used to stand like that when his Dad had been insensitive or that once when he had a new client that kept calling him at home… and the penny dropped, rattling around in his otherwise empty brain with a hollow clang. Oh. Holy shit, she thinks I… He raised his eyes up slowly, and focused on hers. Grey-green, a soft brown in the middle, like early spring in Kensington Park, when the mud still showed through the new grass, when everything was all over fog, with two tears hanging in the eyelashes like raindrops on the trees.
Looking at her eyes was making him homesick. “This is a massive shitstorm. Let me explain. Please.”

He hurt her. Jaal was fine, but she was hurt. Because of his genius idea. Shit. Shit. Shit.

Somehow, he had to make her understand. Through his frustrated, random words strung together as he fumbled towards that goal, her face cleared. “Oh. So… this was a weird version of you trying not to offend Jaal?”

“And him, us. He got it. He’s the alien, but we’re the alien. We’re all so strange to each other. Like, I’d let him wear my jacket, but he’d never let me wear his cloak thing. Rolfinn? I’ve got the accent wrong — and maybe a vowel or three consonants. Has to do with status, and species. Probably. Still fuzzy on the details. And his Resistance patch is something sacred - where I’d trade a HUST-L with him anytime.”

She was nodding, thoughtful. “Isn’t there a less… naked way?”

The crux of the issue. “Yeah, it’s a gimmick, but Jaal saw the symbolism. We went bare to be vulnerable. Armor for answers. It worked.”

“Then why aren’t you naked?” Her eyes, still fringed with tears, were now burning holes in his chest and dropping lower, obscured by those eyelashes. She was looking at him, like…

His mind whirred at the implication of that question combined with that look. Sara might be holding a stronger torch than he had assumed from her professional and strictly friendly behavior after she’d spilled her guts… it might be time to take a risk. If you take a risk for the right reasons…

“I could fix that?” She rolled her eyes at him, and started to turn away, but not before she flushed a deeper red. He rushed to hold her attention, keep her there, stopping short of touching her. “It was my turn earlier. Jaal’s more… squishy, so he wears armor everywhere.” He raised an eyebrow, “But really, I can fix the naked thing, if you’re… interested.”

Her eyes went hazy, and her lips parted. A good sign, that. “Another time, Kosta. Just… clear it with me, next time, will you? No more special requisitions.” Her ears and neck were bright red against the crazy blue of her hair. Her skin would be warm if he went to kiss her now…

But she turned to leave, and he grinned instead, catching her eye. “Can’t promise that. Can promise to clear it with you first, though.”

She turned back, and glanced up at him. “It… it was a good idea to try to dodge a disaster. But perhaps Jaal and you could put what you learned in writing, for the rest of the Team? Or have Jaal start a more comprehensive comparison of cultures during travel time? It would be good if we didn’t offend Evfra the next time we see him.”

“Oh, Evfra’s easy. He’s super into karaoke.” Her surprised delight filled the whole cargo bay. He smiled, nervously, and offered, slow, so she could dodge the question, if she wanted. “Do you like karaoke? I was thinking of mentioning it to Anan. Possible Milky Way export, right — especially if the Angara already have something like it? I bet the Vortex would do an Open Mic night onstage one night a week.”

She raised a single eyebrow, skeptical, and stared at him like that for the longest ten seconds of his life. His heartbeat pounded louder than the drive core. Finally, she spoke, “Are you asking me out?” Her voice was flat, inflectionless. Even Gil couldn’t read that face.

Maybe it wasn’t just SAM who had beat Gil at poker.
He swallowed, “Didn’t I already promise you a drink, Ryder? Before we ever docked. I paid back the beer for moving the couch, but the balance of drinks is still on my end. You bought your own last time. Not done before we have champagne and celebrations, right?”

She blinked and then smiled, dipping her chin, and looking up at him through those eyelashes, still damp. “You didn’t really ask.”

“Just give me a heads up.”

She left without answering, but... it felt like she had. He followed her to the door again, and she turned to glance back over her shoulder at him, her eyes dark before she bumped into Cora with an incoherent apology.

Liam leaned up against the door frame to watch her go. Gil blew a kiss at him from his place underneath the Nomad, and Liam flipped him off. “Saw Jaal leave, Liam. You taking numbers?”

He smiled while he shook his head at the engineer, his mind whirling, as Peebee hooted from the balcony above.

Ryder liked what she saw. The day had turned into utter shit, but he still had that.

Maybe he’d go shirtless around the Tempest a little more often, if she’d look at him again like that. Temptation went both ways, right? He couldn’t make a move on her, but if she started something...

Well, it was worth a shot.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

This is the third chapter - and the last - of the day.

Sara left the cargo bay like a zombie – bumping into crates and even Cora, with a mumbled apology that wasn’t even intelligible to SAM, with Gil cackling in the background like static on a broken radio.

Somehow, she made it back to her room without a major injury. That was good, since she really didn’t want to see Lexi right now. God only knew what her full body scan would be like…

The problem with having a doctor on board was that they ended up knowing way too much about your anatomy - and your baseline temperatures.

Silent, she collapsed onto her bed sideways, looking out at the stars.

She listened to her heart in her ears for a few minutes. It was a comforting noise, even though it didn’t slow down for as long as she was thinking about… him. Her mind wandered, over his abs and hips, recreating every dip and rise, and the definition of his arms… for the first time since they woke up, she wanted to spend a little quality ‘alone time’ with herself and the memory of his body. But she wouldn’t. She wouldn’t use him like that.

Even if she suspected Liam wouldn’t mind. Much. Or even… at all?

He’d even, in his half-assed way, asked her out. Sort of. Again? Was this the second time? Or the third? Did Liam Kosta ever just come out and ask anything? Was it because he was worried about being rejected? Or… just a style thing? How many times could he ‘almost ask’ without it adding up to one whole invitation?

On the other hand, she wanted to go. Did it matter if he asked, if she wanted to go anyway? He knew she liked him. Knew she liked spending time with him. Did he have to ask, when she was so… obvious?

He was, by far, the funniest member of the Team, the most thoughtful, too, apart from Vetra, who was still apologizing for the mere 25 tubes of toothpaste stuffed under her desk. She sat up, almost deciding to go back and tell him, ‘Yeah, let’s go. I’ll bring the music,’ only to freeze.

“He didn’t ask.” She said that out loud. “I can’t answer if he doesn’t ask.”

SAM didn’t say anything. She flopped backward again, when she realized that the AI wasn’t going to butt in with an opinion, and twisted her fingers in her hairline. “SAM…” her words trailed off. “Shit.”

“Yes, Sara?”

“Nothing, SAM. Just… thinking.” She got up again and wandered to her terminal, and sat down. She pulled up a new message, and sat there, staring at the blinking cursor for another few minutes. “I have no idea what to write.”
“Who are you addressing?”

“Liam.” SAM had no response.

An email was a cowardly way to handle it anyway, right? She shut it down, and turned back, leaning her head against the back of the chair. “Can you just… ask a guy if he meant to ask you out?”

SAM evidently decided she was addressing him after all. “You did that, Sara. Your words were, ‘Are you asking me out?’”

“And he didn’t answer.”

“He stated that the balance of drinks was on his side.”

“That’s not an answer. It’s a deflection.”

“It seems clear that he wishes to go somewhere you two can have drinks, and pay for them.”

“But is it a date?”

SAM was quiet for a few seconds, “By my available definitions, I would answer a qualified ‘yes’, as it seems to depend on the emotions behind the offer.” He paused, “That said, I am capable of reading biometric rhythms, as I did with Gil.”

“SAM, can you tell if Liam Kosta…” Sara’s words trailed off. “Nevermind. I want him to tell me, not you.”

“As you wish, Pathfinder.” She stood up, and went to grab her dirty laundry out of the back corner, in order to start a cycle. Perhaps a little housekeeping would be enough to get her mind off – other people. It was her turn to clean the kitchen, too… She punched in Kallo’s hack to move it to the front of the queue, and then flushing a bit, asked, “SAM… has Liam already done his laundry?”

“He submitted it ten minutes ago, while you were laying down.”

“Move his in front of mine, will you?” She laughed at herself. “Just trying to be… nice, SAM.”

“Of course, Sara.”
“So… Jaal tells me Voeld is cold. Oceans of ice and everything. If a glacier’s a river of ice, what would you call an ocean of ice?” It was Liam’s turn to fumble for conversation starters, as they waited up in the loadout room for the others to arrive, trickling in for the briefing she’d scheduled, even for those who wouldn’t be leaving the ship. He was trying to work his way around to asking her if he should draft up ice skates for their jumpjets, but she didn’t give him a chance.

“So… Jaal tells me Voeld is cold. Oceans of ice and everything. If a glacier’s a river of ice, what would you call an ocean of ice?” It was Liam’s turn to fumble for conversation starters, as they waited up in the loadout room for the others to arrive, trickling in for the briefing she’d scheduled, even for those who wouldn’t be leaving the ship. He was trying to work his way around to asking her if he should draft up ice skates for their jumpjets, but she didn’t give him a chance.

“Yep. Bring the long johns, swamp blossom,” Sara told him, without cracking a smile. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever seen her so tense. “And I think you’d call it ‘Voeld’.”

He chuckled, despite the awkwardness. “Swamp Blossom?”

“Something Dad used to say,” she muttered, and finished loading her clip, sliding it home with a positive, yet ominous click. “When I’d complain about the weather.”

“Try living in the Arctic, sometime,” she spat out, and turned to Jaal. “So, Jaal – I gather your people are cold hardy.”

“Yes.”

“I’m from London. We invented bad weather.”

Sara looked at him, impossible to read. “Oh yeah? Ever had a blizzard in London? Three feet of snow in one storm?”

“Yes.”

“So I don’t need to lecture you,” she turned back to Liam, and the rest of the crew. “I don’t know about the rest of your experiences, but this kind of cold will kill you. Stay warm, and stay inside, unless there’s an emergency. If you need to leave the Tempest, then do so only in your warmest layers. If you get caught outside in a blizzard, then call for help. Don’t go wandering off – it’s super easy to lose your direction when you can’t see your hand in front of your face. Kallo will extract you in the Tempest, if necessary.” She took a deep breath, “We don’t have to worry about ice thickness, at least. No falling through and getting drenched. This ice is hundreds of years thick.”

She rubbed her eyes. “Best behavior, guys. The Resistance needs us, but we need them, too. As for the team going out with me – we will be back no later than eighteen hundred hours every evening, unless we expressly tell you otherwise. If we do not return, then come find us, damn it, because it means we’re crashed in a snowbank somewhere. Keep someone on comms all the time – SAM is your point of contact. Gil’s installed the tracker on the Nomad, as well as checked the traction control.”

“And I stocked it with extra blankets, as well as carbohydrate bars – watch the labels and don’t eat the dextro -, flares, heat packs, shovels, ammo…” Vetra listed.

“Best to be prepared,” Sara rolled her neck. “All right. Peebee, we’ll start activating monoliths
tomorrow, so have your cold weather gear ready. Today’s about gaining Resistance trust and basic mapping, so we’re going to find this labor camp, and see if we can figure out where their stores have disappeared to. Questions?"

Nobody asked a thing. Given her demeanor, Liam didn’t blame them. The Pathfinder was a little scary at the moment.

“Alright then, Liam and Jaal are with me today, but tomorrow… Peebee and Jaal.” Liam tried not to wince, but she wasn’t looking at him anyway, even as she qualified her statement. “But Liam – stay in touch, okay? Because I’ll probably want you with me if we find the vault. And Cora – I’ll keep an eye out for the Ark survivors like we discussed – and I’ll want you and Peebee with me if we find anything promising. They might be more likely to trust us with an Asari along.” Peebee snorted. “Something you wanted to share with the class, Peebs?”

“Nah. Keep it to myself this time,” Peebee snarked.

Liam tried not to be too disappointed. At least he got to go today. That was something, right?

She pulled him aside before they climbed in the Nomad, both of them already shivering, from the cutting wind blowing in from the open hatch, snow drifting inside, much to Gil’s displeasure. “Look, I know you’re upset about tomorrow…”

“It’s always your call,” he tried to look her in the eye, but her visor didn’t make it easy. “You’re the Pathfinder. Jaal makes sense. So does Peebee. You don’t have to apologize, or justify shit.”

“It’s an Angaran planet, a big one,” she stressed, “I need Jaal as a contact for the Resistance, pretty much the whole time we’re here.” She held her helmet like she had a headache. “I know it doesn’t mean crap, but… I’ll miss having you along. So… there’s that.” The last three words came out in a quiet rush.

Liam felt his face get hot – a welcome warmth. “Um, yeah. It does help, actually.” He caught a brief smile through her visor. “I’ll be here, staying warm, drinking hot coffee, wrapped in my blankie… maybe watch a surfing vid - something with tropical beaches…”

“Ass,” she nudged his hip. “And don’t worry, I will need you,” she sighed. “You and Peeb are the best team for vaults – among other things.”

He grinned, lowering his voice. “Yeah? What else am I the best at?”

Her visor fogged over briefly before her defroster kicked in. “Fishing for compliments, Kosta?”

“Only if there’s fish in the river, Ryder. Don’t want to waste my time.”

“He leaned in, “Everything we’ve had to do so far, short of Ascendants.” His lips dropped open, but she pulled away. “Let’s get going. Daylight’s limited. You don’t want to be in a blizzard with nothing but the headlights lighting your way. Good way to get hopelessly lost or drive off the road. Light reflects off the snow and makes it worse.”

Liam stared after her, and Jaal came to clap him on the shoulder, like a proud uncle, before climbing into the vehicle’s backseat. He settled in, strapped himself down in the shotgun position, and turned to see Sara staring at him. Her eyes crinkled up through her visor, as she fired up the engine.

It took her less than five minutes to decide to ignore the guiding lights to keep them on the road and go cross country with SAM’s navpoints to guide her. All he could do was check his straps, and hold on, for what was going to be the ride of his life.
“We’ve got Kett!” She called out, sounding happier now at the possibility of having something to shoot.

He jumped out of the Nomad, Jaal right behind, trying not to grin.

He was way too addicted to seeing her happy.
They found the vault two days later – the monoliths proving easy to access, and remarkably clear of protective Remnant. She barely had to do any climbing, thankfully, cheering her up even more, since she couldn’t ask Peebee or Jaal to spot her – too embarrassing, even though Peeb already knew how much the heights freaked her out.

It’s not that she didn’t like Jaal – he was great, a good shot and good company. And he and Peebee were amusing to listen to while driving. Still, she woke up on the third day, excited about things getting back to normal.

Normal? Was that a thing now? But Liam was ready to go, armor on and weapons loaded, before she arrived, gulping her third cup of coffee like it wasn’t scalding hot.

Peebee showed up five minutes late – skipping the loadout station entirely, yawning and gnawing on a protein bar as she strolled over to the Nomad. “Shotgun!” She called through a full mouth.

Liam groaned, “Peebee…”

“Nope. Called it. Too slow, Kosta.”

Sara shot him a glance, but he was already climbing into the back, with no further argument.

The vault wasn’t normal in the least - it was one massive freezer, insulated against the sun and icy-slick – and as treacherous as if making up for the relative ease of the activated monoliths. It was positively the most dangerous place she’d been in Andromeda – and that was starting to mean something.

She was warming up under one of the shields that had been provided by the ever-so-thoughtful Remnant creators, when he decided to jump to the first columns to scout ahead. “Kosta…” she started to warn him.

He made the leap, by the skin of his teeth, hauling himself up with those exemplary arms as if the material wasn’t even slippery… Sara shook her head, and moved on. Liam being reckless wasn’t unusual, after all. Though this was worse than usual, wasn’t it?

He leapt to the next, using his jumpjets only at the last minute.

He was making her heart stop, pulling this shit. So… maybe she was just noticing it now? She rolled her neck and made the leap herself, trying not to think about how far down it was. She didn’t have time to worry about him hurting himself right now.

There weren’t many Remnant in the vault, either, but she didn’t think about it too much, preoccupied as she was with Liam’s odd behavior, as he leapt out in front of Peebee like he had something to prove and electrocuted the Nullifier into tiny little pieces. “Give a girl warning, Kosta!” Peeb protested, shielding her visor from the fallout.

“Kosta… that Observer’s eye was locked on you, and your right flank was wide open. You should have dodged, not…”
“I’m fine,” he brushed off the Remnant rubble littering his armor. “That’s what the shields are for, right?”

Sara grabbed his collar and yanked him down to look her in the eye. “No. They’re not. They’re for when you can’t dodge.” His eyes were too calm for the risk he’d just taken, and he was starting to shake with the cold.

“No, see, a pair of old vets explained it to me. It’s a matter of…”

“I don’t care what the vets said.” Sara’s voice broke. “I’m the Pathfinder, and you will not take that kind of risk again or I’ll…” she stopped speaking, wondering if she had the guts to follow through. She took a breath and kept going. “I’ll leave you on the Tempest.” She let him go, and Liam stepped back, eyes wide. “Don’t make me do it. You know I need you out here. Be more careful. Go get under the heat shield and warm your ass up before your life support fails.”

She felt his eyes on her as she went deeper into the vault but… she had to say it, right? Him fighting like that was dangerous. He wasn’t as heavily armored as Drack and…

And she couldn’t lose him like that – not to some petty little accident with a Remnant with better aim than usual.

His behavior improved after, until a few days later, when they stumbled on the existence of Ancient Einoch – a chance encounter while they were looking for Resistance survivors. Sara ran out of bullets at the wrong moment in her sniper rifle, with no chance of restocking – the Nomad was behind a snow dune, with all the extras, even if she had a chance in hell of using her Tactical Cloak to get that far. Drack howled a warning from the far side – his prosthetics weren’t designed for the cold. Already Sara was regretting not asking Vetra along that morning instead. Lexi would be lecturing her and Drack both, when they got to the ship. “Kid, I’m out of grenades! It’s on you!”

Sara’s hands shook as she swung down her assault rifle, “Well, shit…” She fired, again and again to no effect. She fired off a Shockwave, and then a Throw. Nothing. She braced herself, knowing it was too late to dodge, and fumbled to pull out their carefully hoarded RPGs. “Buy me time!” She ordered, hands shaking with urgency and cold as she prepared the weapon, praying it was designed for the frigid weather.

The Einoch barreled down towards her, charging with a roar.

Liam jumped in front of her, and fell as it collided, picking him up and tossing him aside like trash.

“Liam!” Sara blasted the thing away before Drack could reach them. The creature crumpled. “Oh, God, no!” She scrambled through the drifting snow, falling to her knees, ignoring the cold already trying to lock her joints in place, her panting breaths echoing in her helmet as her life support dipped into the danger zone, and scanned Liam’s vitals, trying not to panic. “SAM? Tell me it’s not as bad as it looks?” From underneath, the snow turned a sickly pink, darkening every second. “Shit… is he even breathing? SAM!”

“Liam Kosta is breathing, and his heart is beating. I have taken the liberty of calling Kallo. The Tempest is on its way for emergency extraction,” SAM advised. “You will need to get him back to the Nomad, Pathfinder. He has a broken leg, and internal injuries. I believe a rib may have pierced his lung.”

Drack tried to get her up. “Come on, Kid. Let’s drag his ass back…”

“Don’t.” Sara ordered. “Don’t be like that.”
“What did I say?”

“You belittled him. He saved my life, Drack. Saved me. I’d be dead – you know that thing was coming for me… and I was out of everything. Even my biotics were drained – not that they did any good. He took that hit for me.”

“A dead hero’s still dead, Kid.” Drack shifted. “Still have to get him back to the Nomad. He’ll be warmer in there – his life support’s all banged up. We have to get him to the Doc.”

Sara closed her eyes, and rose. “Help me?” They loaded him in, and Sara didn’t bother to strap in, choosing to stay beside him, instead, her knees crusted with a dark liquid she didn’t want to identify, even as the Tempest arrived, and a bundled-up Gil drove the Nomad inside the bay.

Lexi met them at the rear door, with Cora and Vetra holding one of the med bay beds, and they moved Liam onto it. Sara shifted around the puddle of his blood that had pooled and tried to freeze to the Nomad’s floor, strangely unwilling to touch it.

She tried to force her way into the med bay, but Lexi barred her way. “Wait here,” the doctor ordered. “Suvi – I’ll need an extra pair of hands.” Sara slumped down against the wall of the hall, her helmet at her side, and made the rest of the unfeeling crew move around her, ignoring the whispers, and not caring that she was being unfair, or that her knees had stained her hands as the blood on her armor melted.

Suvi came out after an hour, eyes tired, and smelling of medigel. “Lexi wants to speak to you, when you’re ready,” she said, and crossed the hall towards the baths.

Sara stared at the closing door for a few moments before she climbed to her feet, unable to see around the corner. “Damn you, Kosta,” she whispered, and went in. “You’d better be fine. I’m not losing you like this.”

Chapter End Notes

Don't hate me?
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Okay, I have no willpower, so have another two chapters today.

I'll probably make you wait for the good stuff until at least Monday, though. Fair warning.

The voices all around him were familiar but… unusually strident. An effort to sit up failed – something strapping him down? Had the Kett got him? Panic rushed through his ears with the sound of his heartbeat, he tried to groan, but couldn't make a noise. Even in the worst dreams, he could usually talk…

“He saved my life.” Sara? Was that Sara? He tried to ask, but his tongue felt heavier than lead. “He jumped in front of an…”

“I don’t care what he jumped in front of this time,” the Doc was talking back to the Pathfinder, and he tried to open his eyes, tell Lexi she couldn’t talk to her that way, but failed. All he could do was listen. “You might think, in your youthful idealism, that his behavior is heroic, but it’s not! It’s going to get him killed, Sara!”

“What, you think I’m encouraging him?”

“How should I know? You’re never serious, about anything.”

“I’m serious about this,” He’d never heard her sound so broken. Not even when her Dad first died. “I’m serious about him.”

“Then grow up and leave him here once in a while! He’s wrecking his body with these injuries. I’ve been treating him after every mission, and now…”

A choking noise. “He told me he was fine, that you’d cleared him…”

Lexi’s voice calmed, “SAM, from now on, when Liam Kosta has had an injury over the course of a mission, please notify the Pathfinder directly. Without giving specifics.”

“He won’t like that,” Sara nearly whispered. He struggled to contradict – why would he mind?

“Someone has to take care of him,” Lexi’s voice broke on the last word. “Because he’s too busy taking care of you.” Footsteps echoed to his bed, the sound of armored boots clacking on the med bay’s floor. “Shit,” he’d never heard the doctor cuss. It must be bad. “He’s conscious – or semi-conscious, anyway.” Tapping noises near his right shoulder, followed by a cool sensation ran through his limbs, forced him to relax.

Lexi had him hooked up to a drip? He must have been knocked for a loop then. He couldn’t even open his eyes...

“Then let’s ask him,” Sara sniffled, and grew closer, and her hand – damp – closed around his. “Hey, Liam,” his name sounded good in the gentle version of her voice, and he wanted to joke that
they weren’t naked, but his lips wouldn’t respond fast enough to cut her off. “Listen, Lexi thinks you haven’t been telling me about small injuries. She’s keeping you overnight, maybe for a few days, until you get better.” He felt the touch of her hand on his. “And she wants to let me know if it happens again. You… you had a close call this time. Broken leg is all that’s left, other than some stitches and nasty bruises, but she wants to give you time for those to heal, okay? SAM thought you’d punctured a lung, but you got really lucky.”

He tried to open his eyes, say something, but only mumbled, “Yeah,” though closed lips. It didn’t sound like what he wanted to say.

“That’s okay with you?”

“This is not legally binding consent,” Lexi criticized. “He can’t even move, because of the restraints, and I just gave him a hefty dose of painkiller.”

“I’m not getting his med info – any of it – without his consent,” Sara snapped. “So if he can’t give permission, I’m not getting it. This isn’t the Alliance – we’re not an army. I’ll just… leave him home until you say he’s fit to work.” The bed shifted slightly as she pulled away, her voice gentling, “I’ve got shit to do, so I… can’t stay, Liam. You get some rest, okay? I’ll come back, soon as I can.”

He wanted to tell her he understood, that he was sorry he’d messed up so bad, but all he could manage was “M’ay.”

He heard her choke on something, the doors open and shut, and Lexi sigh. “Well, Liam, all I can say, is that you’re mine for a few days, at least. You aggravated about ten minor injuries that weren’t getting better on their own, as well as broke your femur – a spiral fracture, congratulations. Not an easy thing to do. Thank whatever that SAM was wrong about the lung – apparently your trouble breathing was just the beginning of hypothermia.”

Liam opened his lips and croaked, “S’ra?”

“Oh, she’ll be back,” Lexi sniffed. “She can’t stay away. You’re her own personal hero, Liam, didn’t you realize? You have her convinced you saved her life.”

He tried to smile, but Lexi groaned, “Don’t you dare smile at that.” She shifted a little and admitted, “But you might have. Drack’s version – wasn’t reassuring. Not that I’m going to tell our guilt-ridden Pathfinder anything of the sort.” She tapped a few times on her console. “I’m going to give you something to let you sleep. Sleep and heal. Sweet Dreams, Liam.”

He drifted off, relieved that Sara, at least, was okay.

Anything was worth it, if they still had his Pathfinder when he woke up.
Sara left the med bay and sagged against the wall, face in her hands. “Liam’s fine, Pathfinder,” Suvi’s voice spoke, from down the hallway. “I’m sure Lexi didn’t give you the details, but we patched him up. As long as he stays put for a while…”

“It was my fault,” Sara said, her voice hoarse. “I told him to buy me time…”

“And he obeyed a direct order,” It was possible that Suvi had the gentlest voice on board. “He’s not going to hold that against you.” She laughed, “He wouldn’t hold any order against you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sara glared at the science officer, and then crumpled. “He was hurt. Obeying me.”

“You couldn’t have known that he wasn’t ready to handle that charge,” Suvi drew closer, and wrapped her arms around Sara. “You didn’t know. It’s not your fault.”

Sara sobbed into her shoulder. “He could have died.”

“We could all die, every day.” Suvi laughed a little, “I had to get an antihistamine injection yesterday because I licked a rock.”

Sara choked, “A rock?” She pulled back, wiping her eyes. “You almost died because you licked a rock?”

“Yes,” Suvi giggled. “It’s a common test. I didn’t even think about it, until my tongue started to swell.” She made a face. “At least I can talk right again.” She paused, “Come on, let’s get you into the showers. You need to rinse off. Don’t worry about the mess in the hall – I’ll take care of it.” She steered her down the hallway, and turned her into the bathroom. “There,” she turned on the tap. “I’ll put a cup of coffee out for you, to warm you up, for when you’re done. Sugar, no cream, right? Set your armor aside, and I’ll make sure it gets cleaned, too. You should rest.” She left, and the door swished shut after her.

Sara undressed, and stepped into the shower, relishing the lukewarm temperature for once, rather than hacking the system to make it hotter.

“He’ll be fine,” she whispered, unbelieving even her own voice. “He’ll be fine.”

The shower felt strangely large, without company.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Okay, since I promised the good stuff for Monday, that means I have to post two more today to stay on track.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Liam twisted and turned in the med bay bed, impeded by the mass effect fields holding his leg straight while it healed. “Doc, I don’t really have to stay here the whole time, right? We can make state of the art armor, right, so we can make up something like crutches?”

“Is my company so distasteful?” Lexi sighed.

“Just wondering how you lot don’t go insane not getting off the ship more often,” Liam admitted, flipping back on his back and staring at the incredibly boring ceiling.

“Suvi was brave and got out on Havarl. She said she nearly lost a foot to a vine. She licked a rock here and had an allergic reaction. Drack’s prosthetics keep failing from the cold, Kallo has had to be prescribed lotion to keep his amphibious skin moist, Gil has started staying up for 48 hours straight just because no one can stop him... I can live without that kind of excitement.” Lexi glanced back at him, “I could get you a datapad from your quarters, if you’d like. Give you something to work on? How’s the pain? Do you want some coffee?”

Liam frowned and ignored the options. “The only work I want to do is out there. Is there word from the Pathfinder yet?”

“She only left half an hour ago. She doesn’t check in that often,” the doctor laughed at him. “I knew you had it bad, Liam, but this is…”

“I don’t have anything worse than a broken leg. I’m just... worried. What was she planning to do today? Who went with her?”

“She doesn’t share her schedule with me. I’m not part of the ground team,” Lexi rolled her eyes, and sat down at her console. “I actually appreciate your company. Usually the only conversation I get during the day is when Drack is left on board. He’s not, today.”

“Yeah? You starting a thing?” Liam leaned over sideways, eager for a little gossip.

Lexi glared at him. “No. He’s not my type.”

“Too bad, I bet he’d be into you.”

“I don’t get involved with patients. And when I want the opinion of a hothead I’ll ask for it.”

“Don’t make it personal.” Liam rolled back. “I hate feeling useless, Lexi.”

She sighed. “You’re taking too much onto yourself. But not everything that stands in our way, much
to Drack’s disappointment, can be solved with a Krogan hammer applied to soft tissue.” She turned away from him, and rose. “I’ll get you that datapad. There’s bound to be something to keep you busy between pain meds and impromptu naps.”

Liam settled back, and tried not to look too eager. But at least he’d be able to email that lo-consul, Verand, that Jaal had mentioned to him as someone who might be able to work around some of the red tape. That would be something…

And maybe, if Lexi didn’t think the Pathfinder was too pissed off, he’d put something new together for her as well.

Though in general terms, ice worlds kind of sucked. “No ice skating this time round,” he lifted and dropped his bum leg just as Lexi walked in the door. She gave him the sort of look that would stop a man in their tracks, and he raised his hands in defense. “Sorry, Doc.”

“Do try not to reinjure yourself. It took an hour to get you patched up in the first place. Spiral fractures are not easy to set.” She sighed, “But no, Liam, definitely no ice skating. Maybe next trip.”

Chapter End Notes

Monday's chapter(s) will be NSFW. I will warn again at the start of the next chapter so nobody misses it.
Chapter 30

Sara clenched and unclenched her hand as her biotics itched to be released – a tingling like wanting to sneeze, but knowing it wasn’t a good time or place. “SAM, is Liam awake?”

“His biorhythms suggest that he is.”

“Shit,” she shuddered.

“Is that bad?”

“Yes, if he was asleep, I could convince myself he needed to rest.” She had been so fucking worried when he’d thrown himself in front of that Einoch, and having to worry about whether or not he would be up to the Moshae’s rescue had kept her up for days.

She’d been checking on his status with SAM repeatedly during every mission she’d been forced to go on without him, until Lexi complained, and blocked her access to his med results – formally given once he was conscious and coherent. So he had been awake enough to pay attention – and now she was left wondering how much he had heard. Humiliating.

Lexi had been blunt, tracking her down at the research center to have the conversation without Liam overhearing. “He won’t be ready. Quit looking every half hour, or I’ll tell Liam about your… obsession. SAM’s constant access is making my equipment glitch, and I’m trying to assemble the Kett genome.”

She filled her days, trying not to think. She destroyed the Kett command center – without him. She retrieved data and hunted poachers, and destroyed an ancient AI that forced to her to choose between the Angaran it was torturing and the life beneath the ice.

And she’d gone on what the Angaran Resistance considered a suicide mission without him, taking Vetra and Jaal instead, fought an Ascendant, saved the Moshae, and as many of the captive Angara as the Resistance team could manage. Quite a day, and it hadn’t ended until late the night before, as they debriefed Evfra, and settled the Moshae into the med bay while being gently upbraided by the scientist about not taking out the entire facility…

“I was just trying to save her people,” Sara paced, feeling the carpet beneath her toes. Liam wasn’t in the med bay any longer – that was obvious, as Moshae Sjefa had taken his place. Luckily, the Kett corpse keeping company with both Liam and Lexi had been disposed of before she’d come on board – according to Cora, that particular ‘specimen’ had begun to stink… her email had begged her to take her along next time, Asari ark leads or not.

“I am aware, Sara. And the Moshae will be, too, once she heals. Lexi informs me she’s rather… unwell. Time might help. Remember – the Angaran race believes in reincarnation – if that is the case, the loss of life there wouldn’t be weighed as heavy a loss as it would be for others.”

Things had finally trickled to a slow ebb of minor tasks, rescuing stranded saboteurs and the like, and now Sara was all too aware of the fact that her and Liam were both on board, both of them in relative health. They had breathing room, for what seemed like the first time in forever, and she… she was restraining herself from throwing herself at him with the force of a teenage girl confronted with her favorite popstar.

Who just happened to be injured while saving her life. God, she was living some adolescent fantasy...
Her face flushed, and she drug her ponytail over her shoulder. After her vidcall to Evfra, Jaal had patted her back gently, looking strangely proud of himself, before telling her, in the tone of someone who knew much, “You should go see Liam. He will want to assure himself that you are well after that mission. My people owe you much, Pathfinder. Be strong and clear. Both of you.”

The implications of that little exchange choked her. Oh, God, Jaal knew. Did everyone know? Suvi probably knew, and Lexi had guessed. Gil could probably read her well enough… was everyone laughing at the Pathfinder with the silly crush? She’d retreated to her room before anyone else could tease.

She’d never missed her brother so much. Scott wouldn’t laugh. He’d probably try to hug her, and she’d shove him away, but he would succeed, since she wanted him to win anyway. She needed a hug. And then he’d tell her, “Of course he adores you. Look at you! What’s not to love?” And then he’d name about five of her worst qualities, before telling her that she was perfect, and that if some stupid boy wasn’t smart enough to figure that out, that he wasn’t worth her time.

She’d never believed him, even before two of her boyfriends had dumped her because they had ‘feelings’ for her brother. Assholes.

Part of her didn’t blame them. Scott was everything she wasn’t.

She crossed to her console, trying to make sense of the madness of everyone vying for her time, and trying to figure out if they could afford another trip to Eos after they rendezvoused with the Moshae on Aya… but she ought to check in with Tann after placing the outpost on Voeld anyway… the crew could use some shore leave after the mess that was the Kett temple thing… but then there was Kadara looming as well, with about a million little things nagging at her that needed to be taken care of… starting with the evidence against Spender.

The distraction didn’t work, and she shut it down and backed away, digging her bare toes harshly into the carpet as punishment for her thoughts. She wished, blindly and hopelessly, that her mother was still alive. She’d give good advice. Mom would quote her *Nothing ventured, nothing gained*, and tell her (again) all about how she met their father on the Citadel, and how he’d swept her off her feet, convinced her to elope with him a scarce nine months later, much to her traditional parents’ disapproval. They’d only come around after she and Scott were born – the lure of grandchildren too much to resist.

Mom would have loved Liam. She’d bake him cookies, and talk his ears off about her eezo experiments while he ate way too many of them. Liam would ask intelligent questions and charm the fuck out of her.

Dad – well, honestly, she was surprised her father had recruited Liam at all. They were too much alike – headstrong and over-protective, intelligent to their own detriment… and prone to recklessness. He should have hated him.

But maybe Dad had a flash of brilliance, as he was prone to do, about how useful he’d be. Because damn it, she’d missed him in the field while he recovered. She never wanted to go anywhere without him again. Everything was easier with Liam backing her up. He understood the way she moved, where’d she be in the field without having to tell him – like reading her mind.

And she might as well admit that she’d missed him personally, as well. Was missing him now, even while he was just on the other side of the ship.

She sighed, and gave up fighting, “SAM, Liam’s whereabouts?” She could probably just about manage not to throw herself at him. She’d just check in, see how the leg was doing… maybe check
for visible scars…

“Liam Kosta is in the cargo bay closet.”

“Thanks, SAM.” She left her room, head hanging and cheeks burning with embarrassment, and hoping, somehow, that a miracle would occur and no one would be in the cargo bay after all.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

This one is SFW.

There's going to be a few chapters today, because of how I broke them up. Some will definitely be NSFW - indicated in the chapter summary.

Liam felt like Sara had avoided him after his not-really-an-accident, made him question whether he really got his answer to drinks and karaoke. He thought she was saying ‘yes’. Just another little problem to add to the ton he was already dealing with, that she got hurt in the crossfire while he was trying to do something helpful with Jaal. That was his life in a nutshell – when it wasn’t him getting hurt while she was trying to save the day for everybody.

He broke a lot of things, trying to hang around the Pathfinder – not just bones.

He tried to fill his downtime by making connections between the Angara and the Initiative. Not a whole lot of success, but… he had to do something while he was stuck on the Tempest. Lo-consul Verand was a treasure – funny as hell, with a dry sort of humor, and of the same thought as him about all the hoops people were trying to make each other jump through when they should just be making friends. She was a little more cautious about trusting the new species in their space – but he’d be the same, if the Kett were all he had to judge an alien species by.

He’d been disappointed – make that pissed - that he didn’t get to come along for the Moshae rescue. When Lexi informed him that they weren’t expecting to see Sara, Vetra, or Jaal for a few days – and why – he’d punched a wall in his frustration. Lexi’s scolding afterward still rang in his ears.

But they’d – she’d - been back for half a day – and Sara hadn’t come to see him. She’d barely poked her head into the med bay in the evenings. Just far enough for the doors to open, really, nodded at him seriously, and ducked back out, with hardly a ‘Hey’ or ‘Any problems?’.

He’d long since ran out of things to keep him busy and his mind off everything – and Gil had banned him from the punching bag while he worked on the Nomad. Said his grunts were distracting.

When she did come by, acting purely professional, if not looking it - she caught him doing the sort of pushups that were less about exercise and more about trying not to think. Shirtless again, too. He had been shirtless a lot lately – but not for any salacious reason. She wasn’t around enough, and making Cora angry about the lack of dress code wasn’t that funny after the first half dozen times. Clothes just felt tight, constricting, like all the fucking red tape around the Nexus and Aya, like the mass effect bands Lexi had finally removed from around his leg.

It was a long way back from Voeld. Too much time to fill with too little movement.

Frustration poured from every tense muscle as he counted, not realizing that she was watching until the door slid shut behind her and she spoke.

“Liam, what’s wrong?”

He stopped as soon as she spoke, worried that it would look like showing off. Yeah, he wanted to
impress her, but not like that. With his mind, with his actions, not just his body. Though any show of interest was welcome after being ignored...

He pulled himself up short. Sara hadn’t been ignoring him. She’d been working while he healed, trying to get them off the ice world in one piece, and save the best loved Angaran in the system for her people. He knew this – he had no business blaming her for some imagined slight.

It wasn’t about her ignoring him. It was about him being worried that she wasn’t coming back. Ever. When he was there, he could protect her. When he wasn’t…

Liam couldn’t just ask ‘Are you keeping me at arm’s length?’ or even, ‘Do you need me around?’ His random dizzy thoughts turned into babble, trying to make his impassioned speech about everything he was trying to do make sense. “I didn’t come all this way for everyone to be outsiders!”

All of this - was it for the Initiative, or just for her? Was it about keeping her safe, or building a home? They were all trying so hard, but… this seemed more personal, even than Vetra trying to make a better life for her sister. Could it be both, without compromising every goal they had?

Shit, he was confused.

His instincts were all wrong. They told him to grab her and kiss her to make her understand how worried he’d been. That sort of unwanted physical contact wasn’t a good idea. He was just sane enough to realize it. He paced like a caged animal instead, keeping a little room between them as he vented.

He was all too aware of that small tense and worried line between her eyebrows, as he cursed the idiocy coming out of his mouth, and then he made his way over to the couch and settled in his comfort corner, shifting forward to lean on his knees. “I don’t know what I’m trying to say. I don’t know what any of this shit means.”

She followed him to the couch, and sat in the opposite corner, as per usual, no doubt trying to keep her distance. He was sick to death of distance and barriers. Why couldn’t anyone just reach out?

“Look, it’s… nice, that you’re building bridges.” She leaned in and smiled, tilting her head, “You try so hard, Liam. Harder than anyone.” He sat back suddenly, twisting sideways to face her, and she straightened. Personal and professional space, he told himself, not rejection. He hadn’t given her an opportunity to reject him.

“I have to,” he stressed, hand twisted up in the cushion on the back of the couch. “Everything is crap, and I… I have to make it right. For you,” he pulled his eyes away, “for everyone! Sooner or later this has to be home. There’s no going back.”

“You don’t have to take it so personally…”

“Yeah, I do,” he looked away. “I… It’s all so foreign. Everything I’m trying to do here, it’s because I need something… normal. I’m trying to make it fit – make us belong.” He wanted to belong here. When he’d found HUST-L, it felt like his place. With them gone…

“Not everything is unfamiliar.” Did she have to sound so pitying? He didn’t need pity, he needed…

He didn’t know what he needed. And what he wanted was on the other side of the damn couch. She might as well be on the far side of the Cluster, for how far out of reach she was.

And that was the problem, right? He couldn’t reach out either – not even when she was right there.
The gap was too wide.

He braced himself first one way on the couch, leaning forward, and then sideways, an arm draped over the back, unable to sit still, as he fumed randomly about shit that didn’t matter to anyone but the fucking angry kid that still lived inside him, staring out at her as if he could make her understand the mess that was his brain just through eye contact.

He wished he could quit thinking so much.

His eyes met hers, worried and pleading with her to understand, and she touched his tense jaw, leaning into his space. He blinked at the sudden contact, his stubble catching against her fingers and the warmth of the palm of her hand, and his eyes prickled.

She still fucking smelled like strawberries. Wasn’t that shampoo gone already? And his body had turned traitor, just to make his frustration worse. He was already associating that smell with the shower, with her being naked, with her curled up in his blanket in shorts and that bloody hideous Blasto tank…

She was wearing it again, and his body was reacting in about the worst way he could imagine. She was still his boss. Nothing had changed – unless you counted it all getting worse.

And then she leaned forward and before he could react, she kissed him.

Something broke when her lips touched him - all these fucking weeks of keeping it cool, trying not to cross boundaries, taking it super slow like he had never tried to take anything before, flirting their arses off until he had to go and wreck it with Jaal’s glowy blue arse in his quarters, and, shit, that fucking mouth of hers was soft and...

Fuck, she kissed like the way he felt was in question. Didn’t she realize...

She gave the orders. She was in charge. His body was just fine with her being his boss. And his brain gave up entirely, willing to throw them both under the bus that was Sara Ryder. He gave in to his desire to cup his hands around her ears, marveling at the softness that was her hair, and kissed her back.

She surged into him immediately, like she’d been waiting for him to do just that, with a little hum that was cute as fuck.

He kissed her soft, and then harder, and she opened to him, giving as good as she got. He upped his game, covering her lips with his, and felt her smile curve her lips up.

Wait... had Vetra found her mint toothpaste somewhere? Shit, unfair...

Damn, this was going to get complicated, a distant alarm rang in his brain, but he shut it down, absorbed in what she was offering – she was reaching out. Someone was finally reaching out, and damn it, he wasn’t going to let down his side.

He didn’t want to be alone. He wanted her to keep going. He wanted… this, to keep going.

What had that old Angaran dude said, back on Havarl? That sometimes, home was a person?

Felt like he had found his. And that should have scared the shit out of him.

But for once, he’d stopped thinking. For the first time since they’d been sucked out of a crashing shuttle, fear was the last thing on his mind.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

NSFW - for all the best reasons.

The first kiss might have been hers, but the second… that was mutual. She could tell the difference, when he decided to return it, and felt his tongue grab at her lower lip, an answer to her questioning brush of lips. She opened, and he lunged towards her, into her.

She liked his impulses, she decided immediately, humming in surprise. He needed to follow through on more of them. She buried her right hand in his hair and let her questions about where they stood go in favor of blind instinct.

Her instinct was to kiss back, like she’d never kissed anyone else, rising up on her knees to get a better angle.

Her hum ended as their lips met a fourth time, open and frantic to meet him halfway, before he slid a hand up underneath her - sadly, still blue - hair and slanted his mouth over hers, pulling her ponytail out in the next second, and fisting his fingers tighter and deeper, as his other hand cupped her waist, hand shaking hard enough to feel through her shirt. His upper lip tasted salty, as if he was nervous to the point of sweating - left over from the pushups, maybe? Sara leaned into him for a long moment, letting him take control of their mouths, slowing down until just kissing felt like he meant more.

Fuck, letting go felt so damn good.

They rocked against each other, giving and giving more, even before the other asked. Her breasts pushed up against his bare chest, separated only by Blasto and her sports bra – and even that felt like too much fabric as she straddled his lap.

There wasn’t anything gentle or questioning about this now. This was floodgates opening, the kissing equivalent of running down a steep hill screaming. This was the rush that came during freefall, just before the jump-jets kicked in. This was the sinking in your stomach as your shuttle lifted off from Earth for the last time.

This was waking up after 600 years of sleep to a brand-new galaxy waiting to be explored – before the shit hit the fan.

She didn’t think – hadn’t they both thought enough? She rocked backward on the couch, tugging him down on top of her, craving his weight holding her down, and the feel of someone else taking the reins for a bit, and the euphoria that came with him touching her hungry skin with shaking hands as he slid his palms up under her tank. As if the touch of her skin shocked him into realizing what was happening, he shifted his weight to his arms, and his hands away, leaving cool emptiness behind. “Shit, Ryder…” his face was serious, angled so close to hers. He took a shaky breath, laughter mixed with worry, and joked, “Are you coming onto me?”

At least that answer was different this time. “Fuck, yes,” she panted, and pulled him down again, arching up to meet his chest. His head bent to her neck, his mouth below her ear slow and tender. “Are you? I mean… if you’re not, I’ll go. No questions asked. Fuck, say that you are.” She might
have sounded desperate. She couldn’t bring herself to care, right that minute.

“Yeah,” he whispered, and she felt him shiver a little as she stroked her fingertips through his scalp. “Yeah, I am.” He lifted his head up, “I could use - something?”

“We both could,” she sighed back and tried to kiss him again.

He dodged her clumsy attempt in favor of cupping her head and tilting it back up to meet his, rubbing his thumbs against her jaw. It took him a minute to kiss her again, as if he was still trying to slow them both down, but every touch, every stroke, every breath on her skin felt like another kiss to skin that hadn’t been touched in hundreds of years.

She stroked her fingers down his back, rough fingers catching on his small hairs, and let her hand drift lower, cupping that ass she had been eyeing since their first trip to the Nexus. He groaned against her lips and shifted closer yet. She kneaded the muscle, and his breaths panted against her neck, where he was nipping now, hard enough to leave a mark.

She’d be wearing scarves or hoodies for a few days after this. That was just fine - Voeld was cold enough to leave her shivering even days later. Though maybe that had another cause, as he raised goosebumps with scraped teeth against her neck.

His teeth on her skin felt better than anything she’d felt since she left Earth. He sucked, hard, and she moaned before she thought about the noise.

A hand slipped up to cover a breast through her layers, and she arched into the muffled touch, with another moan, wanting more, but it shifted away. He slid his hand up under her shirt again, slow, like he was sure she would stop him any minute.

Too many damn layers, her head offered, and SAM was thankfully without a response for once.

Oh God, was she popping SAM’s cherry? Coming in number one on the ‘thoughts I never wanted to think with an AI in my fucking head’ list… maybe she’d better stop thinking. Yes. That was best.

She hadn’t come (her brain snickered) planning to go all the way on Liam’s couch, like some horny teen on prom night back on Earth, but she placed a hand on his chest, and another to the front of his belt. She cleared her throat, and inanely asked, “Nice pants. Can I try the zipper?”

He choked out another laugh into her cheek, nose grazing it while he spoke. “You have all the worst lines stored up, don’t you? Go on, then, Ryder.”

Liam was gentle, undemanding, still slowing her down, pulling her Blasto shirt off and then unfastening her bra with tech-clever fingers, that stroked the side of her breasts the next minute. She was the pushy, awkward one, unbuckling, and then unzipping his pants, and shoving them down with her legs while he laughed against her skin again. Was he still nervous? “Are you sure this is okay?” she asked, mouthing his collarbone and then finding his lips again, a long, slow pulse of his mouth against hers before she broke away, in an attempt to give him an out. “Don’t want to push you into anything.”

“I’m up for it, long as you are.” She wriggled out of her thong - her pants were too tight for anything else, and she didn’t need the whole Nexus whispering about the Pathfinder’s panty lines - and he eased himself out of his boxers, watching her with a line between his eyes, dark with what she hoped was need and not second thoughts. He leaned towards her, forehead against hers, and traced her hair back over her ear, “Christ, Ryder…”

“Call me Sara?” she asked, voice small. “This isn’t really a last names moment, right? I mean, it’s
not the shower, but we’re still naked…”

He chuckled, shaking his head while he tried to sit up, opening his mouth, but before he could start whatever he was going to say, she followed him, and straddled him again. She caught his unsaid words in his mouth and eased down, slow and deliberate. He hissed a noise that might have been the start of her first name - as his hands cradled her hips, trembling. His head fell forward between her breasts, hair tickling.

She rocked, once, gently.

And then he was beyond words, shoving up into her with the focus and persistence that she simultaneously admired and worried about. Didn’t he realize he didn’t need to try… she gasped as he nipped her neck and pulled her down by her hips to hit the right spot deep inside, and she revised her opinion. Maybe he did need to try that hard. God, he… he was really into this. “Liam… again?”

She pushed up on her knees, hoping to have him slam her down again.

“Got it,” he whispered, and did.

Again, and again, until she was shaking over him and begging. “Liam, please…” way louder than she should be, considering where they were. She ground against him, her biotics flaring out of control as she grabbed onto the back of the couch. She relished the moans he made when they touched his skin – beads of sweat forming in the energy’s wake. He shifted his mouth to her breast, tugging, and she broke, her back arching back in ecstasy.

She saw stardust, only realizing that he was staring at her when she came back down, shaking and finally warm – hotter than she’d been since they landed on Voeld. In the glare of the overhead light, too bright, too intense, like so many other things, she shifted sideways. Sara pulled him down to cover her, and kissed him again, tasting the remains of beer on his tongue and his evening stubble against her upper lip in her after-orgasm focus, as she grabbed his ass and brought him closer to joining her on the other side of eternity.

Maybe she should quit borrowing Cora’s Asari romance novels… she stifled the laugh, in case he took it personally.

That thought disappeared in the next second as he laughed himself before looping up her leg pressed against the back of his couch, over his shoulder to get it out of the way. He never stopped looking at her like she was something unique, like he couldn’t believe this was happening, not until he groaned, long and loud. With his own release, his eyes finally closed. Peace settled over his face like rain - peace like she couldn’t ever remember seeing on his face before, as busy and tense as he had been since they both woke up. He fell forward, face first into her shoulder, breathing hard into her loose hair. “Holy…” his words fell away.

“You need to look like that more often,” she did laugh, then, but low and earnest instead of teasing. “I’d… be happy to help with that. If you’re interested.”

He didn’t respond. She swallowed, reality settling in around her with his silence.

Oh God. She had crossed a line. Friends didn’t sleep together. Not like… this, anyway. This wasn’t friends fooling around to blow off tension – she’d done that, it felt way different. This was something different – raw and vulnerable. They had been circling the line of what they were becoming, but now she had all but forced herself on him – what if he was going to stop her, when she’d climbed onto his lap? - she had to make this better.

“Liam? Did I… Fuck, of course I did. The biotics - are you… all right? It was okay, right? Shit…”
she had to let go of him to push her hair away from her eyes, turning her head awkwardly, trying to see him a little better.

He pulled his face from her shoulder, and she could have sworn he blushed. Hard to tell, but he felt hot. Hotter than she did. “Right. All Right. More than all right. Guess I was a bit… pent up.” He met her eyes, and kissed her again, fast and hard, like he was afraid she’d disappear, like he was afraid he’d never get another chance, before backing off, despite her trying to follow his lips. “Thanks?”

Sara barely got a glimpse of everything before he stood, fishing for his boxers. “You’re more than welcome… that was… good.” She raged at her lame response to their – what could she call it, dammit? – with the eternal fire of a thousand suns. “I had fun.” She cringed, nose wrinkling. She was really bad at this.

He got up, arms reaching out impossibly fast, seeming to simultaneously grab his towel off the hook on the storage racks, scooping up her clothes, and handing them all to her at once, eyes dark and worried before they shifted away to find his shirt, and jacket. He put them on, and she knew they were meant to be armor – a physical barrier between what he had just shown her and the self he showed the rest of the Tempest.

He’d forgotten to put on his pants. It’s possible his hands were shaking too bad.

Sara frowned. Was it that upsetting? Definitely not on her end, but… she draped her clothes over his couch and cleaned up, taking her time, trying to give him space to figure out in his head what this had meant. She wanted to be here when he figured it out, but… maybe she should leave.

She could use a little time herself. What she wanted this to mean was obviously different from his version, judging by the fact that he was staring at his pants like they had offended him personally.

Oh, God, did he think she had… used him? Her stomach sank, as they dressed without looking at each other, but as she turned to go he stopped her before she could leave the room. “Sara, about tonight… look, I know things happen, when you’re in tight places… I’m a big boy, I won’t get clingy, but-”

Sara sighed, disappointed, and sunk into her sarcasm. “Kosta, do you really want me to lie just to make you comfortable? If you want this just a one-off, then say so-” her voice shook, and she had to stop for a moment, before she gave away too much, “-and I hope you had fun, too, but… it’s not like this is the first time a guy has ushered me out of his room before his roommates could catch on.” It was impossible to keep the bitterness entirely out of her voice. “It’s not like I’m going to brag about anything, or… skip from one crew member to the next like sexual hopscotch. I won’t tell anyone we… slept together.” The euphemism sounded worse than ‘made love’. “Had intercourse?” Too clinical. Shit. “Banged on your couch?”

“What are you on about?” He seemed honestly confused.

“Aren’t you trying to have another conversation about being adults?”

“No! No, not that…” he cleared his throat. “I’m trying to ask - I know I ask a lot - but… can we keep this - ‘us’ - on the back burner? If things work out, I mean, I don’t want to just toss this into the rubbish as it ‘happened once, it was fun.’… This was great, and… you’re…” his breath shuddered, “brilliant.” Sara’s mouth dropped open in shock, and he rushed to fill the silence that left. “Not just in bed. Fuck, I don’t know what you’re like in bed. ‘Cause couch… Hell, I’d like to try a bed, sometime. Not that I’m pushing. Shit, I just said ‘pushing’… We’re good together, I think – Oh,
God, not just here… One night is just one night, but… you’re something. Something else.” She thought his cheeks were flushing again… and he was grabbing onto the edge of the table next to him like it was the only thing holding him up. His pants were now laying in a little heap on the floor where he had dropped them.

He had really cute knees.

“Maybe we could do - something together.” He cringed, “More things together. Things off ship. Not just – shagging. Shit – could I bugger this up any more?”

Sara smiled, “Liam, are you trying to tell me you like drinking beer and watching movies with me?” Her smile grew wider, hope that maybe Andromeda wasn’t all bad blooming in her chest. “Are you trying to tell me that I’m not just making a nuisance of myself, bugging you all the time in your semi-private space? That you don’t hate me flirting with you in the inanest way?”

“Bothering me? Hate you? Did we or did we not just…” He laughed, “See this? This nervousness? It’s about the most normal thing that’s happened to me since I woke up. But yeah, the drinking beer and watching bad flicks, it’s… more than good. Sex can mess with - things. And I’m fucking brilliant at cocking good things up. We’ve got a lot of stuff on our plate, right?” He cursed, and clutched the back of his head. “My mouth gets me in a ton of trouble. I didn’t mean to make you think I wasn’t… into this. What we’re doing. Whatever it is. Or turns out to be. Just maybe, we should try doing something off-ship. Together. Just us? Maybe on Aya? Wouldn’t mind having your eye on a few things…”

“You still don’t get you into any trouble today,” Sara gave in to the temptation to touch him again, took his hand, and curled her fingers with his. His tightened on hers slowly. “I think I get it.”

“And?”

“And I’m not closing the door. If for no other reason than I’d have someone to watch Hanar porn with,” she teased. “All those tentacles… rrrrr,” she rolled her ‘r’ in the back of her throat, and had the pleasure of seeing him laugh. “But I should tell you, that last six minutes of iridescence was weird…”

“You still haven’t seen the uncut version of that vid.” He pulled her closer, a little more confident. She pushed herself up on tiptoe and kissed him again on his cheek. He seemed shocked for a moment, before kissing her back the same way, and then he patted her ass, clenching his fist closed and moving away a bit, putting some distance between them directly afterward as her eyes widened in surprise. “You’d better get out of here. Work to do.” Mixed signals again. Was he really into ‘them’, or…

“What, am I cutting into your cultural exchange time with Jaal? Are you going to strip him again? Because I want to be there when you end up naked this time. Full Monty, Liam. You owe me, after that last debacle. Maybe I’ll sell tickets, if you won’t… I bet Cora’d give up some credits. She told me she used to have a ton of fun on shore leave. Maybe Vetra and Peebee, too. Lexi’s probably too uptight…”

“I’d strip for Vetra if she could find me mint toothpaste, and don’t think I’m not pissed off about you hoarding that little treasure.” He laughed, shaking his head, “And I didn’t say it was me! Somebody’s got to navigate this thing. Where are we going after Aya?” He winked at her, “You’ve got a Cluster to save, Pathfinder.”

“About that…” she hesitated, “I’m not a genius, or N7, like Dad. I’m pretty average, really.”
“Boring? You?” He cleared his throat and smiled, “You’re bringing worlds back to life. Sounds like a miracle to me.”

“Don’t stick me up on the wall to look at, Kosta.”

“Does that mean I can’t take snapshots?” He tsked, “And here I was gonna ask for a selfie with you to brag to my mates about.”

“You’re such an ass.” She grabbed his datapad and used the camera option as a mirror. Shaking her head, she slipped the tie around her ponytail, smoothing it back as much as she could. It didn’t look quite like apres-sex hair, she hoped. This would be the worst walk of shame ever - she was virtually guaranteed to run across every single crew member except Kallo on her way back to her room. They hadn’t been asleep when she came before…

Oh, God, had they heard them? Where had Gil been… she couldn’t remember.

Best not to think about it – and maybe the drone of the drive core had drowned them out. “How’s my hair?”

“Blue. Really blue.” He kissed her cheek just as she snapped the shot. Her eyes were closed, cheeks flushed. “Try again.”

This one came out right, her with a shy smile and Kosta giving a peace sign. “Such a nerd.”

“Look who’s talking.” He flipped to the previous picture. “But you know… I like the other one too. Just can’t… hang it up. Yet.”

Her heart soared, “Send me copies?”

“You know it.”

As she stepped out, he called after her, “Ryder… don’t go thinking this was a mistake, all right? It wasn’t… at least on my end. Nothing with you is a mistake, for me.”

“Not a mistake. Got it.” She turned back and waved at him, smiling and walking backwards, and hoped he was right.

It was a little thing to hope for. And maybe a date, too? Mentally she calculated how soon they could get to Aya… there was the vault to consider, but surely they could wrangle a little private time planetside?

She showed up with a tube of mint toothpaste from her private stock on his table for him the next day. “I won’t make you strip for it.” she told him, winking, and slipped out leaving it on his table, after watching his smile flash across his face. “But that smile is worth preserving. Lights up my world.”

His groan of misery at the bad line made her day.
Chapter 33

Liam walked around like he’d been punched for about two days after the ‘incident’, haunted by random moments that made him stop right where he was, and pause whatever he’d been doing while he recalled them. He wondered if that’s what Kallo’s memory was like… did the Salarian have to stop and grieve when he looked at wiring? Because if so… he sort of got why Kallo was so upset at Gil. Like desecrating a grave, messing with the Tempest's systems.

The color of her breasts, the feel of them against his stubble, soft and supple, stopped him dead for a good five minutes, and warranted a gentle, “Hey, man, you okay?” from Gil as they wrenched on a broken escape pod. “Maybe you need some sleep?”

“Don't we all?” Fat chance. The memory of the feel of her shifting herself up and down against him kept him awake.

The way her mouth tasted – just as sweet as he’d imagined – was impossible. He had to change his shower time, because he knew there was no way that he wouldn’t have reacted, meeting her in there now. He’d lost control over his body entirely.

The memories weren’t all good. Random recollections made him cringe. His verbal diarrhea had him flushing in embarrassment. Recalling that he had slapped the Pathfinder’s ass… Somehow that was the key repetition in his brain for days. At least he hadn’t slapped it during… whatever he could call it.

He was having a freakish hard time figuring out that little insignificant detail. Her saying ‘banging on his couch’ was physically accurate, but… lacked the emotion that he had attached to the act itself. ‘Making love’ was cheap – and that particular word was scary as hell, because, hello again, on the couch? Not the stuff of a thousand fantasies. ‘Shagging’ was not nearly evocative enough – and classified her with other women (not that there were a ton of them, but still – she deserved to be set apart).

And he had fucked up the whole thing even more by telling her she was brilliant, and telling her he hoped for more… when, despite what she’d said afterwards, it was probably was just a pity fuck, that he could only hope would lead to something better. Least she hadn’t closed the door…

Where had his brain to mouth filter disappeared to, anyway? Had he left it behind in the Milky Way?

His mental version of his Mum had been fussing at him for days about the proper way to treat a lady. *On the couch? For your first time together? Liam…*

His Dad was far more philosophic. *Don’t sweat it, son. Sometimes things happen where they happen. If she likes you, it won’t phase her.* And then his Mum would backhand his Dad, his Dad would laugh, and they’d end up dancing in the kitchen, bickering about their son’s poor performance, and hinting about their own early days while he tried not to listen.

Shit, he missed them. He would never have told his Mum or Dad a damn thing about this, so…. It was easier somehow to disregard their criticism.

Liam gave in to his desire to email her the day after she had dropped off the toothpaste. And shit, nothing had ever made his mouth feel so good. Except maybe kissing her. His lips were still tingling with the memory of that first brush of her lips.

It was probably inadvisable, but she had been really into what he had done with the pictures of Aya.
So maybe… He wrote something up, something he hoped was encouraging the idea of ‘them’, while not pushing, and avoided attaching any of the many pictures cluttering his datapads of things that reminded him of Sara Ryder.

There were a lot of them. Like, a lot. He’d collected a series of photos and stories about angels (and she was never gonna see those, Mum, so quit nagging already), fully aware that his attachment was crossing a boundary that they hadn’t talked about.

Shit, he couldn’t even manage to ask her out without fumbling the play.

He was pretty sure he was cooler than this back in the Milky Way. It had to be the company he was keeping.

Speaking of company - Ryder flashed him a smile as she walked past him on her way to talk to Drack, and then looked away, putting that mask of professionalism on, only the corner of her mouth telling him she was thinking about something besides nailing Spender to the wall.

She was thinking about him. Them. Together. And that was… enough, for now. Right?

Liam leaned his head against the console’s screen and closed his eyes. No. It wasn’t. He wanted her to think about him the way he thought about her – like a beacon shining from a cliff – or maybe a lighthouse? Something about parting the darkness, maybe? But that sounded kind of dirty, or maybe he was just coloring it with recent memories. He started the search of the Tempest’s datafiles, searching for pictures with the key word ‘beacon’.

A Prothean beacon was the first hit, and he deleted the search. Not what he had in mind.

Fuck, she had felt good in his hands. He wanted to drag her off and start over, just thinking about it. He’d kiss her forever, if she let him. What would she do, if he just showed up at her room some night, and asked if he could come in?

Why did there have to be so many people on the Tempest, anyway? There had to be some way to see each other alone, without worrying about whether Jaal would walk in and plop down on the couch demanding vids and games… Angarans had very little concept of the idea of personal space. Probably came from having generations upon generations of family living together in the same home.

Despite his lack of profitable searches on beacons, he sat with the email pulled up for a while, trying to put the words out there, to add what he had said earlier, and then sighed, and flipped it back to what he was supposed to be working on. Words were not his strong suit. He had a lot of them, but they never said what he wanted them to. He snorted, and quoted, “‘Should have sent a poet.’”

Carl Sagan!” Sara grinned at him again as she sauntered off back towards her room. “Contact, am I right?”

“Show off,” he called back, smiling sheepishly, and started a new search. On stories about heroines – maybe a myth? Not Andromeda – because that shit was depressing and sad. A princess of Ethiopia, chained to a rock because she was beautiful and the gods were jealous. Rescued by Perseus, who with his gifts could fly…

Huh, maybe there were parallels. He could turn it into a joke, maybe… He tagged the link to the email. Just in case you were interested, he wrote quickly. Andromeda means ‘Ruler of Men’. Wicked, right? Just look what they did with that. Took the girl and signed her up for sacrifice. Brutal. And no, I’m not suggesting a new strategy the next time we fight an Architect. No tying me up as bait, Ryder, no matter how pretty I am.
He had to stop writing, in order to breathe deep, let the dizziness pass. It wasn’t fair that she was so… amazing.

He wanted to do more than make her laugh. He wanted to impress her - make her realize that he could be the one she needed - not just for sex when she was restless, or watching vids with when she was bored or couldn’t sleep. He could already be both of those – without trying. But he wanted more, so he had to show her how dependable he was, not just a short-tempered arse who wanted to jump her bones. He had to prove that he was someone who wanted to work at her side, help build the Initiative into what they all needed. Someone who could help her find them all a home.

He had only one idea, and it was kind of a long shot, but… but worth a try, anyway.

Sighing, he pulled back up his email and punched out a far easier message, to Verand. Maybe it was time to take another risk, since the first few had worked out so well. He snorted, and Suvi offered, “Have a cold, Liam?” He glanced at the science officer, confused. “You sniffled? I’ve got tea in the kitchen, if you need a hot drink to steam yourself out.”

“I don’t want to waste your tea,” he hit the send button, and followed up with a heads up to the Pathfinder that Verand might try to contact her.

“It’s no trouble, if you change your mind,” Suvi smiled sweetly. “It won’t last forever, in any case.”

“Thanks, but I’ll pass.” He closed down his terminal. The Pathfinder was going to have a lot of emails from him. He’d have to pace himself a bit better.
The next morning, tired and irritable, coffee in hand, Sara dragged herself into the med bay in just her sleeping shorts and her sports bra, covered with her favorite Blasto tank – freshly laundered thanks to Kallo’s hack. “Dressed down this morning, are we?” Lexi was her usual crisp and chipper self. “Tell me you at least wash that shirt between wearings.”

“You’re just going to stick needles into me anyway,” grumbled Sara. “Didn’t see the need to get dressed, just to strip down so you could get to the big muscles. So what’s it this morning, doc? Bird flu? Anthrax? Dragon pox?”

Lexi looked hurt. “Bone and cartilage scans. I’m checking for joint damage, bone density, and micro-fractures, as well as trying to head off any other abnormalities. And I’ll be double checking that your hormone blocks are in place. It’s been six months, and you’re due.”

“Great,” Sara sassed and sipped her coffee, wondering how the hell it had been that long already. “There isn’t enough of this in all seven worlds,” she grumbled into the cup.

Lexi stared at the scan for a moment and softly asked, “Anything you want to talk about, Sara?”

“What?” Sara grumped. “No.”

Lexi cleared her throat. “Sara, becoming sexually active is an important decision for a young…”

Sara choked, and put a hand up to her lips before the precious coffee could escape. “What are you talking about?”

Lexi closed her eyes, looking pained, but SAM finished the doctor’s sentence. “Liam Kosta’s DNA is present in your scan, Sara.”

“Oh, God,” Sara set the cup down, very carefully listening to the ‘snick’ that meant the magnets had engaged, and pressed her hands to her eyes. “Just a sec.” She breathed for a moment, “First, I’m not – wasn’t – a virgin. Haven’t been for…” she counted back, mentally, “638 years – wait… what month is it? 639. And it was… consensual. Enthusiastically consensual. On both sides.” She breathed again, and continued, “Okay, doc, let me have it. Lecture starts… now.”

“Your blockers are still in place,” Lexi continued professionally. “So you don’t need to worry about conceiving. I’ll give you your booster before you leave today.” She cleared her throat, “Regarding impulse control, however – Sara, you do realize you tend to leap into things before you think them through?”

“Worked for me so far,” Sara sighed, and grabbed her coffee again, wishing it were whiskey, the way the day was going. It had to be five o’clock somewhere. “But yes, I know, and yes, it was… a spur of the moment thing. But I’ve also been… aware of him for months, Lexi. He’s…” she flushed, and smiled. “He’s really fun.”

“There are more important things than ‘fun’ in a relationship,” Lexi scolded.

“There are also worse things. He’s honest, kind, smart, we have stuff in common, and he listens when I talk to him, instead of trying to push me into his way of thinking. Do you know he’s the only person who ever asked me why I joined the Initiative? He didn’t just assume it was because of Dad.” Her smile was goofy, and she tried to look more professional. “We’re not… rushing into anything. It’s a small ship, and the night we…” she fumbled again for a euphemism, “fooled around,
he was really tense. I’m not saying it was just for his benefit, I benefited - wow, did I ever, let me know if you want the details, ’cause shit that was awesome - but… it’s probably not going to happen again. I mean, I wish it would, but I know better.” She waggled her head back and forth. “I’m not the sort of girl guys sleep with twice.”

“Why not?” Lexi sounded more horrified than professional.

“Because I’m… me?” Sara fumbled. “I’m a great first lay, but guys don’t see me as long-term potential. Not pretty enough, not smart enough, and back in the Milky Way, I didn’t have a good enough job or family to make up for either of the previous two.”

Lexi placed her datapad down gently on her desk. “You’re telling me Liam didn’t ask you for…”

“No, he did,” Sara contradicted, “Sort of, anyway, but I know he wasn’t serious. When he asked if we could consider something, he was just letting me have an easy out. Without the ‘sex isn’t a commitment’ talk. I know it, and he knows it.” She had spent the first night convincing herself, and she’d analyzed every detail of his email the day before to confirm it. “We’re good, for the one time, but we’re not going there.”

“Are you sure?” Lexi fretted, pressing creases into her already pristine Initiative scrubs. “Because I don’t think…” she pressed her lips together, “Liam is all too inclined to sit you on a pedestal, Sara. Be careful.”

Sara flushed, “Me? You think? Really?” Her head spun and she drank a little more coffee. “But that’s…” she smiled wider, hoping in a way she hadn’t hoped, not since right after the banging, hiding it with the cup.

“Bad.” Lexi frowned. “If you want anything long term with each other, you have to see each other for how you really are. Good and bad.”

“What’s not to love?” Sara laughed, but uneasy, Scott’s reassurances of someone seeing how awesome she was ringing in her ears. “Like I said, Lexi, it was just one night.” And then, wickedly, just to make the doctor uncomfortable, “Though, if he offered to make it a regular thing, I’m in. Tell him I said so, if you want.”

“You know I can’t do that, Sara.”

“I could inform Liam,” SAM began.

“Oh, God, no, SAM,” Sara rushed to correct. “I was teasing.” She paused, “We really need to work on your sarcasm meter. Remind me to talk to Gil.”

“A reminder has been added to your ‘to-do’ list.”

Lexi, shaking her head, injected the hormone blocker into her arm, and waved her out of the med bay without another word.

Sara returned to her room to read Liam’s email again, this time seeing his words in a positive light. She gasped a surprised laugh, her cheeks colored by the additional messages now waiting for her consumption. “SAM, you didn’t tell me about these messages…”

“I wanted to ask you a few questions, before you read them. I am confused about your relationship with Liam Kosta, Sara. Would you mind clarifying?”

“Sure, SAM,” Sara spun herself out of her chair, and made her way over to her couch, propping
herself up against the side, datapad with the downloaded emails already keyed up. “It’s not like I was trying not to think about him or anything. Losing cause, that.”

“If this is a bad time…”

“No, let’s crack open that well of feelings, shall we?” Sara set aside her datapad. “Shoot.”

“Bang.”

“Getting better at the humor, SAM,” Sara laughed, “No, really. Go ahead. Ask away.”

“My previous experience with love was your father and mother. He was devoted to her, to the exclusion of… many things. He often felt… neglectful in other relationships because he was so intent on saving her life.”

“Right.” Sara felt the similar stab of grief. “I missed having him around, too. But I wanted Mom to live, so… we made the sacrifice. Whatever it took, right?”

“Your relationship with Liam is something… different.”

“It’s… early,” Sara fumbled. “Mom and Dad had been together for a long time before you entered the picture. You didn’t get to see them meet, or know them before they got married and had kids. Scott and I – we’re in the same boat.” She frowned, “You know, I never realized – you’re kind of like having another little brother – just… in my head.” She shook her head, “But you know more about me, even than Scott, so… maybe let’s not go there. It’ll make it weird.”

SAM was quiet for a moment, before he continued, “I have your father’s journals, but… I think I see your meaning. Relationships develop, get deeper or…”

“Or fade away.” Sara propped her hands behind her head. “Liam and I… I like him. I hope he likes me. I care about him. A lot. But we don’t know if what we have is like what Mom and Dad had. It probably isn’t – the odds aren’t in our favor. And maybe that’s for the best.”

“Is that what you want? You seemed unwilling to have me tell him…”

“Well, yeah. I do want that. But most people date, try to figure out if they’re compatible before having sex – at least with someone they like that way. Don’t make me explain ‘friends with benefits’ or ‘one night stands’, okay? Let’s just leave it at we jumped the gun, and he needed to put the brakes on, pull back a bit. I get it.”

“Why didn’t he wait, if that’s the case?”

“It just - happened - and I’d say we know we’re compatible, at least superficially. And we both wanted it, and really didn’t want to stop,” Sara laughed, sheepishly. “Sex is fun. We hadn’t had fun in a while.” She flushed, grinning, “And Liam Kosta kisses like his mouth was made to do nothing else.” She pulled Blasto off, suddenly too warm, even for that light cover. “Fuck, he knows how to kiss. Hope I get to do that again. If Lexi’s hints are right, then I hope I get to do all of it again.”

“Kissing doesn’t always lead to sex.”

“Not necessarily,” Sara rushed. “It all has to do with what you both want, you know? Liam might not… want what I want. He might want to stay… free. Keep his options open. And that’s fine. Really.”

“Your biometrics do not indicate that would be fine. Thinking about him has stimulated oxytocin and
serotonin levels in your body. I am currently relieved that Lexi boosted your hormone blockers. Sara, Liam Kosta makes you happy.”

“He does,” Sara admitted. “But it doesn’t matter what I want, if what he wants is different. And we’ve only known each other a few months. Not long enough. It takes years to figure if you work right together.”

“Your parents knew each other for nine months and three days before they eloped on the Citadel.”

“Well, they’re the exceptions,” Sara huffed. “Besides, Mom’s parents were pissed the fuck off that she went and married an N7 right out of the barracks like that. I heard that for every family visit for years as a kid – her parents were super traditional. If Mom knew that I had already slept with Liam, she’d be reading me a riot act. Grandmother would disown me.”

“…I do not believe that to be true. Your father’s journals indicate that they slept together on their third date. His words were, and I quote…”

“Don’t need to know that, SAM!” Sara rolled her eyes. “Besides, Liam and I haven’t even been on one date. Not one. Strictly speaking, our first date will be on Aya, if it actually happens.”

“Will you have sex with him again?”

Sara closed her eyes, searching for patience, “Probably not. Maybe. If it comes up.” She sniggered at her own choice of words. “Perhaps.” She threw caution to the wind, “All right, SAM, fine. If he tries to drag me off into the bushes of Aya to have his way with me again, I’d lead the way.”

“Those were very contradictory responses, Sara.”

“The last one is the truth, SAM. No point lying to the AI in my head, right?”

“I still don’t understand why it’s not better just to tell him what you want.”

“Trust me, it’s a big mistake to just – throw yourself at a person like that. I haven’t done that since high school. Bad experience. I’ll never do that again.”

“Fear of rejection?”

“Big-time. Best let it lie for a while, and see what we both think after we’ve… seen more of each other off-ship.”

SAM paused, “You have new email, Sara. It is from Liam.”

Sara scrambled to reach her datapad. “Thanks, SAM.”
Lexi had requested Liam come in a little more often to chat, recently. She seemed to think that if he got enough things off his chest, he’d quit being so reckless.

“Not a chance,” he laughed. The doctor seemed genuine in her concern about his repeated injuries, and maybe a little bit amused at his massive infatuation with their Pathfinder, and more than a little worried that the object of his affection didn’t quite feel the same. Her warnings weren’t wasted – “I know the chances of Sara Ryder ending up with me are one in a million.” The Pathfinder could choose from anyone on the Nexus, Eos, and probably Aya – if they didn’t all just die on some godforsaken world by eating the wrong cherry-like fruit…

“How,” Lexi took her time analyzing his data.

“Look, Doc, I know she’s not as crazy about me,” he sighed for the dozenth time since he’d entered the med bay, and winced as she jabbed yet another needle into his arm - fertility blocker - without a wince. It was easier to let the doctor show her concern by pressing needles into them than try to get her to talk about her own worries. Least with the blockers in place he didn’t need to worry about that particular consequence of acting on impulse. “But there’s no harm in trying to get her attention, right?”

Lexi sighed, and leaned up against her workstation. “No, Liam. But there’s a lot of pressure on Ryder. You’ve got to give her time and space.” The doctor pressed her lips together before she admitted, “And… I know you had sexual intercourse.”

Liam flinched, but there was no needle involved. “Oh.”

“Foreign DNA shows up on the routine scans I do on all of you. Yours was… apparent on her internal scan.” The doctor turned back, pressing her lips together. “Liam, you’re a nice person. I don’t want you getting your hopes up when she might decide that it was a good time and nothing more.”

He swallowed. “We didn’t close the door.”

“In a conversation that occurred right after the event. There’s a big difference between closing the door and choosing not to walk through it.” Her voice was so gentle. “In any case, if she cares about you, she wouldn’t want you to be so foolhardy. She’d want you to stay safe.”

“Not my style, Lexi. And I don’t think it’s Sara’s either.”

“I know,” she sighed, and sat down on her stool next to the bed he was perched on. “I can’t discuss what we talked about, due to patient confidentiality, but…”

“Say no more,” he swung his legs to the other side, trying not to think. “We’re meeting on Aya, to do some… Pathfinder things. I’ll… talk to her then.”

“No pressure, Liam,” Lexi warned.

“No pressure, doc.” He left the med bay, massively disappointed, but at least knowing what Ryder was thinking. If she thought it was a mistake, he’d promised he wouldn’t get clingy.

Drack stopped him at the entrance to the galley. “Hey, Kid, drinks on Aya? Kallo says we’re just an hour out.”
“Yeah, sure, why not,” Liam muttered at the Krogan, while climbing the ladder. “Jaal tells me they have a pub – a tavetaan? I could use a drink. Or ten. What’s that intoxicant he told us about – tavum?”

“Something like that,” Drack agreed, heading back into the mess. “Meet you there, then?”

Maybe with something stronger than beer he could drown his disappointment.

~SS~

Liam had seen her list of things that Sara had to get done while they were here, and it was massive. She wasn’t standing him up. But still – he’d hoped to see her by now. Only now did he realize that they hadn’t set a time, or even much of a place other than ‘Maybe Aya?’

“SAM?” Liam requested.

“Yes, Liam?”

“Could you let the Pathfinder know that I’m at the tavetaan, waiting, whenever she’s done?”

“Of course, Liam.” SAM paused, “Sara has been informed. She is currently with the governor, but hopes to wrap up soon.”

“Thanks.” Gloomy, he stared behind the bar. “So much for plans,” he muttered. Least he hadn’t mapped out anything elaborate. He’d figured they’d just walk around, look at waterfalls, maybe admire plants that weren’t trying to kill them for once. He’d hoped to talk to her about Verand a bit, check out the merchant Verand suspected of smuggling Kett weapons, and bring her up to date on his progress with his contact, and how he was a little worried that he hadn’t heard back recently. Maybe they’d have a drink first, given their meeting spot...

The longer he waited, the more nervous he got.

“You’re nursing that drink like you hatched it,” Drack grunted at him.

“I’m… supposed to meet Ryder here.” The truth slipped out – no doubt aided by the tavum.

“Ryder, eh? What the hell for?”

Liam winced, he’d been waiting long enough without moving on for Drack to figure out something was up. “Um… yeah, we were supposed to go see Aya, do a few… things.”

“Things?” Drack grinned, “Look, if you’re courting each other, just say so.”

“We’re not…” Liam choked, “You’ve got the wrong idea. We’re just…”

“Ah, so she doesn’t know it’s a date?” Drack guffawed, “No problem, Kid. If you don’t think she’s into you, you just come up with an alternative plan.” Drack directed his attention to the nutrient paste vats behind the counter. “Lots of great stuff on Aya that might make her job and yours a little easier, right? Females dig it when males look useful. Forget all that romance crap – it’s just fluff for what they really want. Competence. Survival is sexy.”

Liam slapped the Krogan’s shoulder, “Drack, you’re a genius!”
The Krogan snorted into his drink. “Tell me that in about four hours, Kid, after that tavum shit wears off.”

Liam relaxed into planning with the Krogan – who was full of great ideas about things that might be a good use of their time. “Oh, that reminds me,” Liam laughed at himself, “I needed her to take a look at that merchant for Verand, too. SAM – do you think you could add that to the list?”

“Certainly, Liam.”

“There you go,” Drack hit him hard enough to knock him forward. “And there she is. Good luck, Kid.”

Sara jogged around the corner, looking at her Omni-tool. When she saw him, she smiled, brilliant and amazing as always, and started, “Hey, Liam…” only to have her face fall. “Oh, hi… Drack.”

“Shit,” Liam muttered under his breath, stomach sinking. “I don’t suppose you could get lost, Drack?”

“Not a chance, Kid. This is going to be funny, and I want in. Your girl is hilarious when she gets pissed off. She’s gonna get really pissed with me hanging around. And when your grand idea of a ‘date’ gets going, she’s going to boil over. This is gonna be the show of the century.”

“Not my girl.”

“Wants to be. Did you see that death-glare?” Drack cackled. “I’d bet you ten Galaxy Swirls that I’m going to be first in line for the next suicide mission. Won’t be alone, though – you’re going to be right there with me.”

“What was I thinking?” Liam hissed, “You never take romantic advice from a Krogan…”

“Not this one, anyway. Get the scans, and I don’t care what happens to your little romance.” Drack curled his hand around his cup. “You humans don’t live long enough to experience true love.”

“You’re an arse,” he hissed at his friend, only half listening as she ordered, and turned to him, eyes already wary. He smiled, and his leg started bouncing. She was going to hate this. What had he done?
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Second chapter of the day - and there will be one more, at least.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sara had managed to finish all their business on Aya, talking to the governor and Evfra, visiting the vault with the Moshae, talking to the curators at the Repository, running an errand for Suvi, talking to one of their astronomers about star charts – all these things had crowded into her morning and early afternoon. But now, she was finally free, and SAM had told her Liam was still waiting. She tugged down her hoodie and smoothed her hair back, wishing she had thought to change into something a little more… date worthy.

But at least it wasn’t Blasto?

She turned the final corner and started to greet him, “Hey, Kosta!” only to find him and Drack halfway through drinks, “… oh, hi, Drack.” Not what she had expected of their… first date?

He hadn’t actually used the word ‘date’. Maybe what he wanted was what they had done at the Vortex - a couple of drinks, with tons of people around? But she thought he was insinuating that he wanted time alone together, not… Maybe she was overthinking this, she scolded herself, and tried again, “What are you drinking?” She sidled up to the bar, and smiled at the barkeep. “I’ll have one of what they’re having?”

The Angaran viewed her with something she was beginning to recognize as their version of suspicion. Jaal looked at her that way a lot.

Liam turned to her, and smiled, but he seemed… distant. Nervous. Not first date nervous. More like… ‘I’m about to do something that you’re not going to like’ nervous.

Suddenly she was glad she hadn’t had time to put on her dress. Whatever he had up his sleeve, it wasn’t something pretty-dress-worthy.

He confirmed it with his next sentence.

“So… I’ve got this idea, about things to help bridge the gap. Nothing illegal, just some scans of tech, some equipment… and this one merchant in the marketplace that my contact, Verand…”

Her eyes narrowed. “Not what I had in mind, Kosta.” Drack was right behind him. Maybe that was the problem? He couldn’t treat this like a… a date moment with another crewmember right there, could he?

She was making excuses for him. Another way to play favorites, she judged, and prepared to say no.

He saw it coming. “Hear me out. Like…” he nodded at the vats behind their bartender. “This nutrient paste. It could feed a lot of people, right, SAM?”
“Don’t drag SAM into this,” Sara groaned, “Did you ask the Angara whether they minded us scanning their stuff?”

“Um…” he stared into his drink, “Yeah, I might have stirred up some trouble just asking about it. Apparently the Kett kind of… borrow things without permission. Stealing.”

“Liam…”

He didn’t notice the name. “Yeah, I know, but the benefit outweighs the risk, right? People are starving, right?” He was jittering, bouncing his leg against the ground like he couldn’t stay still. Nervous, and not ‘girl I really like nervous’ but more, ‘I know this isn’t right, nervous.’ Not a date, then. She sighed, and all her dreams of sweet kisses by fountains and holding hands through the Aya Memorial Garden fell away. “And these news outlets that they have around everywhere… those are wicked.”

“Liam…”

“It’s not illegal. Just…”

“You sound like Vetra.”

“Harsh, Pathfinder.”

She pressed her lips together firmly, before she said something unwise. She didn’t know what she was more upset about – the title, the ‘date’ that wasn’t a date, or…. Drack. Possibly, she was being unreasonable… but damn it, wasn’t she owed a couple of hours off? With a sigh, she slipped off the stool, and peeved, scanned the vats behind the bar. “Done. What else?”

“SAM, the navpoints we discussed?”

“SAM, you usually keep me from crossing lines,” Sara said on the public connection.

“Liam’s arguments are valid, Pathfinder.”

“Are you two ganging up on me? The ends don’t always justify the means, SAM,” she groaned, and wandered away to the nearest navpoint, in the direction of the markets. “This isn’t what I had in mind, Liam, when you asked to meet me on Aya!”

Drack cackled into his drink. Sara turned back to him, narrowing her eyes dangerously. “Did you have something to do with this, old man?”

“People starving on Elaaden, too, Pathfinder. And you put off nailing Spender – again – in favor of coming back to Aya to meet pretty boy, here. Least this way some work gets done while you two make eyes at each other.”

“Hey!” Liam protested.

“I’m the one who has to justify your decision to Kesh, and Kesh is the one keeping the Nexus running,” Drack grumped.

“We had to deliver the Moshae to her people, I had to talk to Evfra, and visit the vault. And everyone’s earned some down time! Besides, I can’t see Krogans opting for nutrient paste over fresh meat,” Sara couldn’t stop the blush. He wasn’t wrong – she had justified getting off the ship on Aya for ‘morale purposes’ before they headed to yet another inhospitable world. It wasn’t a bad reason… and they’d be eating a lot better on the way to Kadara.
“Krogans have to eat something. Better nutrient paste than nothing at all.”

“You are in on it.” She stomped away, feeling guilty about starving hypothetical Krogan children, but kept the comm connection open. “If I get arrested for this, I’m taking both of you down with me when I account to Tann.”

“Kesh’ll back you. We’ll both owe you, for standing up to Spender.”

Vetra’s voice cut in. “Cut the chatter on the line. I’m trying to bargain for fruit here.” She paused, and in a lower voice mentioned, “Though, Pathfinder, if you wanted to get a scan of their water purification equipment - I have a group on Kadara that would pay the good stuff for that.”

“Not you, too!” Vetra’s easygoing chuckle didn’t reassure her any.

A few hours later – not quite in trouble with the Angaran authorities, but certainly not surrounded by happy Angaran citizens - she clumped back towards the bar and her ‘date’. She leveled Liam a glare that would have flattened him against the bar, had she tossed a Throw with it.

She half wished she had, but… it wouldn’t do to create an alien incident. And it was at least partially her fault, since she had assumed he wanted to do something… personal. Her eyes stung again, and she blinked.

Liam held up his hands in that ‘I’m unarmed, don’t hurt me’ stance that she recognized from his mess with Jaal. Drack slapped his shoulder, and wandered away. “I’m sorry, Pathfinder.”

“Are you? How interesting.” She slid onto the stool, and squinting, told the bartender, “The strongest thing you’ve got. Mix that thing… and the other thing. What’s it called, ‘tavum’?” The Angaran squinted at her, but did as she said. “And that thing – quilloa? That’s the one.”

“Didn’t Jaal say not to mix…”

“I don’t care. I just spent an afternoon doing inappropriate scans when I would rather just have asked the governor for the right contacts. I don’t care if that’s too slow. We need to do this right, Liam!”

He was quiet. “I know. I’m just… frustrated. With everything. We could help each other – and no one will help. And I… wasn’t sure what this was supposed to be.” The last had the tone of a confession, but Sara chose not to acknowledge it.

“You want to help? Pissing off our best chance at an alliance by taking things they aren’t ready to offer isn’t the way,” she sighed, and drank the beverage the Angaran slid towards her. “Never again, Liam.”

“Am I only Liam when I’ve cocked up?”

She drank before answering. The liquor spread over her tongue, fruit based and…. shit, that was strong. The truth followed, before she could stop it, “I thought we were supposed to be spending the afternoon together. Sara and Liam, not the Pathfinder and her Team. Forgive me, but I was…” tears prickled her eyes, “I was thinking we’d be a little less formal, and a lot less Initiative-like. I thought this was… for us.”

“Oh. Right.” He crumpled in on himself and despite everything, she felt worse. Even worse than starving Krogan babies. “Sorry. I blew it.” In the distance, an Angaran, accompanied by music from some unseen source, started singing something soothing and melodic.

Sara sipped. “First time on Aya, bound to happen. I guess – I just thought you were into me, as a
person, not as the Pathfinder.” She blinked, fast, and hid her face in her drink, gulping faster than was advisable.

“Shit, I – am.” He sounded so hesitant.

Sara sighed, and blurted out, “I wanted to spend time with you, Liam. Doing… non-Pathfinder related activities. We could have hiked around and stared at waterfalls for all I care. Or gone to the Repository - kind of like a museum - or even just walked around the market. Hell, we could stay here and get drunk.” She sniffed, blinking the tears away. “I’m halfway there at least, anyway. Damn, this stuff is strong.” She wiped her eyes. “Serve you right if I make you haul my ass back to the Tempest again.” The song was getting deeper, the Angaran voice capable of a great range. “This song’s kind of pretty, isn’t it? What do you think it’s about? My translators aren’t picking up most of the words.”

“I’ll carry you back again. Just… don’t cry?”

“I don’t cry over boys. It’s the alcohol – strong enough to make my eyes water.” She lifted her drink again, as the song faded away, to the sound of shouted compliments. Apparently the Angarans didn’t clap? She chugged the drink and slammed the cup down. “Fuck this shit. It’s my first afternoon off since the Nexus, and I know what I want to do.” She stood up. “I’m gonna sing.” He snorted. “What, you think I’m joking? Leave if you don’t like it.”

Liam’s eyes went wide, “What, really?”

“Yes, really. I’m just drunk enough for it to be an excuse.” She approached the man behind the counter. “Do I need to sign up to sing, or anything like that?” The bartender shook his head, with wide eyes. “Great, I have just the thing.” She descended the steps, aware that she was leaving Liam behind. Maybe he’d leave. Right now, she wasn’t sure she cared.

SAM interrupted, “Sara, I thought you weren’t going to lie about your emotions?”

“Shut up, SAM. It’s a defense mechanism,” Sara gritted out, and approached the natural amphitheater that the lower level created – the shades apparently designed to amplify noise. “Hi,” she laughed at herself a little as they echoed her voice back at her. “So… I’m the human Pathfinder, Ryder, from the Milky Way galaxy, and apparently, this is something our peoples have in common. If you don’t mind, I’d like to sing something.”

The Angarans were mostly silent, looking at each other. Sara bit her lip, and called up her Omni-Tool. “Right,” she said, and breathed out, shakily. “Little nervous. Been more than six hundred years since I tried to do this.” She tried the joke, only to have it fall flat. “Rough crowd. Anyway, forgive me, if it’s horrible.” She breathed out. “Maximum Effort,” she breathed in, closed her eyes, and let herself relax. The music of an ancient synthesizer streamed through her tool – a song older than she had any right to remember.

“‘There’ll be no strings to bind your hands, not if my love can’t bind your heart…’”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Sara is quoting ‘Deadpool’. And the song ‘Angel of the Morning’ was in the opening credits of the movie. If you haven't seen it, do. It's funny, and wrong, and romantic, and one of the best superhero (sort of) movies ever made.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Last chapter of the day!

“Holy…” She’d quoted *Deadpool*, and now she was singing... “Not this song.” Liam hunched over, like someone had punched him. No way it was an accident. She was making a statement. A pointed statement.

Despite his desperate wishes, Sara kept going, “There’s no need to take a stand, for it was I who chose to start.”

Strong and clear – giving that Angaran phrase a whole new meaning - her voice echoed through the meeting place. The music dropped a key, and acceptance settled over her face, “I see no need to take me home. I’m old enough to face the dawn…”

As the music rose to the first crescendo, he looked at the Angara – most of them entranced by the raw emotion. “Shit,” he whispered. She couldn’t be aware of the spell she was casting, as she entered the chorus.

“Just call me Angel of the Morning,” she repeated. Her voice almost broke, but not really. It even might have been part of the show. “Angel! Then slowly turn away… from me.”

That stung. Liam could have laughed, otherwise. Sara opened her eyes and fastened them on him, looking a trifle smug as she entered the next verse. “Maybe the sun’s light will be dim, and it won’t matter anyhow….” Sunlight and the Angara – they’d eat this up, and she knew it. “If morning’s echo says we’ve sinned, well it was what I wanted now.” A flash of something that Liam wanted to interpret as forgiveness shadowed her face, but then she re-concentrated on her audience, almost martial-like in her fierceness. “And if we’re victims of the night. I won’t be blinded by the light!” As she swung back into the chorus again, he did allow the laugh to escape, even while his stomach twisted. The Angara were swaying. Fucking *swaying*.

Someone’s hand clapped on his shoulder, and he turned to see Jaal. “The Pathfinder is singing?”

“Um, yeah.” She was definitely doing that – the crowd was in the palm of her hand. “Not bad, right?”

“She is entrancing,” the man breathed. “What is an ‘angel’?”

“A heavenly being? Largely believed to be fictional.” Liam smiled sheepishly. “I… always thought she kind of looked like one.” His face grew hot. He needed another drink, but the bartender was absorbed in Ryder’s music, eyes glistening.

“Does she know this?”

“Um, no.”

“You must tell her!” Jaal enthused. “She’s singing for you, my friend.” He urged him out of his seat. “Lift your arms! Shout your compliments!” The rest of the audience certainly was…
“Um… that’s not the way humans usually do this, mate,” Liam stammered, standing awkwardly, unsure where to put his hands. Should he clap? When in Rome… but somehow he couldn’t bring himself to bounce up and down with his hands raised, like some of the lower tables were doing.

“Then how will she ever know what you think?” Jaal’s face fell. “Oh, it is over. That was… ethereal. Do you think she will sing again another day?” Sara was accepting compliments, laughing at herself and departing with one of her little waves and a wrinkled nose that suggested she was largely regretting her performance.

SAM must be working her metabolism again.

“Get her drunk enough, and you won’t be able to stop her,” Liam rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. “See you later, Jaal. I think I’ve got some groveling to do.”

“Be strong and clear!” Jaal was still all starry eyed. “The Pathfinder as well!” The Angaran version of applause was still echoing from the canopies above as he made his way down into the semicircle to meet her.

“Nice acoustics,” Sara joked, meeting him halfway, “Better than the shower back home, am I right?” She couldn’t quite meet his eyes.

Liam shifted back and forth on his feet. “Um, so… Jaal sends his compliments, and his wish for an encore. And… you’ve got mine, too. That was pretty awesome,” He smiled, and she smiled too, sheepishly. “I’m sorry, for what it’s worth.”

“So am I.” Sara looked up. “Glad they liked it, but I shouldn’t have aired dirty laundry for all of Aya to see. Can I blame it on the quilloa? Still spinning a bit here, even with SAM speeding up the old metabolism. I wouldn’t have thought an AI could be such a nag.”

Liam laughed. “I don’t mind the embarrassment. Worth it, to hear that.”

“Good. Just… next time, I want to spend time with you, Liam, not Drack and assorted offended Angarans.”

He cleared his throat. “So… there’ll be a next time?” He held his breath.

“Yes.” Her cheeks were flushed, so it was probably the alcohol talking. Perhaps this drink was why the Angara were so terminally honest. All their brain cells had been liquified… “If you manage to ask, anyway.”

“After you finish your drink, do you want to go look at waterfalls? That’s what I was planning before Drack…”

“Don’t blame this on Drack. It’s got Liam Kosta written all over it. And yes. I would.” She pulled up her Omni-tool to pay for the drink. “Just let me tip the patient man.”

“Wait,” Liam reached out and covered the display. “I got this. Free drinks for Pathfinders, right?”

She blinked again, and smiled, “You sure?”

“Yeah. Least I can do after making you cry.”

“I’m not crying now. Singing is cathartic.” She shut down her tool. “All right. Lead on, Liam. I’m yours for…” she glanced at the tool again. “An hour, before Kallo is going to demand that we take off for some facetious reason that really just means that he’s been planet-side too long. Some people
need shore leave, some people need to spend their lives in space. It’s when they try to live together that problems happen…”

“No pressure, Ryder.” He held out his hand. “Come on then.”

She eyed his hand like it would bite her. “You want to hold my hand? In public?”

“Why the fuck not? You just sang the most notorious morning-after song ever written in the Milky Way, at me, in front of an audience of alien strangers and Jaal. Least I can do is hold your hand afterward.”

She put her closed fist in his. “Fine. Lead on, Liam.”

He grinned, relieved, and tugged her away from the tavetaan. “This way?”

“You’ve got a rotten sense of direction.” She shook her head, and said, “SAM? Navpoints for the ten most impressive waterfalls in the Aya area.”

They made it to the closest one, and were hanging over the bridge that crossed underneath smiling at each other. Liam inched closer, and wrapped his arm around her back. He turned, and opened his mouth, to talk to her about Verand, and found her staring at his mouth.

His mind went blank, and outside of his control, he leaned in, slow, so she could stop him if she was still pissed. He was barely a breath away from hers, before Kallo voice crackled out into both their comms.

“I have to clear the dock in thirty minutes.” His head jerked back at the Salarian’s voice. Sara’s head fell forward, and she turned away. “I would suggest you start making your way back to the ship.”

“Is that an order from the dockmaster?” Sara sounded extra combative.

“…No?”

“Then who gave the order?”

“The polite request came from the ship in orbit that needs the space? Not the largest dock in the galaxy, Pathfinder. Most of the docks won’t accommodate a ship our size.”

“Fine,” she huffed. “We’ll be back in a half an hour.”

“We? Who’s with you? SAM?” She hung up on him without answering, tugging at her companion.

“SAM, don’t tell Kallo who I’m with. He’s the worst gossip. Come on, Liam.” She dragged him backwards, so that they were screened by the water, and shoved him up against the slick rock. “We’ve got half an hour. Kiss me?”

“Are you still pissed off your arse?” Liam smiled, “Is this when I start carrying you back? I think the Angara would like that, too. Big on open emotions, aren’t they?”

“Just in for a hell of a headache. Just… do it?”

He leaned in, and pecked her lips. “There. Happy?”

Sara shook her head, frowning, “Do you not like me?”
Liam groaned and knocked his head back against the rock. “Why do you think I don’t like you?”

“Because of that!” She gestured wildly. “You never just say anything. You answer questions with questions, never use the words I expect. It’s never ‘Let’s go look at waterfalls, just you and me.’ It’s all ‘Do you like karaoke?’”

“It’s obvious that you do, indeed, like karaoke, but you didn’t answer at the time, either,” Liam pushed himself forward, and she took a step back. Liam’s shoulders tensed. “Why do you need all the ‘I’s dotted and ‘t’s crossed?’” She flushed and didn’t answer. “I want specifics.” He grabbed her hand. “Come on, let’s go make Kallo happy by being early. We… need to talk. Without time restraints.”

“You think?” Sara snarked.

“Shut up, Ryder.”

“You first, Kosta.” But she trotted to come alongside him, and didn’t let go of his hand, either. And in a few minutes, “I didn’t mean that.”

“Good. Neither did I.”
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

/tosses a chapter into the Void of Space, and leaves, throwing her cape over her nose while winking.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Liam retrieved two mugs from the coffee maker, angling his head towards the mess in a silent question. She rolled her eyes, tapped her Omni-Tool a few times, and pulled him inside her room instead, "It's not like it's taboo for people to join me in my room, or anything. And you've already been here, once." He looked around, a little uncomfortable, given the last time he'd been in there. "Sit," she ordered, and parked on her couch, fidgeting with the pocket of her hoodie. Liam weighed his seating options, and opted for the chair in front of the console – out of reach of the temptation of Sara Ryder, and additionally held back with his hands weighed down with both mugs.

He needed some answers before he dared give in, “So is this where I get the tragic backstory? I mean, you're all set up for it, right?”

She snorted, “Not so tragic. More like really short and really oblivious. My first ‘real’ boyfriend lasted two months, before his mother made him break up with me because my Dad was a mad scientist and my Mom was dying. Said I was needy baggage waiting to happen. His words, not his mother’s. I think.”

“Right. One arse down.” Liam handed her the coffee mug as a reward. “Continue.”

“Lost my virginity between him and the next guy, just a one night thing – but I had to be told that was all it was. Humiliating, when he had to give me that talk. But the next boyfriend was great – until…” she hesitated.

“Until…”

“He was only dating me to get to my brother,” Sara flushed guiltily. “And I should have known that, from the hints going in. He kept saying how hot Scott was. I broke up with him when he suggested…” she didn’t need to finish.

“Nasty,” Liam’s lip curled.

“Yeah.” She stared into the coffee cup. “The next one was less obvious, at least. His parents left town, and he asked me over. I drove more than an hour away on my little hoverbike – why not, right? We were having fun together. Lots of fun. That meant good things, I thought. Thinking was my first mistake. After I spent the night, he made me breakfast and then he…” she let out a shuddery breath that Liam could feel two feet away. “…he broke up with me.” She flushed, blinking miserably, tears welling up. “I found out he’d come onto Scott as soon as I got home – Scott had just missed me, trying to let me know what had happened, hoping to catch me before I left. It was all some kind of sick revenge thing.”
“Ouch.” Liam pressed his lips together, the pattern clear. “Wanker isn’t a strong enough word.”

“Which one are you talking about?” Sara laughed feebly. “After that, I gave up. Dating opportunities were thin on the ground in the Alliance, anyway. Had a few flings on the odd weekend off, that’s it. And then I joined the Initiative, and was thrust into the crash course for Pathfinder training – no time to meet people. Went to sleep for 600 years… woke up, and met you. And you… you’re subtle. And then the thing with Jaal happened. I’m pretty used to red flags, Liam. You’re throwing about three a day. I need…” she stopped and stared at her coffee again.

“What do you need, Sara?”

“I need to know if you fucking like me or not!” She huffed irritably and set down the mug. “I’m not asking for anything serious. I’m not asking for you to declare your undying love. I just want to know if you want me around. If you think I’m fun to be with. If you ever think about kissing me again. If you think about… the banging.” Her ears turned red. “If you lay awake and wonder if I’m up, too, and what I would do if you knocked on my door,” she mumbled.

“All of the above?” Liam bent forward in his chair and rubbed his hands through his hair, and locked eyes with her. “Look, I’ve… messed up things. Lots of things. I’ve been trying not to screw this up with being – too much.” He stared at his feet. “I think about emailing you about fifty times a day. I think about you – worry, even though it’s stupid – every time you’re out there without me. Ask Lexi – I went crazy while you were on Voeld and rescuing the Moshae. You’re always on my mind. And women think that’s… creepy.”

“It’s sweet.” Sara had a watery smile.

Liam snorted, “You’re the first to think so, then. And I doubt that will last forever. Not when I’m sending you shit that makes no sense because it makes me think of you.”

Sara narrowed her eyes and pulled up a list on her Omni-tool, and slid closer to him. “Read.”

Liam glanced at it, eyes wide. “Ryder…”

“Read.” The list seemed mostly random, scrolling down into what looked like forever.

Reasons

He breaks his own bones to keep me safe.

He can hotwire anything from the Nomad when the security system goes off at a weird time to Halo games to work with Omni-tools.

He hands look like they’re not just for show. How do you get those kind of scars, anyway?

He makes me laugh, even when I don’t want to.

He knows when to pick a fight with me to get me off my ass and moving. Like Scott.

He carries me home when I’m drunk. Who does that?

His car. I shouldn’t admit that. Shallow.
He’s not afraid to get mad around me, or tell me when I’m fucking wrong.

He asked me why I came to Andromeda, instead of assuming it was because of Dad.

He annoys people I hate on purpose, because it makes me smile later. Don’t think he knows that I know, either. Shouldn’t be endearing.

Drack likes him. Drack has the best taste. Kesh is so lucky.

Dad hired him. He knew how rare he was.

He kisses like he’s not thinking about anything else but my mouth.

He’s right about Hanar film production. Never gonna admit that aloud. Even if the six minutes of iridescence made no sense.

Adrenaline Junkie. ’Nuff said. I miss my hits.


The Hustle. Why can’t I stop thinking about that fucking day? He lent me a book and made me laugh. Not a big deal. But it was.

Flips in zero-g. Bet he thinks I didn’t notice. I shouldn’t watch him so much.

The way his laugh chokes off when he knows he shouldn’t be finding something funny.

He wasted bullets on an already dead Kett back on Habitat 7 just to vent his feelings. Stupid. Worth it.

It kept going, but the lines blurred together.

Liam took a deep breath, “First of all, you still haven’t seen the uncut version of that film. The subtitles help – but I can’t show you the subtitles. Yet. That’s third date material. Second,” he waved his hand at the list, “How long have you been keeping…”

“Long enough.” She pressed her lips together as if she refused to say more.

SAM butted in, “There are 256 entries on the list.”

“Not helping, SAM!” She colored. “But yeah, I’m into you, Liam. No lies. I need you to quit screwing around with me. Even if it’s me… wanting this to be something more, not you. Just tell me, already, if I need to knock it off.”

“Shit,” Liam sighed, and dropped his hand to meet her eyes. “You’re so goddamn direct. Is it the alcohol?”

“No,” Sara narrowed her eyes. “I’m not drunk now. SAM took care of it. I want you to get your British arse over here and kiss me, damn it.”

Liam shook his head, “Don’t try to sound like me, Sara.” He stood up, and sat next to her, stiff and awkward. “You didn’t really set the mood, you know?”

“Kisses are not made of Eezo. Even yours-”

He kissed her between words, and when he stopped, she kept talking. “… and you’re not getting
any, no matter how good you are at trying to shut me up. I hate that ‘shut up kiss’ trope. It’s not romantic, it’s demeaning."

“Not trying to shut you up, Ryder.” He took her hand and threaded her fingers through his. “I’m trying to say sorry.” He kissed her again, soft and slow, just lips brushing against hers. “So… sorry? Again.”

“I’m still pissed – and I mean angry, not drunk,” Sara sighed. “All right, now you know all about my tragic love life. What about yours?”

Liam winced, “That’s it. Girl after girl – she thinks I’m wicked, smart, pick an adjective, whatever, then ends up dumping me because I smother her. I’m trying not to do that this time around. I… fall hard. And then I get broken. I don’t think I could survive another one.” He swallowed, “Does today count as a date, even though I messed up?”

“What, counting down until you can show me the dirty subtitles?” Sara snarked, and then sighed, “Sorry. Yeah. It does. What’s not date-like about looking like a jerk in front of potential alien allies? We saw a waterfall together, and had drinks, and I made a fool of myself. Oh, God, I sang…” She hid her face against his shoulder and he put an arm around her. Maybe the Angara will forget?” She pulled back, laughing, with a wrinkled nose, “And I feel like an asshole, so it’s definitely an occasion to mark, right?” She laughed, weakly. “Like that doesn’t happen every day.”

“Yeah?” He grinned, “Me, too. Want some company?”

Sara huffed, but slid closer. “All right.” She was silent for about half a minute, “Hey, can you arrange the Halo games to play on my display?”

“Should work. Downloaded them into the ship’s library last time – unless you’ve got special security in here, we’re good.”

“PVP?”

“Nah, I don’t want you to vent your feelings by shooting at me. Sets a bad precedent.” He tapped at his Omni-tool. “Let’s do something less ominous. Like… MarioKart.”

Sara groaned, “No!”

“Yeah. And no SAM.”

“I believe I can play my own car, given my control over the functions in this room,” SAM announced serenely.

“We’re both gonna die,” Sara grumbled. “He’s so gonna cheat – all the blue turtles.”

“Great. Losing’s half the fun,” Liam enthused, and sat back in the far corner of her couch. “Let’s get cozy then.” He patted the cushion in front of him, and lifted his eyebrows. “If you want to, anyway?”

She eyed him, and shifted to fit between his legs, and he settled his arms around her. “You sure you’ll be able to drive like this?” She wriggled backwards to make herself more comfortable.

“Oh yeah,” he scoffed. “It’s not about winning the game. It’s about the company. Ready, SAM?”

“I am prepared,” SAM paused, “Is this an appropriate time to begin trash-talking?”
“Perfect timing, mate. I’m gonna own your Node.”

“My Node is not portable, unlike your ass. Which I will be all over.”

"Shit, it's like trash-talking with Jaal. We need to work on this, Sara. Priorities."

Sara dominated the game for hours, despite SAM’s abilities, until she fell asleep mid-race, leaning back against Liam’s chest, head tucked into the crook of his shoulder, her Mario shoecar parked against a wall. Liam tapped up ‘2 Players’ on the next screen, trying not to move violently.

She was drooling, his shirt getting damp and clammy. He didn’t care.

Liam kept going, playing against SAM late into the night, unwilling to disrupt her rest. “SAM?” He asked quietly, when they’d finished their latest round of races, SAM’s Toad jumping on top of the winner’s box, as Liam’s Luigi watched from a distance.

“Yes, Liam?”

“Any ideas how to get her to the bed?”

“I believe her sleep cycle will not be disrupted by movement.”

Liam slipped sideways, trying to support her. “Be easier with her biotics,” he groaned, lifting her into a cradling hold.

“I am sorry I cannot assist.”

He shifted, and her head fell against his chest. “It’s only a few steps.” He managed to get over, and laid her down on the impeccable coverlet, folding it in half to cover her. “Will she be all right?”

“Her nightmares tend not to start until early morning. She will be fine until then.”

Liam ran his hand through his hair. “All right. Wake me up when she wakes up, all right? I think… I think we need to talk some more in the morning. Got something to get off my chest.”

“Is this about the difficulty with Lo-consul Verand?”

“Shit,” Liam grimaced, “You know about that?”

“Yes. I was not… snooping, but I noticed messages coming and going with that as the subject with increasing urgency in the past week. I thought there might be an issue. I have not told Sara or the Nexus.”

“Right. That’s my job.” He swallowed. “It’s the reason I didn’t kiss her right, you know? Because I’ve fucked up. I’m still fucking up, unless she can make it right. Didn’t seem like I should take advantage, when… and I really wanted to fix this on my own. She’s gonna hate me.”

“I believe you underestimate her flexibility. There is an 85% probability that she will forgive you, and help you save Verand.”

“And the other 15%?”

“Range from her shoving you out an airlock, locking you in the cargo hold in lieu of a proper brig, making you confess to Kesh and Kandros that you’ve comprised Nexus security, and abandoning you on Kadara.” The AI was blunt. “However, after 91% of those options, she would return for you. Possibly before your demise.”
“Not making me feeling better about this, SAM.”

“Good luck.”

“Since when do you wish people luck?”

“Any time they have to deal with Sara before her coffee in the morning.”

Liam laughed. “Good one.”

“I was not intending to be funny. Bring the coffee with you and you improve your chances of survival to 97%.”

“Noted. You’re a pal, SAM.”

“Thank you. I see you as a friend as well. And you make Sara happy – which is a rare thing.”

Liam frowned, “You know that?”

“My consciousness is linked with hers, and I can read biometric rhythms. Her serotonin and oxytocin levels while in your proximity, combined with her heart rate…”

“Got it, without all the medical mumbo-jumbo.” Liam swallowed, “Shit, I’ve really fucked up then.”

“I will do everything in my power to make her see reason. I believe you did the right thing – we are not at war with the Angara, and even the Roekkar are not formally declared enemies. In fact, we are actively trying to make peace with both factions. And all is not lost. It’s still possible that Verand will check back in before we orbit Kadara.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?”

“After analyzing the speed of her replies to your previous emails, the chance is less than 4%. But that is still a chance.”

Chapter End Notes

I could post the next one. Do you want the next one today? Or tomorrow?
“Liam has requested to see you first thing this morning, Sara.” SAM spoke before she wanted to admit she was awake, as he altered the lighting to early morning mode. “Sara, it is urgent.” She groaned, and rolled over, her head pounding. “He left you some water by your bed before leaving last night, sent an email, and is on his way with coffee. I predict he will arrive…”

“A little quieter, SAM?” There was a knock on the door, and Sara sat up in bed. “Come in,” she mumbled, and flung the blankets off, staring blankly at the clothes she’d been wearing yesterday. Liam came in, and stared. “What, can’t take all this natural beauty first thing?”

“Um… you look great,” he cleared his throat. “Coffee?”

“Thanks,” she stumbled in the general direction of her couch. “Just woke up – haven’t checked my email yet. SAM thinks it’s urgent. What did you need?” She folded her legs up crosslegged and sipped, her head clearing minutely – enough for her to open her eyes to mere slits.

“Um… maybe want to finish that cup first?” Liam put the second mug in front of her. “SAM says you usually have three. I’ll go back for more in a minute.”

Sara rubbed her eye with her free hand. “Did you guys get all buddy-buddy after I fell asleep?”

“You might say that. Sara, I want you to promise you will hear Liam out before you make snap judgements.”

“Wow, that sounds too ominous for first thing in the morning,” Sara tried to laugh, and then caught Liam’s eye, dark and troubled. “Well, shit. How bad is it?”

“I gave away Nexus information – location and navpoints – to that lo-consul I told you about,” he mumbled. “Verand.”

Sara chugged the first cup, and picked up the second before she replied. “Go on.”

“And now she’s disappeared. Her and her whole team.” He clasped his hands behind his back and stood up straighter. “From what I’ve been able to figure out, she’s been… taken. Kidnapped.”


“Liam…” Sara tilted her head up at the ceiling, resisting the urge to lay into him like the shrew he probably thought she was after the scene she’d made on Aya, or the desperate version of herself he’d seen back on the ship the night before. “Really? Smugglers and pirates? Buying people’s trust with Nexus data? Have you been watching too many episodes of *Omega’s Alpha* or something? Haven’t you talked to Vetra or Lexi about what that place is like?”

“I don’t need to ask. I’ve been plenty of places with HUST-L. And I know I screwed up,” he was moving now, tense and upset, and for once, her jokes weren’t making him laugh. “It was about building trust – and it worked!” Sara frowned, realizing it was more serious than she thought. “Verand’s good people. Fuck the data - she’s worth saving on her own merit, and I was so fucking sick of red tape and… ugh.” He paced, hitting the wall with the side of his fist. “There’s no justifying this. I was just trying to make it better… take some of the heat and pressure off you, and to
prove that taking a risk on me was worth it. I never wanted to involve you at all – you shouldn’t have to fix my mistakes. Verand would never misuse that data. Never. And it went wrong. Like it always does.”

He tried to punch the wall again, but Sara lunged to grab his arm, eyes wide. “What the hell, Liam? You’ve got nothing to prove. My dad picked you – and I...” she took a deep breath, “I would have done the same, if you’d bothered to ask my opinion. The Team needs someone like you. You’re one of the most valuable people we have. Your work-arounds are saving lives…” he pulled away, and Sara finished, weakly, “and I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

“Don’t. All my life, this crap keeps happening… when you take a risk for the right reasons it’s supposed to work out!”

“Knock off the pity party! You wanna talk failures? Dad was a failure,” her voice was fierce, and she grabbed him again, this time by the shoulder, and cupped his face. His day-old stubble caught on her fingers, and the circles under his eyes were deep and pronounced. Had he slept at all? “He bankrupted us, trying to cure Mom, trying to build SAM. Moved us to Earth, uprooted Scott and I from everything we knew, burned his bridges in attempts to get funding for his pet project, and… and then, according to his journals, he sold SAM and all of us to the highest bidder when it didn’t work out the way he planned.” She stressed the last word. “Plans change, Liam. Your intentions were good. We’ll fix this, we’ll save your contact, and then the galaxy. One thing at a time.”

“I thought Bradley would help,” His eyes were locked on hers, worried. “Verand’s been helping them out so much back on Eos, I thought…”

“They’re civilians, scientists, colonists, you can’t blame them for not jumping into the dark,” Sara quieted. “We’ll manage. I’m not without my own talents, you know? And there’s SAM.”

“You talents,” Liam barked a laugh, obviously trying to tease, but falling short. “Right. Good thing I can electrocute the stuff your bullets miss. Too bad SAM can’t aim for you.”

SAM replied, “I can. Sara prefers me not to. It is a matter of control - much like driving the Nomad.”

“You both know I’m the better shot. It’s that damn Kett rifle Vetra had me try out because the APEX guys loved it so much,” she groused. “Get me a decent assault rifle, Liam.” She bit her lip, but he hadn’t noticed the repeated slips, so she pressed on. “Send the navpoints to Kallo, SAM, and let’s go break the news about killing pirates to the crew.”

“Sure,” he shuddered, “I’ve got a plan. But… bring the Mattock, will you, if the Thokin isn’t working out? I don’t think we’ll survive another mission with just the Charger and your biotics.”

“Deal. I’ll also have Drack bring the grenades.”

“No grenades. We’re heading inside a pirate spaceship, not going up against an Ascendant… we need to save those grenades, Sara. If we run into another before we can hit Eos or the Nexus to restock…”

She frowned away her smile at him using her name. “You always bring the grenades, Liam, lest gorram Reavers land planetside, interrupt your heist, and…”

That pulled him out of his dark thoughts, with a double blink and slow smile, “Shit, you’ve seen Firefly?”

“We’re living Firefly. The Kett are the closest thing to Reavers I’ve ever seen. I’ve been watching it on a constant loop for a few weeks. SAM is fascinated by River Tam.” She clenched her jaw, “Quit
acting surprised at my geekhood, Kosta. Or I’ll start singing the ‘Hero of Canton’. I know all the
damn words by this time. I think I can make it about you easily enough.” She was relieved to see
him knocked loose of his brooding – she could keep picking a fight, if it would work.

He did it for her, all the time.

“Hey, a cheering section would be new. Used to the opposite.”

“That’s me, your friendly galactic cheerleader?” She smiled at him, tilting her head.

He cleared his throat, “Um… I think you don’t qualify. Besides, I’d want the colors of Manchester
United. They don’t do blue.”

“Guess I won’t unpack my pompoms then.” His laugh broke off short, but it was close enough.
“Okay, SAM… how bad is it? Do we have to put off going to Kadara? Or can we at least stop,
track down that Resistance contact and mollify Drack?”

“Verand has been out of communication for a week, Sara. I do not believe a delay would be wise –
we would lose her trail.” SAM was blunt.

“Shit, Drack’s gonna kill me,” Liam winced. “Yet another delay keeping us from saving Kesh from
Spender.”

“Don’t worry,” Sara winked, even while she clenched her jaw, trying to hide her fear from him. “I’ll
protect you from the big bad Krogan. And you’ll pay him back, soon enough, when I take you with
us to New Tuchanka.” She rose and headed towards her wardrobe, grabbing out her Pathfinder
fatigues. She stepped out of her underwear, pulled off the hoodie she’d slept in, and stripped off her
old bra. “Kesh says they’ve got problems they don’t want to talk about, so there will be plenty of
chances to redeem yourself.” She pulled on another thong and bra, and stepped into fresh fatigues,
and turned to find him watching. She smirked. “Time to be the Pathfinder, right? Like a boss.”
She strolled back over to her little table, and grabbed her cup, peering into it ruefully. “Shit. I’m
gonna need at least two more cups before I deal with Drack. Definitely a four cup day.”

“On it, Pathfinder.” He saluted, but paused on his way out the door. “Um… I’m not used to the
whole ‘acceptance’ thing you’re doing here. But… thanks.” He backed away. “I’ll get that coffee.”

After the door closed, Sara winced, and held her head. “SAM… anything you can do about the
hangover?”

“No. I am contacting the rest of the Team to assemble in the meeting room in an hour, to be briefed
on the situation. By my calculations, approximately two-thirds of the team will disapprove of the
necessary delay to save Lo-consul Verand and retrieve the security data.” He paused, “Perhaps you
should drink a great deal of water, and ask Lexi for some painkillers before your headache gets
worse.”

“Shit,” Sara hissed, and stood upright. “Good call, SAM. Let’s get the worst over with – send the
new navpoint to Kallo, and tell him we’ll explain at the meeting.”
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Second chapter of the day.

Haven’t decided whether to post the rest of the mission today or tomorrow. Might be a few more chapters. Might only post one more.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To say that the Team wasn’t happy was an understatement. Crates shook as Cora left the meeting room. Jaal murmured something in shaky Angaran that didn’t translate. Drack loomed ominously. Kallo was still pissed when Sara and Liam entered the bridge, three days of tracing the Angaran team under their belt.

“I’m not risking the Tempest on this,” Liam told the pilot’s narrowed eyes. “I’ve got a plan.”

“A plan, he says,” Kallo muttered, as the ship stopped cold next to the debris field SAM had indicated as the most likely location to encounter the pirates.

“Go ahead, Kosta,” Sara murmured. How she continued to be so… encouraging, he didn’t understand.

“I say…” he took a quick breath, “I say we play to their scavenger roots. With the debris at the site. Sort of… a Trojan horse, scenario. We’ve got storage crates enough. We’ll suit up and…” He shook his hands out and rolled his neck. “We’ve wasted enough time. Let’s hit the ‘go’ button, shoot pirates, and save people.” He braced himself for her rejection. Surely she’d have a better idea…

But Sara smiled, still positive, even after his pitiful excuse for a plan. “All right. I’m in. Let’s go do… whatever this is.”

Liam blinked, “Yeah? I thought you’d… Wait, what? I mean, yeah! Hell, yeah!” He grinned a little wider. “We play this right, they’ll deliver us right where we need to go.” He clenched his fists at his side, praying to whatever was listening that he was right, as tension creeped up his neck. Did she really think his idea was enough – that it would work? Or was she just humoring him, so that he’d fall flat and she could save the day?

He couldn’t believe Sara Ryder would do that, though. Even if he deserved it, Verand didn’t.


The Krogan glowered, but didn’t complain, as he followed. “Least I get to shoot something.”

“Don’t forget the grenades,” Sara wheedled.
Firefly was on his mind so some gorram reason, as they waited what seemed an interminable amount of time for something to happen.

Sara was more like Zoe than he was like Jayne. He might be able to pull off Wash on a good day… but Kallo would fight him for the honor of getting to say ‘I’m a leaf on the wind…’ if not for the spear of metal piercing his chest. Liam knew exactly who deserved the spear – and it wasn’t Kallo.

On the Serenity at least one of them would be dead at the end of the story. A similar outcome awaited them here, in all probability, though SAM was offline due to the radiation, so he couldn’t figure out the exact numbers. Liam stretched his gloves, fistng his hands slowly, wondering how he could bring these things up, as they waited in the deepest darkest space in a clump of wreckage debris, concealed in a cargo crate.

He couldn’t bring them up here, obviously, with Drack listening in like the world’s worst nanny, grumpy and irritable at the latest thing the Pathfinder had asked of him and his old bones.

Sara was trying to convince the Krogan that he loved every minute of it. She was right, but Drack would never give in. And then she shifted topics, explaining like a fucking professor the real reason the Trojan horse worked. “You know, this isn’t really a Trojan Horse. The first one was meant to be a sacrifice to the gods. They told them ‘Don’t touch it, ‘cause it’s holy’ and belongs to such and such a god, and they were just jerks and brought it into the city to give it to the wrong god to piss the enemy off. They died because they were jerks.” She was quiet for a moment while Liam tried not to laugh. “True story. Just can’t ever remember which gods. They all run together.”

Drack grunted, “Stupid. They should have just torched it. Made of wood, right? Lit it on fire and set it back towards the enemy, with its soldiers burning up inside.”

“That would have been awesome,” Sara breathed.

“Would have risked setting the city on fire,” Liam bit off. “Didn’t you take Western Civ? Cities were walled, in those days. Not like they had volunteer fire departments.”

“Spoilsport,” she muttered.

The silence weighed, as they waited in the dark, Sara started singing, low and slow as she fitted the words around the melody, “Liam, Liam… he robs from the rich and gives to the poor… he ripped off the Director and gave Tann what for… our love for him now isn’t hard to explain… Andromeda’s Hero, the man they call… Liam.”

“Your meter’s off,” he grumbled, glad she couldn’t see his cheeks heating up. He heard the defroster in his helmet kick in, a soft whirring in his ears, a welcome distraction to his own heartbeat. Had he ever been this nervous? Between her and the mission…

“Who made you goddamn Shakespeare?”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re tone deaf?” She wasn’t, but this dread was twisting what he wanted to say into bitter things. He could think of about a dozen other songs he’d kill to have her sing. He had to figure out how to sweet talk Dutch into setting up karaoke. Maybe if he found enough new things to ferment… that Aya grown melon would make a killer liqueur.

Potatoes had to be in the genome bank, right? That meant vodka…
Or maybe someone had brought agave to Andromeda? Agave would grow on Eos, he’d bet his last credit. If they could reinvent tequila… maybe he could drown his sorrows when Sara Ryder dumped his ass (could you call it dumping?) after this massive screw-up. Might be worth Lexi’s scolding if he could forget how he’d arsed this whole situation up...

“Knock it off, you two!” Drack scolded. “Listen - the scavengers will be here any minute, and damn it, they’ll hear you if you keep bickering. I’m not dying in a box in deep space because two kids can’t keep their mouths shut.”

“You keep telling yourself that, old man,” Sara teased, her breath coming faster over the comms, accompanied with chattering teeth, as Liam shifted closer to her. “Liam? What’s wrong?”


“SAM? You with us at all?”

“Barely, Pathfinder, but I can tell your temperature is within normal parameters.” SAM was quiet for a moment. “I believe your shivering is due to fear.”

He had cocked up everything, and ‘they’ hadn’t even started yet. Why hadn’t he held back, told her he couldn’t sleep with her because of respect, or some shit like that? It would have been true – he respected the hell out of her. The problem was he couldn’t tell her ‘no’, either – not when he wanted the same things she did. And yes, Mum, he was fully aware that wasn’t healthy. Why couldn’t he have just gone and talked to Lexi, and let her tell him once again that he didn’t need to try to impress the Pathfinder? Why hadn’t he just let it go, instead of dragging Verand into trouble, and getting her captured - and maybe killed?

Why hadn’t he just been up front, told Sara Ryder that she was everything amazing, and wonderful, and beautiful in Andromeda, and that every little thing he did wasn’t for the Initiative, but for her? And he couldn’t try to fix it now - not in front of Drack. He’d rather confess how he felt in front of Vetra, and he couldn’t do anything right in her eyes…

Before he could finish his continued self-chastisement, their container shifted, and ground them together on top of the Krogan. “Get off!” The Krogan bellowed, evidently forgetting the value of silence. “You’re crushing my good leg. I’m gonna need that to get both your inexperienced asses out of here alive.”

“Sorry!” Liam offered. In trying to get up he slipped and his hand slid up under Sara’s chest plate.

“God, Liam, if you wanted to feel me up you only had to ask,” she whispered, voice rough, but half laughing instead of angry. Why wasn’t she fucking angry?

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he stammered back, wanting to hear her sound like that under better conditions, despairing that would ever happen now, and then he felt them land, hard in someone’s cargo bay, one leg between hers.

“Why do you always get to be on top?” She groaned, her helmet bumping his, and she shifted away on her arse before he could apologize to her open invitation. Sometimes being British was a real drawback to flirting. “Drack, can you get the doors open?”

“Gladly,” grunted the Krogan. “You two make me sick.” The Krogan kicked open the doors, scowling into a largely empty, but strangely messy for what was supposed to be an Angaran cargo bay.
“This isn’t an Angaran ship,” Sara’s eyes were wide and scared on the other side of her visor, when he met her eyes. Shit. “This is a Kett ship. A big one. What the hell, Kosta?”

He cursed, aloud. “Well, shit.” And then grinned, tight, “Change… Change of plan?”

The alarms went off in the next second. Shit.

She scowled at him, playful mood lost, and he winced, knowing he deserved it. Instead of dwelling, he took off with what he hoped looked like confidence, instead of ‘I don’t know where the hell I’m going, but work with me’ aura. “I got us into this mess, I’m gonna get us out. Doesn’t change the reason we’re here. Find Verand, get out.”

“Alarms, Liam!”

“I know, I know!”

Raiders flooded the bay. “Tell Talon we have stows!” One shouted into his headpiece. “We have stows!”

“Definitely not Kett running this thing!” Liam shot two in the head, one after the other, but didn’t bother to stop to admire the shot. Too much at stake.

“Shut them down,” Sara ordered, and started jumping in the air like some kind of flea, and slamming back down with her Krogan Hammer, sending a shockwave to topple the two Raiders closest to her. “I got two, Drack!”

“Small fry,” the Krogan grunted. “I’m up to five already. And the sharpshooter should count for five more, at least.”

The last of them fell, and the ship’s comm crackled into life, flooding the room with feedback. “Report! What’s going on down there!”

“Um… sounds like we could get some answers?” Liam offered hesitantly.

“Right, kid.” Drack seemed resigned. “I guess this is it. Hate to be fatalistic – but it’s been nice knowing you. Thought you might have made it, for a few seconds there.”

“Shut up, Drack,” Sara turned and faced the Krogan, two heads taller than her, with spiky armor, and she was the intimidating one. “He’s trying to save a friend. We’re talking a week’s delay, at most, coming here, and I’ve told you that, twice. SAM backs up my math. One long day, and then we’ll hightail it to Kadara, fast as the Tempest can fly.”

“That’s a week longer Kesh has to wait,” Drack grunted.

“Fuck,” Liam whispered, and ran a hand over his helmet. “Pathfinder… this isn’t the best place for this conversation.” In the distance, the terminal chirped at them, demanding their status, again, more stridently this time.

“Don’t start, Kosta,” Sara turned and shoved him up against a container, her helmet two inches away from his. “You’re a screw up, Liam. I can’t decide whether to kiss you or space you.”

He stopped breathing, “Can I pick?” That didn’t sound like she was going to dump his idiotic arse…

“Shut up, I said,” Sara repeated, and pulled her gun off her back. “We’re going to save Verand. We’re going to get off this ship. All of us.” She breathed twice, loud enough to hear over the
comms, her eyes determined. “And Liam – this isn’t how you die, damn it. Stay Alive. That’s an order. From your boss.”

Liam nodded once, as she backed off, his breath misting against his visor. “Sure thing, boss.”

Sara approached the console, as it demanded, “For the last time, report! We just fixed those bay seals. If you idiots blew them, I’ll have your skins!”

She was his hero – confirmed in the next moment by her choice of words. “Nothing wrong here. Just… a weapons malfunction. Everything fine here.” She paused for a moment, while Liam choked back panicked laughter, “How are you?” She winked at him, happy nature regained, at least temporarily, and in that moment, he knew.

He was in love with Sara Ryder. He was surprised that angels hadn’t descended and started to sing, right here, in the hold of some unknown Angaran raider junkheap of a ship. There was nobody else out there, in all of space and time.

Sara disconnected the useless connection, and stopped the threats. “That wasn’t going anywhere useful,” she smiled cheerfully, teeth visible even through her visor, more fanglike than toothy. “So… shoot pirates, rescue contact?”

“She’s here, somewhere,” Liam rubbed his helmet. “Think they salvaged this thing?”

“They’re not Kett,” Sara allowed. “SAM, do you have us?”

“Not precisely,” SAM explained. “Debris and radiation are still disrupting scans.”

“So where to?”

“We find Verand, and fast.” He pointed, “This way.” He hit an access pad, only to reveal a massive turret that whirred, auto-targeting, just before he slammed it back close. “Not that way.” He pointed in a different direction. “This way? Let’s go.”

He thought he heard her start to laugh, and then dismissed it. There was no way she could be laughing.

She was scared off her arse, just like him.

Chapter End Notes

Joss Whedon’s 'Firefly' is a work of art.

And this is just the beginning of the Star Wars references.

And yes, that is the LotR reference. Or at least the first one...
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Probably the last for the day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The doors sealed from without just as Sara reached them. She kicked them in spite, and Liam cursed. “Override from the console?” They hiked back in the direction they came from, and while Sara hacked, he paced. “Come on, we have to find Verand!”

“We don’t even know if this is the way,” Sara stated, holding onto the last remnants of her calm. “And be quiet, unless you want to do this yourself. Hacking takes time, without SAM.”

“Well, something has to go right!” Liam paced. “You take a risk for the right reason, it’s supposed to work!” If he repeated that phrase one more time, she would space him. He was suited up – he’d probably live for at least a few hours while she cleared the fucking ship of pirates and rescued hapless lo-consuls. He punched a cargo bin. “Ugh.” He checked his glove for damage, and then started to reload his rifle, clicking bullets into his magazine with impatient ire.

“You’re fine, we’re fine,” Sara clenched her teeth as she finished the hack, speaking more to herself than Liam. “Stay on task, and…” she snapped her neck up at the noise of something connecting, but the doors stayed locked.

Instead the slimy voice of that bastard Raider – what was his name again, Calot? That didn’t sound particularly Angaran - chuckled. “You turn on each other so…”

“Fuck you,” without looking, she shot the console before he could finish, glaring at Liam and breathing through her nose. “We’re not turning on anybody. Got it? We have a shitty plan to rescue people, and we’re fucking doing it. Any questions?” She hefted her gun into her other hand, balancing the weight, her eyes shifting between Drack and Liam.

She wasn’t quite covering him with her weapon, but it was damn close. She didn’t bother to engage the safety, either. Liam lifted his hands up, very wisely. “Nope.”

“Good!” Her chest rose and fell, and her voice came out in a high hysterical whine. “I shot the console!” Drack laughed at her sudden panic. “Think he’ll be mad?” She asked in a smaller voice, and clicked the safety on apologetically, as she tried to temper her murderous impulses.

Liam shrugged, “What more could he do?”

Drack sighed, “You had to say it?”

Alarms blared once more, and Sara didn’t even have time to cuss as the cargo bay doors cracked, hissed and vented into open space, debris flashing past. Her gun and her anger whooshed away with the atmosphere as she grabbed at anything she could find.

She started laughing, clenching to the bay door hinge with cramping fingers.
Karma was a bitch.

Chapter End Notes

Hate to leave them hanging, but... heh, I couldn't resist the cliffhanger.
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sara’s lighter weight and lesser strength blew her out first, and Liam let go a fraction of a second later.

No fucking way was he going to lose her now.

She’d barely managed to grasp the edge of the door hinge. Liam grabbed on next to her, reaching over to brace her, let her get a better grip, before he realized she was… how could she be laughing? Worse, he was, too, her infectious chortle something impossible to resist. Over the crackling radiation in his helmet comm, he heard her ask, “Liam… Hold me?”

They’d both gone mad.

He snorted, “Now you ask?” Drack landed next to them like a ton of bricks and he hauled the Krogan up to where he could grab on with his shorter arms, thanking whoever was listening for all those pushups. “Not great timing, there, Ryder.”

“Never claimed to have great timing!” She was insane, laughing at a time like this, and he was just as crazy, enjoying every minute with her, even knowing she was going to come down on him like a ton of bricks later. Assuming they lived. Big assumption, there. Even Drack wasn’t ruining this… Why the hell did this feel like a date? And strangely, as he thought about it, every single major mission they had been on together, ever since Habitat 7, was colored backward to a rosy hue, and embellished with her blue hair, goofy smile, sassmouth, and earnest expressions.

They were gonna die out there together, and there was still nowhere else he’d rather be. This was how he was going to die – and oddly, he was just fine with that. Dying with her made it all worth it.

He opened his mouth, figuring that he might as well tell her so, at least once, no matter the audience, only to be interrupted.

“You folks need a hand?” A familiar voice crackled through their comms, breaking him out of his reverie.

“Augie?” The relief in Liam’s voice was like clean water, “You came!” Sara crinkled up her nose at him, and mouthed ‘Augie?’ Her body shook with her continued laughter, and he shook his head at her to warn her to save her strength. “You have timing!”

“Sorry it took us so long,” the man laughed. “We would have come in sooner, but we didn’t know how we could help. Settlers aren’t soldiers.”

“It’s fucking good to hear your voice.” His whole body felt lighter, even while he still struggled to hold on.

“Likewise.” Bradley consulted with one of his engineers. “ Took us a while to figure out how we could help. Damn it, Kosta, we’re scientists, not soldiers. But a wreck of a ship with bad shielding? We’ve got engineers, son! Let it rip, boys!” A sparkle of EMP energy rippled across the skin of the ship, and brought the shields down. “Ooh, power surge! This beast does not like being prodded! Hold onto something,” the man warned. Liam pulled Sara tight against him, and ignored her stare while he thanked whoever their helmets hid his reaction.
A little more atmosphere, a couple fewer helmets, and he could have kissed her – better than any kiss in any vid, ever. His muscles shook with the strain of holding her closer.

He couldn’t lose her now. That would keep him hanging on as long as he needed to.

He couldn’t tell if the throbbing in his ears was his heartbeat or the ship’s protesting core. But she wrapped her own arm around him, the other still attached to the ship. Had he ever seen her eyes so wide?

“Closing the doors!” Bradley announced, and a few seconds later, Sara pushed inward, releasing his waist, as Liam felt the hatch catch the soles of his boots. Was it so easy for her to let go? His own arm felt too empty, now. “Took out the gravity, folks. It’ll be a freefall in there, until we figure it out, or they do. Whoever gets there first.” He paused, “Take your time, fellas.”

One of the engineers laughed over the static, and claimed, “I’m an engineer, not a magician, Bradley!”

Sara’s giggle settled in his brain and took root. “’The enemy’s gate is down!’” She called out before she leapt into zero-g, twisting away into a graceful parabola so she could shove herself out feet first.

Liam groaned, “You’re an even bigger geek than I thought, Pathfinder. Orson Scott Card? *Ender’s Game*?” He watched her, holding on lazily to a bulkhead as she floated free.

“Blame Dad! He gave me the first book. Liked *Ender’s Shadow* better. Bean was a better character. Less whiny. Scott disagrees, but he would. Fucking tragic hero, that’s my brother. I think Dad named him after him, but I can’t prove it… SAM? You there yet?” She twisted gracefully in midair.

“I have no record of the reasons your parents named your brother ‘Scott’, Sara.” SAM’s voice sounded clearer, at least.

“Well, I’m no fucking ‘princess’, so it’s not the meaning,” she sassed back at the AI.

“Tell me you didn’t make it through *Speaker of the Dead*. I crapped out at *Xenocide*.” Liam braced himself against a bulkhead, unable to take his eyes off her as she tumbled through the air, spinning slowly in a horizontal position.

“No can do. Sorry!” She called out, “Read all of them. Even took a little sidetrack in order to read philosophers afterward. Went through a whole ‘deep thinkers period’, thanks to Card. I don’t recommend thinking that much about genocide in high school.”

“I think I hate your Dad. He fucking ruined your childhood.”

“Prepared me for first contact, though! And the Alliance loved me working with Prothean researchers. Until they didn’t. Fuck ‘em all. This is better than all that crap we left behind.” She laughed, and did a slow flip. “Come on, Kosta, come have some fun with me.”

“What is this, a book club? Fucking kids,” Drack groaned, “zero-g makes me want to hurl, we’ve got a whole ship of pirates to get through, people to rescue, and you two are…” Sara grabbed Liam’s hand and together they rotated slowly, twisting in midair. “Dancing?”

“We’re pretending to be in a production of Peter Pan,” Sara announced all too clearly. Bradley laughed outright over the open line. “Pirates and everything, and Tinkerbell’s locked up with the Lost Boys.”
“Peter Who?” Drack grumped.

Liam grinned at the Krogan through his helmet. “Just having some fun, old man.”

“Let’s do a lift, like figure skating!” Sara enthused, and shoved herself off from a corner in his direction. “Cutting Edge, here I come!”

Liam laughed outright, and caught her, holding her above his head. “Nah, wrong film. ‘Nobody puts Baby in a corner.’”

“Now we’re talking!” She arched her back, feeling his hands hold her steady as they flipped end over end, until she had to shove against the ceiling/floor to shift down to see him. “I think Dad had a copy of that one. Think we could do some Dirty Dancing?”

“Fuck, yeah, why not?” He pulled her down to meet him, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, looking at his lips through his visor, humming Time of My Life. “Great music in there, anyway. I’d drink a beer and watch it with you. As long as I can make fun of your early crush on a long dead actor.”

“The Turian version is better by far. Reach and flexibility…”

“Turning gravity back on. Prepare to flip,” Bradley warned over the comms. “The engineers tell me things are going sideways.”

Liam tapped into his Omni-tool, so he could whisper in her ear, rather than broadcast it. “I’m holding you now. Sorry it took a while.”

“Never let go?” Her voice teased, but wobbled at the end.

Liam groaned, but tightened his arm while reaching out for a strut to brace them both. “Really, Ryder?”

“This ship’s going down, right?”

“Damn straight. But we’re taking the entire hold with us. No casualties from the subdecks. No mums telling their babies fairy tales while the cabin fills with water.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” She clanked her helmet against his for a brief moment, before their new world flipped upside down and sideways to the sound of her joyous laughter. She let go of him, landing in a half crouch, still laughing.

He’d give a lot to make her laugh like that every day for… forever. Shit.

Sorry, Mum. Best of intentions, and all that. But I guess I take after Dad on this one.

Now the only problem was how the hell to tell her before they both died horribly.

Chapter End Notes

I’m going to miss some of the references in here. If I do, point them out, and I’ll confirm them.
But there's Peter Pan, Dirty Dancing, Star Trek (yay, Bones!), that really cheesy ice skating movie known as 'Cutting Edge', Titanic, and... what did I miss?

Oh, Orson Scott Card. I have a particular love for him because he wrote a Dragon Age comic, as well as his Sci Fi stuff. 'Ender's Game' is a modern Sci Fi classic.

lol I'm so sorry. Bioware should never have admitted Star Wars exists in the Mass Effect universe. It's all their fault. Right. Another chapter anyone? We haven't finished the loyalty mission yet...
Chapter 43

It was completely inappropriate, given everything that was at risk, but despite that, Sara couldn’t remember the last time she’d had this much fun. With the ship turned sideways, even the jumping didn’t phase her. It was more like a funhouse than a Kett ship – and even the Raiders popping up every so often to fire at them couldn’t ruin her good mood. Even though she’d lost her favorite assault rifle.

Liam would catch her, if her jumpjets failed or the crates they were leaping up to slipped at the wrong time. And she enjoyed SAM’s confusion.

“Floors are not walls,” the AI protested, inflexibly. “It is next to impossible to predict where you should go based on existing maps.”

“They are now, mate,” Liam managed, boosting himself up to meet her on the next level. They locked eyes briefly, but she had to look away. “You all right?” He murmured low.

“Just fine,” she assured him, and turned to boost her way over to the grate. “Stay there!” She called out. “I’m going to bust this vent open.” She fired off a shockwave, and it shattered into tiny pieces.

Liam leaped up to join her in the next minute. “That’s… my girl?” There was a question in his voice, and Sara frowned at him, and didn’t answer. He winced.

She bit her lip at what that indicated, and then winked, “Just try to keep up, Kosta?” Laughing, she jumped and grabbed for the next ledge, hoisting herself up.

She heard him curse, followed by the popping sound that meant he was right behind her, and Drack’s muttered imprecations about damn kids. “SNIPER!” She yelled out, and hit the deck as the Sharpshooter’s laser sight focused on her.

“Shit,” she heard Liam burst sideways, scooting behind a too-small crate. “Ideas, Pathfinder?”

She snickered, noting the webbing holding down a sagging trio of crates on the wall/floor just above the enemy. “Still think I can’t hit anything?” She holstered her pistol with a click, and slung down her sniper rifle. “A hundred credits says three shots or less.”

“You’re on,” Liam laughed.

She fired, and a cable snapped loose. She reloaded, and aimed, her sights magnifying the target again. “That’s one,” she grinned, and breathed out, focusing, and firing with empty lungs. “Two?”

“Two,” Drack had caught up. “That’s the way, Kid. Nice and easy. No pressure.”

“One more, Sara,” she whispered, and lined up the shot. Her sights shifted with the pounding of her heart, and she controlled her breath, and fired. The last cable snapped, and the crates toppled, burying her prey. “Take that, Liam!”

“Shit,” Liam pulled up his Omni-Tool and tapped in a sequence. “You win.”

“I always do.” Sara shifted upright, and accepted Drack’s hand to climb to her feet.

“Wish Andromeda had something like a carnival,” Liam chuckled. “You could win me a giant-ass stuffed bear.”
“Nah,” Sara wrinkled her nose. “Those things are rigged.” She winked, “But SAM could hack the targets. If, you know, I was allowed to cheat.”

Liam was quiet for just a minute, “Maybe just the once,” he admitted, and then waved her ahead. “Onward and upward?”

“Are we doing C.S. Lewis now?” She cocked her hip out sideways. “Because if this is Narnia, Tann is the White Witch, hands down.”

“Focus, Kids,” Drack grumbled. “Verand?”

Sara sighed, “Yes, Dad.”

“Not your Dad,” the Krogan complained.

“Forgive me, you sounded just like him for a minute there.” The crates below started to shift. “Shit, is he still alive?” She pulled out a grenade and turned back to see Liam doing the same thing. “Balls in holes?”

His laugh rang through the corridor. “Balls in holes,” he agreed, and together they jumped and dropped the weapons in unison, Drack’s cussing following them upward, and through the adjoining corridor.
“Shit,” Liam whispered, eyes worried, staring at the consoles, all of which were showing the same picture, of captured slaves. “SAM? Those are humans.”

“Yes, Kosta. It appears that the Raiders were already targeting Initiative colonists.”

“Changes nothing,” Sara reminded them both. “We’re here for Verand, but we’ll get everybody else out, too, right?” She’d picked up a new rifle at some point off a dead body, and was furiously reloading it as fast as her fingers could move. “Hopefully this thing will hit the broad side of a shuttle.”

Bradley’s voice piped in, “Shuttles are ready for evac, Pathfinder.” He paused, “Don’t hit my shuttle with that thing? It’s… special.”

“I knew there was no way that was stock,” Liam laughed. “I want details, Augie.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bradley put him off. “Maybe over cards. I’m too old for this calvary to the rescue shit.”

“I’ll believe that when you do.”

Sara sighed and slammed the spare clip into her belt. “All right, I’m ready. Let’s get ‘em out. SAM… do you have enough access to release the prisoners?”

“I believe that I can manage, if you can get me close enough to these terminals. Sending navpoints now,” Sara tapped at her Omni-tool. “You will need to maintain proximity. And I should warn you, there are more unusual lifeforms on board this ship. Adhi, and I believe an Einoch, from the size of the heat signature.”

“Well, shit. Dinosaurs in Space,” she sighed. “Wouldn’t have minded skipping that episode, but it is what it is, I guess. Okay, SAM. Let’s get started.” She dashed over to the terminal, and the doors swished open.

“I’ve got your six,” Liam assured her, and crouched behind the tumbled crates. Drack roared and charged towards the nearest four targets. “And Drack has your nine through three?”

Sara laughed, and nudged him, grinning. “You just like watching my ass. Nobody better?”

“Let’s see if you still think that when we get out of here in one piece.”

She frowned at him, and clicked the safety off her pistol. “Don’t move,” she ordered. She shot over his shoulder, hitting a Raider in the head. “Talk about it later?” She asked. “Maybe when we don’t have smugglers trying to kill us.”

“Um, yeah, later.” He stifled his guilt. “Raiders first, then we… talk. Preferably without guns in our hands.” His stomach knotted tight, and he lined up his sight on a sharpshooter. “Sniper on your five.” He fired and the Raider went down.

“Nice shot,” Sara complimented and then pandemonium descended, in the form of half-domesticated Adhi.

He clenched his teeth, and concentrated on her defense.
He didn’t deserve her.
Chapter 45

Calot wasn’t playing. Seems the bastard was sending everyone and everything he had left at them in wave after wave, trying to – well, Liam wasn’t sure what the pirate was trying to protect. Maybe the ship itself - but that was hardly worth saving. Especially after the Pathfinder finished with it.

It didn’t matter to Sara, though. “Superhero landing!” She called out before slamming her Omni-blade into the neck of the Einoch beneath her. It was official, he had never seen this side to her before. Sara Ryder was made for heroic rescue missions going apeshit wrong like she wasn’t made for playing nice with Tann or arguing colonial affairs or stressing out over which group of colonists to unfreeze next. Now that Verand and the colonists – and that was a shock - were safe, she was outright playing – counting up Raider and Adhi bodies with Drack like she thought she was a Legolas with bright blue hair. “Sixty-five, Drack!”

Or maybe she was Gimli. He didn’t want to stereotype… and Drack was way ahead. “Don’t make me laugh, Ryder, you’re messing up my aim!”

“If that’s all it takes, Andromeda’s in serious trouble,” she whirled around, just in time to see the barrier around Calot fall. “Shield’s down around Pirate Captain Asshole, Number One!”

“Is that supposed to be me? How did you get to be Picard in this scenario? My accent’s closer!”

“Drack’s Worf. Weapon collection. Don’t argue with your Captain, Number One, or I’ll demote you and promote Cora!”

“Who’s Cora, then? The Counselor?!” Liam gave up, and tapped his Omni-tool twice, “Overload’s ready… Captain.”

“Dunno, but SAM’s Data! And it’s Combo time!” Sara chirped, and tossed her biotics at the asshole. “Your turn…” The lightening arced elegantly from just behind her. “And he’s down,” she grinned and threw herself at him. He staggered back with her exuberance, and she let go. “I’m buying the beer this time, Liam. Because damn it, this was fun!” Behind her, Drack threw a grenade at the man’s remains. “What the hell, Drack? Don’t waste those!”

“You’re the one who made me bring the grenades! I never get to have any fun.” The Krogan stomped off, sulking, and she turned back to Liam, eyes still bright.

“What, really?” Liam’s voice broke. “Even when it all went… sideways and upside down? Literally?”

“Fuck, yes!” Sara’s face glowed with exertion and her hands shook with what had to be adrenaline. “This is the most fun I’ve had since I defrosted! Even driving the Nomad isn’t this cool!”

“I am not going to say ‘anytime’.” But he laughed, helplessly. “I don’t know what to do with you, Sara Ryder. I thought I had you figured out.”

“Just keeping you guessing.” She scrambled across the hold towards the exit. “Let’s get out of here before the ship blows up just because we touched it.”

“I can’t argue with that.” His stomach twisted with the knowledge of what he knew came next, watching her stumble away over broken tech and salvage.

It would never be harder to watch someone walk away. “SAM? What are my odds?”
But SAM didn’t answer. Too much interference? Liam holstered his own pistol and followed her, trying to figure out what to say.

He gave up soon enough – nothing he could say would make this better. "Don't suppose we could tow it back to Eos? A little weekend project?"

At least he got to hear her laugh one more time.
The two of them found themselves in the limited space of Bradley’s shuttle while the engineers fought with Kallo over where to meet up with the rest of the Pathfinder crew. Apparently, the pilot was unwilling to bring the Tempest anywhere close to Calot’s ship – Gil insisted it could blow up at any minute. “Oh my god, there’s hope,” Sara joked, “this has to be the first time Kallo’s listened to Gil about anything, right?”

Liam managed a short laugh as Sara pulled her helmet off to breathe gunk-free air. She flushed under his stare.

“What? Do I have grease on my face?” She rubbed at her cheek. “The way some of those generators were leaking after being hung upside down… at least the armor’s black. I’ll clean it up later.”

Liam struggled for a moment with whether or not just to ask her straight out if she was dumping him now, or later, when she could do it without the audience. He chickened out, and quipped, instead. “*Star Wars.* You quoted *Star Wars* to an Angaran raider captain. ’Weapon malfunction?’ Really, Ryder? Did you think Verand was playing the role of Princess Leia? Wait… you actually said, “Hold me,” when we were getting spaced… which part do you think you’re cast in?”

“I’m not a princess,” She snorted, “*A New Hope* is a classic, Liam. Everyone’s seen the original trilogy. Except Jaal… maybe. How far have you two gotten in your cultural exchange? I’m invited the next time you end up naked. I hope you remember that.” She looked up at him through her eyelashes. “Hell, I hope I’m invited every time you end up naked.”

But Liam wasn’t allowing himself to get sidetracked. Not this time. “I caught ‘Deadpool’… and I know I heard you yelling ‘POW’ a couple of times, like you were fucking Adam West - while you were killing Adhi and raiders with your Krogan Hammer… interspersed with you and Drack counting like Gimli and Legolas… Tolkien? Really? I mean, fuck, you’re…” he looked away, and down at his feet. They were the wrong words. He couldn’t find the fucking words. He needed to say he was sorry, that he’d change the way he did things, that he’d been so scared that his fuck-up had put her – and other people – in danger, that…

“Can it, you two.” Drack’s voice cut into his dark thoughts like an Asari Sword. “If the pheromones are any stronger in here my quads will start shrinking.”

“Shouldn’t it be the opposite, old man?” Sara teased, tilting her head sideways.

“Not when it’s you two. Hell, I don’t like to think about my granddaughter getting it on, and she’s old enough to start a family, I guess. Give it another fifty years. At least.”

“You must really hate thinking about Salarians having sex.”

“They lay clutches, Ryder. Just like Krogans. Didn’t you get biology lessons in your Pathfinder training?”

“I didn’t pay attention. Not interested in Salarians that way. And the eggs have to get fertilized somehow, right? How does that work, old man?”

“Take a break from watching Hanar porn and watch something educational, if you’re so damn curious,” Drack sassed. “I know what you two get up to in that glorified closet…”

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**Chapter 46**

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“No, you don’t,” Liam muttered, still wondering how to fix that problem. Hell, he hadn’t even kissed her again… not really. He knew all too well how that would end. Kissing Sara Ryder was more of a rush than creeper or Red Sand could ever be. If he kissed her now, he’d never fucking stop. And she ought to drop his arse like a hot coal.

He should tell her that, but… not in front of Drack and all these rescued people… and not when the girl of his dreams was talking alien sex with an ancient Krogan. He didn’t want to miss this conversation.

Choices, choices.

“I didn’t say I never think about aliens, just not Salarians. Turian voices are hot as hell. I’d fuck a Krogan, for sure. Got any grandsons?” Sara waggled her eyebrows at Drack.

“Knock it off, Ryder, or I’m gonna throw up. And stay away if Kesh does have kids. My great-grandsons aren’t for you, you cradle-robbing pervert.”

Liam gave up and laughed until his sides and head hurt. It had been that kind of day.

The shuttle moved so much slower than the Tempest, and Liam was full onto bugging out when Sara finally grabbed his hand and pulled him to his feet. “Come on,” she flashed a half smile at him, “We need to talk.” She twisted his fingers through hers. “I know a spot.”

Her spot was a little indentation of a storage niche, just out of sight of the other passengers, occupied by a stack of two ammo crates, held down by netting. “Gotta thing for closets?” He shouldn’t be flirting. She should be yelling. She should be informing him that he’d lost his place on the Team, and that they would be dropping him off on Eos permanently. Maybe Augie give him a place out of the kindness of his heart… but Sara wasn’t looking too serious. She lifted an eyebrow and drew him closer.

“I’ve got a thing for you, maybe, and a thing for privacy, definitely,” Her eyes narrowed as she hoisted herself up on top of the crates. “Why, problems? Would you rather I plant one on you in front of a roomful of strangers? Didn’t figure you were one for PDAs.”

He couldn’t resist – even if it was just a goodbye kiss. He cupped her face, and touched his lips to hers. She hummed, and pulled him even closer. He lost it for a moment, in the softness of her mouth, and the pull of her tongue. He kissed her like he’d wanted to do since they were blown out of the cargo hold, and how he wanted to when they were ‘dancing’, pouring everything he couldn’t manage to say – regret and idiocy and love - and finally jerked back with a groan, remembering where they were. “Shit, Liam,” she laughed, low and sexier than he had any right to deserve. “That felt like you’d been saving it up. What for?”

“For being amazing,” he whispered, and rested his forehead against hers, despairing at any attempt at apologizing. “You’re…” he shook his head and kissed her again, cupping the back of her head and leaning her back, further out of sight.

Behind them, someone whooped as they caught a glimpse, and he backed off, face burning. “Shit, I’m sorry, Sara. Pathfinder, I mean… I…”
“No apology necessary,” Sara grinned, and tried to start over, hands drifting to his arse. “Why do you think I dragged you back here?”


“I’m not stupid, Liam. And I am pissed off,” she leaned forward and rested her head against his chest. “I’m just more fucking relieved we’re – you’re - all right. I don’t think I’ve ever been so scared.”

“At me? ‘Cause it should be at me. I’m the one who got us, you, Verand, and the entire Initiative into this…”

“At you?” She interrupted, tilting her head while she thought, “Not so much. You tried to make a difference, Liam. I try my best every day, but I’m surrounded by people who have given up. They’ve settled into their mediocre lives here. And you know what? I’m not satisfied with mediocre! I want… more. You didn’t come all this way for everyone to be outsiders? Well, I didn’t come all this way for a second-class version of life.” She hitched him forward by his belt loops. “And I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at the assholes who are running things, the ones that won’t let us get to know each other! The only thing you did wrong is not running it by me first.”

“Um…” Liam laughed against her lips, her breath close enough to taste like her. “You’re getting to know me just fine.”

“Wasn’t talking about you. Was talking about the Angara. And I don’t know about you. Not enough,” she whispered and kissed him again.

He forgot to protest, groaning into her mouth while she leaned herself back like she intended him to climb up and join her… he pulled away, eyes desperate. “Shit. Sara…”

“Don’t talk,” she murmured, “Just…” she cupped his face and pulled him down. “Please. Make me forget this crap day?”

“Here?! There isn’t even a door!”

She muttered something dire under her breath, and let him go. “What the hell do you want, Liam?” He opened his mouth to explain, but she shook her head. “You know what? When you figure it out, you know where to find me.” She left, before he could stop her, and there was clapping from the colonists as he stumbled after her. The Angarans whispered to each other from where they huddled in despairing balls.

Drack ambled over and slapped him on the back. “C’mere, Kid. Drack’s got some advice on women for you.”

Liam leaned up against the side of the shuttle, watching her until she disappeared into Augie’s cockpit. “I just didn’t want to jump her in another closet. I wanted to get some things out there, first. Big things. The Biggest.”

“Another closet?’ Yeah, Cora owes me fifty creds.” Drack snorted, “That was your first mistake - okay, tenth. At least. If a woman wants to bang you in a closet, you let her if you want to. And I know you want to. Human pheromones are disgusting. And that advice is tripled if she’s carrying a Hammer. You don’t want one of those against your quads. Pair. Whatever.”

He glanced at the Krogan, “You gonna tell me how you know that, old man?”
“Nope. My broken hearts die with me,” Drack sighed, “But trust me – I know this. What that woman wants isn’t anything like what you think. Most men can’t work their minds around that way – and every single damn female is different. So when she tells you something, listen. Take her at her word. Sara’s not going to play coy. She’s got this nasty sarcastic wall up – who doesn’t? But under that sarcasm lies truth.” Drack shook himself, the spines of his armor hitting the wall with the movement. “And a woman like that tends to get what she wants. Best bet for success, be the one who offers it to her.”

Liam lifted his eyes and glanced around at the hold, seeing something new. “Hey… look at that,” he pointed with his elbow, a little scared to draw attention to a minor miracle, lest he jinx it somehow.

“What?” Drack frowned, “What am I seeing?”

“They’re mingling,” Liam grinned. “No shit.” The colonists were sitting next to the Angarans, and a dozen little conversations about Eos and the Milky Way were popping up like flowers. “That’s our Pathfinder, for you. She did it, all right.”

Drack snorted, “Nah.” He smiled, showing all his teeth. “This one’s on you. Good job, Kid.” He slapped his back and Liam fell forward. “Now, do some thinking about what your girl really wants out of you, and then go get her. I guarantee, she’s waiting. And hopefully you’ll never figure out how hard a Hammer can hit your soft bits.”

Liam watched the Krogan leave. “I didn’t know Krogans had soft bits!” He called out after him.

“I’ll have Lexi forward you something educational!”
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

Let's get a little sappy.

NSFW. No guarantees on the next chapter though.

Sara had quit avoiding him about two hours after he’d put the brakes on, casting little apologetic glances his way first, and a sheepish, “Sorry,” shortly after, as soon as she found a minute where he was mostly alone. “Lost it there. Didn't mean to push.”

He’d smiled, and told her “No worries,” but he hadn’t touched her, choosing to take Drack’s advice about thinking first, figuring out what she wanted. And what he wanted. What he wanted was a hell of a lot easier – but it all hinged on her.

He’d come up with a few things: peace (They were working on it, dammit), a place for the Milky Way colonists (Ditto), and… something a little more difficult to come by, but a lot easier to define with a three-letter word. One that explained ‘why him’ exactly, instead of anyone else.

They ended up rendezvousing with the Tempest on Eos – the closest habitable planet, and luckily, one supplied with the crucial elements for what he needed. Flat ground, sand enough to draw a few lines in, lots of pipe to make goals, and…

“A soccer ball?”

He tossed the spare ball in his gloved hands, prepared to step in as keeper, if necessary. “Football,” he corrected, “90% of the universe can’t be wrong, Pathfinder.”

She rolled her eyes. “You know what I meant.” She grinned at him sideways. “It’s wonderful, the way you never stop trying to build your bridge,” Sara leaned towards him, and nudged him with her hip, a long press of her body against his. His hands tightened on the ball to keep from grabbing her right there. She’d let him, but the words had to come first – and they’d distract the players, if he let himself get carried away. His heart thudded in his ears, and he could feel the pulse in his suddenly two-tight gloves. “Everyone needed this. Thanks.” Her eyelashes did things to his stomach. Crazy, dizzy things. He’d be sending her another email for sure, this one titled, ‘Feelings’.

At least if the rest of this day went right. Shouldn’t something go right the first time?

Of course, this had gone right, hadn’t it? Sort of… ‘Community’ was sitting in his draft box, waiting for him to be brave enough to send it, along with about four of its brothers, each more effusive than the last. They were all wrong. He couldn’t seem to get them right.

But it didn’t matter, standing here. Not as long as he finally got it out. “Yeah? Finally feels like I quit trying too hard.” First things first. Confessions. “Even using the Pathfinder like a symbol.” He glanced down at her, meaning to look right back, but her eyes held his attention away from the game. “I’m sorry. You rally people like a champ, but when it’s life or death, is that friendship at the end, or relief?” Sara was silent, looking back away. Fuck, he had to get this out. “I get it now. Why just getting together is so important.” He looked back at the game, just in time to shout out
“Check the play!” The refs blew their whistle, and he ordered, “Free kick for charging.”

He turned back, lips dry as the sand beneath their feet, but ready to change the subject. “No charge for matchmaking.” That had to be the stupidest segue he’d ever made, but she glanced up and then away again, cheeks rosy. “I couldn’t do any of this without you.” Those eight words said everything and nothing. “All this time, I’ve been fighting to try to deserve my place on the Team, deserve… you.”

“You’re sweet, Kosta.” That sounded like she was going to let him down soft. He’d deserve that, hands down.

But it wasn’t a ‘get lost’, either. He kicked the sand, impatient with himself again. “No, I mean it.” His hands shook, palms sweaty in his gloves. “We’re the same about a lot of things. So… what about ‘us’?” She blinked at him, with a small smile. He smiled back, wider.

Her eyes opened all the way. “Wait, you’re serious?”

“Is Drack gonna foul in about five seconds?” He cleared his throat and backtracked, “Hey, it’s all right, if it’s just ‘We used to flirt once.’ But if you’re serious, I’d like to be serious. What you’re doing deserves it. You deserve it.” She wasn’t even blinking. “I mean, if the door’s still open, anyway. I just… I’m scared to lose you, but you’re not mine to worry about. You and me – we’re all screwed up and weird. I just know… I don’t want to look at you with ‘what-ifs’.”

Her face turned as hard as Voeld’s ice, and he had to tighten his hands on the ball again, so that he didn’t raise his hands automatically in defense while he waited for her to dump him. But she surprised him, instead. She kept doing that – keeping him on his toes and she snapped, “Door’s wide open, Liam.” Her lips trembled, and the ice fell away, an avalanche of words, tears in her eyes. “But, if we’re going to be a thing, no pedestals. The whole cluster wants a piece of the Pathfinder.” She looked away, back at the game, before touching his arm. “Make ‘us’ about ‘us’?” He opened his mouth to reply, but she kept going, “I’m easily impressed, Liam. All kidding aside, you’re doing just fine with soccer, beer, and movies. You don’t have to kill pirates for me, or try to be some sort of diplomat. Though… you’re kind of good at that.” She lifted her chin. “Look at them.” The Angarans were kicking collective Milky Way ass, but… that was good, too. They had way better teamwork – maybe they could all learn something. “You know, the Top Gear guys used to do this with hatchbacks.” She paused, “That’s my kind of soccer. The kind that doesn’t involve sand in my crack. But I suppose the Nomad would pop the ball, right?” She was babbling, now, nervous, pulling on her ponytail.

Maybe he could calm her down? “It’s football. And Sara Ryder?” He grinned, and spoke low when she turned back to him. “It’s about us.” He was treated to the brilliant smile she rarely gave anyone, and his heart stopped – only to have Drack barrel into them both, knocking him and his girl on their arses. Sara laughed, and kicked helplessly at the Krogan until he got up, winking at Liam like he’d done something smart.

That arse. He did it on fucking purpose.

The refs called out the foul, and awarded the ball to the Angaran team. Liam scrambled up, offered his hand, and she took it, standing closer than he could ever remember her being in public, and then turning her back, to lean against him, pulling his arm around her waist.

It was an answer. Bloody hell, he could cheer.

He leaned his cheek against her hair, smelling strawberries. “Switch up. You ready to get in the game?” Liam asked, voice hoarse, trying to get back on track.
Sara looked up at him, barely smiled, eyes hooded, and backed away toward the Tempest, one eyebrow lifted in unmistakable invitation.

Shit, he’d be an idiot if he couldn’t tell what that meant. Liam drop-kicked the spare ball in his hand and followed her at an easy jog. They had more than enough players and refs anyway – and he’d vastly prefer what he hoped she had in mind.

And she had a point about the sand.
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

Still SFW, because of where I decided to break it off.

Don't worry, I don't fade to black in the next two (!) chapters. But for those of you who don't like the smut, you might want to just skip them entirely.

And yes, I'll be posting them shortly.

Sara couldn’t believe a single word she was hearing. One in five registered. Hopefully the important ones? ‘Matchmaking.’ ‘Us’. ‘Serious.’ ‘Doors.’ ‘Scared.’

Was this happening? Was he… shit, he was. That look she’d seen in his eyes back on Bradley’s shuttle, that hadn’t been ‘It’s not you, it’s me.’ It had been, ‘I fucking care about you too much to grope you in the back of Augie’s shuttle just out of sight of a dozen refugees.’ And a little bit, "I owe you an apology for turning your job title into a cause, among other things, and I can't kiss you until I do it."

She’d thought she was just coming on too strong – that she’d imagined his laughter and dopey looks as she goofed around while getting the job done. She figured he’d been totally turned off that she’d turned the shitshow into something that would make him smile… but again, she must have read him wrong. She could see the beads of sweat on his nose caused by her silence. She should say something, before he changed his mind.

But Lexi’s words rang in her ears, and she let herself become another kind of serious. If he was trying so hard to be upfront, she should try, too. “No pedestals, Liam. Make ‘us’ about ‘us’.” She slumped, defeated, watching him. “Everyone wants a piece of ‘the Pathfinder’. I don't want to be 'the Pathfinder' to you.”

His face was lighting up. “Sara Ryder, it's about ‘us’.” His voice... she'd never heard him sound like that, serious, sexy... and barely controlled.

She didn’t know this Liam, but she fucking wanted to. She was still embarrassed by her actions – but she was blaming that crazy impulse on the rush of pulling off that disastrous funhouse of a mission. She’d never felt so alive after – not in all her six hundred plus years.

This was a close second, though.

Or it was, until Drack knocked them both into the sand – deliberately, if she knew the Krogan. He could tell they were having a moment. Kicking sand in his face helped relieve her feelings a bit. But Drack's interference didn't matter, after Liam helped her up, and she took the opportunity to wrap his arm around her and lean up against him. She didn’t fucking care if anyone saw. The Team knew anyway – or would, soon enough.

The heat from his body seeped though the layers of their clothes, and his hand played with the hem of her jacket, like it wanted to slide up and underneath. She wanted to strip those damn gloves off with her teeth, and make him touch her everywhere.
Too soon? Possibly – especially since he was talking to her. “Switch up. Want to get in the game?”

She wanted to play something vastly different than soccer. Football. Whatever.

She turned, caught his eye, and backed away with something she hoped was an alluring dare in her eyes.

Sara could have cheered when he immediately dropkicked the ball, and started stripping off the gloves, smirking back at her like it was his idea.

“Come on, Kosta! Before they figure out we’re missing!” She turned to lead the way, the door to the cargo bay opening smoothly into the lower corridor, and then her own bedroom door already opened, possibly with SAM’s assistance, and closing behind him. She pulled him up against the wall, and had her arms and legs twined around his neck and waist almost before SAM locked the door.

“You know you deserve better than a tosser with less patience than a Krogan, right?” He laughed into her neck, as if he was pretty sure he knew the answer. “You deserve a fucking hero – someone right up there.” He kept working her neck with his mouth anyway, not waiting for another answer.

“No pedestals, Liam,” she panted in his ear. “Is this going to become a thing? I don’t want Blasto, or Batman, or… hell, Kosta, I’m not even looking for a Skywalker. Luke was a total space cadet with anger management issues, and look where it got him.”

“You’re enough Skywalker for both of us,” he pulled away, a line between his eyes that she didn’t like.

“I’m thinking I’m more Rogue One. One big mission, to turn around a lifetime of mediocrity?”

“Not if I can fucking help it.” He pulled away, just a little more, bracing his arm behind her head. “I hate vids that end with dying on a beach.”

“You? Hate a vid?” He didn’t laugh, so Sara grabbed at his chin, forcing him to look her in the eye. “Don’t you get it? If I’m Luke, you’re Han. Luke might have been the Jedi, but Han was the real essential personnel. Rebels were nothing without him. Until he joined up, they were struggling. When he tried to leave, they lost Hoth, and almost lost their General.”

“I don’t think Luke bent that way. Reading old slash fan fiction, Ryder?”

“The geek is strong in my family. My father had it, my mother had it, my brother has it… but that’s not what I meant, and you know it. You’re Han Solo. Cocky bastard, likes to fly by the seat of his pants in rough situations? Knows who to ask to get what he wants, gets the job done no matter what, wrenches his way around spaceships, best friend’s a dude from a different species two heads taller than him, knows half the people in the galaxy, shoots first, wears that damn jacket like he sleeps in it, and…”

“And manages to piss most everyone off just by being himself,” he laughed like he couldn’t help it, face glowing like she had just made all his dreams come true. It was a little… scary, both of them being this happy. It couldn’t last, right? She shoved the worry away. “All right, Sara. What do you want? A compliment like that and I’ll give you anything.”

“This. You. What we’re trying to have? Nothing more than that, for as long as it lasts. I want a man who will analyze the film version of Elcor ‘Hamlet’ to find the deeper meaning in the actor’s monotones. I want a man who inspires me to greatness by sending me aesthetics about everything from ‘Frontiers’ to the Angara.” She touched his cheek, “I want you, Liam.”
He choked and stared at her. “Fuck, you are perfect. And crazy.”

“Nowhere near perfect, and SAM swears I’m sane. I ask him all the time. I’m just... aware of what I have in front of me, and not inclined to take it for granted.” She tilted her head sideways and slipped away, towards her bed. “I want a man who’ll buy me drinks in every bar across the cluster, and claim that they’re free for Pathfinders, because he’s covering my tab the whole time. I want a guy who’ll slap my ass without thinking about my job title. I want a guy who will love me like Dad…” she stopped, not sure if she should say anything close to what she was thinking.

“Like dad loved mum?” Liam’s voice was thick, as he filled in the blank.

“You said your dad liked a happy mum.” Her voice shook. “Liam, do you think maybe… we could quit fooling around? That’s what you meant, right? When you said I deserved ‘serious’? I mean, I’ll understand if you need to take it slower, but I know what I want, and if you know what you want, then…”

“Fuck, yeah,” She was back his arms, and she was lost forever with his next words. “I’d do anything to make you happy… Sara.” A few more nuzzles against her neck, before he laughed in her ear, making her shiver and come out goosebumps, “Just… can we table the ‘mum’ part, for a bit? I know it’s important to repopulate, but… I’m not ready to screw up kids yet. Not without a car to help keep them in line. Picture my kids, before you answer. Least one of ‘em is going to put a fork in Andromeda’s equivalent of a socket, just because it looks like it’d fit.” He paused, “But we can call him ‘Sparkplug’ afterward, so that would be all right. And if he gets my hair, he’ll probably look like he did that anyway, for most of his childhood. Poor bastard.”

“I think the Pathfinder can pull a few strings on that front,” she wrinkled up her nose. “I’m not ready to mess up kids, either. No place on the Tempest for rugrats, anyway.” She kissed his neck, “Don’t think we’re slated for the breeding program yet. We’re in too high of demand. Gil's Jill probably knows the details, though, if you want me to find out sometime. But let's not worry about it now, right?”

Liam’s breath shuddered as Sara unzipped his jacket, and worked his t-shirt off over his head, trailing her fingers down his chest. “You sure about this? Me, I mean.”

Sara grinned, “Never seen you so worried. Are you sure about this? Me, I mean,” she mocked. “I keep thinking about Jaal… he’s so smooth, like an Angaran Don Juan. He wouldn’t be getting ready to shag you in your room, counting himself lucky to get this far. A bed wouldn’t be good enough for him. He’d arrange for a Aya waterfall, and maybe those glowy bugs on Havarl… wine before, maybe fruit for afters…” He paused, “We are going to shag in your room, right? I’m not reading this wrong?”

"Liam..." Sara wrapped her arms around his neck. “Blue butts aren’t my thing. Mind you, if there was a Krogan on board that wasn’t older than my upteenth great-grandfather… I’ve always been curious about quads. And you know how I feel about Hanar.” Sara bit her lip, feeling him laugh against her. “Nice chests, however…” she ran her hand down his again. “Holy Abs, Batman. You should never have let me see you without a shirt. Pure lust, plain and simple. I want this one against me.” She unzipped her own jacket and peeled it off, to let it fall behind her, leaving her in just her sports bra. “Pants off, Kosta.” She dared him, and dropped her own, revealing her thong. “Think happy thoughts, right?”

He’d never looked so vulnerable, unbuckling his low-slung belt and kicking the pants off. “Happy Sara, coming right up.” He stepped back towards her, nuzzling her cheek and breathing in her ear. He trailed a shaking hand up her thigh and cupped her arse, leaving more goosebumps behind. “I’m
plenty happy enough to fly, no pixie dust needed.” And then his mouth was back on hers, and the world dropped away.
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

The first of two NSFW chapters.

She shut off his worries with another kiss – and he was a little too excited about the possibility of that becoming a regular thing. It had been months since the last time he touched her, but his hand on the curve of her ass felt like it fucking belonged there. She rocked up on her toes, encouraging him – she should know better - but he picked her up and carried her over to the bed, dropping her hard enough to bounce before crawling over her, knowing he was grinning like an idiot. She shimmied up to the headboard, stretching, and hit her speakers a couple of times until a song with a decent beat pounded out of the speakers. “Good call,” grunted Liam and kissed her, hard. “Maybe it will drown us out if they come back before you’re finished.”

“Not if I can help it.” Sara stripped her out of her bra and tossed it in the direction of her couch.

“Shit,” she rolled back underneath him to wriggle out of her underwear, obviously driven by a one track mind. “I can’t… I can’t even,” he groaned, as she looped her thumbs into his shorts and shifted them down, grabbing his balls on the way like she fucking owned them.

Hell, if this was serious, maybe she did. Liam couldn’t say he minded, but, “Don’t touch me too much. I’ve… been thinking about this since - shit, since the last time, and…”

“Gonna misfire?” She laughed, and bent down to hover over his mouth, pulling her hair out so that it fell around her face. “You’re not that young, Liam.”

“Youth has nothing to do with it. Your being here right now? That’s it. End of story, if you get hands on.”

“Knock it off, Kosta.” She shimmied down and licked him deliberately. “You know you want me to touch you everywhere. You’re not convincing anyone.”

“I can’t lie to you,” He laughed and shoved his shorts free with the heel of his foot. As soon as he was free of that last bit of clothing, she was back on him. He saw his chance, and rolled her over, but she was one up on him - her hands cupped around his arse, squeezing.

That was hers, too, apparently. He choked out a small laugh and stretched to kiss her. “God, I love your ass,” she muttered against his mouth before she bit his lip.

“So you are a bum girl,” Liam managed, “Good to know. More squats, fewer pushups.” She wrapped her legs around him and arched, sliding him along. “Sweet Baby Jesus, Sara.”

“Come on, already, if you’re up for it.”

“Quit using British slang. It sounds all wrong when you-” She pulled him down, and kissed him quiet, and he lost the plot entirely. He gathered her leg up and rolled against her and she hummed. “You’re ready, then?”

“Yeah,” he slid inside, trying to be gentle. “Faster, Liam. If Habitat 7 couldn’t keep me dead…” she
gasped with his sudden movement, “Not going to break…” The bed banged against the window behind it, with the force of his thrust, and she shrieked with laughter. He almost lost it at the sound, so he stopped, so that he could store the picture of her away forever. His Sara, laid back, tits free of confinement and skin glowing with the orange Eos sunset, in vivid contrast with her bright blue hair.

“God, this view,” he groaned, looking at her and bending his neck to reach her tits. “Can’t get enough…” He bit, still gently, and sucked, hard, curling his tongue around the tip of the left.

She clutched the back of his head, “Eos or me?”

“I’m not looking out the window, Sara. Do you know how hard it is not to look in the shower? Don’t tell me that you wouldn’t have been all, ‘My eyes are up here, Kosta.’”

“You weren’t the only one. Move already!” Sara wriggled, and chuckling at her impatience, Liam stroked her. She shut her eyes, voice breathy as he found the right spot. “Wouldn’t have minded. I rubbed myself against you, didn’t I?”

He stopped, stunned with the disclosure. “You’re so bloody naughty. Teasing me in the fucking shower, Ryder? Like three weeks after meeting me? Whatever happened to not hitting on me?”

“Only you?” She sounded unsure now, and he couldn’t let that happen.

“I know it,” he lifted his head and kissed her again, moving torturously slow until she moaned beneath him, trying to rock up so that he’d take her harder. He wanted that, too, but he had to hold on… he tried to think of anything else other than how good she felt wrapped around him. “That black jacket of yours… I want to see you in that and nothing else. Grease material, with that ponytail. You’ll sing for me, again, right? I’ve got the music somewhere…” He panted, and stopped again. Every thought of her drove him closer to the edge. “Shit, I’m not going to last at this rate.”

Sara’s laugh pealed. “You’re so much fun. After Habitat 7, I never thought Andromeda would be…” There was the final word – what she wanted, what she needed. Fun. He could give her that. He thrust against her, taking her off guard and she gasped, wrapping her legs around his. “Oh, God. Fucking yes, Liam… More!” The bed rocked again, and again, a pounding beat against the window. She wrinkled her forehead, the entire bed shifted sideways a couple of inches in glowy blue wonder, and SAM spoke:

“Sara, according to Kallo’s schematics, the window’s integrity is more than adequate to withstand…”

“Shut up, SAM,” she gasped. “Busy here. Talk about window integrity later. When my boyfriend isn’t fucking me into the bed.” Liam rewarded the words with a few more thrusts. “Fuck.”

“Very well, Sara. I apologize for the unnecessary interruption. In the future, I will endeavor to… look elsewhere.”

She didn’t answer in words.

“Boyfriend, huh?” Liam grabbed her hips and pulled her leg over his shoulder, and she arched up, hands against the headboard, bent like a bow. “I like that.” He touched his thumb to her, and she shuddered, on the verge. “Am I your boyfriend, Pathfinder?” He tasted the word, smiling.

She shook underneath him – so damn close. “Sara, Liam. When we’re naked, it’s always Sara. And yeah, I guess?” She was timid again, and he couldn’t stand it. She should never be worried about… “I mean… you said serious, right?”
“Fuck, yeah. No question.”

“Then shut up, and fuck me, already.” There she was.

He laughed, and bent over her until she folded in half, her leg sliding down to the crook of his arm. Her fingers scrabbled at his back, trying to pull him closer yet, cupping his neck, and tugging at his hair. Her heel pressed into his back – Christ, nothing had ever felt so fucking good. He buried his face in her shoulder, trying and failing, to hang on… “Sara…”

She moaned and snapped up, caught between him and her own instincts, a gentle shockwave spilled over him, and he pulled her tight against him, moving her through her release and finding his own in a series of shuddery relief, her biotics tipping him over the final edge. “God, yes.” He collapsed over her, and she nudged him weakly. He used to the last of his muscle control to roll them both to one side, brushing her loosened hair away from her eyes.

He tightened his arms and whispered, eyes closed, “Wanna date me, Sara Ryder?”

“If it means you’ll fuck me like that!” She laughed again, and he hoped she’d never stop.

“Real dates, too, not just drinks at bars, and doing stuff for work, or shagging on our down time. Sound like a fair deal?” He pulled away, so he could sit up, needing to see her face. “No playing around. Just… us.”

“I’m in, Liam,” she reached up, and pulled him down to settle between her breasts, his body relaxing in a relieved slump. He kissed the underside of one, tasting...

His head popped up. He had to know. “How do you always smell like strawberries? And you taste like them… what fucking sorcery is this?”

“Flavored sugar scrub – for exfoliation. Mom used to make it. It’s my last tub - I’m going to run out soon. So don’t get used to it.”

“Too late.” He kissed her again, sighing, and licked his way down to her navel, tasting strawberries. “You’re a giant sweet!”

“Um… thanks?” She laughed, and then sighed, as he moved lower, kissing her pelvis, and then dipping down further. “Oh, God, Liam. Are you offering?”

“Yeah? If you’re into it. Gotta figure these things out, right?”

“Fuck, yes.” She arched into his mouth. “Don’t fucking stop.”

“No fear.” He filled his mouth with her, knowing that nothing had ever tasted so good.
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

Completely and utterly NSFW, from the first sentence to the end.

I think this is the first time I've posted two consecutive chapters of smut. There should be some sort of award for this. Achievement Unlocked: DoubleSmut, or something.

Sara’s legs dangled over Liam’s shoulders, his head between, his tense fingers stroking, and his tongue lapping at her like she was strawberry ice cream. He was relentless, pushing her along until she twisted her hands into his hair and begged him to fill her again. “Get up here, then,” she lunged upwards, straddling his lap and kissing him, tasting herself. “Hold on, got an idea…”

It took him a minute to get her settled how he wanted her. He apparently had a plan – a good one. “Shit, Liam, I love your ideas.” She rode him backwards, as he stroked her, slow and deliberate. As if he thought he’d been too rough the first time, as if he thought he had something to prove. As if he could show her how much he cared with the way he made her come.

She’d never been taken care of, like this, by a lover before. It was different. Sweet. Just like him.

He pulled her hair to the left, freeing her ear for his whispers. Lovely words hissed into her ear while she writhed on his lap, her nipples in his hands. “Do you know how sexy you look?” He kissed her shoulder, his breath warming her skin. “Look, Sara…” Through half-slitted eyes, she watched herself reflected back as the sun dimmed further to show star-studded skies. She could see herself moving up and down on his cock, slick and slow and completely unrushed, like they had all the time in the fucking world. “The hell with vids, I don’t need to watch anything but you, for the rest of my life.”

Sara had never known how much she wanted someone to say that. She shivered, close again, her biotics rocking the bed this time. “Liam…” she whimpered.

“I’ve got you. Fall if you want to. I’ll catch.” She cried out, slumping backwards against him, his arms wrapped around her middle, supporting her as the rush of energy spent itself. The bed and her models shook with her release, but he only moaned like it was the best thing he’d ever felt. “Sara…” he breathed, and tipped her sideways, diagonal across the bed, stroking her stomach as she reached back with shaky hands to cup his head to kiss him, imperfect and messy, but feeling it. “God, you’re perfect,” he insisted.

“Liam…” He kissed her shoulder again, curled around her tight, still buried inside, as if he didn’t want to let go any more than she did him. After a long time, she confessed, “You know, you’re the first guy I’ve slept with twice?”

“Technically, that was the third time, Sara. Should I be counting?”

“Hmm, nah,” she felt so safe, secure. “That wouldn’t count. Pretty sure I’m the only one who got anything out of it…”

“We are not having this argument. Trust me, it was mutual. Keep arguing and I’ll give you a
fourth…” he snuggled against her, a loving counterpoint to the teasing bickering. “Don’t make me do it.”

She opened her mouth to sass back, only to hear voices, right outside her door. “I don’t care if you don’t fit into the showers with anyone else, Drack!” They heard typing on an Omni-Tool, briskly efficient. “I’m giving all of you cold water for the next 24 hours, because you cheated, and let the Angarans win!” Kallo insisted.

“They were pretty good,” Lexi wavered.

“They’d never played before,” Kallo argued right back. “That game should have been in the bag.”

Sara giggled into her pillow. “Guess we’re not getting any hot water tonight. We’re the losing team. We didn’t even play.”

“Don’t feel like a loser, but I guess I should get out of your space…”

She flipped over, hands to his chest. He slid out of her, and she blinked, realizing that he hadn’t lied. She straddled his body, and his hands tightened on her ass possessively. “Stay? Not because I don’t want them to know, but because… because I don’t want you to go? I promise that your overclocked Omni-tool won’t overload in my bed… I know you worry about - but it’s a good bed. Kallo showed me…”

He lifted a finger to her lips. “I’m not arguing, Sara. Anywhere you are is way better than my couch.” His mouth tilted up on one side, and he sat up to kiss her. He pulled back, resting against her forehead. “So… you’re okay with them knowing we’re…”

“No secrets. No doubts. No questions. Just answers. And here’s one for you.” She kissed him, twisting her fingers into his, desperate to keep him close. “If we’re… serious, they’re gonna know, Liam. What’s the point of hiding it?”

“Who said anything about hiding? I’m not going anywhere if you don’t make me.” He dropped back on her pillow, grinning. He picked up and traced her hands. “Why’re your hands covered with little nicks?”

“Working on the hovercycle, infected before I’d let Mom have a look. Basically – I’m a stubborn ass, just like my Dad.” She grinned. “Yours?” She traced the curly flat scar, reddened, almost like a burn, but oddly decorative. “Never seen one like this. Is it a birthmark?”

“Trying to build a Tesla coil on the roof of our flat back in London. I was convinced I had solved the mystery of how he intended to provide free electricity for the world. Did things in the wrong order, forgot a decent ground. Got zapped. Nearly killed my Mum with the scare – paramedics and everything. Least it’s wicked looking?” He laughed underneath her as her fingers tightened. “The rest are from about a million tiny accidents over the years. Can’t even remember them all. Dad bought stock in Medigel.”


“Yes?” She sat up straighter and narrowed her eyes at him in challenge. “Oh God, what did I do now?” He braced himself on his elbows.

Instead, she fired a question at him. “Who has the best ship? Han Solo or Malcolm Reynolds?”

“Um, you?”
“Good answer.” She laid down next to him, turning sideways. “You next. Ask a question. We’re naked, so we might as well have a cultural exchange. Just the important stuff.”

Liam laughed, and she shoved him. “Um… okay, if we had a famous couple name, what would it be?”


He shook silently for quite a while before he could gasp out, “Your turn.”

She knew what she wanted to ask, so she sat up again, and propped herself up over his head, holding onto the headboard, framing him so that he couldn’t wriggle away from the answer. “Why didn’t you tell me you liked me and wanted to be with me after we slept together? You did, right? No lies, Liam.”

“Because you weren’t into me that way. You were just trying to make me feel better and let off some steam. Show me that things weren’t that different here. And I sort of did, didn’t I? I mean… I tried, anyway.”

“Lies.”

“No shit?” He shoved himself up on one arm.

“No lies, Liam.”

“Damn. Read you wrong then. So did Lexi. She told me to put the brakes on – hard.”

“She said the same thing about you. Warning me off, saying I’d hurt you… I wouldn’t use you! I care about you - ask SAM. He had a million questions about… this.”

“Sorry,” he reached up and kissed her. “SAM’s fucking confused after the shit I put you through, huh?”

“A bit.” She laughed, and laid back down, snuggling up to his chest. “He’ll get the idea, though.”

Liam’s next question came slow, “Did you try to be with anyone else?”

“Like you with that chick back at APEX?”

“I haven’t talked to her in months… not since the first time we shagged. And don’t dodge the question.”

“Hm. I saw how she looked at me last time I dropped by to talk to Kandros. Hates my guts. She’s into you, Kosta.”

“I guess I’d better tell you that I’m not Han Solo anymore.”

“You’re not?” Sara popped up her head.

“Nope,” Liam yawned and smiled, kissing her hair. “I’m Han Taken. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

She snorted. “Weak, Kosta.”

“And you didn’t answer.”
She was quiet for a minute. “Why didn’t you kiss me first, at the very least?”

“Too easy. Once I kissed you, I knew I wouldn’t ever stop. I’ve known that since… shit, our first shower together? Wanted to kiss you then, in the worst way. Dreamt about it, even.” His hands tightened around her. “I didn’t want you to have to deal with the hearts in my eyes if you found someone else. Self-preservation, with Jaal on the ship. Have you heard him flirt with Cora, Vetra, and Peebee? I was out there with a datapad, taking notes. Read them to you later, if you want…”

“Dumbass. There’s no one else. I melted and there you were. Waiting, with a wave and a smile, and doing flips in zero-g.”

“I think I’ve always been waiting for you.” His voice was deeper, and his eyes were drooping.

“Can you get any sappier?” Sara snuggled closer, and placed her palm on his chest, followed by her head.

“Don’t test me.”

~SS~

When he slept, his normally tense body relaxed, only jerking occasionally as his dreams took him to dark places. Sara didn’t sleep for a long time, running her hands over what parts of his body she could reach without waking him, marveling that she could, that he was there – and would be again, as often as she’d like. She whispered secrets to him long after she knew that he was asleep – sure that she wouldn’t sleep much anyway, with a spare body in her bed, generating heat.

A good exchange for not waking up alone. Not like she did a lot of sleeping anyway.

When he woke the next morning, she was setting the picture of him kissing her cheek on the shelf in front of her model of the Normandy – two cups of coffee steaming on the table next to the bed. One for each of them, like they were a couple. Her heart thrilled with the thought. They were a couple.

It wasn’t just in her head. Not this time.

Liam must have had similar thoughts. “Now I know it’s real, and not just some crazy wet dream,” he laughed rough, rubbing his eyes, and pulling the sheet to drape around his hips. His hair was wild - all over the place. He was gorgeous, and he was hers. She couldn’t stop the goofy smile that brought forward. “You’re blocking your view of the Normandy with me? Nice priorities, Sara.”

She watched him stand up and tuck the sheet in more securely, mourning the loss. “You’ve got nothing I haven’t already seen, you know. Not after last night. And yeah, I like you way better than the Normandy.” She grabbed a data pad and started taking pics. “Especially right now.” She wolf-whistled. “Hot damn, you’re pretty the morning after!”

“Stop it!” He held up a hand, and the next three pics were fuzzy. “My hair… I didn’t wrap it up - I’m not wearing…” he dissolved into laughter. “At least let me put pants on?!”

“I want you on my wall,” She pouted.

“Then let me pose - I don’t know, like the ‘Thinker’ or Michelangelo’s ‘David’, or even the Asari
'Justicar', or something approaching art, instead of like a third rate porn star who forgot his robe…”

“Nah.” She beamed at him. “That’s not you.” She tossed him a wrench and he caught it before it hit his head, wide eyed and confused. “Drop the sheet, get some pants, and let’s head for the Nomad. We’ve got wrenching to do, grease monkey. Before Gil wakes up from his latest all-nighter. I’ve already told Kallo to take off, as soon as he’s ready. Gil will sleep longer with the drive core white noise, so we won’t be interrupted.”

He lifted both eyebrows, “You trying to make me randy, Ryder?”

“I don’t have to try, Kosta.” She dropped an eye at the tented sheet, and he clutched it self-consciously. “I’ve got mods to install – that’s our excuse. We could totally do it in the back of the Nomad. Plenty of room. Gil never needs to know…” She bit her lip and flushed. “Don’t tell me you never thought about it?”

“Come here, dammit.” He grabbed at her, the sheet fell away, and, “The Nomad can fucking wait.”
Chapter 51

Liam hovered over the ‘send’ button at his console the next day, all his files of embarrassing family photos, poems and pictures of things that reminded him of her, of all which he’d collected over their months of not-quite-together, with the little email attached that said, simply, ‘No Secrets’.

He was supposed to be working. Had a million and one things to do, to research about Kadara, to make this trip more secure, contacts that Verand had forwarded...

But instead he punched the button, took a breath, and heard her squeal from halfway across the ship. Grinning, he went looking.

“Dumbass!” She shoved him into the galley - thankfully empty - and kissed him. “You nearly filled my inbox with all the data!” He sat on the table, and held her waist. She kissed him again, long and slow, and he sunk into it, into her.

Worth it, to slack off work, and maybe get chewed out later, to get to spend the time with her.

He came up for air, resting his forehead against hers, breathless, “Thought about a… date, sort of. On our way to Kadara?”

“Now? What does that have to do with pictures?”

He shifted her hips closer, as the galley door slid shut. He couldn’t get close enough. “You pick a picture, I’ll explain the story behind it, or why I picked it, whatever?”

Sara shifted back on her heels, looking up at him, and then smiled. “All right. Deal. But we do the same with my pictures. We’ll take turns. Come on…” she tugged him out the door, and her door hissed open. “Sit on the bed. SAM?”

“I have already compiled your photos. Do you wish me to remove the ones of you in the bathtub with your brother?”

Liam snort-laughed. “How old were they?”

Sara shoved him, wrinkling her nose. “Yes, SAM. Let Scott decide if my boyfriend gets to see him naked.”

“Sending, Sara.”

“Thanks, SAM. Who goes first?” Sara was already flicking her way through her Omni-tool, crosslegged on her covers, wrinkling the pristine duvet with her weight.

He’d helped make the bed that morning – it wasn’t as smooth as usual, but how his girl ever managed to make anything before her coffee, he had no idea. She couldn’t even open her eyes without the caffeine. He’d watched her, eyes shut, bumping into furniture, but fucking smoothing the bed like she’d never been there. “You do. You’ve had longer to look.”

“What, like a minute?” she scowled, in concentration. “Okay, this one?”

The picture in question was a very young Liam, missing his four front teeth, holding what looked like a crooked wooden box. “Oh, that…” Liam cleared his throat. “Yeah, that would have been my transmogrifier?”
"Calvin and Hobbes?"

“Right. Only I didn’t use cardboard. I built the damn thing, inserted LEDs, did the circuits and everything. I used my Dad’s Omni-tool – way too big and clumsy for me. Lucky I didn’t cut anything off. Anything important, anyway. Lost a couple of fingernail edges… Mum was proud, thus the pic. Dad was actually upset – and he was always chill as chill. They had words, and I had to promise not to touch his power tools after that.” He was already calling up a photo as Sara cooed over the picture. “This is the story I want to hear.”

A pre-teen Sara with a black eye was flipping off the camera, wearing cut-off shorts and a loose tank top – featuring a Krogan cartoon character he only vaguely remembered - over a sports bra. Her hair was streaked like a rainbow. In the background, a gangly Scott more arms and legs than muscles lunged for her, nothing but a blur. “Oh, God. I didn’t realize that one would be in there.” She cringed.

“You look like you’ve been in a fight.”

“Um… yeah. The day before?” She grimaced. “We’d just moved away from the Citadel. My new school had a pro-human principal, and my best friend was a Turian before we moved.” She stared down at her Omni-tool, unseeing. “He said something rotten in an assembly, and I… walked out. Stayed in the office while the assembly ran down. Two thugs jumped me after I left – nobody bothered to talk to me, so I figured it didn’t matter, you know? Gave me the black eye before I threw them, while Scott ran for help. We all got in trouble – me for skipping school and giving the one a concussion, and the others for bullying. Mom and Dad were… they didn’t like me getting in trouble. Mom was only trying to document my injuries, in case they tried something else, but I… was furious at both of them for taking me away from everyone I cared about.”

“That’s sweet.”

“What?” She blinked at him. “Getting in fights isn’t sweet, Kosta. I could have lodged a formal complaint. Instead, I walked out of a stupid assembly, got myself detention for the next month - with the bullies - got myself labeled an ‘alien-lover’, and… flipped off my Mom. She was the sweet one.”

“And you take after her. So, sweet,” Liam kissed her head. “You’re my hero.”

Sara rolled her eyes. “My turn?”

“Yeah.”

She scrolled past to a file labeled “Sara is an Angel”, squinted her eyes at him suspiciously and called it up. “This one.” The text of a poem unfurled.

‘Bring me all of your dreams
You dreamer,
Bring me all your
Heart melodies
That I may wrap them
In a blue cloud-cloth
Away from the too-rough fingers
Of the world.

-Langston Hughes

“Poetry, Liam?” She leaned against him. “Didn’t see you as the type.”

“Dad loved Hughes. He’s all right, I guess, though I’m not a huge fan.” He rolled his shoulders. “I just… I didn’t want your dreams crushed under the reality of what we’re doing out here.” He glanced away. “I don’t really know what it means. But I went looking for that poem after our first real conversation, and saved it.”

“Maybe it means that my dreams are safe with you?”

“That’s a poem in itself.” Liam pulled her in close enough to reach his Omni-tool. “Lemme see. How about…” he hesitated, and then a smile spread wide over his face. “No shit.”

“Oh no,” Sara tried to hide the picture, but his arm was in the way of her hand. “Don’t look at that.”

He whistled. “No way am I not looking. Sexy Sara! Look at that arse!” He laughed. “Go on. Get it over with.”

“Convention.” Her lips were tight.

“And you cosplayed. As Batgirl?”

“Batwoman, thank you very much. Note the breasts. Batgirl is too goofy. Black on black is my color. Even if that bodysuit was way too tight…” she winced, and tried to block his view. Liam dodged.

“How did you convince Scott to go as Robin? Look at his legs! He must have waxed…” Liam’s laughs shook the bed. “Did you make the costumes and everything?”

“Blackmail. And, yes?”

He grinned. “I knew you thought you were a superhero. It’s okay, Sara. I spent my childhood trying to jump off things taller than the roof of our building. Definitely thought I was Superman for a while there. How old are you here? Should I not be having these dirty thoughts? Because, shit, that arse…”

Her whole face was red. “…I was 18. Barely. Mom wouldn’t give us permission to go alone until we were adults. So… yeah. Just before we shipped off to boot camp.” She hid her face in his chest. “I did not intend to bring this picture. Dammit, Scott must have messed with my data. I knew I should have changed the password. SAM, give me a reminder to change it before he… He’s always figuring them out, dammit. Having a twin sucks.”

“Brave Scott, to show off those legs, just to torment you at some future date. I want all the details.” He flipped to the next picture and hooted. “Shit… an Asari Catwoman found you?”

“She was really nice! Along with the Turian Poison Ivy and the Krogan Jokers and Harley Quinn.” She flipped through the pictures quickly, showing them as she named them. “We posed for a lot of
pictures that day. And no, we did NOT enter the contest.”

“Why the hell not? Fuck, look at Harley’s Hammer! They let that in? Did you and Scott dress up for Halloween? Are there pictures of that in here? Can you make me an outfit so I can embarrass you on the Nexus? Batman vs. Superman, Pathfinder style? Let’s start a fundraiser for Nexus-Con!”

“Yes, and yes,” she gave up and climbed over him and held his Omni-tool up where he couldn’t reach it. “Liam, stop. It’s humiliating.”

“Why?!” He stopped fighting. “It’s fun.”

“Because… I’m not that person any longer.”

“You should be. Don’t give up on it.” He reached up and kissed her. “POW.”

She giggled, despite herself.

He kissed her again, and she relaxed against him, letting go of his Omni-Tool to reach him better. He cradled her arse with his hand and shifted her higher. “BAM,” he whispered.

“Bazooka?” She whispered, settling down on his chest.

He rolled her over. “Holy Hot Lips, Batman.”
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

I’m sorry for the long lag (cough - for me) between chapters! I realized that Kadara needed some changes, so I revamped it. It will mean more Kadara chapters in the end. A lot happens here, after all.

This one’s short, but there will probably be two more before the end of the week.

They entered orbit around Kadara – Drack’s ever-so-gracious nature tempering Kesh’s angry updates about Spender’s continuing influence. “Just keep in mind we’re running out of time,” the Krogan grumped as he left them alone in the briefing room after Evfra’s call with the key details.

The meeting hadn’t gone well. Cora hadn’t taken her decision to go to Kadara to track down the evidence and hopefully find the Resistance contact that would let them find a way to reach the Roekkar well – at all.

“You’re asking for trouble, ignoring the missing arks like you are,” the woman warned as she departed, to prepare for landing. “We need the Asari matriarch. You can’t keep fighting every battle on your own!”

“I’m not ignoring them – and that’s the problem. I’m only one person, and trouble is everywhere,” Sara whined right back. “Seriously. Even Sid has bad news for us.”

“Hey, it’ll be fine,” Liam seemed to be smiling all the time lately. Sara might once have found it annoying. As it was, she was nearly as bad. Nearly. Her cheeks only hurt from grinning, his were developing new lines around them. “Get this, Pathfinder – Vetra says Kadara has two pubs. One in the Port, and the other in the Slums. Sounds like a crawl to me…”

Sara snickered, “Priorities, Liam.” She leaned up against his chest, and he wrapped his arms around her. “No drinkies until after we find the Resistance contact, right?”

“Um… about that,” Liam looked up at the ceiling. “Remember how I’m an ex-cop? Kadara sounds like the wrong sort of place for me. I’m thinking… maybe stay behind?”

Sara jerked back, looking up at his face. “You don’t wanna go?” Her face was worried. “Are you feeling okay?”

“No, it’s not that I don’t want to go with you, it’s that,” Liam laughed, uneasy. “You’re better off with Drack and Vetra for this job. They’ve got something they call ‘business’ to handle anyway, in the Port, so you can do your thing with Kelly. We sort of… talked about it, and they decided I got to break the news to you. Best to leave me with the ship, until I can ‘guarantee’ its safety. Cora agrees – she’s gonna guard the Nomad. We’re a bit too squeaky Initiative clean for the Port anyway. Once we’ve got access to the Badlands, I’m all yours.”

Sara’s face cleared, “I get it. Bribes. You need to pay the ‘dirty cop’ for a bit? Are you going to get pissy, so I can be the good guy?” She pouted. “I want to be the bad cop. The bad cop has all the fun.”
Liam snorted, “You watch too many crime vids. But yeah. If I want to come with you, I need to show I’m not the uptight ass you know and…” he stopped before he could finish, rushing through the next sentence. “Only then will the crimeridden metropolis of Kadara Port recognize that the Pathfinder is the hero they need to save them from the nightmare that is Sloane Kelly.”

Sara snickered. “You ought to write comics.” She paused, “I’ll pack my cape then, Officer Kosta. Don’t want to get on the bad side of the law. Or do I?” She winked and started to pull away, but he grasped her arm.

“On Kadara, Kelly is the law. I hear bad shit, Pathfinder. No joke.” Those new lines around his mouth looked tense suddenly, instead of promising smiles and kisses.

She nodded, suddenly serious. “I know. I’m going to figure something out.” She twisted her mouth sideways, “I’ll miss you, though. Won’t be the same without you, even if I’m gonna be mostly on my own… while Drack and Vetra handle their ‘business’.”

“It’s just a couple hours, right? And you’ll have Drack and Vetra, as soon as they’re finished.” He kissed her soft, “You’ll be careful?”

Sara scoffed, “When am I not careful?”

She had to whack him to get him to stop laughing, her own dimples showing.
Chapter 53

Kadara was a juxtaposition of glowing neon lights, the smell of sulfur, and mountain sunsets – it felt instead of looked dangerous – like one of those rainforest frogs with vivid colors that were beautiful to look at, but poisonous to touch. Open shops were everywhere – evidence of a thriving economy that the Nexus lacked – and Kelly’s Oulaws openly recruited and threatened in equal measures all throughout the Port – echoed with the Collective’s own, more tentative, voice.

She felt like a target, even dressed in civvies - a black leather jacket and pants, with a scarf to keep out the worst of the mountain breezes – as if her face screamed ‘Initiative Pathfinder’ to everyone that looked at her. “Maybe just should have worn the fatigues,” she muttered to SAM, as she entered Kralla’s Song, the place Evfra had told her ‘Shena’ would meet her. “You’re lucky, SAM, you never have to worry about whether your outfit is appropriate.”

“That is true, Sara.”

She propped herself up in the corner between the bar and the window with a view of a distant mountain range, and tried to blend in. “Should I risk drinking on the job?” She started to ask the AI, only to be interrupted.

“You look like you’re waiting for someone.” She turned. A swarthy man with lean hips and a smirking smile belonged to the sultry voice. “May I buy you a drink?”

Sara scanned the bar, but there was no sign of Drack or Vetra. The contact was supposed to meet her here… she sighed mentally. “Sara, this is most likely your contact,” SAM advised. “I would suggest you accept.”

“Shit,” Sara muttered. This guy looked like more trouble than the Port itself. “I guess I’ve got time for a drink,” resigned, she accepted whiskey from the suddenly all too eager bartender, and narrowed her eyes at the man, waiting for him to drink first. It seemed like that kind of place – and the exiles had had 14 months to figure out new and improved ways of spiking a drink using Heleus flora and fauna. The only good thing was that the Resistance didn't really have any need to pull anything like that.

“Reyes Vidal, at your service,” the man nearly bowed, dark eyes kind but calculating. “Shena, I presume?”

“If you like. But I’d prefer it if you called me Reyes.” He winked, “I hate code names.”

“What does Shena mean? I was figuring on someone a little more… Angaran.” She’d been looking forward to it, actually. The Angara were so straight forward – dealing with them was a pleasure. This man looked as straight-forward as a twist-tie.

“Evfra respects the value of a mole that looks like the people he’s spying on,” the man lifted his chin and flashed her a real smile – one that lit up his coffee colored eyes, fringed with those fuck-me eyelashes, and crinkled the edges around them. Damn it, he was attractive, and knew how to work it to his advantage – had Evfra hired a honeypot? “It means… mouth. I’m good with words. Among…” he undressed her with his eyes, “…other things.” His eyebrows lifted in suggestion.

“Right. That’s all I need to know.” Sara flushed, and tried very hard not to think about Liam just that morning, waking her up with his mouth. And failed. Best alarm clock ever. For once, her eyes had opened before she chugged the first cup of coffee. She sipped her whisky to hide her flush, and
sighed with bliss at the beverage. “It’s smooth… miss a little peat, though. Do they make this here?” She stared into the glass wistfully. “I’m going to need more of this. A lot more of this.”

Reyes eyes flashed, “A woman who values a good whisky is worth her weight in platinum.” He raised his own cup to her.

“So… what do you need from me, anyway?”

“I can think of many, many things,” his eyes twinkled mischievously. “Interested?”

Oh God, he was hitting on her. Wasn’t he? It wasn’t like she was exactly used to it… and this guy was an admitted spy for the Resistance. Sara flushed a deeper red, and resisted telling the ‘Mouth’ what it could go suck on. She had a mission – and she needed this guy. “I have a boyfriend,” won out against all her better options, and she cringed.

Reyes winked, and waved her over to a table. “None of us are perfect.”

She swallowed, and led the way. “If you’re so good with words, then… start using them.”

“It begins with Sloane Kelly,” he offered, settling himself comfortably in a chair, “and an Angaran traitor named ‘Vehn’.” He leaned forward, all at once serious, “She’s going to execute him. Kelly knows that she has to keep the Angara happy – and Vehn arranged the Moshæ’s capture by the Kett. His death buys her a little more leeway – and as the Collective gains power, she desperately needs just that.”

“So…” Sara bought herself time to think with another sip, “Vehn’s the Angara’s Most Wanted?”

“Something like that,” his mouth tilted up. “Now, Kelly will see you. You can sweettalk your cute little ass into her cells, and get the information you need from Vehn.”

“Wait…” Sara paused, trying not to bristle at his phrasing, “Kelly’s gonna execute him? Doesn’t Evfra want to try him?”

“Kelly doesn’t hand over prisoners,” Reyes looked grave. “Justice is brutal and swift on Kadara, Pathfinder. Some would say it’s not justice at all.”

“We’ve got to try to break him out, then,” Sara summed up. “Shit just got complicated.”

Reyes lifted his own drink to sip. “As you say.”
Liam paid the ‘fees’, grumbling loudly about it to the dockmaster as he paid him twice the usual amount, watching the man pocket the difference. It was a good idea to have an official in their pocket, if Sara managed to pull off the coup she and Drack were hoping for. It would be a coup to start an outpost here on this wretched planet, even more so if they managed to bring some of the exiles back into the Initiative fold.

His girl had plans – outlined precisely to the rest of the Team by SAM in the meeting held right after landing. Nailing Spender was just the beginning. He agreed with her idealism – in theory.

After all, the exiles had been abandoned by Tann, and therefore the rest of the Initiative. They were struggling, despite everything they’d accomplished on their own. It wasn’t just a matter of having the most capable – and experienced - colonists on their side. It was a matter of them needing each other, for commerce, for experts in their fields, for Milky Way knowledge that would be lost without them.

He settled down to research who exactly had been exiled in the Nexus mutiny, hoping to make a list for the Pathfinder, to make his argument stronger. Records were incomplete – Tann had just rounded up everybody that seemed to express a dissenting opinion and shoved them onto shuttles with Kadara as the major destination. It was utter bullshit, and he got lost piecing the clues together, finding doctors, scientists, engineers among the mutineers.

Tann might as well have shot himself in the foot. It was a wonder that the Nexus was as far along as it was when they arrived.

Three hours later, Vetra pinged him. “Hey, Kosta, you might want to make your way down here to Kralla’s Song. Pathfinder’s asking for you…”

“What? Why? Is Sara hurt?” He reached for his pistol automatically, and then winced, knowing he couldn’t bring a gun into the Port at all. “What happened? Did Sloane Kelly pull something?”

“Um… not exactly,” Vetra temporized. “She’s kind of… how do I put this?” The Turian’s voice was dry, drawling, drawing out his impatience. “Kralla’s Song has whisky, and she went a little overboard…”

Liam groaned, “Say no more. Did she speak to Sloane first?”

“Course she did. She got the job done and then some. Give her some credit - she’s not an idiot or a slacker. But she couldn’t save that Vehn kid’s life, and Sloane had him executed an hour ago. Apparently the Pathfinder pissed off Sloane something rotten. Never had a chance. The kid’s head is hanging over the entrance to the Port. Sara’s… feeling it. I’m keeping her company, now that my completely legitimate business is handled…”

“I hope that doesn’t mean smuggling.” It meant smuggling, but at this point, both of them had to keep up appearances of not liking each other. He got it. It meant that a few mods got grudgingly shoved his direction, in favor of ‘keeping his ass alive’, and it meant that he tipped her off when someone from the Nexus was asking questions about a certain place and time.

In the end, they were on the same side, even if they couldn’t stop squabbling.

Maybe this was what having a sister felt like. He’d never admit it to Vetra’s face, but… it felt good.
“You paid the bribes, Kid,” Drack cut in, shoving his face into the view on Vetra’s screen, and proving once again that Krogans lacked subtlety. “It’s all good. We did good. So did the Pathfinder – she’s really good at drawing eyes away from what doesn’t need to be looked at, you know? But we’ve got some nasty guys down here eying her Initiative blue hair like they’re gonna take a scalp. Humans do that, right? Seems like I read about it somewhere.”

Vetra cackled, “Drack, you read?”

“Shut up, Vetra. You don’t need a gun to murder somebody, if you have a knife. Kid could use the backup.”

“Shit, I’m there.” Liam pulled on his jacket. “Don’t let her hurt them. We’ve still got to play nice, right?”

“Least until we get to the Badlands,” Vetra agreed. “But she needs to let off a little steam. I’m only calling because she asked me to check in, and get you down here, and she was slurring her words something awful. Mentioned something she called a ‘pub crawl’? What’s the point of drinking until you can only crawl?”

Liam groaned, and left the airlock. “Right. On my way.”

He found her, mourning to Vetra that *Kralla’s Song* didn’t have a dance floor, head bobbing and laughing too loud for even this raucous pub. He couldn’t help grinning when she spotted him over the Turian’s shoulder, nearly knocking Drack aside to wave him over. “Liam! You came!” Every little smile was a gift.

Shit, he had it bad.

“Here, aren’t I?” He laughed. “How many’ve you had?”

“What, you going to haul me in for drunk and disorderly?” She winked and frowned, counting on her fingers, wavering over them with unfocused eyes. “The first was with Reyes, our contact, but I took a break – saw a bit of the city while I waited for Drack and Vet.”

“Don’t call me Vet,” the Turian drank the rest of her beverage with a grace that spoke of long practice.

“Then I heard a few Angarans mention that the execution had happened, and saw… well, I came back here. Sounded like the best plan. Vet and Drack showed after the first… two?”

“Close to that,” Drack grunted. “Ask Umi, if you don’t know.”

Liam caught the bartender’s eye as he slipped into the booth next to Sara, Drack stepping aside to let him in. The bartender held up four fingers. He whistled. “SAM?”

“She asked me not to interfere with her metabolism,” SAM mourned. “I estimate that it is cut heavily, but still hovers at about 40 proof. I have been filtering out impurities, however.”

“Liam, I wanna dance,” she pouted. “If I buy enough drinks from Umi, will she let me dance?! Umi’s nice, as long as you pay up front…”

“Tartarus has a dance floor,” Drack mumbled. “Nice little dive. Dancers. Good drinks. Slums, though. Think the Kid can walk? Have to take the elevator to get there.” He nudged Liam. “You know. The same elevator that takes us to the *Tempest*?” Liam nodded in approval.
Sara rolled her eyes. “I can walk! If I can dance, I can walk…”

Drack cackled, “You haven’t tried to dance yet, Kid.”

“Thank the Spirits, or something like them,” Vetra rose, “I’m going to get back to the ship. You three have fun. I’m not in the mood for Tartarus.” She shuddered, “The drinks might be better, but the rest… those bars around the dancers give me the heebee jeebies.”

Before long, Liam had settled Sara’s considerable tab, and escorted her out of the pub, with minimal support, an unspoken agreement between him and Drack that they’d just go back to the ship, and put up with her complaints later. When they reached the docks, the dockmaster beamed at him and Sara, “Ready to depart, Pathfinder?”

He hadn’t been that bloody polite earlier.

“Nope,” Sara grinned, “We’re going dancing. Taking the elevator to the slums.” She moved her hand to indicate their descent. It mostly went down – only a little sideways of its intended path.

Drack cackled. “So much for that plan, Kid. Thoughts?”

Liam shrugged, “If she’s got us with her, she’ll be safe enough. Let’s take her dancing.”

Sara pressed herself up against him. “Liam, do you mean it?”

“Why not?” He managed a laugh, “You’ve got to relax sometime, right?”

She grabbed his hand and dragged him towards the elevator. “Yay!”

“But not without your armor and a gun,” he warned. “Tempest first, Pathfinder.”

And that was how, armed within an inch of his life, he ended up in a club named after a region of the Greek underworld, surrounded by writhing women. He was way too sober for this shit. He had no idea where to look, either, taking temporary refuge by chatting to the friendly Scot behind the bar, and buying Sara another drink – this one called a Kadara Sunrise.

One of the writhing women was persistent – the one that wasn’t behind bars. “Dance with me, Kosta!”

“I’ll dance with the lady,” a voice spoke behind him. “Pathfinder, may I?”

Dark hair and eyes, deep voice with an accent that suggested illicit meetings and secret plans and a smile that knew that he could have any woman he wanted… Liam hated him instantly. And just as quickly envied him, just a bit. Fucker was smooth.

It didn’t help that his Sara lit up like New Year’s Eve. “Reyes Vidal! What are you doing here?”

Liam felt all the weight of the dark eyes, before they turned back to Sara. “Temporarily residing,” the man laughed. “Care to have a go?” Sara grabbed his hand and vaulted awkwardly over the back of the booth they sat in, only to make her way over to the dance floor. She raised her arms above her head, and the bastard wrapped his arm around her middle immediately, pressing up against her and rolling in some obviously Latin-inspired bullshit of an excuse of a dance.

Liam felt his face heat, and he grabbed Sara’s drink to hide his jealousy. Drack cackled, watching the two move. “What, Kid, don’tcha dance?” The Krogan chuckled, “Better watch out then. That Reyes guy moves fast. Look at him go. Didn’t think human hips bent that way.”
“Who is he, anyway?” Sara was circling her hips against his and laughing at the top of her lungs as she gyrated.

“The Resistance contact. Evfra is fucking smart. Vidal’s a small-time smuggler – he can get anywhere Evfra needs him to be. New Tuchanka’s done some business with him in the past.”

Reyes bumped her twice in a row, and she spun around, putting a hand between them, and shoving him away playfully with a smirk he recognized all too well. He downed the remainder of the Sunrise, and stood up, rolling his neck. “On second thoughts, I think I could use a little exercise, being shut up in the ship all day.”

Drack roared. “Now we’re talking. Go get her, Kid.” He pushed him forward. “My money’s on you. My treat if you start a fight. Place could use a little excitement.”

Liam stalked up to his girlfriend, tapped her on the shoulder, and had the joy of seeing her light up at the sight of him. He didn’t ask to cut in, just put his hand on her hip and moved closer, a silent semi-confident question about who she wanted. She bit her lips, and glanced up at him through those eyelashes, and followed, steeping away from the other man instantly.

Relief rushed down his spine like a warm shower. He forgot why he hadn’t wanted to do this – it didn’t matter what the place looked like, if it let him dance with her. He moved a hand to cup the small of her back, and stepped closer yet, and Sara turned away, lifting her hair to air out the back of her neck, beading with sweat from the heat of the lights, hips swinging. She glanced behind her, and Liam resisted the urge to pull her closer, just dropping his hand back to her hips and letting her arch back, dropping her hand behind his neck now.

The fall of her hair stroked his cheek like a kiss, and he let go of his inhibitions.

The pink strobe lights turned her hair the color of a ripe blueberry, like something out of Willy Wonka. Even in full armor, she was captivating, her body heating under his hands.

Reyes was dancing – still too close, but at least now without touching. The bastard was still smiling, but finally pulling away with a wink at Liam’s continued glare.

And with a single wink, he decided he fucking hated Kadara – whether it was the Port or Slums, it didn’t matter. If it was a planet and had Reyes Vidal for a resident, he hated it.

On the other hand – it was nice being so close to Sara. The song blended into another, and Sara turned and draped herself over his front, and he cradled her against him by her arse, not hiding how hard he was at that moment. She wouldn’t care… right?

“So much fun. It’s been too long since I got a chance to do this,” she smiled up at him. “You need to relax, too, Liam.”

“Hard to relax in a place like this,” he swallowed, adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. “But I’m trying.” She ran a hand down his chest and cupped him deliberately through his pants.

“Doesn’t feel like it,” she sassed, and kissed him hard.

He pulled back, “Sara… not here.”

She pouted. “Where, then? It’s not like Drack doesn’t at least suspect. I thought you didn’t care who knew?”

“It’s just… a really sleazy place,” Liam winced. “Can I take you home before you start…”
She pulled away to the sort of ‘safe’ distance that had marked their relationship before everything good started happening regularly. Shit, had that only been a few days? It felt longer, in the best way. “Just having fun, Kosta. Thought you were, too.”

“No, you’re right,” she frowned, her hazy eyes trying to clear. “The Pathfinder wouldn’t dance here. The Pathfinder wouldn’t laugh and have a good time. The Pathfinder…”

He leaned in, and pulled her hand back, and put it against his chest, “Sara can do whatever the hell she likes in her down time,” he said, and yanked her forward against him. “Let’s dance.”

The current song had a deep beat, and while Sara was slower to warm up this time, eventually she lifted both her arms in the air and writhed – giving the girls in the cages a run for their money. He turned her back around, she sunk nearly to the ground, “I did promise you ‘Dirty Dancing’,” he murmured in her ears when she came back up, trailing fingers up the inside of his thighs. He cupped her arse and hoped she could feel it through her armor. “Whatever makes you happy, isn’t that what I promised?”

She turned again, and he saw the smile on her face, just as the strobes broke into a new pattern, flicking from pink to green to blue and back again, in time with the song’s pulse. He settled into a slow grind, his hands lower on her arse than he’d ever managed outside of the Tempest. His heartbeat synced with the music, the club’s lifeblood thudding in his ears.

He saw Drack get up and leave – settling his own tab before saluting, with a sour look – presumably because of the lack of bar fights. After that, things took on an unearthly quality, as the floor filled up. The smell of people growing sweatier filled the air, mixing with the smell of sticky spilled drinks, and the always underlying smell of sulfur from the springs right outside the fence. It smelled worse than the lowest dive in London, but she was there… and they were together. Finally, Sara grabbed his neck and pulled him toward her mouth, and their dancing became kissing, and then groping, as she devoured him right there on the floor.

He didn’t mind, by that point. They weren’t the only dancers taking things a bit too far in public.

“Tempest?” She asked, having to shout into his ear to be heard.

“Fuck, yeah,” he begged, before leaning back in, and capturing her mouth again with his, too far gone to care who was watching – and half hoping that Reyes wanker was doing just that. Sara pulled back, and grabbed his hands, leading him out the door and back to the elevator to the docks with a smirk. “So does this count as the second date?” He managed to ask.

“Hmmmm, the third, if you count the pictures,” she pretended to think, and then laughed at him. “I asked you out, I guess. Does that mean I get the dirty subtitles now?” She suddenly seemed a lot more sober.

“Sara… you’re not drunk.” He shook his head, “You little cheat!”

“Nah. SAM took care of it on the way to the Slums. And it took too long to get Vetra to call you. She kept telling me she could handle it – told me to have as many as I needed to forget Vehn.” She sighed, “As if I could. Poor bastard. Yeah, he was a traitor, but… I would have liked to see the Angara try him, at least. Sloane’s a barbarian – sitting up on her throne like she’s the fucking Queen.” She snorted, “I curtseyed and everything. Pissed her fucking off. It was awesome. Wish you had seen it.”
“You…” Liam shook his head. “You planned this?”

“Not quite. I was hoping to celebrate saving Vehn for the Angaran Resistance’s justice.” She brushed her hair out of her eyes. “But I’m not the only one who needed a break, Liam,” she grinned up at him, nervously. “You’ve been tense since we found out we were coming here. I thought Kralla’s would have a dance floor, though. Forgive me for groping you in a seedy bar?” She tilted her head sideways. “It’s not exactly your comfort zone.”

“I’ve been out of my comfort zone since we got to Heleus,” Liam shook his head, “But there’s nothing to forgive. It was... It’s all good, Sara.” Oddly, he did feel better. “Just... I don’t think you should ever drink alone. Not here, anyway.”

“I concur,” SAM broke in. “Sara was fortunate that Drack arrived when he did.”

“Aww,” Sara grinned, “You two worry about me.”

Liam leaned in and kissed her, slow. “Everyone worries about you.”

“It’s mutual.” She snarked, “I worry about everyone right back.”
They were on their way – finally – the so-called Warden guarding the Slums waving them out without even a conversation two days later. The Badlands might smell of rotten eggs, but otherwise they were kind of pretty, with mountains that made Liam long to test out his jumpjets. He mentioned it in passing, and Sara hummed non-committally. “I don’t know, Liam. They’re… pretty high, you know?”

“No worries. Just a thought. Not like we don’t have a ton to do, anyway.” She smiled at him, relieved, and he hoped she wouldn’t have to do too much climbing while they were there. She deserved a break – she’d already made a lot of improvement.

Or at least gotten better at hiding her fear.

They had left the Port that morning, as soon as they could manage – but not soon enough for Liam’s neck not to ache from tension. Sara had found an Angaran woman’s sister dead in the waterworks yesterday while running some simple errands, and he’d barely slept the night before, determined to protect the ship from people that might try to hijack it. It was far too easy to get away with murder on Kadara.

The rumors hinted that people dumped bodies in the acid pools – rumors confirmed almost as soon as they left the fence behind.

Drack had stayed back on the Tempest, claiming his leg ached, and complaining to Lexi that whatever lubricant she was using wasn’t working. Suited Liam fine, except that Sara had asked the other human to come with them. Cora had been looking sideways at him for a while now, and Liam knew exactly why.

But he was ready. Bring it on.

“So… I don’t think the others have noticed yet,” Cora hesitated.

“Noticed what? That Liam’s laundry is mixed in with mine? That he isn’t hanging out in his storage closet as much?” Sara snorted. “Are we really going to have this conversation? The rest of the Team knew long before you did – they just don’t care. Alliance rules are bullshit out here, Cora.”

“You sure about that?” Cora criticized. “I would think you wouldn’t want the scrutiny from Tann – dating one of your Team, Sara? Is that wise?”

“Tann can go fuck himself.”

Cora turned on him, “Liam, surely you don’t want the Pathfinder to be chastised by the Nexus knowing…”

“Don’t care if they do,” Liam grinned at her from shotgun, hand on the ’Oh, Shit’ handle, Sara driving at her usual breakneck pace around Kadara. He was used to it - he might hold the handle, but
he knew she wouldn’t kill him. Probably. “I’d broadcast it if I could.”

“Wow,” Cora sounded surprised. “I guess I thought you’d… want to keep it quiet. Private. Tann has a nasty side-”

“Nah. She’s amazing. Perfect…”

“Pedestals, Liam,” Sara warned, and jerked the wheel sideways to run over a Fiend that didn’t have the brains not to attack the Nomad. The Nomad always won, even though Gil refused to install the Mad Max inspired stabby spike hubcaps Vetra had found her, claiming aesthetic issues. Apparently, they clashed with his latest, Quarian inspired paintjob. “You promised.”

“Not putting you on a shelf,” Liam protested, unable to wipe the grin off his face, remembering the fight with the engineer. Gil had won, but… barely. “Just… bragging on my girl. That’s always allowed.”

She colored, too beautiful for words. “He’s pretty special on his own,” she called back to Cora.

“I’m something, sure enough,” he agreed, knowing he probably looked about as cool as a curry. Didn’t care. Cora knowing – even if she didn’t approve – was freeing. Like it was all happening again. Shit, he probably had stars in his eyes.

“Special…” Cora mused, “Is that what you call it?”

“Yeah, I do,” Sara reached over and squeezed his knee, and nearly drove them into a pool of acid. He didn’t even flinch.

“Watch the road,” shrieked Cora.

“What road? She makes her own roads,” Liam laughed. “Nice and easy, Pathfinder.” She squeezed his knee again, before putting both hands back on the wheel, laughing. “If you want, I could drive?”

“Dream on, Kosta,” she winked, though, and he hoped. Maybe someday.

They had a wealth of ‘somedays’ ahead of them.
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

Second chapter of the day - slightly NSFW towards the end. For about two sentences.

Sara was making a point of rotating the Team – and with the Remnant monoliths needing activation, Peebee was the obvious choice.

But naturally, the Asari was the next to question, “So… when we’re fighting, you’re sticking pretty close to the Pathfinder. You do that with other people?”

“Nope.” Liam was gleeful from his place in the backseat. Sara could hear the smile in his voice. Her breath caught a little, realizing that he was relishing each and every one of their friends confronting them about their relationship.

If she was being totally honest, she kinda loved it too.

“Gotcha.” The asari was quiet for a moment. “Are you two… together-together?”

“Yes,” She answered, crisp and without any room for misinterpretation. “Problems?”

“Nah. Now I get why you didn’t fool around with me.”

Liam’s eyes went round in the mirror, and she felt the heat crawl up her neck to her ears and beyond as she choked. “Peebee! You said you’d be discreet!”

Her boyfriend snorted, “Peebs? Discreet? Pathfinder, you feeling okay?”

“You know that the Tempest monitors our comms while in the field, right?” Sara warned. “I can hear Gil and Kallo gasping from here…”

“So?” Peebee rolled her eyes. “You were holding out for someone else. That’s cool,” Peebee grinned back at Liam. “She turned me down flat. If we hadn’t been in zero-g I would have crashed. Hard.”

“When?” Liam sounded curious, not hurt or jealous.

Fifty points to him for maturity, but the Nomad was still way too hot. It wasn’t like Kadara was a desert planet or anything… damn Peebee and her big mouth. “SAM – are the Nomad’s environmental settings in need of calibration?”

“The Nomad’s life support is fully functional, Pathfinder,” SAM pitched in. “Temperatures are within normal limits.”

Peebee appeared to be trying to remember. “Oh… four months ago? After Havarl, for sure. Fuzzy on the rest of the details. Days run together, don’t they?”

“Wow, Sara…” Liam sounded awed, “You held out that long? For me? Your friendly, lovable space cadet?” His voice was all smiles. “I’m touched.”
“Maybe,” Sara purposefully drove up a nearly sheer mountainside, to hide her embarrassment. “Hang on, you two, I’m going to test the new Boost mod.” She heard the rustling as Liam checked his safety straps. “Don’t let it go to your head, Liam. You didn’t close the door, so…”

“Him close the door?” Peebee hooted, “Liam was holding it open with both hands and a foot, waiting for you to walk through. You two destroyed me!” Peebee paused, “Well, I sulked for a half a minute each time. Same thing.”

Sara gritted her teeth, squashing her jealousy down while willing the Nomad to Boost up the cliff face. “Are you saying you… propositioned him, too, Peebee?”

“I didn’t know you were panting after him! And given the circumstances, I think I’m owed a bit of teasing leeway,” Peebee protested. “Let me have a little fun.” She paused, “Though, if you two were up for a threesome…”

“Hell, no,” Sara bit off. “I don’t share.” Liam gaped for a moment before recovering, raising his hands in acceptance at her decision. She melted a little, watching him. So many other guys might try to push her… it wasn’t like Peebee wasn’t cute, and smart, and… shit, she was kind of a catch, all in all. And Liam hadn’t taken her up on her offer…

She had the best boyfriend ever.

“Fine, fine,” Peebee looked out her window, her eyes still glinting with mischief. “So, how’s she in bed, Liam?”

“Bloody brilliant,” Liam groaned. “Have you seen her arse? And the way her tits bounce when she gets going… Could watch that all day, if we had the time.”

“Best ass in the Cluster,” Peebee snickered. “Unless it’s Cora’s.” The pair of them refocused their eyes on her backside, planted firmly against the seat.

“Quit objectifying me!” Sara’s cheeks heated further, and she adjusted her hands on the wheel. She’d had no idea her… friends saw her this way. Major ego boost. “At least… not in front of Peebee, Liam? SAM – there’s got to be something wrong with the environmental controls!”

SAM sounded vaguely testy, “The controls are functioning perfectly, Sara.”

Liam grinned at her, and she relaxed, just a little. “Sorry, love. Just wanted to brag to my mates.”

Sara’s breath caught, and she took the risk of glancing at him over her shoulder. His eyebrows raised and he made kissy lips.

She flushed deeper yet, and winked back, nodding. Liam tightened his straps at her silent warning.

And she drove off a cliff, just to show Peebee who was in control.

“SHIT!” Peebee screamed and braced herself against the roof of the Nomad.

Sara laughed, and adjusted her angle, bouncing along sideways to slow their landing. “No problems, Peeb. I’ve got this.”

“What a lovely drive,” Liam deadpanned. Sara reached back and pretended to swat him.

“Shut up back there. I’m a fabulous driver.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Liam laughed, and grabbed her fingers to give her a squeeze. He leaned
forward as they came more level, straps released to give him the freedom, and breathed in her ear.
“And I’ll tell you more tonight, if you want to hear it that bad.”

Her eyes went wide. She’d never had anyone read her so well. It was a little… scary. Were they moving too fast? It was too fast, right? She turned away and concentrated on the imaginary road up and through the mountains. Maybe… maybe she should take someone else out for a few days… just to give them both some space.

But that night, she forgot all about it, as he moaned his appreciation beneath her. “Shit, Sara…” he thrust upward, groaning. “I can’t… I can’t hold on.” His fingertips sunk into the softer muscles of her backside.

She came apart, back arched and tits out for his eyes only. “Liam… Liam, I…” she caught her breath, and the words before they could escape.

She slumped and cuddled into his chest, eyes watering with sudden emotion, shaking with shock.

She’d been about to tell him she loved him. Holy Fucking Hell. She couldn’t do that yet, right? Maybe… maybe she should leave him behind for a few days. Just until she talked herself into sanity and a semblance of control…

“Hey, you all right?” Liam shifted her sideways, and wiped her eyes. “You’re all teary. Was I too rough? Fuck, Sara, you should have…”

“I’m fine,” she managed, relatively credible, and shoved at his shoulder with her forehead, hiding from him. “You must be a geologist, is all.”

“Sara…” he warned, but he was already laughing.

“Because you just rocked my world.” His groan broke up the feelings, made them bearable again. “What? Too soon?”

He groaned. “You’re terrible.” But then he smiled and kissed the side of her head. “Don’t ever change.”

It wasn’t too soon – it was too late. Shit.

But if she were careful, she could probably keep it to herself.
Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

Going out to iduna, who needs the distraction today. Hang in there, my friend.

I'll do my part to keep you busy.

It wasn’t that strange, who gravitated where, when Liam thought about it. People tended to enjoy the planets that spoke to their interests, right?

It wasn’t hard to see that Vetra loved Kadara - he figured she’d settle there, once the immediate threat was resolved – unless Sid didn’t want to leave the Nexus. The young woman had a good thing going, working in comms. Drack would head for Elaaden, no doubt about that – though Kesh might want to raise kids on the station – Grandpa would settle where he could see them. Gil would go wherever his Jill ended up – friendship would keep him close. That meant Eos, or moving around as necessary as more settlements grew and people reproduced.

Kallo would stay with the Tempest as long as it was flyng. Hands down, no questions please. Suvi would be nomadic – but he’d bet on the Angara making room for her on Aya, eventually – Havarl if they couldn’t. Cora was harder to pin down – but probably Eos. She’d already talked about starting a garden there.

It begged the question – where did Liam want to end up? This whole idea of getting ‘serious’ with Sara – they still had a lot to do, but he should at least try to think about what might happen at the end of everything. Jumping from crisis to crisis was no way to live – he needed to slow down, and make a bloody plan for once in his already-too-long-for-a-human life. It didn’t help that Sara didn’t talk a lot about what she hoped Meridian would lead to. Liam thought she was afraid to jinx whatever good luck had already come their way.

But if he had a choice, he wanted to end up with her, wherever. But if that meant Kadara… and that wasn’t beyond the range of probability. Sara liked the shops, the gritty atmosphere, the mountain scenery, even some of the people.

The possibility didn’t thrill him, but everyone made sacrifices to be with the one they wanted, right?

It would be a hell of a sacrifice. He couldn’t even get comfortable at the pubs, because, hello, ex-cop? He and Jaal tended to hang out together in a corner to try to look unobtrusive – and usually failed. They were too high-profile. Especially Jaal. His friend was some sort of Resistance hero, it turned out – a minor celebrity on Aya, and the local boy made good on Havarl. But on a planet full of exiles, they both stood out like sore thumbs. A pair of goody two-shoes trying to fit on too-large feet.

But Sara was right - there were a lot of good people on Kadara, people that had gotten caught up in the rebellion thinking they were doing the right thing, and honestly, he couldn’t claim that he wouldn’t have been one of them, if they’d been around. Tann and Addison epitomized political bullshit.

Still, there were a lot of people that he hated. Sloane Kelly was the worst. He wasn’t sure he could
resign himself to living anywhere she wielded influence…

But Reyes Vidal was the second on his list. Sleezy scum, with the casual way he just used people… but Liam wouldn’t lie to himself – he wasn’t worried about vague ‘people’, or at least, no more than normal. And yeah, he worried about ‘people’ a lot. But more specifically, he worried about Sara. Reyes manipulated his Sara to do his dirty work, over and over again.

He had no proof, but every ex-cop sense screamed at him that Vidal was involved with something much larger than smuggling.

But he couldn’t just bring it up. “So, hey, Pathfinder, you know that Resistance contact? I think he’s up to his neck in Collective shit, and he’s using you as a shovel to dig himself out.” Liam snorted to himself, drawing a shocked look at the noise from Jaal. If he did say anything like it, it would look – well, it would look like jealousy, a monster worse than any bug or pseudo-dinosaur they’d squished on this rock. He sighed, rubbed the back of his neck, and knew he could say nothing. He could do nothing but put up with Reyes Vidal trying to sweet-talk his girl, smirking every time she accepted a drink while they met in his private room to talk over developments and Resistance information.

Damn it, whoever was feeding him information was the best – or maybe the bastard was just that observant. Vidal had confirmed their ‘involvement’ when half the Pathfinder Team still hadn’t figured out he wasn’t sleeping on his couch anymore. Mind you, the other half either didn’t care or had guessed months ago and had had time to deal with it. Maybe a couple were even rooting for him?

Unlikely, that. He was the Team screw-up, and he was bloody lucky that Sara - beautiful, clever, strong Sara - was willing to put up with all his faults and quirks… but that didn’t mean that he didn’t have opinions about who she spent her time with.

His Mum’s voice was critical at the bitter tinge to his thoughts about the smuggler. *She can accept a drink from whoever she bloody likes, Liam – just like you can.* And Sara did like Reyes. She liked him just about as much as she disliked Sloane. The bastard made her laugh, even while she rolled her eyes at the stuff he casually left out of his reports.

He had to give Sara credit - she knew he was trouble. But she didn’t let that stop her from making a point to check in with him when they were coming in from the badlands.

Fact was, Liam was jealous. She was doing all this running around for Reyes, but Reyes hadn’t been the one to hold her while she cried about the Angaran woman killed in the water pipes. Reyes hadn’t been there to stop Sloane’s bullies as they kicked people in the street until they were bloody and broken. Reyes hadn’t given her his ration of medigel so that she could patch the injured up and get them to the doctor in the Slums, and then home, risking Sloane’s ire, while fucking telling SAM straight up that she didn’t care if the bitch didn’t like it.

Reyes wasn’t around for a lot of things that needed to be fixed about Kadara. Weaseling piece of Adhi shit.

Needless to say, when the email came through one late afternoon, Liam wasn’t happy.

He hadn’t made any effort to hide how he felt when she’d shown him the email, wimbling about attending as Reyes’ plus one. Whether she could make some contacts, whether she could make a difference to the exiles there just by showing up and being social… she was on the fence, when he talked to her earlier. “I don’t like going without backup…” she’d wavered. “I’ll think about it, I guess. I’ve got some time, right?” She shrugged. “I’ll call him back later.”
He’d taken two hours to convince himself to tell her his full and unedited opinion of the whole situation. Liam knocked at her door, and at her ‘Hey!’ entered her room, frowning.

“So… you’re gonna go after all?” He was too late – he’d missed the vidcom entirely.

“What?” She was wearing the one pretty dress she had allowed herself – a little black thing with a breezy skirt and crisscrossy straps that cinched at the waist in the back. She looked better than any word in his vocabulary. “Yeah, I am. Reyes is planning something, something that will work in the Resistance’s favor. And if we can help the Angarans here… even if this is just the first step to making the exiles see that the Initiative still wants to help them…”

“Kadara is an independent colony. Let them solve their own problems.” He eyed her dress, his desire to whistle warring with practicality. “You’re gonna wear that?” He didn’t like his own tone. Liam… his Mum warned.

“It’s a party, Liam. And you don’t mean that. Not really. People are suffering here. We’ve got to try to help them. The Initiative failed these people, time and again. We have to try to make it right.”

“Yeah, I know – and you’re right. But it’s a party on Kadara. You should wear armor.”

“I’m going to sneak in my pistol,” she showed him the thigh holster, up high enough on the inside of her thigh to make him breathe faster, imagining her sliding her hand up to draw it – a million adolescent comic book fantasies flooding to the front of his mind, displacing Vidal, however temporarily. “I’m safe, Liam. Safer than usual, considering there’s no way to hide my pistol in my fatigues or civvies without a hoodie. And it’s too humid for a hoodie.” She pouted. “Sure wish the Initiative had thought to pack Flashbang holsters. Then I could wear my Blasto tank on Eos. Safest place to carry a gun, nestled between the girls – especially since I’m not planning on letting anyone get to second base.”

He ignored the reference to a notorious bra holster, and squashed down his automatic retort that she’d damn well not be planning to get felt up. “Safe. Right.” Until someone shot her in the strappy back of that damn dress. He took a deep breath. Honesty. No secrets, he reminded himself. Not being clingy. Just honest. “I don’t want you to go. Not with him.”

“Are you jealous?” Her tone was teasing. “Afraid Reyes is going to take advantage of me? Or afraid I’m going to run off with the sexy smuggler?”

Shit, she thought he was sexy? No secrets, Liam. “And if I said yes?”

She blinked, “What, really? I don’t see Reyes that way. He’s one of the few people actually trying to make a difference. He works for the Resistance. He might as well be… Jaal! Or Evfra!”

And he’d seen her eye up Jaal’s ass… “He’s a crook. A Resistance spy, sure, but a smuggler, too. You can’t trust him. And his version of making a difference is still getting people killed. Good people.”

“I know. But Sloane’s insane and cruel. I’ll take dishonest over letting people torture and kick people in the street any day.” She shook out her hair, upside down, and started twisting it into an updo. “You’re smart, Liam. You can see as well as I can that the Resistance has aligned itself with the Collective. We know what Sloane’s like. We have no clue about the Charlatan – we can only judge by his actions. It’s the devil you know against the devil you don’t know. Given the two, I’ll pick the demon of lesser evil.”

That made absolutely no sense, and yet… fuck, that was so Sara. One last go to keep her safe, then.
“Don’t go. Please.”

“I won’t leave the port.”

“Doesn’t help, even if you’re not in the slums. Remember that woman we found in the water system? There are people out there who’d kidnap the Pathfinder in a heartbeat. They hate the Initiative here. You’d be dead before we could take action. Don’t go. Please.”

“That’s when I use my biotics. I can take care of myself. And I could use a night off, you know?” She fastened her hair with a clasp that he had seen sitting on her desk, and a cascade of wavy blue hair dripped over her shoulders like magic. She slipped on her boots - at least she’d be able to run - and walked over to him, placing a hand on his chest. “I’m with you, Liam. You don’t have to be jealous.”

“You’re dressing up for him.”

Her eyes narrowed. Now he was in for it. He’d never learn to keep his bloody mouth shut. “I’m dressing up for myself. I brought this dress all the way to Andromeda, it deserves to be taken out and worn occasionally. This is the first chance I’ve had to wear it. That’s all.”

“Only because I never take you out.” It hadn’t worked out yet. Super frustrating. Every time he got something set up someone called her out to the other end of the sector. Cancelling romantic plans made him feel like a loser with a fake girlfriend.

“We get drinks all the time. This is business. Mostly.” She rolled her eyes, “I’m doing this because Reyes is an ally, and so is the Resistance, and there are a lot of mostly innocent people on Kadara that deserve better than Sloane Kelly.” She paused, “Even if most of them seem to be high on something or other.”

“Then wear armor. Or let me come with you.”

“The invitation was only for one.” She lifted her chin. “I’ll be back, Liam. And you need to trust me.” She grabbed her black jacket off her bed and kissed his cheek. “I’ll wake you when I get back. Feel free to sleep in here, if you want to.”

“Hurry back, then,” he stepped aside, against his better judgement. “And… be careful?”

“I’m always careful.”

This time there wasn’t room to laugh.
Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

Have another chapter, though this will probably be the last one of the day. The next one still needs some tweaking.

“You promised Liam you’d be careful.” SAM was becoming the worst sort of nag.

Sara was on her second drink, bought with confused answers to Umi behind the bar. “I am being careful. And you’re being careful for me, which is even better. Like eyes in the back of my head, that’s you, SAM.” She’d long since run out of people to talk to, though the Angaran Keema was a very nice person, one that she’d like to get to know better.

“Sara, you are well on your way to inebriation. Reyes will return soon…”

“And he told me to mingle, and draw attention,” Sara muttered under her breath. Luckily most of the people in the room were either high or drunk off their asses, or standing too close to the sound system to hear her at all. “I’m going to drink until I do just that.” She finished her drink and Umi smirked at her, inviting her over for another. “No one will draw more eyes than a drunk Pathfinder… you know what I’m like when I get this way.” Sara answered the bartender’s call, sidling up and nodding to the bartender.

“I find these tactics inadvisable, Pathfinder…”

“Don’t Pathfinder me now, SAM. It’s my night off. And yours. You could kick back and enjoy yourself a little, you know.”

“Care to experiment?” Umi smiled, a little too toothily, and poured the drink. “It’s Angaran wine and a little surprise.”


“Well, you’re still standing,” Umi’s voice mused, but Sara couldn’t see more than a blue blob outline of the woman. Or feel her own face. “That’s a good sign.”

The music swelled, and time skipped along like a merry dancer, whirling by unnoticed. Sara found herself on top of a table with no memory of how she got there, surrounded by enthusiastic Angara and Turians cheering her on as she danced, arms high and waving around. “Sara, perhaps you should slow down, until Reyes returns,” SAM warned her.

“It’s my night off!” She yelled out loud, and heard Sloane laugh, and saw her rise from her throne. “You know what? I’mma gonna sit in her chair,” she slurred, and climbed down, hearing a distant whistle at the show. “Fuck you!” She yelled at the catcaller, and then giggled.

"That an offer, Pathfinder?"

“Sara, he could see your holster…”
She flipped him off, and made her way to the throne, and settled herself on it, eyes wide.

“Comfy…” she decided, grinning, and running her hands along the soft cushions. “Could get used to this… like being queen of everything, or something like that.” Sloane reentered, and Sara rose. “Just keeping it warm for you, your majesty,” she snarked.

“Right. Thanks.” Sloane’s clipped voice wasn’t promising return favors.

“Funny, you don’t sound grateful,” Sara sniffed. “You’re lucky I’m not easy to offend.”

“That’s it,” SAM sounded very firm – more like her mother than she could ever remember hearing him before. “I am speeding up your metabolism, whether you like it or not, before you get yourself in a fight with Sloane. Consider yourself cut off.”

“Spoilsport,” Sara sighed, to confused looks from Sloane. The Outlaw leader narrowed her eyes, and sat back down in her chair. Sara pulled away, holding the side of her head. “But… maybe I should go find Reyes, after all?”

“I think that would be wise. You aren’t the only person in the room who has snuck in weapons, Sara. A little time is all I need.”

“Got it,” Sara headed for the door. “Can you find Reyes?”

“Storage closet, second left, and then the first left,” SAM instructed.

Sara slipped out past the guards, “Just looking for the restroom!” she trilled at one, who rolled his eyes, uninterested. She turned the last corner, and opened the door, only to lean up against the sill watching Reyes rooting in cargo containers on his knees. “You look like you’re looking for something,” she snarked, only to see Reyes hit his head on the lid.

“Shit,” he cursed, rubbing, and then smiled at her. “Care to give me a hand? The cargo numbers aren’t sequential…”

“What are you looking for anyway?” She shifted a few crates with her biotics, and lifted one down. Reyes crowed with triumph, and lifted the lid, crawling inside and fishing out a bottle. “Alcohol? I just flashed half Sloane’s people my ass just to get you a drink?”

“Would have liked to see that… But no. Not just any alcohol,” Reyes corrected. “This is whisky. The lone remaining bottle of the single cask the Initiative brought with them.” Sara whistled in appreciation. “Said cask was ‘liberated’ by Kelly during the Nexus rebellion, and bottled here. Six hundred and…”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s really fucking old shit,” Sara interrupted, eyes gleaming, “You gonna share?”

The sound of boots hitting the grate echoed down the hallway, and Vidal cursed. “Shit. I can't be found here…” He dropped the bottle back into the crate. Their eyes met, and his softened. “We need a distraction, Pathfinder.” His hands tightened on her arm, and pulled Sara closer. “Care to help me out?” His head lowered to hers, slowly.

Sara shut her eyes, and acted on instinct.
Liam’s shoulders relaxed at the noise of the airlock opening, and someone descending from the bridge.

Sara was back - earlyish, by Kadara standards - as mad as a hornet from the sound of it, too. She emerged through the open door of his cargo closet, dripping wet boots in one hand, and a bottle in the other. “Making a lot of noise for someone stalking barefooted though the Tempest’s cargo hold, there, Pathfinder.”

“Bastard,” she kicked a storage crate, and hopped in pain. “Holy Fucking God DAMN it all to Hell, you fucking piece of shit.”

“Hope that wasn’t for me.” She only glared, so Liam tried again. “You’re going to wake up Gil, if you don’t quiet down. But… I take it the party didn’t go well, then?” Liam tried not to feel smug, failed, and hid his reaction by rubbing his already immaculate dismantled gun down with inorganic lubricant. An extra coat never hurt.

This was the tenth.

He might have been waiting up, worried. His guns were very shiny.

“I was drunk.” Sara flushed.

“Somehow I’m not surprised,” Liam’s jaw clenched. “So what happened?”

“I was supposed to provide a distraction,” Sara toed her bare foot around the edge of his couch.

“Great, go on, then.”

“So I danced, and drank, and mingled, and then sat on Sloane’s throne.”

Liam looked up at her. “Is that it, then?” He braced himself for what he knew came next. This was when she told him that she’d hooked up with someone else, and…

“Reyes tried to kiss me,” the words blurted out, as if she couldn’t control them.

Rage bubbled up. “I knew it!” Liam slammed the gun down on the table, shoving the whole piece of furniture away from him. “That bloody arse, I’m gonna…”

“Liam, stop! There’s more!”

“Like hell, there’s more! Unless you’re gonna tell me that you kissed him back and want to break up, the bastard has a beating coming to him!”

“What the fuck you talking about?!” She dropped her boots, and put a calming hand on his chest. “I took care of it. Little extra biotic behind the punch. I know it hurt, because he threw up on my
shoes. Had to bribe someone to let me rinse the boots off. Glad I didn’t wear the heels, now. They’d be ruined, but a little water isn’t gonna hurt these babies.” She lifted the bottle in her other hand, “And I got the bottle of whisky he was trying to steal as an apology?” Liam rolled his eyes, and her face fell. “Does that mean you don’t wanna have a drink and a dance?” She pouted, “You aren’t still mad, are you?”

“A dance? Not here.” He indicated the cramped quarters of his little closet with derision. “And there’s no way I’m going to the Slums this time of night.”

“Course not here, or there. Come on up to my quarters, if you aren’t still pissed at me.” She whirled away, the skirt of the dress twirling so he could almost see her arse. “Gotta try to get some mileage out of this dress. Fucking wasted evening.”

Once she left the room, SAM spoke. “She got very drunk, Liam. Please… don’t let her drink alone again. I was worried for her safety.”

“Since when do you worry?” SAM was silent, and Liam’s shoulders relaxed. “Shit, it was that bad? All right, SAM, promised.”

“Thank you.”

He followed after about ten minutes - most of them spent changing out of his armor - yeah, he’d been waiting for the call to arms, he’d never try to lie about that - and trying to get the grease out from under his nails just in case she let him touch her, despite him being a world-class idiot - and knocked on her door like he wasn’t spending most nights in there. Still her place, not his. “Sara?” His voice was low, most of the others were already sleeping. No point waking them up, just to hear the fallout.

“Come on in,” her words were clear. She hadn’t started drinking without him, then - good. He entered, and stood at parade rest, hands to his back. “Oh…” she swallowed, and uncrossed her legs, spinning her chair away from her console. A slow rendition of a love song played in the background. He relaxed a bit. She had been serious then. He’d feel even more of an idiot if she hadn’t… “You dressed up,” she whispered, standing up and walking around him. Her hand drifted over his hip, before she emerged in front of him.

“You and jackets, huh?” Her eyes had gone dreamy and distant. “Damn you, Mom, for contributing to my genes.” Her eyes raised up to his, chagrined. “So… you still pissed at me?”

“Isn’t that my line?” He smiled wider. “I think I was asked to dance, Sara Ryder.”

Her eyes slitted and her lips curled up, “For you, Liam Kosta, I’ll even put on the heels.” But she bent over first, messing under her skirt. “And take off the holster. I shouldn’t need to shoot you, if you play nice.” She tossed the gun – way too nonchalant about handling the weapon, safety on or not – towards her desk, missing entirely, only to turn and dig under her bed for the mythical heels, giving him a great look at her ass, clad only in what looked like a string. He closed his eyes, praying silently to whatever god existed that she would let him take it off later. Or not. Not off would be good too. Being versatile was a good thing… She strapped the shoes on, brisk and efficient, the same way she reloaded her guns.

He found his words as he watched. “I’ll play as nice as you want to play, Sara Ryder.”
“And if I don’t want to play nice?” She stood, and swayed towards him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

He swallowed, “I can be the bad guy, I guess.”

“Wasn’t sure you were gonna come up at all,” she whispered, and leaned into his shoulder. “You were right. I was wrong. Reyes is a charming asshole. Fun, and nice enough, but still an asshole.”

“I know his type. Takes advantage, when he thinks he can get away with it.” His hands slid down to her lower back, toying with the little straps that crisscrossed her back, reveling in the warm skin underneath the flimsy material. “I should have told you before, but you look gorgeous. I want to smash his face in for trying to kiss you.” He paused, “Can I smash his face in? And maybe kiss you afterward?”

“A territorial thing?” Sara wrinkled her nose.

“Nah, just… your clothes aren’t an invitation. They’re what you want to wear. Why shouldn’t you want to look pretty on your night off? Forgot that for a moment, earlier. I know better. Sorry?”

“Forgiven.” She stretched up to reach his lips, and kissed him gently. “Thanks for saying I look pretty.”

“On the other hand, you don’t look pretty. You look beautiful.” She shoved him. “What, it’s the truth!”

“You’re so cheesy.”

The song switched, to something old, Ed Sheeran crooning his love to someone that must have been a lot like Sara, and Liam cleared his throat, knowing what to do, for once. “I found a love, for me. Darling, just dive right in, follow my lead.” Her arms tightened around his neck, and he swayed with her. “I found a girl. Beautiful and sweet. I never knew you were the someone, waiting for me.”

He detached her arms from around his neck and twirled her out in a strange mockery of a pirouette, and held her there – not really dancing, but… moving with her as she laughed, light and easy. “We were just kids when we fell in love, not knowing what it was. I will not give you up, this time…”

She whirled back towards him and they danced silently, listening to the words. “You are the king of cheeseballs, Liam Kosta.”

“I can live with that?” He picked back up the song, “We are still kids, but we’re so in love. Fighting against all odds… I see my future in your eyes…” He lost himself as she tipped her chin up to see him. “I’ve met an angel in person,” he finished, breath catching, “I don’t deserve this. You look perfect tonight.” The music died down, and he just stared at her, lowering down for another kiss.

“Way to say it with music, Liam,” she whispered when he pulled back.

“White Christmas,” he whispered back, grinning at her paraphrase.

“Is there a movie you haven’t seen?”

“Bing Crosby rocks, and Danny Kaye’s a hero. Crushed hard on Rosemary Clooney, too.” He thought for a minute, “I haven’t seen The Last of the Legion Director’s Cut. It’s mythical, though. Probably doesn’t exist.”
“What, like Rodents of Unusual Size?” She snorted, and when he bent down to kiss her, she… well, she was perfect, after all, kissing him back like she needed him to survive. Definitely better than how he thought the evening was gonna go. “Liam,” she whispered, when they paused to breathe, “the dress… it is an invitation. To a private party.”

“Yeah?”

“Wanna come as my plus one?”

Liam groaned, but kissed her anyway, and followed her to the bed. “Bad, Ryder. Really bad.”

“You like it when I’m naughty.”

“What did I tell you about trying to sound like me? And I didn’t mean that kind of bad. I meant that line was terrible.”

“Be honest - you love it.”

“Not as much as you.” She pulled back, eyes wide, and then just fell into him, raising her mouth up to his. He was so close to saying it – but he couldn’t. Not until he was sure she felt the same way. There were a couple times lately he thought maybe… Too soon, though, to confess that shit.

The ties of her dress came undone with barely a touch, falling away with a whisper of synthetic silk as she let him push the straps off her shoulders. She fought to get his jacket off and shirt over his head – he barely had to pause, she was so deft, sitting back on the edge of her bed when she won the battle.

She wasn’t wearing a bra. She’d gone out, with nothing but a couple of silky thin layers between her and the most dangerous people in the cluster… but he wasn’t angry. Liam cupped a breast in his hand, sinking to his knees to kiss the other, a supplicant begging for an angel’s forgiveness. She pressed him closer, and let him slide the inadequate string to her ankles – the goddamn dress already puddling around the strappy shoes. His hands trailed to her hips, and fondled to take the scrap of missing fabric’s place between her legs, and she caught her breath at the first touch. “Liam…”

“Shhh…” he rose back up, stroking. “I got this.”

Her nails burned a path down his muscled shoulders, tightening and releasing as he played, gathering her arousal, but never entering. She shuddered, and let her head fall back. “You’re spoiling me. Let me do some of the work.”

“Problems? Just say if I’m doing it wrong.”

“Nooo…” the word shook. “Christ. You’re a fucking tease, you know that?”

“Just making sure you want me like I want you.”

Her hands scrabbled at his belt, tearing away at it in her impatience. “Liam Kosta…” her voice warned, and then she froze, grabbing onto his hips as he pinched her nub, and sent her over. He caught her, holding her up. “Fuck. Fuck… Liam… please…”

He lifted her, and sat down on her bed, holding her against his chest, shivering as she straddled him, not waiting to release him before she ground down, whining wordlessly for what he could give her. He fell backward, and let her go, to struggle free of the rest of his clothing. “Hold up, love,” he whispered, when she tried to sink down with his pants barely down.
“Hurry,” she panted. “Can’t…” she bent down, catching his lips with hers, insistent. Their mouth grappled with each other, tongues warring. “Liam, I need…”

He shoved his pants off with his foot, not willing to displace her to strip them off easier. Her love song playlist droned on in the background, but the blood rushing in his ears drowned it out so that he couldn’t hear but one word in three – just the slow murmur of crooned words. He paused, hoping he could slow her down. “Wanna dance, Sara Ryder?”

Her breath caught, as he let her slide home. “With you, you mean?” She moved, and the world tried to end. "I asked you first, didn't I?"

His hands clutched at her hips, trying to hold her still. “Shit, Sara, don’t do that yet. Not yet, love. Shit, shit, shit…”

She laughed at him, wicked. “What, you don’t want me to do this?” She raised on her knees, slowslowslow, and dropped down, hard, grinding against him. “Mixed signals, Liam, my boy. I would have said you’d like this. Guess you shouldn’t have let me be on top, if you wanted control,” she mocked.

He opened his eyes, the effort taking everything, and rolled, pinning her underneath him. “Got you now,” he bent down and nipped at her tattoo, and then kissed down her clavicle to the hollow of her throat. “At my mercy?”

She snorted, “You beast.” She wriggled underneath him.

“Do you really want it like that?” He hesitated.

“Nah,” her face softened, “Liam…” his name was a question, but he wasn’t ready to answer, so he kissed her instead, moving closer to her, gliding slowly, just enough to keep her going, bending his neck down so he could keep kissing hers.

He hadn’t made love to her yet. Not really. Their sex was usually hot and playful, not slow and sensual. This… this seemed like the right time for something a little different. The delicate skin on her throat darkened with the stubble from his cheek when he pulled back from the mark he’d left.

Her hands were still held still by his, but he shifted to get one of his free, so he could brush her hair out of her eyes. “Christ, you are so bloody beautiful,” his voice broke.

“Let me touch you,” she whispered. “Liam… please…”

Her eyes, desperate and wide, fixed on his, and he gave in, lifting her hand and placing it on his chest. She stroked him, nails grazing a nipple, and further down, until his abs quivered involuntarily. She spread her fingers, catching his cock between them as he moved inside her, and he choked, the sensation almost too much in combination with how tight she was. “Sara,” he warned, and she laughed, gentle, but raised her hand to his navel, and then up to his neck, drawing him down to meet her forehead.

“Come on, Liam,” she gasped when he moved harder. “You can’t break me.”

“I might,” he tried to warn her, but it was too late. She was snapping herself against him, rising to meet him, and his body wasn’t listening to his conscious control any longer. “Sara…” he emptied into her, helpless in her arms. “Holy Shit, sorry. I didn’t want…”

“I know,” she panted, still moving. “But I didn’t want you to have to wait. Besides, I’m…” she shuddered, and arched up, and he cursed his oversensitivity as she came apart again around him.
“Ow…” he whimpered, and fell against her.

“Ow?” Sara lifted her head, staring incredulously. “I hurt you? How?”


She frowned, “Didn’t know about that.” She rolled him over, off of her, and stared down, eyes wide. “Is that why you try to make sure I finish first?”

“Nah,” Liam traced the line of marks to her collarbone. No secrets. “I get off on watching you.” He swallowed, “Is that weird?”

She lifted an eyebrow, “You? Liking to watch? No…” she snarked, giggling. “Only you.”

“Then we’re good,” she snuggled next to him, eyes drooping now, and limbs lazy. “I’ve got no complaints, Kosta.” She went quiet, and then muttered. “Want you to stay in here all the time. Do you want to… you know, move in? You don’t have to, if you don’t wanna, but I’d like it.”

“You serious?”

“Yeah. I am.”

He didn’t answer right away, and she drowsed off, cuddled close. With no one to talk it through, he laid awake thinking about what ‘serious’ meant, way out here. Back home it might have meant finding a flat, or something. So maybe – maybe it wasn’t different, just because they were in a different galaxy after all.

His Mum would have thought they were moving too fast. It had only been a few months since they’d met… but shit, if they both wanted… and it wasn’t like her bed wasn’t a hell of a lot more comfortable… Liam fell asleep between thoughts, his Sara clutched to him like he might wake up and she’d be gone.

He hesitated the next morning, when they picked up their mess, but Sara pointedly took his dress jacket, and hung it up next to her dress. He frowned, staring at the g-string on the floor, until she picked it up and slipped it to him. “Memento? From our fourth date.” She smirked. “Now can I watch the dirty subtitles with you?”

Liam allowed himself a smile. He was saving those subtitles, for a special occasion. But this was easily dodged. “Not a date,” he slipped it into his pocket, all the same. “If I’m staying here, now, that was just an evening in.” He searched her face for a sign that she was sure.

He saw nothing to say otherwise. On the contrary her face lit up like Guy Fawkes Day. “Can’t wait to see what you come up with for a date, then.”

“No pressure…”

“No pressure.” She raised up on her toes and kissed his cheek. “You’ll do great. You always do.”

He snorted. “Aya.”

“Shhh, I’ve blocked out that memory. Even SAM couldn’t recover it. Never happened. I can’t believe I was such a… shrew.” She covered his lips with a single finger. “Can’t we just move on?”
“Nah, I’ve got to get you off this ship before I can do that. Just have to figure out when.” He wrapped his arms around her back. “My girlfriend’s job is so bloody demanding. Fucks with my plans like you won’t believe. I ought to give her boss what-for.”

Her laughter gave him life, and he relaxed a little more.

It would be fine. Had to be.

They both needed this too much for it to go wrong.
Chapter 60

Sara watched the old vid, curled up between Liam’s legs, with the slow creeping certainty of déjà vu. She’d seen this movie before.

“Scott loved Westerns,” was all she’d said aloud, and Liam hugged her from behind.

“Still does, Sara. He’s gonna be all right, you’ll see.”

On the display, she watched the lean, rugged hero, poker face intact, fingers flexing in the ready position at his hip, just waiting to draw his Colt .45 as he paced the appropriate distance. Twenty paces, and then turn and shoot. “If the bad guy is so bad, then why doesn’t he just turn and shoot the deputy in the back?”

“Because then the sheriff would be forced to intervene, because he broke the code of the west. It's about honor, you know?”

Sara wrinkled her nose. “The only code these guys have is how many bodies they’ve piled up along the way.”

Liam’s laugh broke off, “Sounds familiar, right? Think Kelly’s a fan?”

“Ugh, I don’t want to think about Sloane.”

“Sorry.” The characters finished pacing, and then spun, but the hero was at least two milliseconds faster, shooting the gun out of the villains hand, and then placing another bullet right between his eyes. “That’s silly,” Liam grunted, “Should have shot in the mouth or kidney. More likely to hit the crucial portions of the brain through the mouth, or bleed out. You could totally survive a head shot like that. Waste of bullets.”

“You think he’s aiming to maim?” Sara snorted. “Besides, the forehead shot looks prettier for the camera. The guy lost his hat and everything.”

“Good point,” Liam hugged her again, as the hero’s chosen lady ran out of the general store, her own hat flying off and her hair falling down, throwing herself into the gunfighter’s arms. He tipped her back, and kissed her in what was no doubt supposed to be a passionate manner, as the girl went limp in his arms, her own hands reaching up to cup his face.

“Haven’t they ever heard of bobby and hat pins?” Sara giggled, trying to lighten her tension. “No self-respecting woman would let her hair just tumble down like that. Only prostitutes let their heads go bare. It’s historically inaccurate!” She waved her hand at the man. “Plus, somebody really ought to give that guy kissing lessons. That looks like it hurts.”

“It’s a symbol, Sara.” Liam murmured and kissed her neck. “She’s letting go. That guy’s totally getting laid tonight, right?”

“Oh, is that what happens next?”

“Only off camera.” Liam lifted his arm and tapped the code into his Omni-Tool to turn off the display. “All done. Ready to sleep?” He stretched upwards, and shifted his leg free to make his way to the bed.

Sara laid awake for a while, thinking about the stupid movie. Gunfighters and outlaws, and the guy
getting a girl…

She had been around Kadara long enough to realize that the Outlaws and Collective were gearing up for a final showdown. She’d visited the Collective – carefully leaving Liam behind in favor of Vetra and Drack to keep his reputation squeaky clean since he sucked at being the bad guy. She was reluctantly impressed with the organization that the Charlatan managed in such chaos – and without being a constant presence? It wasn’t just good management - it was a fucking miracle.

The Collective was no gang. It was more like a government, complete with their own army. Dangerous as hell, but hardly feral like the Outlaws. They were purifying their own water, and experimenting on domesticating Adhi – nobody else was that far along, not even the Nexus. What’s more, the Collective members assured her that they knew a good thing when they saw it. The Collective treated its people well – unless they were proven traitors. And even then, instead of Sloane’s casual brutality, the girl was simply ‘detained’.

Her relationship with the Outlaws, on the other hand, could politely be described as ‘strained’. She saw little to compliment about the way Kelly ran the Port, or the Outlaws, and the older woman knew it. So to say that Sara was shocked when Sloane contacted her was an understatement.

She didn’t think they were on that good of terms, to let the Outlaw leader call her on her ship, and say they needed to meet. That meeting was a farce, anyway, with Sloane insisting that they’d beat up her second in command, that the Charlatan had made overtures via a note on Kaetus’ body...

Sloane’s attempt at complimenting her honorability and independent thinking made Sara snort. “Honorable? Me?” She grinned ferally at the Outlaw. “I didn’t know you cared.” Her curiosity about the situation bubbled over, mixing liberally with caution, and then overwhelming it entirely. She had to know what was going on, and this might be her only chance to really find out who the Charlatan really was.

“What happened to Kaetus is on me,” Sloane met her eyes squarely. “I let the Collective go on for too long. Now they’re bold, and dangerous. I’ve got to end this before it get worse.” She tapped out the location of the meeting, sending it directly to SAM.

This had all come to a head, and if she had to choose… there was no doubt where her loyalties lay.

She made up her mind to go over her third cup of coffee the next morning. She’d take Jaal and Liam – and go to the meeting spot, meet Sloane, and see what happened.

Liam was willing enough, as always, though Jaal grumbled a little bit about assisting the Outlaws. Sara assured him she sympathized, as she climbed out of the Nomad, and waved an overprotective Liam to stay behind. “You two, stay with the Nomad,” she instructed. “I don’t trust Sloane as far as I can throw her.”

“Pathfinder,” Liam protested, “You can’t go into the dark cave without…”

“Stay here, Liam,” her eyes were grave, but she tried not to give away her doubt. She didn’t need Liam rushing in and stirring up shit just because he thought she was in danger. “I’m just here to referee, after all.” She prayed she was right. “If I show with back up, people might… get spooked, and cause more trouble,” she finished weakly. “I’ll have SAM call you in, if I need you, okay? SAM?”

“I will signal for you at the first sign of danger, Liam.” The AI confirmed.

Liam pressed his lips together, but Jaal nodded, tugging his friend back. “Understood, Pathfinder,”
the Angaran answered for him. “We will be here.”

She stepped inside the cave, and a twitchy Sloane met her immediately. “You took your sweet time,” the woman sassed. “I was beginning to think you weren’t coming.”

Sara eyed her, “You came alone?”

“Yeah,” Kelly’s fingers twitches, just like the gunfighter in the movie from the night before. Sara resisted the urge to draw her own weapon. “That was the agreement.”

“After you then,” Sara said finally, after weighing the situation.

“Why, Pathfinder, you would think you don’t trust me,” Sloane mocked.

“I don’t,” Sara bit off, so that there was no misunderstanding. “But I have your back, whether I like it or not.” The other woman nodded, crisp and nearly professional, and turned and led the way into the cave.

It was oddly calm – just the sound of the dripping water from the roof into the many puddles interrupting their quiet steps as they penetrated the darkness. Sara switched on her headlamp, and Sloane barked, “Turn that bloody thing off. You’re betraying our position.”

“Forgive me for not wanting to trip,” Sara began to sas, just as a form stepped out of the shadows on the edge of the light.

“You look like you’re waiting for someone.” Sara did trip then.

“Reyes?” Vidal stepped out of the shadows.

Sloane’s lip curled. “I’m here for the Charlatan, not some third-rate smuggler.”

“They’re one and the same,” Sara breathed. “You’re the Charlatan?” she blurted. He bowed elaborately, but didn’t meet her eyes. She didn’t feel betrayed, exactly. Just – bewildered. It made too much sense for her to be truly surprised. “Why didn’t you just say something?” The evidence piled up – the Angaran spy, his interest in the Roekkar murders… he’d been undermining Sloane since long before she’d arrived on Kadara.

He had used her, just like Liam claimed. Fucking hell.

But Sloane had barely blinked. “You said you wanted to settle things. How?”

“A duel. You and me, right now. Winner takes Kadara Port.”

“Somebody’s been watching too many Westerns,” she muttered under her breath, and Reyes shot her a look of alarm. “Seriously, Reyes?”

“Two people shooting each other is better than a lot of people shooting each other.” His eyes were hooded. That definitely wasn’t the only thing on his mind… he had another plan.

Sloane wasn’t the brightest bulb on the Christmas tree. “I’ll take those terms.”

Sara’s mind scattered, trying to figure out the twist, while the two duelists circled each other, hands at their hips. “Sara, there is a sniper. His sights are set on Sloane. Please, take two steps to your left.”

SAM’s words barely penetrated, but Sara’s eyes followed the red laser pinpointing Sloane Kelly, and the truth hit home.
Reyes was a liar. He never played by the rules. She had only a few seconds to decide.

Despairing, she stepped aside. Reyes lifted his hand, and fired it. “Bang.” He blew at the imaginary barrel.

Sara’s stomach churned. “Do you think that’s funny?!” With her choice of inaction, Sloane fell into a lifeless heap, bleeding out. She’d be dead in a matter of minutes… or sooner. Her eyes faded into blankness.

“A little?” Reyes was all business now. “Get her out of here,” he ordered, and an entire crew of accomplices filed out of the background, lifting Sloane’s body and taking care of business. “Kadara Port is ours tonight.”

She glared at Reyes, and stepped forward. “You lied to me. I thought I knew you. But that doesn’t matter, huh? Because you got everything you wanted.”

“What I was is peace,” Reyes spoke from between his teeth. “Sloane would have brought war to Heleus. We don’t have the population to survive that.”

The truth stung. “Just as well she’s dead then,” Sara spat, and turned back towards the entrance. Standing there was Liam, arguing with Jaal. “Shit,” she whispered.

“Lover’s quarrel?”

“None of your damn business, Reyes.” Liam pulled away, and started back towards the Nomad, and Sara moved to follow him.

Reyes caught at her arm. “Wait, Pathfinder. With Sloane gone, you are free to place an outpost on Kadara.”

“Oh yeah? What’ll that cost me?”

“The trade your outpost will bring in should be sufficient.”

Sara touched her gun, but the time of shooting Reyes was long past. “As long as you can guarantee none of the Initiative shuttles will be shot down.”

“The outpost will have my full protection,” Reyes held out his hand.

Sara stared at it. “What is this? The word of a liar?”

“The hand of a partner,” Reyes challenged.

Sara took it, shook it once, and then let go, resisting the urge to wipe it clean on her armor. “We are not friends, Reyes. You lied to me.”

“Perhaps, in time, I will regain your trust.”

“It’ll be a warm day on Voeld first.”

“With the monoliths active again, who knows what will happen?” Sara wanted to wipe the smug smile off Reyes’ face. “I’ll plan for swimsuit weather on my next visit.”
Chapter 61

Chapter Summary

So... the next two chapters will be the last for at least a week, because I am going on vacation.

But I didn't want to leave you guys hanging about Kadara, either. So here you go.

Liam kicked at the rocks at his feet, from where he was leaned up against the Nomad. “I don’t like this, Jaal.”

“Agreed,” the Angaran rumbled. “I say we go in, and risk whatever punishment the Pathfinder judges sufficient for disobeying orders. She should not be in there alone.”

“Liam, there is a sniper inside, with his sights on Sloane – and Sara is in the line of fire.” SAM announced.

“shit,” Liam sprinted for the mouth of the cave, Jaal close behind, and saw the red beam of the laser, lining up with both Sara and Kelly’s head, too far away to reach. “Shit,” he grabbed at Jaal, and opened his mouth to warn her. “What the bloody hell is she…” Liam watched, helpless, as Sara stepped aside, out of the path of the bullet. SAM had warned her, too… but she…

The sniper rifle – suppressed – fired with a whooshing ‘snap’ as a single shot took down the notorious leader of the Outlaws. Kelly lay in a broken crumple, mismatched eyes wide open with shock at her betrayal, and a copper-smelling pool collecting underneath her.

Jaal grunted, and Liam’s mind whirred, as Sara approached the Charlatan, who turned, and… “Shit,” Liam hit the rock wall. “Reyes? Reyes was the Charlatan?” Sara snarled at him – accusing and harsh.

A untranslated phrase left Jaal’s lips. “You can say that again, Mate,” Liam muttered. “Kelly’s dead,” Liam told himself. “And Sara let her die…” his stomach turned over. “How could she…”

“You had no respect for Sloane Kelly, Liam,” Jaal asked, confused. “She was a bad leader.”

“That Reyes…” Liam drew his own weapon, lining it up on Vidal. “He used her. Again. As a distraction. He used her… he’s not going to bloody do it again.”

Jaal caught at him. “You should discuss this with the Pathfinder.”

“She let it happen!” He shook Jaal’s hand free. “She watched Kelly get murdered…”

“Was this not the least bloody ending?” Jaal asked quietly. “The Pathfinder knows they were headed to a war. Another war. Do we not have enough enemies, between the Roekkar, and the Kett? Under Reyes, the Initiative will be allowed an outpost. Is that not our first goal?”

“Not like this,” but Liam dropped the pistol. “It shouldn’t be like this.” He turned and left the cave. “I’ll be back at the Nomad, Jaal. Tell the Pathfinder…” he shook his head. “Tell her whatever shit you like.”
Chapter 62

Chapter Summary

I lied. Oops. It will be three chapters today. Maybe four, actually.

Liam was quiet, clear back to the Tempest. At Sara’s orders, they rose from their dock, watching and hearing the Port dissolve into gunfire as they raised the Tempest into a low orbit. Sara stayed on the bridge for a long time, even once the city was out of sight, sending Kallo and Suvi away so that she could stare at the planet in peace.

Peace was an illusion.

Liam found her there, fists clenched and sick to her stomach. “How could you do it?”

“I didn’t have much of a choice,” Sara’s voice was flat. “It was Kelly and her string of dead and tortured Angara, or the Charlatan and a puppet in charge of the Port. They were both shit choices, and someone had to die for the sake of fucking peace.” She finally turned away from the display. “At least this way, we’ll have an outpost on Kadara.” She paused, and the silence dragged out between them. “I should call Addison. At least I don’t feel like spouting poetry.” She folded her arms across her chest, and couldn’t meet his eyes.

“You let an assassination take place in front of you,” Liam pressed. “You watched, allowed it to happen.”

“I know,” Sara blinked away her tears, and folded her arms around her waist. “I accept full responsibility.”

“You should,” Liam stepped forward. “I didn’t think you… it’s hard to even look at you.”

She spun on him, “What, you didn’t think I could do it? Make the difficult choice? How could I side with Sloane, knowing that the Angara would be little more than slaves? How could I tell Evfra that I betrayed the Resistance? How could I try to cover up that Reyes led me – led all of us, including Evfra – into a trap, designed to put him into power?” She shook her head. “I had a choice, Liam. But… this was the right one. And someone had to die for it.” She pushed past Liam to leave the bridge. “So much for pedestals, Liam.”

“Sara…” he tried to stop her.

“You don’t want to see me right now. You know what? I don’t want to see myself, either,” she shook his hand free. “That’s fine, Liam. I’ll live with my choices. Alone. That way you can keep your pretty little conscience all white and pure.”

“That wasn’t what I was gonna say,” he called out to her as she slid down the ladder to the lower level of her room. She heard a thump. “Sara,” his voice was closer.

“SAM, lock my door,” she instructed the AI as she entered her room. “I don’t want to be disturbed.” She threw herself on her bed, face down, and tried to weep for what she’d done.

The tears wouldn’t come.
It had been the right choice.
Chapter 63

“Sara!” Liam’s voice sounded hoarse to his own ears, as he thumped on the door. “Will you let me in?” His fist was red from pounding. “I’m sorry.”

She hadn’t changed the codes to let him through. He thumped his hand again, weakly. He was attracting quite an audience, Jaal and Peebee and Lexi up front, Drack, Gil and Cora in the distance by the cargo bay. “I shouldn’t have criticized,” he tried, “it was your call.”

SAM’s voice spoke over the general comm. “Lexi, I believe the Pathfinder needs your assistance.”

Lexi strode forward immediately, “SAM, medical override to the Pathfinder’s door, please.”

“My pleasure,” the doors opened a brief crack, and Lexi slipped in. The doors snapped shut, before Liam could step through as well. “My apologies, Liam,” SAM sounded contrite. “Sara was clear that she didn’t want to see anyone else. I will have words with her, I assure you, about denying you access to what should be your room, as well.”

"Since when?" Drack grunted.

“I don’t care about that,” Liam lied, and then sat down, crosslegged on the floor of the hall, blocking the entrance to the mess. “I’ve screwed up again.”

“What happened?” Cora’s voice was gentle. Liam scrubbed at his face, and didn’t answer. Least she hadn’t asked what he’d done this time… “I was in the cargo hold, not monitoring comms…”

“Reyes Vidal was the Charlatan,” Jaal supplied when Liam didn’t answer. “He had a sniper in position to kill Sloane Kelly. SAM warned all of us, but Sara chose to let her die. The Collective is taking Kadara Port as we speak.”

“Kelly is dead?” Cora’s voice held nothing but shock. “Sara let Vidal kill her?”

SAM spoke up, correcting gently. “Vidal did not pull the trigger, but he orchestrated the event. However, Sara blames herself, because she could have intervened, and chose not to, for the sake of Kadara.”

“Mercy,” Suvi whispered.

“That’s why we left port?” Kalle’s voice echoed from behind.


“Then why is Loverboy out here instead of in there, comforting the Pathfinder?” Drack grumbled.

“Because I accused her of murder,” Liam snapped.

“Wow, pot calling kettle black, much?” Vetra snarked. “How many Talon Raiders died on that ship, Liam?”

Suvi stepped around him. “We all need to calm down. I’ll make a pot of tea. That will help…” she disappeared into the mess.

“They were slavers,” Liam wanted to yell back at Vetra, but he was just too tired.
“Sloane was one step away,” Vetra countered. “I, for one, am glad she’s dead. Vidal will do a far better job at keeping things moving. He won’t crush the Angara underneath his heel, either.”

Jaal hummed, “I agree. Kelly is not a great loss, and Vidal’s ties to my people will make life better for them here. Liam, I remain surprised at your response.”

“Doesn’t matter if she was crap,” Liam muttered. “We could have taken her into custody, had a government try her…”

“What, like Tann’s version of a – what fucking animal was it, it had a pocket, of all the fucked up things – a wallaby court? No…”


“That was it. Who else could try her? Aya’s governor?” Vetra shrugged. “This is faster. And she doesn’t get the chance to hurt anybody else.” The Turian stepped forward. “I think that this isn’t about Vidal, or about Kelly. I think this is about your hurt pride. She didn’t tell you what was going on. She didn’t trust you enough to tell you.”

“The Pathfinder didn’t know,” Jaal protested.

“Didn’t she?” Vetra humphed. “I wonder. Liam, if you’re gonna be involved with the Pathfinder, you two better find a way to deal with the choices she makes that you don’t agree with. She’s still your fucking boss.” She turned away, back towards the cargo bay. “I’ve got a few calls to make. My sources are going to go haywire with the tumult down there. Better try to limit the damage. Let me know if we end up leaving, okay, Kallo? Otherwise I’m going to need some time off planet tomorrow, Cora.”

“Sure thing,” the second in command replied meek and gentle. “If things get sorted, anyway. No shore leave if there’s still a gang war on the surface.”

The others drifted away back to their stations, but Liam sat, until the mess door opened again, and Suvi thrust a mug into his hand. “Wish we had lemon,” she half-laughed.

“Don’t like lemon. Take it black.” Liam stared blankly at the cup. “What are you, my Mum?” She’d thought a cuppa solved everything, too.

“Come on,” Suvi tugged at him. “To the table, at least.”

Liam rose, and followed, settling himself into the chair. “I was wrong,” he admitted, after taking a tentative sip. The almost forgotten taste of tea spread over his tongue, bringing tears to his eyes. He hadn’t even realized how much he missed it, until now. Thought he was a coffee drinker, but this… this was a taste of home. Were there tea bushes in Hydroponics?

“Not really,” Suvi mused, drinking her own. “If we were back in the Milky Way, you’d be dead on. But we aren’t, are we? Justice looks different out here,” her eyes were sad. “I took such things for granted. I didn’t even think about it, back there.” She traced an imaginary pattern in the tabletop. “Laws. Order. Security personnel. Lives meaning something. Sara’s trying to change that, so it means something here, too. But I’ve done a lot of talking to Lexi – she grew up on Omega, you know? And to Vetra. I think it’s different, for people who grow up privileged, protected, like you and I.” She shivered. “Vetra’s life didn’t mean anything on Palavin. Even her mother ignored her, after her father left. She worked a lot of shady jobs, just trying to keep her and her sister afloat and alive.”
Liam laughed, one tinged with bitterness, “My parents were lawyers. Did you know?”

“Then your response is understandable. You grew up with people seeking justice.” Suvi covered his hand on his mug with hers. “Most of the lawyers haven’t come out of the deep freeze yet. Some people are happy about that.”

“Right,” he took another sip. “I just didn’t think Sara could…” his words trailed off.

“That she would stand by, and let things take their course?” Suvi asked, very quietly indeed. “I know you two are…” she laughed. “I’m happy for you, you know. It’s hard being alone out here.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt her. I love her,” Liam whispered, shocked that he was saying it out loud. Sara should have heard it first.

“We know,” Suvi drawled. “Hard to miss. I’m only a couple thin walls away, after all.” She lifted her mug. “She was so sad when she came on board. I could tell – it takes a lonely person to know a lonely person, aye? She’s lost so much – and she’s so happy to have found you.”

“So what do I do?” His eyes raised, and met hers, drooping with fatigue. Even their resident scientist had been working long hours.

But Suvi shrugged. “Wait. She’ll want to talk it out, eventually. If not, then, you cope.” Her eyes were sad. “I won’t lie. She may not want to talk. But… Sara loves you, too. I think you’ll work it out. Just give her space, and time.”

Liam shook his head, a silent disagreement. “Don’t think so. A guy gets only one chance with a girl like that, I’ve already had two, and screwed ’em up. Twice.”

“They say third time’s a charm,” Suvi sipped again. “You know, SAM probably was looking for a better way, and didn’t find it.”

“I was,” SAM confirmed. Was it only him anthropomorphizing the AI, that he sounded mournful?

“There was no better way?” Liam closed his eyes.

“Not with our current limitations,” the AI replied. “I advised Sara to step away, otherwise, the sniper might have fired on her, too. She was in the line of fire. If she had knocked Kelly over, she risked getting shot by the woman she was saving.”

Liam pushed back, the tea now churning in his stomach. “That bloody arsehole Vidal, I’m gonna…”

“I believe it wasn’t Reyes’ intention to kill the Pathfinder,” SAM interrupted. “I believe his sniper was acting on his own. I spoke when I did to spare her life, and my own, and to give her the choice of saving Sloane’s as well. I believe she made the right choice. Sloane’s death had the best outcome, for the most parties, as it preserved our reputation with the Resistance. It was a calculated loss.”

“Shit, Sara,” Liam bent over with his elbows on the table to rub at the back of his head, sinking his fingers into his hair. “I’m sorry. Will I ever stop cocking up? I’m so fucking sorry.”

“Apology noted,” a quiet voice spoke from the door. “Suvi – I don’t suppose you’ve got enough for one more cup?”

“Of course, Sara, I made a whole pot,” Suvi slipped out of the booth. “Sit yourself down, I’ll fetch it for you. You’ve had a rough day.”
“Rough.” Sara laughed, eyes worn and lined around the edges, and face blotchy, as she settled next to him in the booth seat. “Right.”
Lexi’s arrival in the room was accompanied only to the soft whoosh of her door opening and closing again. “Sara,” her scan tinted her eyelids orange. “Physically, you are fine. What’s going on?”

“You’re the one that said we shouldn’t neglect mental health,” Sara mumbled. “I’m mentally unhealthy, doc. Fix me.”

Lexi sighed, and sat on the bed. “It’s not that easy, Sara.”

“The hell it isn’t.”

“What happened?”

“Sloane Kelly’s dead.”

“Did you kill her?”

Sara hesitated. “Indirectly?”

“Sara, you either kill someone or you don’t.”

“I didn’t pull the trigger, but I… pulled the trigger,” Sara sat up, and pillowed her face in her hands. “Kadara is in the midst of a gang war, in which the Collective will win, because the Outcasts’ second in command and leader are both dying or dead.”

“Kaetus is dying?” Lexi swallowed. “How are you responsible?”

“I’m not, for Kaetus. I think, anyway. He did his own thing, Vidal kidnapped him, beat him up. Last I heard, he wasn’t gonna live. Kelly, though… she’s on me. Vidal hired a sniper, SAM warned me, and instead of stepping forward and saving her life, I stepped back, and…”

“I see,” Lexi was calm. “I’ve seen a lot of things like this, where I grew up. Rarely are the good guys and the bad guys clearly delineated.”

“Yeah?” Sara dropped her hands, and showed her tired face to the doctor. “But I thought Vidal was one of the good ones.”

“So… he betrayed you.”

“He used me, the son of a bitch,” Sara sounded almost impressed. “I hopped here and there like a good little bunny rabbit…”

“A what?” The Asari asked.

“A large Earth rodent with strong back legs,” SAM supplied the doctor.

“Thank you, SAM.”

 “… the point is I was mistaken. He beat up Kaetus, to draw Kelly out of her safe place, and dragged me into the mess, thinking I’d be there as an ‘independent’ representative. An outsider.” Sara hissed. “He pinned this on me. And then gave me everything I wanted, an outpost, extended the hand of friendship, whatever, to make me complicit in her murder! Now it looks like I was in it from the start.” She looked away. “I could handle that, though, if only…”
“This isn’t about Kelly,” Lexi sighed. “Liam isn’t taking this well.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

“Who?”

Sara winced, “Literary detective. Iconic. You’d love Dr. Watson, have Liam lend you the vids…” her words trailed off. “God, he probably wants to leave the ship, now.”

“I doubt that.”

“Come off it, Lexi. His girlfriend just killed a woman in cold blood.” Sara snarked, “What’s not to love?”

“A bad woman.”

“Ends justify the means?” Sara shook her head. “I can’t say that, Doc. I can’t. Pathfinders have to be better than that. I sold a woman’s life for an outpost.” Sara stared off into the middle distance, unseeing. Behind her the planet spun, Kadara’s sunset neverending.

The silence dragged on until Lexi hummed, “Has Liam told you the story of when he met the Archangel?”

“That Turian vigilante?” Sara blinked, “No. He keeps trying, but Peebee and Drack shut him down, every time. Have you…”

The doctor smiled, wistfully. “It’s quite a story. This Turian was with C-Sec, even served with Commander Shepard, before… you know.” Her hands smoothed the blanket next to her. “A good man, by all accounts, law-abiding and fair. And yet… he ended up a vigilante, on the side of justice by any means.” She stared down at the smooth patch of blanket. “I think you’ll find that Liam is more understanding than you think. He speaks before he thinks, and that pedestal he has you up on – it’s not a bad thing that it just got shortened a few feet.”

Sara snorted. “You think?”

“Do you want the man you love to see you as perfect forever?”

Sara shuddered, “God, no.”

“Then let him see you as you are, sooner rather than later. So that he’ll understand who you can be, good and bad.” Lexi reached out and held Sara’s hand. “I’ve… had a lot of relationships, Sara. I know what it is, for someone to lift you up as something impossible, just to realize you’re mortal after all. My exes – they never understood the difference between being professionally detached, and being cold and clinical.” She laughed, “You don’t have that struggle. You and Liam – your feelings are always on your sleeves.” She squeezed her hand. “That’s a good thing. Let him disapprove. Let him see that you regret what you had to do. You’ll both be stronger for it.” She let go. “I think Suvi’s tea should be ready by now. I prescribe a strong cup.”

“Tea, huh?” Sara smiled weakly. “Just what the doctor ordered.” She sniffed. “My Mom was from England. Did you know? She used to sit me and Scott down in the kitchen with a massive pot and make us drink the whole thing. She said the meaning of life was found in tea leaves.” She bit her lip. “I’ve always liked coffee better, myself.”

“Both are full of anti-oxidants,” Lexi began to lecture, and then stood up. “Go on. I’m going back to the med-bay.”
Sara fiddled with the edge of the blanket until she left. “SAM, is Liam…”

“Liam is in the mess, talking to Suvi.”

“Right,” Sara stared at the wall separating her room from the kitchen. “I guess I should go in there then.”
Chapter 65

Chapter Summary

Okay, last one for a week. I swear. Sorry to spam you all!

But it worked better broken up like this than all stuck together.

“Sara…” Liam tried again. “I didn’t know… everything. SAM’s filled me in, a bit, and…”

“Neither did I,” Sara snapped back, but touched his arm a second later, only to snatch it away and ball it into a fist. “I – I don’t feel right about it, either. Maybe never will.” Suvi slipped her the mug, and she lifted it to her lips. “We’ve killed a lot of people, but… I didn’t know their face, like Sloane’s. I keep seeing her eyes – one brown, one blue, just staring up like that…” her words trailed off. “Christ, I need a drink.”

Suvi took her own mug, “I’m just going to finish this on the bridge. Give you two a chance to talk,” she stepped out, and the doors swished shut.

Liam was quiet, waiting for her to finish her thought. “Thing is,” Sara started, “I don’t regret Kelly’s death. I regret the manner of it. I hate that I witnessed it. I resent that it is on my hands. That I had to allow it to happen. But that she died? Nope.” She drank too deeply of the hot tea, and coughed, hiding her mouth. “I would have left that for someone else to decide. And that makes me feel even more guilty. Because if she deserved death – then it should have been me behind the gun. Tann would never have the guts, the coward. Him exiling people is how Kadara got into this mess.”

Liam wrapped his arm around her stiff shoulders. “No, it shouldn’t have been you pulling the trigger. And… you did the right thing. You did. I’m a wanker, who never gets anything right. A total screw up.”

Sara shook her head, “I hate it when you say that.”

“I know.” He laughed, depreciatingly, “Doesn’t make it less true.”

Sara sighed, “Forgive me?”

“For what?”

“For taking the side of the vigilantes,” she blurted out. “For not upholding the Initiative. For not standing firm. For taking the easy way out. For not talking to you about my suspicions about what this meeting really meant.”

Liam let the silence last a minute. “Done.”

“Just like that?” Sara managed a weak smirk, “I’m not really used to this ‘acceptance’ thing.”

“That’s my line,” Liam grinned, but the smile faded fast. “I didn’t tell you my suspicions either. I’m not stupid, Sara. I knew down to my toes that Reyes was in way deeper with the Collective than a Resistance spy and a two-bit smuggler. I should have seen it coming. And I should have told you, jealous, or not.” He stared at his cup. “I wanted to be the better man. Fucked it right up.”
“I’m crazy about you, Liam Kosta,” Sara leaned closer against him. “You know that?”

“Right back atcha, Sara Ryder.” He cleared his throat. “Does that mean I’m not going to get locked out again?”

“Shit!” Sara bolted upright. “I didn’t even think… SAM, send Liam’s Omni-Tool the code for my- “ she flushed, “Our door, please.”

His Omni-Tool chirped, but he ignored it, settling his arm around her again.

The tense silence eased. “We can move your stuff in today, if you want,” Sara finally added.

“You’ve already got a couch. And a display. What else do I got, that needs to take up your space?”

“Our space.”

The words warmed him like the tea hadn’t. “My clothes, I guess? Maybe a rack for datapads?”

The edge of her lips curled up, and she shifted so he could just see her eyes, glinting a little. “We could grab your beer…”

“True love, whatever,” Liam teased. “You just want me for my beer.”

She opened her mouth, but his Omni-Tool chirped to life, and Drack’s picture snapped into view.

“Hey, Loverboy, if you’re done groveling to the Kid, get your ass into the armory. Reyes’ has sent us a shuttle of presents, and Vetra and I are up to our eyeballs in the good stuff. We could use extra hands. Yours and the Kid’s, if she’s done being melancholy. And Vetra says he wants a vidcom with her and that Keema, as soon as she can manage it, about the outpost site.”

“Since when did I start being Loverboy?” Liam protested.

Drack cackled, “When you started cozying up and fighting with a locked door between you. Don’t fight it – some nicknames are for life. Are you coming up here or not?”

“We’ll be up in a minute,” Sara sat up, and smoothed her hair back. “Do I look like I’ve been crying?”

“You look gorgeous,” Liam grinned at her. “Guess moving the beer will have to wait?”

“Hmmm… beer or guns?” Sara sighed, “Time to be responsible. Weapons first, beer later. We’ve still got to drink that whisky, too.”

“Not at the same time,” SAM instructed.

Sara groaned, “SAM…”

“I don’t think she needs a twelve-step program quite yet, SAM,” Liam told the AI. “I’ve got this.”

“Very well, Liam,” SAM answered after a moment. “I will tell Lexi to put her emails about alcohol abuse on hold.”

Liam hissed at Sara, "He's joking, right?"

Sara shrugged, "I have no idea."
Chapter 66

Chapter Summary

Hello again! I'm back from vacation with a peeling scalp from too much sun, and a backlog of handwritten notes that need to be typed (sand and laptops don't mix).

Hopefully I'll get them all down fast, but have patience with me during this crazy time of year. Seriously, everything happens at once.

This chapter references sex, but as everything happens off camera, should be SFW.

They left the outpost to form itself with the Collective's eager help, promising that they would check back in soon to the newly declared 'Free Port of Kadara'. It sounded good, though in practice, it didn't seem much changed, other than a few merchants in the market that declared the stores were 'under new management'.

But they couldn't stick around and make sure Reyes made things better. That Turian ex-Spectre, Avitus, had found what he thought was Ark Naturus, and Cora was twitching to investigate the newly hacked black box from the Asari Ark, they needed to visit Elaadan, and a million other places and people were demanding their time. Only Kallo was happy, as they were spending more time in space than in port or orbit.

The workload overwhelmed the skills of one Pathfinder, and Sara was falling into bed every night, asleep before her head hit the pillow, only to wake up panting and sometimes screaming – and not for the good reason.

Sex was a no-go, mostly because of the distance caused by his disapproval of her choice remained, whether he wanted it to or not. Liam could admit it - and had, multiple times. Only Cora agreed with him, in any case, that Reyes was trouble. All the others could see was that Reyes was doing a bang-up job of letting Keema get on with the public side of things, while he pulled strings from the shadows. Liam longed to let it go. The so-called duel was in the past. Nothing anyone could do now.

Sara's crying got worse, as the pressure – from Tann, from Addison, from the entire Cluster – weighed down her shoulders, like Atlas holding up the world. And instead of finding another Pathfinder to share the burden when they found the Ark, it turned out Macen, the Turian Pathfinder, was long dead.

Watching Sara deal gently with a grieving lover who was also his successor - shit, he hoped it never happened to him. He wanted her job like a hole in the head.

Stress made her dream about falling. He could tell by her twitching. Scary, how he could tell what she was dreaming about...

Distance, or no distance, Liam held her through the tears all the same, her clutching at him while she caught her breath. She returned the favor, when he woke to choked sobs and a wet pillow. It was a different sort of intimacy than he was used to – being there for the shit. He kind of liked it, when it didn’t totally suck.
It tasted like being dependable, like being there for someone that was there for him, too, through all the crap and complications, instead of watching an escape pod launch at the first sign of conflict.

He wouldn’t have ever thought he’d find someone like her. Someone who’d let him be so vulnerable, without making fun or calling him weak. Who’d let him lay awake, his tears puddling on her chest, listening to her breathe, and her heart beat, until his own slowed down. Who’d let him ramble on about his parents, and London, or the last movie he’d seen in the Milky Way, or just breathe until they were tired enough to drift off again.

He’d never thought that he could revel in the sound of someone breathing. He could listen to it forever.

He brought her coffee the morning they landed on Elaadan – sun streaming in from her window display bleaching the blue of her hair into a color as pale as the sky. She opened her eyes, all too briefly, and rolled over to make room for him, as he set the cup down on her nightstand. “SAM,” she muttered, groggy, “Is something wrong with the automatic shades?”

“They are on their darkest setting, Sara.” SAM paused. “As you no doubt remember, Elaadan doesn’t rotate.”

“Shit,” Liam snuggled up to her, wrapping one arm around her middle and kissing her neck, hoping she wouldn’t shove him away. “Eternal day. Suck to be a vampire here.” He nipped her neck, hoping to make her giggle.

Sara groaned instead. “I don’t suppose we’ve got anything we could block it out with, SAM?”

“I will investigate, and have Gil change the programming,” SAM assured them both. “But in the meantime, Kallo wants you to know that the locals are currently trying to pry pieces of the Tempest off. ‘Scavengers’ he calls them. Apparently, there is a high population of these people on Elaadan. Lexi is hoping to prove a personal theory that such behavior is a side effect of the cryogenic process, and Peebee is already waiting at the airlock for you both, no doubt hoping that you will make the Remnant ruins a priority during your mapping.” SAM paused again, “Also, Drack has already made several personal calls this morning to the Krogan colony, New Tuchanka. I heard the words ‘Drive core’, ‘bomb’ and ‘Morda’.”

“Fuck it,” grumbled Sara. “I don’t wanna get up, Mom. Lemme stay home from school today.” She tried to roll over, but Liam cuddled closer, taking up the room. “Judas,” she tried to elbow him.

“Come on, Pathfinder,” he wheedled. “I brought coffee.”

“All the coffee?” She managed to open one eye.

“All the coffee that Jaal didn’t drink first. Between you and me, I think he’s a caffeine addict.”

Her mouth twitched up. “You spoil me, Liam.”

“Just keeping you moving, love.” He kissed her neck again, hoping they were finally coming back to an even keel. “Hey, know what I’ve cocked up on this planet?”

“What?” Sara mumbled.

“Absolutely nothing.”

Sara flopped onto her back, throwing an arm over her face. “Alright then. That’s worth getting up for. So… who’s guarding the Tempest from being pried apart by vicious scavengers while the rest
of us get shit done?”

“Cora?” Liam sounded hopeful. “Maybe Vetra?”

“You wanna come this time?” She rolled over to face him, and opened both eyes. “What about good cop/bad cop? Won’t it matter, if we have to deal with these Scavengers?”

“I think you’ll need me more than the Tempest, especially since they don’t seem to be organized,” Sara trailed her hand down his chest to wrap her hand around him, stroking lightly. Liam held his breath, his body responding too quickly for comfort, and not wanting to jump her if she wasn’t ready to forgive him. Again.

“I always need you,” she murmured, a saucy smile lighting up her tired face. “Wanna make Peebee wait?”

“Mmhmm,” Liam kissed her forehead. “Morning eye-opener, get the blood moving, huh?” Trying to be cool about the prospect of sex was taking every single ounce of control he had. It had been a while… “Are we good then? I don’t do angry sex.”

“We’re good, Kosta. Besides, I’d look for any reason to put off going out into that evil fucking sunshine,” Sara snarked.

“Lexi has prepared sunscreen for both of you,” SAM informed them.

Sara groaned, and hid her face against his shoulder. “Tell her thank you, SAM.”

“I will inform Peebee that you are having sex, and will be late.”

Liam’s mouth twitched, “You do that. She’ll be down pounding at the door in two seconds.”

“Done.” SAM paused, “She is speaking to Kallo, to tell him to shut off the hot water.”

“Sara can override that, right?”

She slapped his arse, and he groaned, bucking into her. “Not if you don’t concentrate. I’m down here, Kosta. Quit proxy fighting with Peebee, already, and get to work.”

“Yes, ma’am.”
Ten minutes later, he left a sated Sara, his towel wrapped around his middle, and nodded to a furious Peebee as the door slid smoothly open. “‘Scuse me, this boytoy needs the shower,” he smirked, and slid into the loo. “Need a quick rinse off. Sara, love, you gonna join me?” He called back at her.

“Give me a half a minute,” Sara called back weakly. “Have to make sure I’m not gonna fall over when I try to use my legs.”

It was worth Peebee’s glares, to know that he’d made Sara gasp and her eyes open wide even before her first sip of coffee. “I’ll save you a shower head.”
“The Remnant will have to wait,” Sara told Peebee at the Team meeting that morning. “We’re going to check in with this Paradise place, fill up on water for the Tempest…”

“I hope we can afford it,” Cora grumbled.

Sara continued over her, “…talk to this Strux dude about Morda…”

“He’s a fucking liar,” Drack grumbled.

“I believe you, Old Man,” Sara assured him. “But we still have to hear him out. That said, then we’re going straight to New Tuchanka. The vault can take second fiddle for once. It’s not like inactive monoliths stopped the badass Krogan from making a successful colony here. Us squishies can manage just fine in a little heat for a few days. And even a vault can’t possibly make a planet start turning, right?” Sara squinted at Suvi. “It can’t, can it?”

Suvi hesitated, “It shouldn’t be able to…” while Drack grunted in approval.

“So… who is with me today?” Sara summed up.

Cora hesitated. “Can I say, ‘not it?’” She flushed. “I sunburn easily. Lexi has warned me to stay out of the direct rays as much as possible. There’s things I should check on the location of the Asari Ark, as well.” Her eyes narrowed, “We are going to find it next, after Elaadan, right, Pathfinder?”

Sara nodded. “That’s the plan.” Cora’s shoulders fell, reassured, at least for the moment.

“I want to go,” Vetra stood at the back of the room, arms crossed. “I have contacts with the Krogan, and Kesh wants me to check up on someone she hasn’t heard from in a while.”

Drack eyed her narrowly, “Who?”

“Your granddaughter doesn’t tell you everything, Old Man.” Vetra snapped her mouth shut. “Ask her, if you want to know who she hangs out with.”

Sara watched the two of them, amused when Drack frowned. “All right, then, it’s you two, for now.” She smiled apologetically at Liam who shrugged it off.

“Can’t win them all. I’m going to get some other work done.” He pecked her cheek, and sauntered down the ramp to the research station. “Kick some arse for me, love?”

“You know it,” Sara called after him.

Peebee rolled her eyes, “I think I liked you both better when you were pining hopelessly, or even when you were fighting. Least then there was something to watch.” She walked over to the balcony edge and heaved herself over, calling back after she landed. “Come find me when you’re ready to look for the Remnant ruins. Or activate the vault. Or something besides talking too much and making googly eyes at your sweetums.”

Sara leaned down over the edge, “Liam is not my sweetums.”

“I’m not?” Liam’s voice drifted back up. “Shit, I’m doing this all wrong then.”

“Dumbass!”
Liam blew her a kiss, and she flushed to the sound of Vetra’s disgusted noises and Drack’s cackling.
“You forgave him too quick,” Vetra grumbled as they made their way off the ship. “How many times are you going to let Liam say whatever shit he likes and forgive him?”

“He was right, this time,” Sara sighed. The air beat down around them like her childhood’s Easy Bake Oven after she’d souped it up in order to be hot enough to melt Eezo. Her mother had nearly passed out, when she caught her… “God, it’s hot, Vetra. Can we not pick a fight? Please?” She stared at the armed guards around the little oasis that claimed to be Paradise on Elaadan. “Not much chance of not getting in trouble here, though, from the looks of things.”

“Good,” Drack squinted into the blazing light and hazy heat. “I’m here to pick a fight with somebody, dammit. You’d better hope it’s Strux.”

“If you must fight, fight with the water mafia,” Vetra checked her rifle, and spare ammo. “I’ve heard about this angara… she apparently has some super-secret source. She’s supposed to be pretty scary.”

“Yeah, let’s not pick a fight with the water mafia,” Sara hoped, rather than believed that possible. “Or the Scavengers, or the entire Krogan colony… We need to be on our best behavior, guys.” She paused before continuing, voice strained, “We can do that, right?”

"Yes, Mom," Vetra rolled her eyes, her visor's optics tracking with her pupil.

Drack only grunted, and jumped off the Tempest’s ramp, directly into the overbearing sunshine. “Let’s get this over with, if you aren’t gonna let me have any fun.” Vetra and Sara exchanged a worried glance, and followed him.

"Well, one thing you can say about Elaadan," Sara tried, weakly, already sweating. "It's not Voeld?"

"I could use some ice right about now."
“So,” Liam propped himself up right inside Peebee’s door, like he belonged there. “What do you know about these Scavengers?”

“Make yourself at home, why don’t you? Don’t know much. Nastiest of the nasty mutineers,” Peebee didn’t look up from the Observer she was constantly tinkering with. She claimed it was a gift for the Pathfinder – but Liam had yet to see it tested. Hopefully Sara would test it, before taking it into a fight... with her luck, it would turn on her first chance. “Rumor has it they do everything from cannibalism, to kidnapping. They aren’t picky about who and what they use or abuse – as long as they survive.” She finally shot a glance over at him. “Why? You aren’t worried about...” her smile was sickly sweet. “Aw, Liam, that’s cute.” Her voice was anything but endeared. “Intimidated by the big, bad Scavengers?”

“Nothing wrong with that. Like you aren’t?” Liam managed his own smile. “Not any more than usual. Just... trying to get a lay of the land. El-la-dan. Hadn’t heard much, ‘cept that the Krogan had settled here. SAM’s told me a little. Wonder why they went all weird, though?”

“Talk to Lexi,” Suvi called, eavesdropping as usual from her chair by the forward display. “She has theories, about the way people were woke up, back in the early days, when the Scourge first hit. She thinks that skipping steps during the first crisis damaged people.” Her eyes were on her tablet, but lifted, her forehead creased. “I hope she’s wrong. I wasn’t the first to wake up – that was Kelly, security, and then life support, but...” she shook her head.

“No shit?” Liam shuddered. “Lucky that I woke up on the Hyperion, then. Rude awakening there, too, but at east I got a cup of coffee before Habitat 7.”

“What a scam,” Peebee didn’t look up from her work. “You got to skip the whole ‘starvation or freeze’ bit Tann fed us.” Her hands were still busy with the Observer. “Course, I was off grid, making more trouble than I was worth. Kalinda saw to that.”

“You know Tann didn’t have many other options. He did, at least, manage to give the Outlaws a choice. It’s Kelly’s fault that they chose exile,” Suvi paused, “I wonder, though, if the Pathfinder’s brother is going to have the same issues – might, if what Lexi theorizes is true. I’ve read her research, and it’s compelling...”

Liam frowned, and straightened. “You think?”

“I’m sure that Harry’s has everything under control,” Suvi temporized, turning back to her station. “But Lexi could use a hand collecting data, if you aren’t busy.”

He wasn’t busy. He had all the time in the world, especially if Lexi figured out something that would help the other Ryder. Sara’s grief, if she lost her brother after all the shit Tann had put her through - it was best not to think about it.

Liam found Lexi at the research station, a fancy Omni-Tool in her hand, with a frown on her face as she tried to upload a program to it. “Am I interrupting?”

“What?” Her head snapped up, and she shook her head. “No. Not at all. Did you need something?”

Liam nodded at the Tool, “You stole my line. Upgrading technology’s kind of one of my things.” Lexi looked surprised. “Look, Doc, Suvi and Peebs say that you have a theory about the Scavengers. That their brains got scrambled coming out of stasis. Suvi thinks it might have messed
with the Pathfinder’s brother. I… want to help. If I can.”

“That would be Peebee’s version, though how she became privy to my notes…” she tapped irritably at her own Omni-Tool. “I’ll have to change my passwords.”

“She works with tech that nobody’s seen before last year,” Liam pointed out, lip curling up on one side. “You don’t think she could hack your passwords, if she was curious?” He held out his hand towards the other Omni-Tool, “Care if I have a look?”

“She could just ask,” Lexi started, before rolling her eyes. “Of course, what am I saying? Being Asari might be contagious, the way she avoids me.” She eyed his hand, hovering over the tool. “Be my guest. I don’t remember my own Tool being quite so - irritating to upgrade.”

Liam huffed a laugh, “I’m here, I’m free, and I’m willing to trek through Paradise to scan people, if you need it. I always like getting off-ship, and I can hold my own, if you’re worried.” He lifted the new Omni-Tool, shifting it, testing the weight.

Lexi smiled, “That’s sweet of you. I’d go myself, but…”

“I get it,” Liam broke in. “I don’t think people who aren’t armed should leave the ship here. Kallo and Gil have turned on some sort of defense system – with SAM in charge, or some shit like that, but no point pushing our luck.” He held out his left arm, and handed her back the Tool. “Go on then.”

“Do you know how to activate the scanner?” Lexi asked.

He snorted, “Seen Sara do it enough.” He punched a few buttons, and turned his arm towards her. “Looks good, though you have slightly elevated… blood pressure?” He winced, “Sorry, Doc. Patient confidentiality. Least I’m not giving you a shot in your arse in the hallway.”

Lexi just laughed, “Somehow, I’m not surprised.” Her lips twisted, “All right then, scan as many Scavengers as you can find – and a few others, so that I can use them as a control group, if you don’t mind. I need to make sure there’s nothing in the environment that could cause the imbalance I suspect.” She nodded at the tool. “It’s connected to my display in the med bay, so I’ll stay in constant contact.” She hesitated, “Liam, are you and Sara-”

“Are fine,” he assured her, feeling his face heat. “More than fine. She’s as spectacular as always. And… I’m doing things different. Like this,” he lifted the Tool. “No more hopping from crisis to crisis, leaving before I screw up. I’ll use my skills for other things, instead. There’s got to be something. I - I want to be around, help her cope with all the shit, but the good stuff, too. I’m done bailing from situations with the first mistake, and I’m trying not to bumble into messes in the first place, just so I can look like a genius while I try to fix things.” He fiddled with the Tool, making unnecessary adjustments to the display, pulling up the specs and programming, rather than meet Lexi’s eyes. “And I know we’ll fight, but next time, we’ll try to keep the rest of the crew out of it. Not gonna bring it home again.” He squinted at the display, “You know, you could increase the efficiency of the scanner by nearly 10 percent, if you overclocked. It’d take… five minutes? Maybe?”

“Really?” Lexi smiled, “Not my field. Go ahead and change what you think would help. I imagine you won’t want to talk to the Scavengers for longer than you need to. Not a pleasant group, by all accounts.”

Liam laughed, “See that? You’re assuming I was planning to talk to them, instead of just stealing their data without their permission.”
“Liam!”

“Easier to ask forgiveness, Doc.”
Chapter 70

Sara reentered the ship a few hours later with his name on her lips, but for once, he wasn't stalking the Research Station, awaiting her return. “Kosta, front and center!” She tapped her Omni-Tool, paging him. “Honey, I’m home!” She waited for a response before sputtering, “Liam, where the hell are you?”

Lexi chuckled, as Liam’s head popped up, from the fascinating data Lexi had compiled from his many scans. “You’d better report, Liam. She sounds like she needs you.”

Liam pulled up the link. “I swear, I haven’t done anything but help Lexi.” Her face was furrowed, concerned on the screen. “You aren’t getting complaints from Paradise, are you? I didn’t stir up any shit, Pathfinder, swear.”

“Not at all.” She bit the words off. “We’ve just got problems. Strux claims Morda wants the drive core to make a bomb – that she’s targeting the Nexus. We have to prioritize the Remnant ship after all – and the Scavengers are our competition. You and Drack are going to help me clear out their Flophouse.”

Liam choked, “Flophouse? They have a flophouse? Where do they think we are… the Ancient West?”

“Probably,” Lexi muttered. “Their thought processes are…” she pressed her lips together. “I can’t think of an appropriate word.”

“Don’t you mean scrambled?” Liam shoved down the inappropriate laughter.

“What the fuck did you two get up to today?” Sara sighed, “Whatever,” she disconnected, but appeared in the med bay door a second later, sweaty, sunburned, and limp. “The point is – we need to get the drive core before Morda does, and I need you and Drack and Peebee…”

“On it, Pathfinder,” Liam started to remove Lexi’s updated Omni-Tool off his wrist, but Lexi covered it with her hand.

“Keep it,” she smiled. “Maybe it will come in useful.”

“Ooh,” Sara stepped forward. “Did you get a pretty?”

Liam winked, “As a matter of fact, I did.” He tapped up the specs, and sent them over to her. “Nice, eh?”

Sara whistled, “That scanner’s better than mine. I’ll have to requisition an upgrade, Mr. Kosta.” She bit her lower lip, “Is the program compatible with a Krogan Hammer?”

“For you, I’ll make it work. Shouldn’t be hard,” Liam pecked her cheek. “We rolling out immediately?”

“Shouldn’t take long to lure Peebee away, with promise of Remnant goodies. Drack’s still in the Nomad, waiting for us.” She pressed her lips together, “The Nomad will be tight, but I don’t want to come back to the Tempest between. And Peebee can make herself useful at the Flophouse, too. If they’ll mess with the Tempest, they’ll fiddle with the Nomad, too. We need a dedicated guard, assuming we recover the drive core.” Her fingers rapped an impatient beat against her Omni-Tool. “We have to get the drive core.”
“Take protein bars, extra water, and sunscreen!” Lexi scanned her, tinting her skin bright orange. “The damage to your epidermis is extreme, Sara.” She gave her an injection. “That will keep the pain to a minimum. I can treat the damage when you get back, but it will involve a night in the med bay.”

“I know,” Sara sighed. “I’ve never experienced anything like the sun here. It’s more evil than the Archon. Still, we have to stop the bad people from blowing up the Nexus, before we can tackle the vaults. See you, Lexi. Don’t wait up.” She was already tapping out a message to Peebee, as she followed Liam to the loadout bench. “Peebee’s suit up, and has her guns. She’ll meet us at the Nomad.” She frowned, “Did you know she’s been sleeping with her weapons?”

“Don’t we all? Better than a security blanket.” Liam shrugged into the sleeves of his armor, and Sara checked his connections, as he grabbed extra ammo, plus a few disruptor rounds, sliding them into the pockets of his tactical pants. He grabbed his helmet, and kissed her. “Missed you,” he whispered, looking in her eyes, his own wide and wistful.

“Same here,” she smiled, and his heart skipped a beat, before she shoved him towards the door. “Come on. Drive core won’t wait. You can tell me all about your day in the car. I don’t know whether to be relieved or worried that you ended up under Lexi’s wing.”
Chapter 71

“The places you take me,” Liam teased, breathless, as he and Sara crouched behind a crate of what seemed to be – for some reason – flotation devices. On a desert planet? What the hell did the Scavengers need with these? Eos had a lake – but somehow he didn’t think they were exporting. Hoarding, maybe, hoping to sell them to the highest bidder?

They’d yet to find a water world. Unfair. He could use a good swim. His sweat was sweating.

“You can go back to the Tempest, if you don’t like my idea of a good time,” Sara’s teeth were clenched, as she lined up her Isharay, and fired, once, and twice, on the sharpshooter trying to return the favor. The bitter tone to her words belied her slow exhale of relief when the enemy fell forward, off the balcony above them, her hands already working on reloading her rifle.

“Not a chance,” Liam flashed a smile for her, and fired off an Overload at the next sniper bearing down on his girl. “Pretty sure that your idea of a date is better than anything I can come up with. I was thinking the Nexus needed zero-g laser tag. What do you think? Business opportunity?” She took advantage of the shocked sharpshooter, and brought him down with a headshot. “Nice shot.”

“Thanks,” she pursed her lips, sliding her clip into place. “I had my first kiss playing laser tag.”

“Shit, I want to hear that story,” Liam laughed, as he followed her lead, lining up his shot on the next target.

“It was a ploy, to get me close enough to take him out. He got all into it, and then ‘BAM!’” She fired, and another Scavenger crumpled to the ground. "Right in his chest.”

Liam whistled, “That’s some Mata Hari shit, right there. Baby Sara was a hard ass.” He fired six times, in quick succession, while she zoomed in. “It would work on me.”

“Quit flirting!” Peebee’s voice over the comm demanded. “I need backup here. Scavengers are trying to break into the Nomad. And you might remember I’m the one with the drive core? Drack! Even if those two can’t get their brains out of their pants, I would think you would…”

“Bit pinned down!” Drack warned. Over the comm the sound of squishy noises echoed. “Gonna have to be somebody else.”

“Fuck,” Sara swore, and turned to Liam. “Can you…”

“On it, Pathfinder,” Liam saluted ironically and counted gunshots, waiting for the pause that meant someone needed a reload. He slipped over the crate, sprinting for the next possible cover. “Your knight is on his way, Peebs.”

“My hero,” Peebee hissed. “Get your ass over here, whatever you call yourself.”

“Got you covered, Kosta,” Sara vaulted the crate in the opposite direction, sniper rifle recoiling against her shoulder as she took down two Scavengers in quick succession, before diving behind an all-terrain vehicle to recover her shields and reload, her breath harsh over the link. “On my way to you, Old Man.”

“‘Bout time,” the Krogan gruned. “Hammer’s getting slippery. Idiots won’t stop charging me.”

Kosta made a mad dash, and kicked his jumpjets up to the landing above, where Peebee waited with
the Nomad. She was surrounded by three Scavengers trying to hack the Nomad’s locks, and four Adhi, all trying to climb aboard the slippery hood.

“Shit, Peebs! You weren’t kidding.” He didn’t have enough bullets to take down all seven. There was only one thing for it. “Brace for impact – I’m gonna toss a grenade.”

“What?!” the comm link shrieked, “The Nomad…”

“Gil upgraded the shields. I’m sure they’re good enough. We’d better hope so…” Liam pressed the button to activate the projectile, and tossed. “Head down!” He crouched, and the flak grenade exploded. For a second, his comm registered the tinny echoing pings of shrapnel hitting the Nomad. “All right in there?”

“No thanks to you,” Peebee grumbled. “I might be deaf….”

“Don’t exaggerate,” Sara’s voice came over, loud and clear. “Liam, stay with the Nomad. Drack and I – we’ve got this.” The sound of suppressing fire, and a huge explosion nearly blinded Liam, complete with an enthusiastic, “I AM KROGAN!” filtering down the comm. “Idiots don’t have the sense to scatter,” Sara sounded relieved. “I love my Hammer, Drack. Have I told you lately? Best present ever.”

Drack cackled, “You’d better tone it down, Kid. Gonna make lover-boy jealous. Those are courting words.”

“Hands off my girl, old man,” Liam played along. “She’s my battlemaster, not yours.”

“She’s a long way from a battlemaster,” Drack’s voice was solemn. “A long way. But… she could get there. Maybe, if she gains 150 pounds and grows thicker skin and better fashion sense. Battlemasters don’t parade around in Blasto tank tops.” He paused, “My mother was a battlemaster. One of the last great warlords. I know one when I see one. Kid’s got… potential.”

“She’s a long way from a battlemaster,” Drack’s voice was solemn. “A long way. But… she could get there. Maybe, if she gains 150 pounds and grows thicker skin and better fashion sense. Battlemasters don’t parade around in Blasto tank tops.” He paused, “My mother was a battlemaster. One of the last great warlords. I know one when I see one. Kid’s got… potential.”

“Should have known you’re the progeny of a badass like that.”

“Knock it off with the flattery. Potential doesn’t keep you from dying,” Drack’s head popped up over the ledge, followed by the rest of him. “That all of them?”

Sara’s sniper rifle fired one last time. Liam and Drack spun wildly, looking for the opponents they’d missed. “What are you looking at?” She blinked, “Oh, sorry. Kaerkyn. Didn’t want them getting into the stores before we could recover them. What the hell did Scavengers on Elaadan need with flotation devices?!” Her jumpjets snapped, and she landed in a crouch next to the Nomad. “I think we got them. SAM?”

“Affirmative, Pathfinder. I am pleased to inform you that you have unlocked the supply storage facility. Navpoint has been added to your map.” SAM paused. “Lexi is requesting a Scavenger corpse, so that she can dissect the brain.”

“Ewww,” Peebee muttered. “I knew I should have insisted on going back to the Tempest between jobs.”

“Gonna get smelly, in this heat,” Liam panted, his heart thudding in his ribs, and hands shaking. Coming down from adrenaline was a trip. “Maybe I can rig something up, with Cryo Ammunition? If I can keep it from exploding, anyway.”

Sara sighed, “Tell her we’ll see what we can do.” She turned and looked at the carnage. “There’s got to be at least one with an intact brain, right?”
“Not the way you were doling out headshots like Christmas candy,” The thick itch of sweat trickled down Liam’s spine, and he shifted his shoulders, gasping with a sudden stab of pain. “Sara… I think I’m…” he looked down, and there was a small puddle of red dying the sand beneath him. “Shit, I think I’m hit…”

“Shit, Liam…” she was at his side. “When did that happen?” She peeled back the layers of his armor, trying to reach the wound, dropping his ruined jacket on the ground. A sudden rip, and then her fingers ran over his apparently shredded back with a worried hiss. “Do you have medigel?”

“No, we left in a hurry. Maybe in one of the pockets?” He craned his neck, trying to see. “How bad is it?”

“Stay fucking still,” Sara muttered. Her hands disappeared, and he heard a pop, as she cracked open her own supply. “This is shrapnel. You hit yourself in the back with your own grenade? I’m going to have to get a better look. Sorry, Kosta, I know how much you love this shirt.” She sawed at the edges of the material, with what felt like her knife. He watched shreds drop into the red sand at his feet, and then Liam grunted, as the pain ripped through his back. “Got it!” She pressed the shrapnel into his hand. “Shit,” she pressed against his skin, and he grunted again. “Bleeding bad.” Her voice shook. “I probably shouldn’t have taken it out… fuck.”

“Rookie mistake, loverboy,” Drack grunted. “Thought you were doing better than that.”

“I was at an acceptable distance!”

“You might have chipped the bone,” Sara scanned him with her spare arm. “No good. I don’t have enough medical detail for SAM to zero in. Use yours?”

It hurt, but Liam managed to turn the scanner on himself, and send the data over to her, after a few tries, his fingers shaking too violently to make the typing easy. Sara cursed again, “Fuck. I’m no doctor, but this is bad. I’m calling Kallo for an extraction.” She was already hailing the Tempest. “Drack, Peebee – go salvage what we can. Take the good stuff, leave the flotation devices. We’ve got to get Liam back to Lexi.” She smoothed the medigel, smooth and chilly, into the wound. “That will stop the bleeding, but…” she laughed, incomprehensibly. “You’re going to have to lay down across the front seat. Can’t let that rub…” She swore, frustrated, “Damn it, Kallo, why aren’t you answering SAM?!”

“A ride back in the Pathfinder’s lap?” Liam teased, to lighten the tension. “Where do I sign?”

Peebee groaned, “You’re gonna make us ride in the back?”

“No arguments.” For once, the Pathfinder’s voice cracked like a whip. “I’d do the same for any of you, and you know it, and… and I have to keep pressure on the wound. Unless you want to, Peebs? Is one of your half dozen degrees medical?”

“Nope. I don’t do the gross stuff. Tech doesn’t ooze anything but lubricants.” Peebee pouted, but her fingers fidgeted, like she was nervous. “Come on, then, Liam. I’ll Lift you up, nice and easy.” Sara climbed in, and Peebee twisted her biotics to slide him in sideways. He felt himself relax, as she let gravity resume and he settled into the seat, his face towards Sara’s stomach. “Don’t get any funny ideas, loverboy. We’re all right here.”

“No fear,” Liam wanted to laugh, until Sara traced her fingers back down, and pressed on the wound site. He hissed instead. “I’ll be good, Peebs. Promise. This is not the way I’m gonna go. Even though it’s a hell of a view.”
“Tempest is on the way,” Kallo’s voice, tinny and too far away echoed. “You’ll have to get the Nomad into the open, Pathfinder. There’s no way we can land in that hollow.”

“Understood,” Liam’s head shifted as Sara moved underneath him, and then bounced, as the Nomad started climbing. “Crap, I’m sorry… I can’t avoid every bump.”

Back at the Tempest, Sara disappeared after she and Peebee Lifted him out and settled him on the mobile bed. Liam tilted his head sideways, trying to relax on his stomach as the med bay scans whirred around him, bracing himself for the bad news. “How bad, Doc?”

“A few days, at most,” Lexi sighed. “Liam…”

“My shields were at full, I was at an acceptable distance,” Liam protested immediately. “I didn’t jump out into my own grenade – I was even under cover!”

Lexi blinked, “So this was actually an… accident? You weren’t being reckless?”

“I can vouch for pretty boy. It was a total fluke,” Peebee muttered at the door, and then rolled her eyes when Lexi jumped at the sound of her voice. “Ugh!” She threw her hands up, and stomped away, the sound of her boots on the floor more convincing than her words.

“Did Peebee just come to see if you were all right?” Lexi asked him, very quietly indeed. “Or was that for my benefit?”

“Maybe? Guess she cares after all.”

“Is he gonna live, Doc?” Vetra’s voice asked, and it was Liam’s turn to flinch.

“He’ll be fine, Vetra. Just a trifle - unlucky.”

Vetra snorted. “Good to know. I’ll tell the others. Get some rest, Kosta. Oh, and those mods we discussed are on your disgusting couch. Don’t say I never give you anything.”

“Thanks…” Liam said, wary, muscles tense.

Lexi’s Omni-Tool chirped. “That’s the Pathfinder. Sara will be by in a few. She had to go talk to a Krogan about a drive core.” She turned a tool on his back. “This is going to sting, briefly…” it jabbed into his back, and he yelped. “Sorry. The pain will improve shortly.”

“Wait, she went to see Strux alone?” He struggled to sit up, his muscles not responding.

“Stay still,” Lexi tapped a couple of buttons on his monitor, and hummed in approval.

“That sounds like a happy noise.” Liam twitched at the new voice, “You heard her, hot stuff. Stay still, already. And it was Strux and Morda, actually. Left the drive core with her. Strux was playing us.” Sara herself perched on the bed next to him, and he struggled to focus on her face. “Kesh is right – she’s badass, but she knows how to take care of her people.” She grinned. “And once we get the vaults running, I think she’s going to let the Initiative put up an outpost on the edge of New Tuchanka. How is that for a coup, Lexi?”

“Wonders will never cease, and Tann will never forgive you.”

“I can live with that.” Her attention refocused on Liam, a frown wrinkling her forehead.

“Hey, you.” His smile felt lopsided. “Won over the big, bad warlord? I should have known. You put all your points into Charisma.”
“Hey, hero, how’s the back?”

“It was better, before someone stabbed me with a bloody huge needle. Three guesses, and the first two don’t count. Here’s a hint – she’s got an injection fetish.”

Sara broke off a laugh, and her face disappeared. “So? What’s the verdict, Doc?”

“He’s out of commission for a few days,” Lexi murmured. “Nothing serious, missed the spine, but cracked a rib.” A loud whack made Liam crane his neck, trying to see who had hit who, but the doctor continued, “That’s for being an idiot and removing the projectile. He could have bled out. I’m sending you a field medical guide, and expect both you and SAM to memorize it.” She paused, “SAM, why didn’t you stop her?”

“My training in medical matters is thorough, but dependent on reliable scans. As such, I had no way of knowing Liam’s situation was dire. I can tell if a person’s cause of death was natural or not, but cannot detect the fine details, such as the location of arteries. Sara’s was inadequate. Liam’s was not, but it was… fuzzy. I suspect adrenaline, and shock.”

“You’re both lucky he’s going to be okay.” Lexi rubbed her forehead. “Just… don’t do it again.”

“Oh.” Sara blinked rapidly. “Good.” The silence spread out, growing uncomfortable, “Um, Lexi, do you mind if we have a…”

“Oh!” Lexi flushed a deeper blue, her hand falling away. “A few minutes, certainly. I want to scan Drack. That old bastard never reports injuries.” She slipped out of Liam’s field of vision, and Sara promptly took his hand. He curled his around her, ignoring the stabs of pain from his back at the small movements.

“So… do you think I’m going to have a really sexy scar? Drack says chicks dig scars. Too bad it’ll take ‘em getting real close to see it… or I could just start wandering around the Tempest with my shirt off more often. Think anyone will sit up and take notice?” Sara sniffed, and belatedly, Liam realized she was crying. “Hey, Sara… Sara, I’m fine. You heard Doc. It’s nothing. Really.”

“You are not fine. I shouldn’t have removed the metal, how could I make a mistake like that? And I’m the closest thing we have to a field medic,” she slipped off the other bed, and knelt next to him. “I… I don’t know if I can watch you get hurt again, Liam.” She rested her cheek on his hand. “What was it you said on Eos? That you couldn’t do this without me? Well… ditto.”

Liam rubbed her cheek with a single finger. “I’m just that good, huh?”

“Dumbass,” she muttered.

He grinned, hoping it looked rakish instead of goofy. “My Pathfinder, she doesn’t aim positive feedback as easy as she does a sniper rifle. And I’m the underdog on the Team, for sure. Better take what compliments I can get.”

Sara rolled her eyes, and then sprung forward to press her lips to his, quick, before snapping back. “I’ll get Lexi, so she can finish,” she muttered, cheeks flushing. “Get some sleep?”

As she left, SAM spoke. “Liam, I believe you have some mistaken information about why you ended up on the Pathfinder team.”

“Yeah?” Liam shifted, trying to make himself more comfortable. “I thought Alec handpicked me. God knows why. Think I’ve spent more time in the med bay than out of it. But my dossier says something to that effect. Would never have aimed this high, myself.”
“Alec and I were both involved in choosing those that qualified for the Pathfinder program,” SAM was quiet for a moment. “The algorithms involved in the selection process for the Initiative were developed by both of us, with input from Jien Garson. I ran the final program.”

“No shit?” Liam resisted the urge to shove himself up. “You picked me, huh?”

“I did.” SAM was quiet again. “It may be a mistake to admit this, given the mistakes that have been made, but… I was also responsible for the protocol that led to Tann being at the helm after Garson and her successors’ deaths. I… regret this, as much as I am able. The math and logic were sound, but the outcome… I could not have foreseen the personality conflicts that, to use vernacular, spread matches around a burning building. Such things are not my strengths. Recent data suggests that Tann was incompatible with Sloane Kelly, Director Addison, and Kesh, and that the inclusion of – certain key personnel was a grave error.”

“With life, comes mistakes. You’re learning from them. And hey, the Scourge was an outlier,” Liam sounded groggy, to his own ears. Doc must have given him something in the last shot. “You can’t blame yourself for something completely new like that. People act crazy under stress. They might have managed, without that crisis.”

“True.” SAM was quiet. “I am, however, relieved that you and Sara found each other. You are a great comfort and support to her. She really cares for you, and hopes you feel the same. I am relieved that in this, at least, I was successful predicting team personalities. It helped that I was familiar with both Sara and Scott, when their inclusion in the matrix became known.”

“AI as matchmaker?”

“Not intentionally.”

“S’okay. Love her,” Liam murmured, floating and hazy. “…fucking brilliant. Tell her I said so.”

“I believe that should come from you, Liam.”

But he was out, drifting under whatever painkiller Lexi had dosed him with.
Sara flopped around her bed, thinking about luring Paddywack the Pyjak into the bed with her. Liam had given him the name - bestowed because of his opposable thumbs, suitable for playing the age old rhyming game, though teaching him to do so had proved impossible. He kept trying anyway, claiming the thumbs had to be good for something.

It was a dumb idea – the creature was barely housetrained – but Liam’s side was empty without him there to throw his sprawling arm across her face, or for her to pin him down mostly accidentally until he squirmed… she sat up, and rubbed her hands across her face.

She was an idiot. He didn’t have a side. Neither one of them were picky about being on the left or right – and as long as Sara got to fall asleep with the galaxy behind her head, she was good. Most nights, whoever got to the bed first – or fell into it face first - chose, usually asleep before their head hit the pillow. Sleep was too precious to quibble and be cute about ‘my side/your side’.

But then again, maybe that meant that whatever side of the bed he was missing from was his side... and that was both of them.

Shit, she had it bad.

She swung her feet to the floor, feeling that comforting thrum of the engine core that meant Gil had everything well in hand, and padded in bare feet, bra and shorts to the mess, idly thinking about cramming a few more calories down her gullet. Word was that Vetra had found a few jars of blackberry preserves...

She made it as far as the hall, before she heard groaning from the medbay. Hesitating, she rocked back and forth for a minute before tiptoeing to the open bay door, and peering in.

Lexi was curled up, face away, on the spare bed – her habit, when she had a patient. Liam – not usually a stomach sleeper – fidgeted and jerked, the blanket that Lexi had spread over him kicked to the floor. He shivered. The ship wasn’t cold, but Lexi did keep the medbay a little cooler, for her cultures…

Before Sara knew what the fuck she was doing, she’d slipped inside the room, picked up the blanket, and spread it out over him.

He sighed, eyes closed, and relaxed. “Thanks, Doc.”

“I’m not your doctor.”

His eyes slitted. “Sara?”

“Just… passing by. Need anything?”

His breath rose the blanket. “I’ve seen this vid. Hot nurse meets endearing patient in the middle of the night… that porn music is going to start any minute. Bow chicka wow wow…”

Sara rolled her eyes, trying not to laugh. Lexi was exhausted, just like the rest of them. “I’m no nurse. Just… couldn’t sleep.” She shifted back and forth slightly.

“Same here.” Liam groaned again. “Wish I could bloody roll over. I hate trying to sleep like this. My spine’s all… kinked.”
“I could help you get on your side?”

“Shit, would you?” Sara moved to him, and he shifted a leg first sideways, while she echoed the lower movement with the upper body. “Hate feeling so - helpless.” He smiled, though. “Nice to see you, though. So… benefits.”

She tucked a long strand of blue hair behind her ear, and shrugged, “I – you – we’d better get some sleep, right? Maybe it’ll be easier now.” She turned to go. “Sweet dreams.”

“Wait!” he hissed. “You could… climb up. I mean, I know you prefer being the big spoon…” his laugh was a little too loud, but his eyes begged her to stay. “The drugs give me crazy dreams.”

Lexi jerked in her sleep, mumbled something about viral dampeners, and Sara shushed him. “Shhh…”

“But… I’d feel better, having you nearby.” He finished lamely. “So… you want to…”

Sara weighed the hospital bed dubiously. “That bed is tiny. Will it hold both of us? Will Lexi mind?”

“I’m not Drack’s size. Holds him up all right. He was in here earlier, complaining the whole time. I’m a model patient, compared to him. Doc won't complain.” He paused, “If you don’t want to-”

"Fine,” Sara’s voice clipped off, and she eased herself up onto the bed, gingerly. “Yell if I jostle you.”

Liam draped an arm around her middle and nuzzled her neck. “M’Fine. Medicine’s kicking in ‘gain. Night?”

She couldn’t say she really slept well, with the unfamiliar music of the med bay’s machines whirring in counterpoint to Liam’s breaths on the back of her neck, and the smell of sterilizing chemicals, but in the morning, Lexi still had to shake her awake.

She left before the lectures could start, Liam’s hands twitching where she used to be.

But SAM was oddly quiet through the whole thing, not speaking up until he was needed professionally the next day.

Just as well, since she really wasn’t sure what had gotten into her.
Chapter 73

Chapter Summary

I'm posting a chapter today, because someone is rereading this 'rabidly'.

You know who you are.

Also... I just realized that I forgot to post chapter 65. It is posted now, so... all readers might want to go back and read from there. Sorry. Things will make a bit more sense now.

Two days went by, without seeing her. Lexi mentioned she’d stopped by in the night, to check on him, but… he didn’t remember a thing. He was out of the hospital bed, and on light duty after 48 hours – a 48 hours of hazy, dreamlike awakenings that he was never sure were real afterward.

Sara was on the other side of the planet by then, dealing with the water mafia and their secret underground lake. SAM kept him posted on her doings – that was new. She spent the night there, apparently unwilling to uproot the Tempest - and too far away to make it back without driving while exhausted - just in case word got back to Paradise that the mafia had fallen, and some scavenger tried to take advantage. It made sense – somebody from the Pathfinder team needed to be here when the Initiative arrived – and without an outpost, they were the only Initiative presence on Elaadan.

Lexi let him armor up, and shoulder a gun, and try to look tough for the locals, at least. He was chafing a bit, for sure, ready to get back out there and do something besides warming the bench. But the reps had shown up remarkably fast, and so for now – he refocused on the hundreds of little vials of serum in front of him. There was more than one way to solve the Scavenger mental imbalance problem. And this one was non-violent. Definitely to be preferred. He’d been cleared for full duty that morning – but it was a non-issue, since the Pathfinder wasn’t home. So here he was, working, bare-chested, trying to concentrate on fiddly controls.

Cora was disgusted, but Elaadan was hot, even with the Tempest’s climate controls.

As if thinking about her summoned her, Sara’s voice rang out, strident and surprised, “Liam!” His head snapped up from the device he was adjusting to handle widespread distribution of said serum. “Are you cleared for regular duty? You look about a hundred times better.” She didn’t wait for an answer, bouncing down the catwalk towards him, circling him, in what he hoped was appreciation for the view. “We’ve got a rescue mission. A transport carrying the Krogan seed bank disappeared – hijacked, and a Krogan gardener went with it, and we’ve got to go for them. Vetrà’s got deals to barter, things that can’t be changed, so you’re on. Peebee’s too busy with her personal project…”

“Didn’t know Krogans gardened,” but he was already running for the locker, eager to get away from the ship. To be with her. Same difference. “Drack coming with?”

“Yep. Never seen him so pissed off. Baby Krogan need those plants,” Sara’s nose scrunched up in amusement, when he rounded the corner to the loadout bench.

“I knew the Old Man was an old softy,” Liam purred, and she smiled. His gut clenched. “I’ve missed that smile.”
She drew a deep breath. “Yeah?”

“Take care, Liam,” Lexi called up from below. “Don’t overdo it.”

Liam winked at his girl. “Me? Overdo? Must be thinking about someone else, Doc.”

“And there’s the Liam we know and love,” Sara wrapped her arms around his neck, and his heart thudded, erratic in his bare chest. She let go too quickly, though. “Come on. You can show Drack your sexy scar on the way. Let’s save the gardener, and then haul ass off Elaadan. Cora called - says we’ve got some Asaris to save.”

“Navpoints?” Liam’s face lit up. “Really?”

“Navpoints,” she confirmed, and shouldered her sniper rifle, and several rounds of extra ammo. “This is one planet I won’t be sorry to leave behind.”

“So… you’re not going to sign up for a homestead on Elaadan?”

“Kosta…”

“Just saying, I bet Morda would love having the Pathfinder’s ear. Tann, too. And you know he’d never visit…”

“Fuck Tann.”

“No thanks. Salarians don’t do it for me.”

“I won’t tell Kallo. Might break his heart.”

“Aw, I didn’t know he cared.”

Sara stopped him cold, one hand on his chest. “Everybody cares, Liam. I’m not kidding.” She backed up, her hand raising to her ponytail, tucking it into her helmet as she pulled it back on, but not in time for him to miss the darker flush of her cheeks under her ever-darker tan, despite sunscreen and armor. “You scared us. You scared me.”

He remembered, like a flash of lightning, SAM’s words from a few days ago, and his own response to them. “Brilliant,” he whispered, before engaging his comms.

“What was that?” She turned back, frowning.

“Nothing. Let’s go find a nursery.”
“Drack, if I don’t make it back, tell Kesh I love her.” Sara choked from her hiding place behind some fallen debris, crouched into an uncomfortable position, completely inappropriate laughter threatening to escape. The mission had quickly devolved from a straight forward ‘find the transport, kill everybody, and get the fuck out of there’ to a deep and touching view of Krogan parenthood.

“What?!” Drack exploded out from behind a shipping container, and slammed his Hammer into the poor bastard of a Scavenger around the corner. “What the fuck is that supposed to…”

“Shit, you didn’t know…” Vorn cleared his throat. “She’s gonna…”

“I’m gonna!” Drack barreled into two more, bowling them over like ninepins.

“Whoa,” Liam whispered, barely audible over the incensed roaring. “Note to self: Don’t piss off Grandpa.”

Sara stood up, assault rifle in hand, ready to pick off the ones Drack missed, but…

“They’re gone, Pathfinder,” SAM confirmed. “You should run to catch up. I fear Drack may not…”

“Shit,” Liam caught on to the thunder beneath their feet before she did. “Vorn’s still trapped. But the shuttle – it’s already warming up for liftoff. What the fuck do we do?”

Sara cursed in turn. “We save Vorn. No way am I going back to the Tempest and telling Kesh her… um… botanist is dead. I don’t have a death wish. First she’d kill me, then Drack would kill me, then she’d kill me again. Assuming the feelings are mutual, anyway.” She checked her loadout, and engaged her shields. “Liam – think you can hack the security on the crate?”

“Probably…” he watched as she shouldered her rifle. “What are you gonna do?”

“I’m going to let Drack blow off some steam on that jackass who took the transport.” Her eyes crinkled up behind her visor, and she rested her rifle across her forearm. “You’re going to go bond with a botanist. The two of you can catch up to us later. You’ll have something in common.”

He was already running for a terminal. “Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“If you can’t figure it out, I’m not gonna tell you!” She jump-jetted over her obstacles, gliding to catch up with the enraged Krogan. “Hurry it up, will ya? I don’t want to leave either of you behind.”

She bounded erratically across broken bridges, clambered over crates to reach the landing area, just to curse when she got to the top. “Drack?” She dove behind the first thing she saw – a tank of some sort, hopefully not full of anything explosive – but she scanned it just in case. Better safe than sorry. “That’s a Hydra, right?” Another lumbered out, “Shit, make that two. You all right, Old Man?”

She backed up to the fixture, trying to control her breathing, like a child playing hide and seek.

“I see ‘em,” the man grumbled, his breath coming heavy and labored over the comms. “Got any RPGs?”

“One…” Sara admitted. “But I was saving it for that damn Architect.” She holstered her assault rifle and pulled down her Isharay. “We’re going to have to do this the hard way.”
“Where’s…”

“He’s bringing Vorn. I don’t care how you feel about him, we’re not leaving him here. I’d bet the Krogan need him more than they need the plants, am I right? I don’t want to be there when Kesh decides to scuttle the Nexus because the Pathfinder let him die.” She stared down the scope, and lined it up with the right turret. “I’m going to need a distraction, something to keep those bastards off me.”

“I’ve got one right here,” a new voice rang out, and Sara glanced across the way. Liam grinned and waved, crouched down with his eyes barely peeking over his cover. Vorn stood upright and unafraid next to him, holding a small item in his hand. “Miss me?” A sharpshooter hit right over his head, and he ducked. “Shit, guess they didn’t.” The laughter over the comm made her stomach clench.

“Kosta…” Sara warned.

“Fucking kids.” Drack mumbled. “Think they know everything. Back in my day…” he mumbled something Sara couldn’t hear. Probably something about walking uphill both ways to school, through irradiated wastelands.

Vorn shifted, letting her see that he was holding some sort of…root? “Heh, heh…” he was laughing, Liam was still laughing… obviously it wasn’t going to take much more bonding.

“Kosta - I worry when you look like that.”

“It wasn’t my idea, Pathfinder. Honest to God.”

“We’ll save it for when we need it. I have to get close to Aroane first.” Vorn tucked it away. “I’m going to delay the transport.” He sprinted across the landing, faster than any Krogan Sara had ever seen before. “You take care of the pirates!”

“There’s lots of pirates,” Liam agreed, ducking behind a crate, just before the Hydra started firing at him. “Lots and lots of pirates.”

“You sound way too cheery about that.”

“You’re really good at killing pirates,” his bullets peppered a couple of lesser enemies. “Gave you lots of practice, right? Just a warm up for this, apparently. At least here we’re not in danger of blowing up, too? And there’s gravity – and the gate isn’t upside down and sideways. That’s a definite plus.”

“Oh, yeah, piece of cake,” Sara’s voice rang with sarcasm, eyeing the Hydra again through her scope. “Know what, Kosta? The cake is a lie.”

“Are you going to shoot that thing, or just look at it close up?” Drack snarled and charged.

Sara swallowed, evened her breath, and squeezed the trigger, between heartbeats. Two shots, reload, two shots… the rhythm drew her in, and it took Liam screaming, “Sara, get out of there!” to break her focus. She glanced up from her scope, realizing that the other Hydra was gaining on her, that her scope had narrowed her focus too much.

She jumped up, and dodged, her breath ragged in her ears. “Shit, that was close.” She leaned up against a crate, safe enough for a moment. “Everyone okay?”

“You said it.” She heard him swallow. “Fine, so far. I’m up to nine. Those Hydras are cramping
our style though.”

“Working on it,” she hissed, reloading the rifle again. “Sure would be nice to have a couple of grenades right about now…” Drack cackled, and three seconds later the Hydra’s right shoulder erupted in sparks and flames. “Drack, you’re my favorite.”

“Hey! I thought I was your favorite.” Liam chuckled. “Quit plagiarizing Serenity.”

“Will if I want to.” She wasn’t sure what Vorn was doing, but at least he was staying out of trouble as the other two men baited and drew fire from the machines while she pinged away at their turrets. “I’ve got to upgrade this fucking thing,” she muttered. “I need more bullets, faster reload time, more power…”

“Better accuracy?”

“Those are fighting words, Kosta.” She lined up again, and finally the second turret exploded. “Take him out, boys. I’ve broken all his teeth.” Sara sighed with relief, and moved, trying to find a better line of sight on the second one. “You know I’m a better shot than you.”

“No argument. Just trying to figure out what to get you for your birthday. Jewelry’s so passé, and pirates is done.”

She couldn’t help but laugh. “Save it for the bedroom,” Drack grumped.

“Oh, we don’t talk guns in the boudoir,” Liam snickered. “That’s dinner table conversation. Suitable for polite company.”

“Most of the time,” Sara temporized, but Drack just snorted. “Don’t kinkshame, Old Man. You’re the one who keeps sending me dirty photos. Hell, you’re the one to hook me up with the Isharay in the first place. Rrrrr…”

With a roaring laugh, another grenade made contact, and the last Hydra fell. Sara emerged from her hiding place. “Where’s Vorn?”

“Over here,” the gardener looked up as Drack advanced on him slowly. “Look, Drack… Kesh and I…” His words broke off, when Drack stopped walking, his eyes focused on the muzzle pointed at the back of the botanist’s head, his eyes widening when he felt the gun’s touch.

Sara’s legs wobbled, and she almost fell. “Aroane…”

“I’m taking that transport.”

She’d never seen a Krogan’s eyes twinkle, but Vorn’s did, as he took out the root, and pierced it with his hoary fingers. It emitted a stinking yellow-green gas, and Aroane choked, and crumpled, his gun falling from his hand. She stepped forward, and Vorn warned them off. “Stay back! It’s bad for everyone who isn’t Krogan. Strong stuff.” He was still laughing, though.

She froze, but Drack, his scarred lips smirking, made his way forward, and picked up the pirate by a leg. Vorn ignored him, merely punching a code into his Omni-Tool and making notes about his ‘first live trial’ and the effectiveness of the root-based weapon.

“Right about now I’m really glad you gave Morda the drive core,” Liam whispered in her ear. “Krogan gardeners are deadly. Really want them on our side.”

“Priorities, Liam,” Sara murmured, and stepped forward, crouching down, as close as she could get
to the edge without starting to shake. “What do you think, Drack? Should we keep him? We don’t need him. We can nail Spender without him.”

“You can’t do that! I know things!”

Drack huffed. “I do whatever I want.” He dropped him, and Sara, unable to find it in herself to mourn the loss of the man, backed up, and turned back to a shocked Liam.

“It wasn’t our decision. The Krogan colony is independent. At least for now.” She tapped his chest. “Come on. Let’s get those plants home to the little Krogan babies Grandpa Drack is so worried about.”


They all wisely remained quiet, as the ship lifted off the planet. “You know, the Krogan need you,” Vorn finally spoke up. “Kesh needs you. You need to quit acting like you’re expendable.”

“Shut up, and let me be old and grumpy in peace.”

Sara slapped Vorn’s back, already liking the man. “New Tuchanka coming up.”

“And another Ark,” Liam’s knee bounced next to her. “What do you think we’ll find?”

“Kett,” Sara breathed, slumping against the wall of the transport. “Just a hunch, but I think we’ll find Kett. And if we’re lucky a few survivors.” She closed her eyes, and took off her helmet. It was dark out here, like it wouldn’t be on the planet, and she felt her eyes growing heavy. “God, I’m tired.” Her head fell sideways, and between breaths, she fell asleep.

Next to her, Liam stopped bouncing his knee, in favor of keeping her still.
Chapter 75

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sara wasn’t sure she’d ever been as pissed off in her life. She’d fought through the whole Kett-occupied ship, with only a single Asari Pathfinder team member to help them. Peebee and Cora had bickered the whole way about Asari Commandos, and-

And she’d never regretted leaving Liam behind so much. He hadn’t complained – he wasn’t doing that any more. For all of his need to get off ship as much as possible, it – it was starting to seem like he didn’t want to be bothered, going out all the time. That he’d plenty to do at home.

Or maybe, he just didn’t want to go with her? He’d been eager enough to volunteer for Lexi’s pet project, back on Elaadan…

Sara stopped her thoughts short, knowing she was being a bitch. He was trying to do better, do things differently, think them through. Be less pushy, while still being available. And he was super-useful to Lexi, who was as overworked as the rest of them, and could use his tech skills. They were a Team – needed to be, to do what needed to be done. He was trying to be a Team member.

She shouldn’t be so selfish. But as she stared at Cora’s personal hero, Sarissa ‘I-wrote-the-book-on-Asari-Commandos’, she had to bite her tongue to stop herself from echoing Peebee’s disgust. There was a question, of course – Sarissa had probably saved a lot of lives, by not saving her Matriarch. But the Asari would never be able to trust their Pathfinder again, if she let Sarissa stay.

She wondered what Liam would have thought of the situation. Whether he’d say anything at all, or just let her decide on her own who should be the Asari Pathfinder.

She would have done the same thing as Sarissa, but she wasn’t Asari. Comparisons were useless between the two cultures.

That was the whole point – she wasn’t Asari, and neither was Cora – however deluded she was about her time with them. Idly, she wondered if that was how Cora saw herself – a bodyguard for life? But one Pathfinder had already died on Cora’s watch. So probably not.

And the two Asari women she had with her – Peebee and Vedaria – were split down the middle. Naturally. Of course, Peebee was also openly sneering about the antiquated tradition of a Matriarch needing that level of protection, and Vedaria just didn’t have any self-confidence.

She frowned at both of them, and spoke, on impulse. “Vedaria, congrats. You’ve just been promoted.” She turned away, to let the new Asari Pathfinder deal with Asari problems, and Cora deal with her own misplaced devotion. She marched back to the Tempest, and through the airlock, face dark with anger at the situation. “Get us away from here, as soon as we’re all back on board.” she ordered Kallo. “I’ve got to get Addison on the vidcom.” Kallo blinked, and prepared to disconnect from the Ark.

The Colonial Director surveyed her with some worry at the news. Sara could see the wrinkles on her forehead even over the Scourge’s interference. “Are you sure you made the right…”

“Yes,” Sara bit off. “Most of the Asari would never trust Sarissa – not after a betrayal like that. It was a sacred oath and duty, Director. There really isn’t an equivalent in current Earth cultures – but it was a ‘no win’ scenario.” They were both silent for a while. “And the Asari still have a Pathfinder.
One that has just about the same amount of experience I had when I started – and more against the Kett. She’s creative, adaptable, and a quick learner. You can’t say that I’m not working my fingers to the bone for you. Give her the same chance you gave me. At the very least.”

“No, I suppose I can’t say that,” Addison gritted out through clenched teeth. “Fine. As it turns out, I have an extra job for you. A missing person request. Critical personnel. Check your email. Addison out.”

The link severed, and Sara slumped against the table. “More work. Just what I needed.” She pulled up the email, and cursed. “Satellite tracking all over the fucking galaxy, just to find one person? What the hell, Addison? How critical of personnel is this woman?”

“Hey,” Liam poked his head over the rail. “You want to be alone? Nobody comes up here for company. Loneliest part of the ship, no joke.”

“I dunno,” Sara pulled up the attached map of the relay they were supposed to investigate, and then wrapped her arms around herself. “Liam – do you ever think that we can’t win? That we’re just going to die out here, slowly?”

“Not much. Not anymore. You’ve got this. You’ve had this since we routed the Kett on Eos. We’re going to survive.”

She stared up at the ceiling, willing back the tears. “You sure about that?”

He wrapped his arms around her from the back. “I’m sure. You’re not?”

“Hard to have faith when nobody knows what they’re doing, and all the so-called experts are either defecting or proving themselves inadequate, one after the other.” She motioned to the screen. “Addison just gave me a missing person’s request that is going to have us checking every semi-viable planet from here to Eos. Critical personnel. She left with the outcasts – apparently because she objected to the fucking birth control measures.” Sara shook her head, “What the fuck? Who would want to bring a child into a situation like this?! Sleepers are one thing, but a newborn?”

“I would advise prioritizing her recovery, Pathfinder. She is, indeed, critical personnel.” SAM uploaded several schematics of the forward stations.

“So she’s a genius, but she’s got no common sense?” Sara snarked at the AI. “Great. Just what we need on the Nexus.”

Liam snorted, “SAM knows what he’s doing. He’s had protocols and worst-case scenarios filed away since before we left the Milky Way. How do you think we ended up with Tann?”

“No,” Sara’s voice broke. “SAM?!”

“I apologize. The Scourge was not part of the algorithm.”

“He’s only human,” Liam chuckled. “He’s allowed to be wrong sometimes, right?”

“Fuck, SAM, when you’re wrong, you’re really fucking wrong.” Sara turned, breaking out of his arms. Surprised, Liam raised them, and then rubbed the back of his head. “SAM…” She shook her head. “SAM – look elsewhere for a while, will you? I need to think.” She backed away.

“Of course, Sara.”
Just a personal headcanon - given that we know SAM was fully integrated with Alec, I find it likely that all the emergency protocols were designed by him and approved by Garson and the rest of the dead council.

He would have had all the personality profiles, and would have seen that Tann was a strong choice for survival in worst case scenarios. But his grasp on personalities and emotions is tenuous, at best. In many ways, I think SAM would blame himself for not taking that data into account.
Chapter 76

Chapter Summary

My router went down last week. Do you know how hard it is for me to have chapters ready to post and not be able to post them?

Anyway, the world sucks today, and I'm trying to cheer myself up by making up for lost time. Escapism is effective, albeit temporarily. So have a chapter. There might be another one tomorrow.

“Back on Voeld,” Liam sighed, and Jaal slapped his shoulders. “It doesn’t feel any warmer.”

Sara didn’t take the bait. The trip around the cluster, with them tracking Addison’s ‘friend’, who turned out to be the brilliant inventor of the forward stations, not to mention over eight months pregnant, had been just as chilly as any day on Voeld. Sara and SAM still weren’t speaking to each other, except when necessary. Liam was strongly considering an intervention. But he could hardly lock them in a room until they kissed and made up.

In the meantime, they were holed up outside the couple’s shuttle, knowing that she was going into labor, and that the Kett were coming for her. “This – this is a shitshow,” Sara finally spoke. “I have no idea what to do. Jaal? Liam?”

“Is there anything we can do?” Jaal asked, low. “How do human women deliver their young?”

Liam choked, “Not really the time for the birds and bees, mate. But it hurts. A lot. And things can go really wrong without a doctor or somebody to oversee the whole thing.”

“Exactly, and already things are going pear-shaped,” Sara bit off – motioning to the Kett cruiser coming in just over the hill. “We’ve got company! Lexi – are you there?!”

“I am here with you, Pathfinder,” Lexi spoke over the comms, her voice impatient. “Just waiting for your word. But I need a pair of hands on site. Preferably one with experience.”

Sara crouched down behind the empty crate. “Asking a lot, Lexi.” Her forehead creased deep enough that Liam wanted to rub the wrinkles smooth. “I sure haven’t. Have either of you helped with childbirth before?”

Liam winced, knowing what happened next. “Yeah. Once. A woman went into labor after an earthquake on a colony world. I was there… didn’t do much except tell her to breathe, and we got really lucky, but…”

Sara relaxed and motioned to the shuttle. “Good. Get in there and let Lexi tell you what to do. Jaal and I will hold the line.”

“Umm…”

“That’s an order, Kosta!” She knelt down behind a crate. “SAM, I need to make up for Liam being out of commission. Engineer profile, please.” Her orders to her AI were crisp and professional – none of her easy banter with SAM, not since their (What could he call it when his girl and her AI
were arguing in each other’s heads?) disagreement. “Jaal – get the grenades and extra ammo out of
the Nomad. I’m going to set up some turrets, and get Zap working for us, then switch to Soldier
until we run out of grenades.” She checked her weapons. “Worst comes to worst, I’ll switch to
biotics and just throw ‘em until I’m out of power and ammo.” She slammed her elbow against the
crate in frustration.

“Yes, Pathfinder.”

There wasn’t any help or way to avoid it. Liam made his way to the shuttle, and knocked, awkward.
“You two need a hand in there?”

A muffled scream leaked out, and he reflexively wiped his hands – sweaty inside his gloves - on his
pants. “Look, I’ve got a Nexus doctor on the comms, if you’d like a little - guidance. And this won’t
be my first birth, either.” That didn’t say much, but it wasn’t a good idea to panic the locals with
honesty. It’s not like he had trained to be a doula.

The door opened, and a wild-eyed man peeked at him through the crack. “You’ve done this before?”

“Once? Sort of.”

He shoved him at his wife. “Help her. Please.”

“DAMN IT! I TOLD YOU NOT TO LET THEM IN!”

“I’m not going to turn down help just for your bloody pride!”

“Put me on the external comms, Liam.” He hit the button, and Lexi’s voice rang out, calm and
confident. “First, use medigel to disinfect your hands. You’ll need to check for dilation.” Lexi
instructed. “Gently…”

Liam closed his eyes, and tried not to think about it, or compare it to anything in his personal
experience. “Um… she’s ten centimeters, or damn close, anyway.”

The woman breathed in small pants, and then groaned. “Does that mean I can push?” She panted,
wildly.

“It does,” the doctor soothed, and instructed both men to take a foot, and her husband a hand. “Deep
breath and… push to a count of ten.” The countdown dragged on into forever – and Liam could
only imagine how long it must have lasted for the woman in pain, her wails dragging on with the
numbers into what seemed like infinity.

“Good, good,” he muttered, hoping it helped. It resulted in a glare. “You’re doing great?”


She sounded a bit like she hung out with Addison. “Hey! You’re doing great!” Liam changed his
tone, and blinked. “No, really, I can see the head.”

“That’s fast,” Lexi sounded like she was smiling. “Wonderful. Now…” The counting began again,
and Liam concentrated on pushing back against the woman’s legs. “Just a few more.”

Liam was conscious of gunfire and explosions outside, muffled by the shuttle as Lexi counted. They
stopped, eventually, and there was a knock at the shuttle door, just as a hearty wail pierced the inside
of the ship. He scrambled for the makeshift blankets the parents had prepared, but the mother just
held out her arms. “Please…” she laughed in relief. “Please…”
He settled the infant in her arms, as soon as the baby’s airway was clear. “There. Safe with Mum.”
The baby latched onto a breast, eyes still shut, and the father clapped him on the back, rocking him forward before crouching down, eyes tired but round with awe, to see his son.

“Thanks,” Liam rolled his neck, and finished the job. It was worse than being in the firefight. More gore by far.

The shuttle door opened, slow, like it had been hacked, and Sara and Jaal entered nervously. “Everyone okay in here? We heard crying…”

“They’re fine.” Liam heard himself answer. “I might never recover.”

Jaal’s face lit up like the aurora above them at the sight of the new trio. “Congratulations!” The Angara exclaimed, laughing.

“Thank you,” the mother’s eyes closed. “Now, get the fuck out.”

Lexi coughed, “Liam, someone has to deliver the placenta…”

“Oh God,” Sara’s nose wrinkled.

“Already done,” Liam admitted. Sara blinked, surprised. “It was whole, Doc – no worries for childbed fever. And I gave the injections. They were all set up for everything, thankfully. We don’t need to evac them to the Tempest unless you want to have a look.”

“We’re not going anywhere near your ship.” The mother’s beatific face contrasted with her firm tone.

“The umbilical cord…”

“We’re good, Lexi,” Liam repeated. “I have done this before. Sort of. I know what to do when the fun part’s over. No tears, and everything looks… good.” He sounded vaguely surprised. “He’s even eating. Today, the Kett don’t win.” He liked the way Sara looked at him, mouth open in surprise.

Sara shook herself out of it in a couple seconds. “I’d better call Addison, then.” She sighed. “She’ll be relieved that you’re all okay.” She snorted, “You would not believe the stuff she pulled me away from to make sure that you and the baby made it. You must be fuc…” she eyed the baby, and censored herself, “really important. Besides being the one to bring this little guy into the galaxy. First human baby in Heleus. One for the history books.”

The woman hesitated, “I know you’re with the Initiative. But… who are you, exactly?”

“I’m Pathfinder Ryder. Your midwife was Liam Kosta, and this is Jaal Ama Darav.”

“Shit, one actually showed up?” The woman laughed. “Thank you, Pathfinder.” She paused, “I won’t ask what happened to your father. He was a good man.”

They were all silent for a moment, before Sara cleared her throat, “So… epically bad timing, but can I tell Addison you’re heading back to the Nexus?”

The woman narrowed her eyes at her. But then she nodded at her husband, and he sat down in the cockpit. “Setting course now.”

“And that’s our cue,” Liam backed away. “Congratulations?”
“Less of a question mark, please,” she smiled at him. “Thank you... Liam, was it? I... I wouldn’t have wanted to go through that alone. Thank your doctor, too.”

“No problem,” Liam lied through his teeth. “Just glad to see he’s here, and doing okay.” He poured more medigel over his hands, and rubbed. He’d done grosser things but – he wasn’t destined to be a doctor. “You know – Liam is a great name.” Sara giggled. “It is!”


He kept catching Sara’s glances at him out of the corner of his eyes, as she drove them back to the ship. “You were pretty great back there,” she finally said out loud. “I could tell she was grateful.”

“The dad, maybe,” Liam admitted. “He was a wreck. I didn’t do much, really. Lexi gave the instructions. I just… caught, and cleaned up.”

She nudged him with an elbow. “You were there. That’s pretty cool. I don’t deal with that stuff well.”

Jaal sighed, still smiling. “Liam, when are you and Sara going to start a family?”

“JAAL!” Sara’s smile disappeared.

“Two people is a family, as far as I’m concerned,” Liam swallowed fast. “Don’t rush it, Jaal.” He felt Sara’s eyes on him, but luckily an Einoch took that moment to cross their path, “Shit, Sara, eyes on the road!”

She jerked the vehicle sideways. “Sorry.”

Jaal didn’t have any concept of dropping the subject, however. “I had read in the cultural center, that humans were mammals,” Jaal enthused on the ride home. “I had no idea it was such an… occasion! The Angara have multiple births, you know. To see one mother, and one baby…” he shook his head, “I feel honored to be allowed to witness it. A rare and marvelous occurrence.”

“Thanks, Jaal.” Sara turned to climb up a snowdrift, her speed moderate for once. “It is special, isn’t it?”

“So… you know the human version of the facts of life, then?” She could hear the relief in Liam’s voice.

“Clinically,” Jaal said, after a moment. “It is a fascinating, miracle of a process. Did you know that Sara’s eggs look like little beads, Liam? The pictures I’ve seen,” he shook his head and sighed, holding onto the ‘Oh shit’ bar. “Human bodies are full of such vibrant colors.”

“Okay… now you’re making it weird,” Liam laughed. “But knowing SAM, he probably got pictures...” he hesitated. He’d forgotten that they weren’t addressing SAM directly when Sara was around.

“I was there, Kosta.” The AI sounded distant. “I wanted to make sure we had a witness if something went wrong.”

“Nothing went wrong,” Sara bit off. “It was fine. Liam and Lexi handled it.”

“Yes, Pathfinder.” SAM quieted. “I did not mean to indicate that because I was not directly involved that they were in danger.”
“I know,” Sara sighed. “I’m sorry, SAM. For everything. We’ll… we’ll talk when we get back to the Nexus, all right? I’ll go to your node, we’ll have a nice chat, just you and me.”

“As you wish, Pathfinder.” They reached a place where the Tempest could extract them without danger, and waited for Kallo to retrieve them. Jaal fell asleep after a few moments, and Liam twisted his fingers with Sara, silence reigning. For once, he had no desire to break it. It felt – better. Comfortable. Familiar, even cozy.

In fact, if Jaal hadn’t been snoring in the seat behind them, he might have risked saying a few things. Just as well that they had a really loud, impossible to ignore Angaran third wheel. He tangled up his fingers with hers a little tighter, though.

It felt good to have something go right.
Chapter 77

Chapter Summary

This one's NSFW towards the end.

It took a few days to get back to the Nexus, their quarters quiet without SAM piping up with his opinions, but Liam didn’t mention it. It wasn't ever a good idea to butt into sibling arguments.

Sara made her excuses to the crew, and headed to meet with Tann and Addison – mumbling about the mission at least having a happy ending. Liam thought about the Vortex, but instead went to keep SAM company in the Pathfinder’s quarters. This way, he’d be there when she got home.

Shit, was he becoming a homebody? Huh.

“Hello, Liam.”

“Hey SAM.” Liam fidgeted, “Know any good jokes?”

“I have not added any to my humor algorithm.” The AI was quiet for a long moment. “Sara is angry with me.”

“A bit. But it’s her thing, not yours. She just realized you were capable of mistakes, is all. She idolized you a bit, I think. You made her feel like we were invincible. Like we couldn’t fail, with you on our side.”

“I… see.”

“I’d bet an apology will be coming along soon enough. As soon as she has a minute to visit your node, and work it out in privacy. We’ve both missed you, whatever Sara doesn’t say.”

“The absence of your company has been noted as well.” Liam threw himself down onto the couch. “Would you care to play a game?”

“Best idea ever. AI’s pick?”

When she came back from the Pathfinder HQ, Liam closed his Omni-Tool, and watched her slump into the chaise corner of her couch, and curl up hedgehog-like, with all the prickles out. “Tann or Addison give you hell again?” He maybe should have taken her silence as a hint, but he’d never been the best at picking up subtle cues, so he made his way over and plopped down next to her instead. “Or is that that Avitus and Ved-what’s-her-name aren’t going to be much of a help?” He paused, “I keep wanting to call her Vidalia, like the onion. Know it’s wrong, but there you go. Veh-dahr-ee-ah. I’ll figure it out eventually.”

He caught a muffled sniff before she answered, “If only Sarissa hadn’t been such a tool.”

He slid closer, and pulled her over onto his shoulder. “Say no more.”

She glared up at him before blurtling, “It’s not fair. Avitus is the Turian Pathfinder. Not an easy job, because they’re scattered, I know. He’s a former Spectre – and he’s going to be doing grunt work,
hunting for pods all over the Cluster. And I should be grateful. That’s one less thing I have to do now, go around and catalog every Turian pod I find – now I just have to forward the coordinates to him. So I’m glad. But I’ve done Vee’s job for her – she has time to be ‘mentored’ and ‘learn as she goes’ – because the woken Asari are already being sent to the outposts I set up! Tann wants to let her cherrypick her assignments, until she finds her balance. Racist fuck. And fuck if Cora isn’t the one who’s signed up for the job. Where was that patience when I was learning, huh? When I got SAM…” her voice trailed off. “I just got thrown into the deep end and told to swim or we’d all drown. It’s hard not to blame SAM for Tann. For everything! Even though he couldn’t have predicted the Scourge. I know it’s not his fault, but damn it!” She kicked at the leg of her coffee table. “I wasn’t supposed to have this job.”

“I get it,” Liam ran his hand up and down her left side, trying to provide comfort. “You had to be Pathfinder for everyone. You’re still Pathfinder for everyone. Everyone else gets to… specialize.”

“Yeah,” she was so tense against him. “I had to leave behind everything I hoped to get out of this galaxy behind, and focus on survival. Their survival, not mine. It sucks, leaving everything that made me, me, to save a fuckton of lives.”

“But you’re kicking ass and taking names. Have you seen the list?” He made to pull it up on his Omni-Tool, pulling her closer in the process.

Her laugh broke off too early. “Trying, anyway.”

He paused, being careful with his next words. “For what it’s worth, even after the shit I put you through, you’re still doing an awesome job. You’ve placed four outposts, found two Arks, and brought the Krogans back into the Initiative. Even Vorn’s relocating to the Nexus – I know, because Drack was rage cooking. Roast again for dinner, along with some crisy root thingies that will try to break our teeth.” He paused. “You might want to watch for small metal pieces, because he was not being gentle with the cookware. But Kesh won’t be the only Krogan now – and both of them are critical personnel. That will drive Tann insane, right? Can I be there when you tell him?”

She relaxed, ever so little, against him. “Helps a bit. To know someone’s grateful.”

“More than grateful. And…” he slowed down even more, knowing he was treading the fine line of confessing everything she wasn’t ready to hear. Probably. But he wanted – even needed to say it. Even if it wasn’t really saying it. “And I want to spend every waking minute with you, so there’s that. You haven’t left me behind. If that matters.” He hesitated, “Does it matter?”

“Depends.” She tilted her head back and up to look in his eyes, and he met her head on. “All the minutes? With the Pathfinder, no matter how messed up and pointless the mission?” She nodded at the plant in the corner, still waiting to be delivered to Kesh when the engineer messaged that she was free. “Even when I’m supposed to be playing florist for two courting Krogan?” She grimaced, “Not that I mind. They’re cute together.” She snorted, “Love is in the air, I guess.”

Liam shook his head, his heart beating a little faster. Like walking a high wire, he was about to tip over. “Not with the Pathfinder. With Sara Ryder. No titles when it’s just us, right?” He swallowed, “It’s always just us, anymore. Even when we’re surrounded by people.”

She stared up at him, eyes wide, and then shifted to face him. “God, Liam, you have no idea how much I needed to hear that.” Her hands found his belt. “Get these off.” She kissed him, boldly, breaking off just when he was getting into it.

“Sara, not that I’m complaining, but…” she shifted down to her knees in front of him. “Holy shit. Are you offering what I think you’re…”
“Let me?” She pulled at his trousers and jocks, as he lifted his ass incredulously off the couch. She bent in and kissed right above his cock, just below his navel, and he groaned, her goal crystal clear.

“Sara, you don’t have to…”

Her eyes stopped the words before he could finish. “This is the only goddamn thing I’ve done today because I want to, Liam.” She flushed, the red spreading clear up to her hairline. “Though I might need a walkthrough. I’ve… never actually done this before. Not all of it. Teased it, sure, but not… you know.”

Liam froze, as if a Einoch was tracking him. “Serious?”

“Well, if you don’t wanna be my guinea pig,” she started to shift back, but he grabbed her shoulder, only to gentle, and slide a hand to her cheek.

“Sara Ryder, if I had my way, you’d learn everything with me. Every waking minute.” She had to realize, didn’t she?

“Well, all right then,” her eyes were watering. “Where do I start?”

“Stop crying, first,” he laughed, and she laughed, and it was good. “Gonna be salty enough without tears involved.”

She choked, on a mixture of laughter and tears, and whacked his thigh. “You are such an ass. Maybe I wasn’t gonna swallow?”

“That’s up to you,” he took a breath, and it caught. “But… before you get going, maybe come up here, and let me kiss you some more. Want that, too. Hasn’t felt like there’s been time to breathe, much less…” He took a breath, to stop babbling. “We should kiss more, is all.”

She tilted her head, and her ponytail fell over her shoulder before she surged towards him – and though he didn’t see any blue beyond her hair, he knew she had to be using her biotics to be so graceful.

Her mouth tasted like coffee and impatience, and he fucking loved it. He loved her, and the knowledge stuck in his throat when she shifted back down until her face was almost in his lap, and she started peeling the layers away again. He needed to tell her. “Christ.” The word directed as much towards his dilemma as towards her goal.

“Nope, just the Pathfinder,” she touched him, too gently. “Now what?” But she didn’t wait for instruction.

“Um…” she licked the head gently, exploring the slit, and he shut his eyes. “That. That’s… ticklish. But good ticklish. Maybe… wrap your hand around me, move a bit?” He was growing, slow but sure under her hand.

She laughed, “Not trying to give you a hand job, Kosta.”

“You said you wanted the whole experience,” he protested, before realizing she was teasing him. “You’re a real tit, you know that?”

“That’s me,” she smiled up at him, her hand holding him like a mic inches away from that fucking mouth. “Now… show me.” She bent down, and sucked him in, and all the words left his head in a rush. She moved around him, and he forgot how to breathe.
“You don’t need – uh - me.”

She giggled, “You’re wrong. What’s the point if you’re not here?”


She was rougher than he’d had before, but shit, it was the best damn blow job he’d ever had, all the same. Even the teeth where there shouldn’t be were… somehow bloody thrilling. She choked a couple of times where he couldn’t help but move in time to her off beat – his fault, not hers. But in the end, she was holding his thigh down with her too-hot hand and she was moving desperately, hand slicked with saliva while he cursed and begged incoherently for mercy. “Fuck, Sara, don’t…” he groaned, and despite her words from before, she swallowed around him, slow movements of mouth as she cleaned him off.

Limp, he slumped back on her couch. “Shit.” She laughed, and climbed up to kiss him, apparently satisfied. “Return the favor sometime?” His body buzzed with his release, but his eyes saw her knees reddened from her carpet. He rubbed them for her, with rueful, if shaky, hands. “That’s got to hurt.”

“Rug burn’s not gonna kill me, Kosta,” she hummed, and settled on his lap. “I feel better. Like I’ve sulked too long.” She kissed him, deep, and he tasted himself, just when he thought she couldn’t get any sexier… “Wanna shake me out of it?” Those lashes were too long, and her eyes… he could drown in them. He replied with his mouth on hers, his hand buried in her hair, the other at her waist, teasing at the skin gapping at the hem of her hoodie.

He broke off only when he absolutely had to breathe. “Sara, I–” He bit off yet another true confession, knowing he couldn’t put it off much longer. It was gonna slip out at the worst time. He’d have to be incredibly careful, to keep it in.

‘Course, it was past the point of getting awkward. If he just blurted it out now, she’d probably laugh. Or think it was because she’d gone down on him. That it was just the sex talking. These things required precision timing.

Why had Heleus demanded that they do everything in the wrong order? But it wasn’t entirely the Cluster’s fault. He had to own it.

He’d just have to figure out how to make it work. Somehow. But for now she was tugging him down on top of her again, and he was having serious flashbacks to their first kiss, first touch, first everything. Her lips were demanding things of his that he couldn’t ignore in favor of navel-gazing.

Time for that later. He’d find a way. He had to.
Chapter 78

I am having a miserable day. Miserable. So I'm going to post several chapters of this at once to make me feel better. It's either that or comfort gaming, and this is more effective and less time consuming, as it is already written, and thanks to a visiting cat throwing up all over my sofa cushions I have a ton of laundry to do instead of curl up on the denuded couch, controller in hand.

If any of you wanted to throw me a comment or kudo to make my day a hell of a lot better, feel free. If not, no harm, no foul.

Liam was a fucking coward. He couldn’t say it out loud – fine, okay, sure. There were other options. He’d write a letter, tell her everything in there. It would be cute – something that they could show their purely hypothetical descendants a few decades later. Assuming that they chose to reproduce. That was up to her. And whether or not he actually ever managed to spit it out before she dumped his unfeeling ass.

So far so good, except that the bloody email wasn’t going well. He had the greeting:

Dear Sara,

And the closing, with the most important word of all, inserted like he’d been saying it all along. Suaver than the Charlatan. Cooler than Voeld.

Love,

Liam

The problem was there was absolutely nothing to put in the middle. Nothing. No absurd list of movies for them to watch together – though he knew she was partial to late 22nd century rom-coms. No pictures that reminded him of her, no links to poetry or books, funny or serious or romantic.

And no words to express how much she meant to him. How it could all come down to the two of them, in a shuttle in the ice fields of Voeld, or in a miserable hut on Elaadan surrounded by scavengers, or a cave on Eos or Kadara with the Collective or Outcasts or Kett picking the Team off one by one, and that he’d still count himself lucky right up to the end - because he had her.

She was everything. EVERYTHING. And he had… nothing. “This is why I’m not a poet.” He narrowly resisted the urge to toss the tablet away. This was the first thing he needed to do today, damn it. The most important thing he would ever write. He was better than this. He wanted to write this.
Jaal – far too silent for such a large man – stuck his head over his shoulder. “Ah, you are writing to the Pathfinder. How lovely.” He read, and Liam clenched his jaw, jealous. Even Jaal’s fucking silence was eloquent. “You have not written anything?”

He groaned, “I can’t think of anything to say that isn’t… doesn’t make me look an arse for not saying it before now,” Liam clicked a single letter on the datapad, and then deleted it. “I mean – how do you tell a woman that she’s everything you never knew you needed, that she inspires you personally to do better things, that you’ve loved her since her first headshot on Habitat 7, if not before, without sounding like a fucking cheerleader or worse, a stalker?”

Jaal blinked, slowly. “‘Stalker’ is a bad thing. Suvi explained the concept. Is this ‘cheer leader’ a bad thing?”

“Um, no,” Liam admitted, staring at the pad without seeing it. “It’s not. Just… it’s not how I’d define myself. I’m more of the debonair ditz, the one who can’t see the forest for the trees until one hits you in the head type, than the perky sort. I’m not Gidget, or Sandra Dee.”


“A surfer girl from a really old vid. Dated. Big time.” Liam flipped a couple of sheets ahead, to his list of movies to watch with Jaal. It was better than anything, to get to listen to the Angaran’s comments – even better than Felicia Day’s MST3K. Gidget qualified as a cultural exchange…

“Surfing’s that sport on the boards, where you ride a wave to shore? I showed you, didn’t I?”

Jaal hummed. “Humans find the oddest ways to derive recreation.” He cocked his head, and leaned forward, hands between his lap. “Why don’t you take her somewhere you have in common – have a nice meal, and work it into the conversation? A night on Aya, perhaps? Bring her a nice plant – like Vorn did…”

Liam snickered, “Where don’t we have in common? We’re stuck here together, on this ship, fighting crazies, and kind of busy with that other thing – you know, finding a home for thousands of displaced people?” His eyes went hazy, “It could go like this… ‘Sara, you know how there’s the thousand other important things we could be doing, instead of having dinner out, right? Well, the problem is I fucking love and adore you and want to father your ten children. Assuming we survive. And hey, if we don’t, no harm, no foul, I just wanted you to know before one of us dies a horrible death. Romantic, right?’” He snorted, “She’d drop me like a stone.”

“That would not work? And why just ten?” Liam pinned Jaal down with a raised eyebrow. “Oh, sarcasm. I am familiar. Peebee uses this often. But there should always be time for romance,” Jaal sighed. “Sara is brave. She would enjoy surfing – but no, that’s something you would have to do on Aya, if you need waves and a sandy beach.” He paused. “You would probably be arrested.”

“Getting arrested sets the wrong mood.” Liam flipped his stylus back and forth between his fingers. “Look, I appreciate the help, Jaal, but… I just need to get the words out for now. It’s not like either of us have time to go on dates right now, much as we’d like to. But I can’t put it off any longer, without it getting weird.” He sighed. “It’s already weird.”

“You must make time,” Jaal huffed. “Sara is – what is the phrase? - ah yes, ‘burning out’. I see the signs. She fights too hard. She needs… a pick me up. A break. A deep breath before the storm hits.” He paused, “I have it. Your movie night.” Liam frowned. “Why not? You watch vids all the time, don’t you? Make this one stand out. Declare yourself hers.”

“I… suppose so,” Liam sighed. “It turned into such a thing. And it was supposed to be for everyone,
not just for us. The movies I’d picked out seem so… lame. Not good enough. We need something – better. Something even I haven’t seen.” His face lit up. “We need the Last of the Legion.” He stood up, and tossed the datapad to Jaal. “Write something like what I just said. Don’t send it – I’ll put it in my own words. I got to talk to Vetra.”

“Vetra?” Jaal was already typing away, eyes moist and soulful as he hunted for the appropriate words.

“Right!” Liam called back. “Because if there’s anybody who knows where I can find a copy of a movie that doesn’t exist, it’ll be her!”

~SS~

“You’ve got to be kidding.” But Vetra’s eyes were burning with a soft glow behind her visor. “I love that vid.” She was tapping at her Omni-Tool, as fast as her talons could manage. “The Director’s Cut. Legend has it that there’s a good fifteen minutes of Turian flexing. Mmmm… I could use some flexibility. Been a long time…” Her mandibles twisted, in what Liam hoped was humor, and not viciousness. “Finding that, here, would be such a coup.” She leaned towards him, “So… if I find it for you, what’ll you give me?”

Liam’s head hit the wall behind him. “My eternal gratitude?”

“Not nearly good enough, Kosta,” Vetra clucked chidingly. “We’re good, you know. When this is over, we’ll part as friends, and-”

“And live real, real, far apart. Maybe talk on major holidays? Maybe.”

The Turian smiled. “We understand each other. I’m going to find your vid. And you’re…” she hummed, her voice filling the room melodically, “…you’re going to owe me a favor.”

“An unspecified favor? Or did you have something in mind?”

“That’s how my contacts usually start,” Vetra admitted. “I find something they need, and eventually, they pay it back – or forward. But for you, I’ve got something in mind. Something special.” Her eyes narrowed behind the visor. “Someone might be pretending to be me. Asking for strange shit.” She coughed. “Do you know what a ‘cat’ is?”

“A domesticated mammal. Usually a pet, though there are larger felines, too.” Liam shook his head. “Why do you ask?”

“You can’t even eat it?” Vetra groaned. “Someone, back on the Nexus, claiming to be me, pulled a cat genome from the banks. Obviously not me, since I don’t even know what the damn thing is.” She looked horrified, “Is it furry?”

“Usually?”

“Why would anyone want to own a pet with fur? The damn pyjak is bad enough, peeing everywhere, but at least it doesn’t shed.”

“But he’s so cute!”
“Sid was cute, too, but that doesn’t mean I allowed her to pee all over the floor.” Vetra clacked irritably. “Fine then. I want you to use your contacts with Nexus Security to figure out who is using up all my outstanding favors for silly shit. I’ll find you this vid in exchange. Deal?” She held out her talon, and Liam grasped it.

“Deal.”

“Liam!” Jaal found him in his old storage closet, sending out an urgent message to a few friends back on the Nexus. “I have it!” He thrust the datapad into his hand, beaming with triumph.

Liam choked as he read, “Jaal, what the fuck is this?” Liam waved the datapad at his friend.

“Do you like it? I thought it appropriate…”

Liam laid back on his couch, pad held in front of him. “‘Dearest Sara,”

“I thought that better. Many people are dear to you. She is the dearest. I did get the superlative correct?”

“Oh yeah, it’s right,” Liam coughed, and continued.

You inspire me, in ways I cannot explain. You uplift me, on the battlefield, on the Tempest, on every planet we land on. You make me strive to build a life for us, and for our people.

Life is uncertain, but how I feel is not. My love for you is the beacon in the Scourge, leading me along safe paths. It is the sun that the planet orbits. It is the sprouted seed in the nursery, my dearest treasure.

I long to dedicate myself to you, to the family we might build together. There is much in our way, but I trust you will guide us both safely home.

I am yours, eternally.

Love,

Liam

He couldn’t help his laughter by the end. “There’s no way in hell Sara’s ever going to think I wrote that. It’s fucking Shakespeare.”

“Why not?” Jaal huffed. “My grammar was perfect, and I had SAM check my spelling. And by all accounts, this ‘Shakespeare’ was a master of verse.”

“For exactly that reason,” Liam sighed. “Look, it’s called ‘voice’, my friend. That letter is you all over. Rewrite it, and send it to Peebs.”

Jaal blinked at it. “Do you think Peebee would appreciate receiving such a letter? She has not been… encouraging my advances.”
“Mate,” Liam leaned over his knees, “If I send that letter to Sara, she’ll break up with me, kick me out of our room, and be pounding on your door at midnight, begging you to take her. Do me a favor, and find your own girl, before you steal the love of my life. And Peebee – she talks tough, all independent, but I see the way she looks at you.” Jaal blinked again, his eyes going round with surprise. “She’s… curious. To a fault. Encourage that, and you’ll get someplace.” Liam turned away, looking back at the datapad. “Just don’t do it in the escape pod. We might have to ride in there. I have a bad feeling.”

Jaal frowned, “But what will you tell Sara, then?”

Liam shrugged, “I’ll think of something. And I’ll have you proofread it, that’s for certain.” He shook his head, “‘sprouted seed’, my ass.” He saved a copy, just in case Sara wanted to read it later.

Considerably later. After he wrote his own version. But how hard could it be, with this as the rough draft?
Chapter 79

Chapter Summary

Second chapter of the day.

When Sara checked her email four nights later, she found an email from Liam. She shoved it aside in favor of pulling up Vetra’s, so that she could savor it later, and check all the myriad attachments in her own time. Liam sent her a message almost every day, after all. They were always fun, and sometimes sweet, and she’d rather be able to concentrate on it, once she finished work-related… “Shit,” she breathed, and read Vetra’s again. “Fucking hell. Just when things were calming down…”

“I didn’t expect quite that reaction,” Liam’s voice came from behind her.

“What?” Sara blinked, “No. I haven’t read yours yet. This is from Vetra. Big problem on a little former planet.” She closed the window, mind spinning. “I like to save yours for last.” She smiled, trying to be winsome. She’d even settle for cute, if it got her a smile.

But Liam looked down and away, “I should warn you about this one. It’s not like the-” He shifted awkwardly. “You know what? Mine will wait. Why don’t you go talk to Vetra – that’s what’s really important. What makes a planet ‘former’ anyway?” His light tone seemed forced, and Sara swallowed.

That was a bad sign. A really bad sign.

“What, are you breaking up with me already? I thought we had another six months in us, at least.” Her voice was light as she waited for the email to load. She didn’t want to think about the weighty feeling in her gut. He wouldn’t, would he? Liam was what made the fighting worth it.

Well, one of the things. But the other was still in a coma back on the Nexus, largely unaware of his big sister’s struggle.

“Fuck,” he breathed, and sat down, burying his head in his hands. “Don’t hate me, okay?”

“No promises,” her voice broke, as the email opened. “Shit.”

Dear Sara,

Thinking about you.

Love,

Liam

She snorted, “Something you want to say, Mr. Kosta?” She couldn’t stop her shoulders from shaking – the tears at the corners of her eyes threatening to fall with relief after the fear of what she thought it would say. “You really had me. I thought you were dumping me for sure.”
“I just wanted to say you’re on my mind.”

“It says that much.” She cleared her throat. “Exactly that much.” Plus a key word, that she certainly wasn’t going to point out if he couldn’t even look her in the eyes. He obviously regretted it.

He groaned, as if in pain. “You’re always on my mind?” She giggled, and he finally looked up, his eyes locking on hers. “You don’t know how much you’re on my mind. You’ve taken over in there. What you looked like when I met you,” her smile faded, “What you did just this morning. What you’ll look like and do thirty years from now. Fifty. Seventy.”

Her mouth dropped open, and he kept going, pushing words out. “I wanted to say that our lives are crazy, and that we’re always on the edge of everything falling apart, but you hold me together. That I want to do the same for you. That it’s not about everyone else anymore, that it’s just about me and you, and what happens next. All those other people? Window dressing. Heleus is about Hele – Us.” He winced. “Shit, that’s corny as hell. Sounded better in my head.”

Her lower lip trembled. He meant it. He couldn’t say it out loud, but… he meant it.

“That I never want this to end – not the war with the Kett, because that can bugger off ASAP - but… you, and me, on the Tempest? I don’t want to give that up – for any golden world or missing ark. And there are no movies, or poems, or books that could tell you for me. So I had to. And then I lost it – my nerve, the words, whatever. And you ended up with that shit.” His hands clutched the cushion of the couch, tense. “Sorry. You deserve better.” He looked away. “So much better.”

“Okay,” she smiled shyly, knowing her cheeks were pink. “Thanks.”

“You’d better go talk to Vetra. We were chatting a few days ago, and I think it’s urgent. I had some people forward her some stuff from Nexus security. Identity theft, if it wasn’t in the email.” His head fell again.

She didn’t want to leave it like this. Sara railed against herself as she rose to leave, and then stopped at the door. “Um, Liam?” He lifted his head. “Just wanted to say – I’m thinking of you, too.” She smiled. “And I think you got it out okay after all.” His shoulders dropped, dejected. “Something I said?” He shook his head.

Half an hour later, she was back on the bridge, and headed to what might have been the Turian home world, had it not exploded, searching for outlaws and kidnapped colonists officially, and searching for a clue about Vetra’s stolen identity, but with a carefully dropped hint from Vetra burning in the back of her mind.

The Last of the Legion. Director’s Cut. Kadara Port. Kosta asked about it. Talk to the mod dealer – the Asari. You know the one. She’ll fix you up. Now get out of here, before you two make me sick.

There wasn’t time now, but she would make time later. He needed this, and she needed him to understand how much she cared. If it took a trip to Kadara and a under the table deal with a shady merchant, so be it. He was worth it.
Chapter 80

Chapter Summary

Third chapter of the day.

Look, I told you it was a bad day. This is probably the last though.

Mildly NSFW towards the end.

“‘There never seems to be enough time, to do the things we want to do, once we find them…’” Liam crooned the chorus of *Time in a Bottle*, while Sara pitched a fit. He was trying to calm himself down. Otherwise, he was going to lay into Peebs, and that… was not going to be a good thing. For anyone. Sara had that well in hand. She didn’t need him piling on.

Peebee’d somehow managed to outdo even him, the King of the Fuck Ups, by jettisoning the Pathfinder team, with no warning, into a molten planet, using her bedroom.

He’d bloody known that they were going for a ride in her escape pod. It was practically foreshadowed, as soon as she moved all her stuff in. What had Lexi called it? ‘Inability to commit?’ Not the time to mention that to either Peebs or the Pathfinder, though.

“How are we going to get back?!” Sara screamed at Peebee. “The Tempest can’t land. How do we get out of here?” The smell of sulfur and hot rock wafted up strong enough to choke them all. “Did you think any of this through?”

“I figured Kalinda would have a shuttle or two of her own,” Peebee sassed. “We’ll commandeer it. I can fly it just fine.” She cupped her hip with both her hands, as if she had to keep them still, to stop them from trembling. Liam knew the feeling, if not that particular gesture. “Look, I know – I should have told you before I launched the pod. But…”

“But nothing.” Sara slammed her hand up against the lava wall. “You’ve marooned us, Peebee. Stranded, on a volcanic rock with barely breathable atmosphere. If I have to go out, I don’t want to go out like this! This is POINTLESS.”

“So, help me get the Remtech, and then we’ll steal a shuttle. It’s not the first time you’ve risked your life for a friend.”

“Not. The. Point.” Sara breathed harshly through her nose. “Those times, I had at least the general idea of the risks I was taking. I had a choice about taking them. I wasn’t going to go have a chat with a friend before a mission of dubious usefulness. I almost didn’t bring my rifle, thinking you had decided that it wasn’t worth the danger. You’re lucky I had already grabbed the grenades.”

Liam was holding in his nervous laughter, but it escaped, a tiny bit. “Sorry, Peebs, just enjoying being the reasonable one for once.” Oddly similar annoyed looks were cast in his general direction.

Peebee stuck out her tongue at him. “Nice.”

“Never claimed to be the bigger man,” Liam shrugged, chagrined, but hardly regretting it.
“Pathfinder,” SAM suggested, “I have limited capabilities at the moment, but I believe there are buried consoles surrounding you. It is possible for you to use your biotics to shift enough rock to reach them. They may still have power.”

“Right,” Sara clenched and unclenched her fists. Liam hadn’t seen her this mad since the pirate ship. Back then, she shot a console, threatened to space him, and made Star Wars jokes. That memory gave him just enough warning to dodge before she let a shockwave fly, flinging his hands up to cover himself as bits of sharp black stone arced everywhere. She scrambled up a short hill, towards the object in question, silent.

“Feeling better?” Liam coughed at Peebee’s snarky form of bravery.

“A little,” she admitted. “Ask me again if – when - we get out of here.”

They were halfway back to what looked like a former vault, when the earthquakes started. Kosta scrambled up a ledge, feeling it break away just as Sara grabbed at him. They both watched it melt away before he looked back up to catch her panicked eyes. “You’re not going out like this, Kosta.”

“I know,” he managed to grit out, gripping her hand, as Peebee Lifted him to safety. “There’s too much I need to say first.” He sat down, harder than he intended, crumpling up on sharp rocks threatening to cut a new hole in his arse. He couldn’t tell if Peebee had let him go on purpose. Probably.

“Don’t even start,” Peebee groaned, “If you two start going, ‘We’re going to die down here, and you’ll never know how much I loved you,’ I’m going to leave both your asses behind after I kick Kalinda’s ass. And then I’ll name the fucking planet after you, just to rub it in. The ugliest name-smush I can think of.” She stomped forward, impatient, pointing. “There. That’s the way. Pathfinder, use your scanner and find the conduits.”

Sara glanced at Liam, lips tight, but activated her scanner in silence.

Liam coughed, needing to lighten things up, before Sara killed someone important. “So, Sara.” He grinned, “Want to push Peebee’s buttons? I can think of a hundred things I could do and say to manage just that.”

“Stop fighting with her,” Sara sighed, and rubbed her head, pointing with her other hand in the opposite direction from where Peebee had indicated, the conduits lit up golden underground through her Omni-Tool’s screen. “That way. Come on.” She drew her pistol.

“I’m not the one fighting. This time. But - what if that’s what I want to say?” Liam protested. “I mean, it’s true.”

“Not. The. Time.” Sara spat through clenched teeth, jerking back towards him. He recoiled, hands in the air, and she wilted at the gesture. “I’m not angry at you, Liam. I’m angry at HER.” She waved her pistol at Peebee, who ducked. “Do you know how much an escape pod costs? More than you earn! And it’s not like manufacturing can just – churn out a replacement! There are priorities – and a new escape pod for the Tempest isn’t one of them!”

“We get paid?” Peebee snarked. “News to me.”

The pistol fell, and Sara frowned, “Tann hasn’t?” she sighed, “I’ll take care of that when I get back. Yes. You get paid. You have a hefty amount of credits coming your way.” Her eyes narrowed as she hiked through the cavern. “Maybe even enough for a new escape pod. Otherwise, you’ll pay – in installments – as you can afford it.”
“Deal,” Peebee sounded smug. “I’m going to make enough in royalties from this tech to pay for a dozen escape pods.”

“There’s a saying back on Earth,” Liam started, stretching his legs in an effort to keep up. The Pathfinder’s rage walking was no joke.

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“Don’t count your chickens before they’ve hatched.”

“How quaint,” Peebee said, voice dry. “Are there many chicken idioms on Earth?”

“A million. Like… don’t put all your eggs in one basket. That one applies too.” Sara was still talking with her jaw clenched.

“And which came first,” Liam snorted, “The chicken or the egg…”

“That’s ridiculous, the chicken had to evolve…” Peebee stopped, confused. “Oh.”

“No, wait, the punchline is ‘Neither, because the Salarian had to uplift them first’,” Liam snorted. “That’s one of my favorites. Right up there with ‘Why did the chicken cross the road?’”

Sara smiled, just a little bit, and took his bait. No one could resist. “Why did the chicken cross the road?”

“To buy an escape pod,” Liam finished, and improbably, Sara stopped walking, to hold herself up against the wall as she held her sides in silent shaking laughter.

“I don’t get it.” Peebee looked at Liam. “What’s so funny?”

“You are. Oh, God, Peebee, I’m fucking furious.”

“I know,” finally, the Asari sounded contrite. “But I swear, I’ll make it up to you. Right about… now.” They turned a corner, and dove for cover. “Shit! How many people does she have?”

Peebee’s eyes were like goggles as she peered around the rock.

Sara’s lips weren’t smiling anymore. “Too many.” She lined up her Isharay precisely. “Both of you, cover fire. I’m taking them out. Including those fucking Einochs. Who had the bright idea to use them as weapons? Because I’m going to fucking find them, and kill them when we’re done here.” She fired, and Liam jumped into action, Overloading and following up with Havoc Strike as the Remnant and Kalinda’s people fought back.

Peebee sputtered, when Kalinda herself emerged. “You bitch,” she screamed, launching herself over their cover and abandoning them to the fight in favor of settling old scores. “I won’t let you beat me to this one. I WON’T!”

“God DAMN it, Peebee!” Sara yelled after her, just as she ran out of ammo for her sniper rifle. She unslung her old Mattock, looking at it dubiously. “I can’t remember the last time I used this thing. Elaadan?”

“Just shoot it!” Liam yelled at her from across the field. “It’s not like bullets go bad!”

“Stun them!” He set off the Overload, and she fired, not as precisely as she would, if acting as a sniper, but the enemies dropped anyway. He took advantage of the enemies turning against her, and spotted one of Kalinda’s supply boxes. “Ammo!” he yelled, and tossed her two, which, in between
clips, she caught and loaded, pocketing the spare. “Graceful,” he breathed, and then had to run, to dive behind the pillars. He heard Sara’s breath on the comm, ragged. “You okay? They didn’t hit you?”


“You’re here, aren’t you? I’m golden.” He peeked his head over the crates. “I think you got them all.”

“Good.” She stood up. “I’m going to go kill Peebee. She did it AGAIN.”

“You can’t kill Peebee.”

“Yes, I can.”

“No, you can’t. You’re her friend. For some reason, we both are. Even when she’s a selfish little shit. And I can’t tell you how much I hope she hears this conversation over her comms.”

Sara choked, and then laughed again. “Right.” She thought for just a moment, as she picked her way across the battlefield. “Can I punch her?” Another earthquake rocked the vault – the vibrations lasting far too long for comfort.

He stopped waiting for them to end. They weren’t going to. The planet was dissolving beneath them. “Ladies first?” Heart in his mouth, he grabbed her hand, and started to run. “We’ve got to get the fuck out of here. It’s melting. See?” The odd liquid that was omni-present in all the vaults was evaporating into an odd metallic haze – and the ground shifted, rearranging itself around the hollows the flows left.

They ran together, hand in hand, in the direction Peebee had disappeared, until they spotted her yelling at her ex. “Kalinda, you idiot, run!”

The woman held what looked like a Remtech core sphere in her hand, but the platform she was on was tipping sideways, melting into the river of lava beneath them all. “Thank you, Pelessaria…” she started a mocking speech, but it was cut off, as the platform tilted, and she dropped the tech. “Peebee!” She slid sideways, grabbing onto the edge, her feet dangling only feet above the lava flow, her poise lost. The sphere rolled to the edge, teetering. “Peebee, save me!”

Peebee glared at the other woman, and then at the tech, and then at Sara, who held up her hands. “I’m out of ammo!” Sara grinned smugly. “And I’m not going to shoot your ex for you anyway. Deal with it yourself.”

“SHIT!” The Asari screamed, but ran for Kalinda, hoisting her out of danger, and then leaping with her to relative safety.

“Thank you, thank you,” the woman sobbed, but Peebee swung back and punched her. “What the hell?!” She held her jaw.

“That was for being a bitch!” Peebee screamed. “Now, take us to your fucking shuttle, and get us back to the Tempest, before I have Kosta electrocute your ass.”

Liam didn’t get a chance to protest, as the woman was already replying. “It’s this way,” Kalinda sobbed, and once again, they were running, trying to be faster than the lava could melt. “It’s not far…” they sprinted for the shuttle, the ground quaking. Kalinda slid into the cockpit, flipping switches.
“Hurry it up,” Peebee warned, and slid into the co-pilots chair, completing the preflight checklist with the ease of long practice. With a jerk, the shuttle took off, and they were free, watching the place they’d just been dissolve behind them as they turned.

Sara confronted Liam. She searched his face for a moment, hands clenched at her sides. He barely caught himself when she threw herself at his neck. “I thought we were dead.”

“Me, too.”

She shoved him, one handed, without letting go. “You were making chicken jokes with your last breath?”

“Made you smile and stop panicking, didn’t it?”

“What the hell am I going to do with you, Kosta?” He pulled her against him, hoping she couldn’t feel him shaking.

“If you think of something, let me know. I’m game for whatever.”

~SS~

The entire Pathfinder Team was calling it ‘Peebee’s Folly’, laughing and joking about escape pods and exes. Kalinda had promised them support and Remtech – and Peebee seemed to think she was sincere. For now, anyway. Everything was fine, on the surface of things.

But it felt like a closer call then they’d had yet - even Habitat 7 didn’t seem quite so… Liam hit his head on the pillow beneath him. Sara had died there. It shouldn’t even compare. But it was worse, because it was stupid. On Habitat 7 they’d been doing their job. And he wasn’t attached – just attracted.

Sara muttered at the slight movement, and held him closer. She’d barely let him go, even in her sleep. She – no doubt influenced by the same adrenaline coursing through his body – had jumped him, immediately after they returned, tearing his clothes off almost before the damn door was shut. Near-death experience, heightened stress, if he had to guess. Sex as a way to prove that they were both still alive. She refused to slow down.

She hadn’t talked to Peebee yet. “Priorities, Liam,” she’d promised, with steel in her voice. She held him down, arms over his head, biting her lip in concentration as she slid down on him.

His attempt to break up her tension failed, “I didn’t realize chicken jokes were your kink.”

“Shut up, Liam,” her face made his smile fade. “You could have died. You nearly did. I – I,” her control broke, body hunched over, tears dripping in small circles on his chest. “Peebee almost died. I almost… again. You – you can’t die on me. Ever.”

“Hey,” he pulled her down, softly, feeling the rigid muscles underneath her skin resist him. “We’re not dead.”

“Then it will be the next time. Or the time after that,” she sniffled. “Every fucking day…” He rolled her over, and kissed her, moving more gently than she had.
She was looking for control, he knew. For a feeling like she could do something about the direction her life had taken. Like she could stop him from dying if she held onto him tight enough. He got it – but it wouldn’t work.

“You don’t need to force me to stay,” he kissed into her skin. “I’m here. I’m always here. Or there, or wherever you want me.” She moaned underneath him, arching up, and he followed her lead, cupping her high, and rising up on his knees to increase the pressure. “I always will be.”

“You can’t know that.” She reached a hand up and cupped his cheek. “You can’t promise that.”

“I know it, Sara. This doesn’t stop with one of us dying. You’ve already done that, remember? And I’m still here.” His eyes held conviction, hers doubt. He traced a single finger down her neck, all the way to her navel. He stopped moving, to nestle closer. Her arms wrapped around him, tight. “I have to be right sometime, Sara. Probability demands it. Right, SAM?”

Her laugh broke something free, and almost accidentally, her mouth found his. Tongues slid against each other, her hand behind his head, fingers twisted tight. She panted into him, he breathed her in. Her fingers dug deep into his thigh, sharp pinpricks of bliss that he couldn’t ignore.

Soft hair rubbed against softer breasts, pressure building from within. She squirmed, trying to pull him deeper, his hands now braced against the bed, afraid to crush her.

His muscles failed against her persistence, and he cradled her instead, arm behind her back, her tears pooling in his shoulder. “Sara.” She found his mouth again, sightlessly seeking. Her hips rose, and he slammed into her, gasping breaths against her neck.

“Oh, God…” her voice broke into a rhythmic wail, as he pounded and she lifted to meet him.

He groaned, and her voice peaked, and broke, and they fell together, a long dive into each other.

He wasn’t sure how long they held each other, trembling, but… he brushed hair out of her face, kissing her chin, jaw, neck, ear. Anywhere he could reach. He shrank, and slipped out, but still he held her, as she shook, and cried, and kissed him back. Chest, neck, forehead, mouth.

He kissed her until the shaking stopped. He kissed her until she fell asleep. He kissed her until he, still trapped in her arms, drifted off as well.

To dream of falling.

He jerked awake, still holding her.

And that was where he was now, stuck in his thoughts that maybe… maybe falling wasn’t the end, if they fell together. If they could survive that, they could survive anything.
Chapter 81

Chapter Summary

This is the long awaited Muppet chapter.

Believe it or not, this little snippet is necessary to the plot. My brain keeps trying to tell me it isn’t, that I should post it as a one-off, but it helps explain something that happens later.

I don’t know why I feel like I have to justify this, either. Just post the chapter already.

Vetra squinted dubiously at the screen in the Vortex. “What the hell are those things?”

“The gelflings?” Liam didn’t look up. He knew what he’d picked. Something so familiar that it wouldn’t interfere with the job at hand, but wouldn’t grate like the silence in a nearly empty pub. “They’re Muppets.”

“Muppets?” Her voice suggested interest. Liam did look up at that. Her mandibles were curling. Definitely interested.

“Yeah, like puppets, with an ‘M’. Massive cult following back on Earth. They sing, save the day – kid’s stuff, originally, but nobody really outgrows the Muppets.” They were docked at the Nexus again, letting Sara update Tann and the science team, and visit with her still unresponsive brother, while the Tempest got some needed supplies and replacement parts. One thing in particular, after their most recent mission.

Liam and Vetra were almost the only people in the pub at two in the afternoon. They’d bargained hard with Dutch to let them use his counterspace to spread out all of the Team’s mods and rifles – so that they could sell off the duplicates and old models.

The last time they’d opened Sara’s loadout locker, a million bits of delicate, expensive gunsmithing fell out. Apparently, their Pathfinder had a hoarding problem – thus why they were taking care of this while she was otherwise occupied, so that they didn’t have to hear her whine about her ‘babies’ finding new homes. It’s not like she could use more than one Recon Scope on her Isharay at a time.

Besides, selling them off now served a purpose. Peebee couldn’t afford the new escape pod, even with Tann reluctantly granting her, Drack, and Jaal back pay, and Kallo flatly refused to take off again without it. Especially not when they were supposed to be going after the Archon. Selling the extra would help, the armory would be organized again, much improving Vetra’s daily moods, and they’d get a better price here than on Kadara or Voeld. Probably.

So here he was, polishing little bits and sorting them by gun type, origin (Milky Way or Andromeda), enhancements, and scarcity, with a movie playing in the background. Not the best way to spend his shore leave, but at least he had a beer. It’s not like there was really anything else to do on the Nexus yet, anyway. And he wasn’t alone, either - Vetra was supposed to be checking market prices on several worlds – until she got distracted with his choice of soothing background noise.

Drack was off in the corner, playing some board game involving real flamethrowers with Kesh and
Vorn instead of helping like he was supposed to. Liam couldn’t blame him – this must be the first
day off Kesh had had since she woke up. “Hey, Loverboy, you think Kid would make up a fourth
for us?” He grunted as one of his playable characters went down to Kesh’s delighted cackles. “My
strategy is all off with only three players.”

“Probably?” Liam hedged, not really wanting to think about Sara playing a game with mini-
flamethrowers. She’d either light the place on fire, or get burned…but at least here, there was
medical personnel within calling distance. “Ask her.”

“Will do,” the Krogan managed, and wiped out Kesh’s vanguard. “I. AM. KROGAN!”

“Too slow, Old Man,” Vorn muttered, and let loose.

“NO…” Drack watched his entire team melt away, prodding the smoking remains of his Thresher
Maw with one thick finger. “You will be avenged,” he promised them, voice throbbing in remorse.

Vetra had settled herself into a chair, staring with wonder at the screen. “How the fuck is this for
kids?” She pointed a shaking talon at the screen.

“The Dark Crystal,” Liam said, without looking up. “I suppose it is pretty dark, but…”

“It’s about slavery, and caste, and good vs. evil, and sacrifice. About the dark and light sides that
everyone has, and choosing to do the right thing, even when you’ve been treated like crap!” Vetra
choked, “I’ve got to show this to Sid.” She slapped the table in front of her. “Start it over again.
Now.”

Liam finally looked up, “What, really?”

“Yes…” she hissed. “I need this. Everyone needs this. Are there more?” She stood and grabbed
him by the shoulders. “Tell me you have more Muppets.”

“I have all of them,” he managed to spit out, between shakes. “But they’re not all fantasies. I mean,
there’s Labyrinth, and maybe you’d like Fraggle Rock? But most of them are about Kermit the Frog
and his girlfriend Miss Piggy, and the rest of their friends. There’s a series that remakes classic
human literature - they’re musicals, Christmas Carol, Treasure Island - and there’s an old series, The
Muppet Show… You might like Muppets in Space, I guess? I mean, there is a Cosmic Knowledge
Fish, and it’s a story about a guy, Gonzo, who doesn’t fit in.” He coughed. “If I’d known you’d
like them, I would have started with something different.”

Vetra let him go, hard enough that he stepped back a couple steps, “I can’t believe, after all these
months, that you’re just now showing me this. You’re a disgrace.”

“What?!” Liam sputtered, “How was I supposed to know…” She was pulling up her Omni-tool,
calling Sid.

“Sid, come to the Vortex. I know you’re off duty, so get your ass over here. I’ve got something you
gotta see. Bring your friends. Every single one of them you can find. I’ve just figured out why
humans bothered to evolve.” She sat back down, entranced, staring at the screen. “Punch up the
rest, Kosta. I’m watching them all. Now. I want the space one next. And then the one about the
maze, whatever you called it.”

“Labyrinth. You’ll love Bowie. But watching all of them might take…”

“Did I stutter?” She tapped her talon against the table, the mods forgotten. “A frog, huh? That’s an… amphibian, right? Like a Salarian. And he’s in love with a pig? Isn’t that a domestic meat
“source?” She frowned, “They can’t possibly be fertile - but then, inter-species relationships?” She shrugged. “None of my business.”

“Well – she’s in love with him. Super demonstrative. He’s not really into PDAs.” But Vetra wasn’t listening.

“Why such the fuss about Elcor Shakespeare, when we could have had this?” The woman hissed, and then fell silent, entranced by the characters on screen. The first of Sid’s friends started drifting in the door, and settling in the booths. One by one they fell silent other than the appropriate gasps at the twists in the plot.

Kosta and Drack finished the job alone, while twenty Turians stared enraptured at the screen as it played out. Dark Crystal finished, and they turned, as one, to glare at him while he disobeyed, and pulled up The Muppet Movie. “You should watch this one before the rest,” he told Vetra.

“Whatever. Just keep ‘em coming.”

He could only obey. Sara was back late, but it was just as well, since Vetra didn’t rest until he had uploaded every single movie to her personal memory storage. When he finally pulled away, the entire Turian population of the Tempest was drinking dextro-beer and watching Treasure Island, with sad clacking noises, as Benjamin Gunn – played by Miss Piggy - wailed about being left behind on the desert island.

Pathfinder Avitus might have been crying – or whatever Turians did without tear ducts. He patted the man on the back as he left, but the new Pathfinder just folded in half, helpless against his grief.

As soon as the Vortex’s door shut, Sara spun around to face him. “What the hell did you do? Avi is as stoic as fuck, usually.”

He swallowed, “Cultural exchange?”

Sara frowned, “At least you weren’t naked this time? In a roomful of mourning Turians, that would have been really weird.” She didn’t sound angry though, and she pulled his arm around her shoulders. “The Muppets, huh?”

“I wanted something soothing and familiar. I couldn’t have known that it would send off all the Turians on the station into a group grief counseling session.”

She scooted closer, tucking herself against him. “It’s okay. Avi needs it. He hasn’t really mourned Macen yet. The smallest things set me off, too. Last time it was one of SAM’s Dad jokes.” She pursed her lips, “I don’t suppose Avi and Gil would hit it off…”

“No matchmaking, Sara.”

“But Avi…”

“Let the man process.” He hugged her closer. “You know what Augie says, ‘You don’t interfere in people’s grief’.”

“Even if it might…”

“Sara. Gil’s one of the few people who brought his whole world with him. He misses a few things, sure, but Jill’s alive, and well, and knocking people up back on Eos.”

Sara snorted, “It sounds really bad when you put it that way.”
“My point is – he’s not a good match for Pathfinder Avitus. He’ll move on when he’s ready, and not before.”

“Oh yeah? When did you get so wise?”

Liam just snorted. “Not wise. Just – there’s no way Gil’s the guy Avitus needs right now. And Gil – I’m not sure he’s really looking, either. His world isn’t half bad, now that you’ve shown up.”
Chapter 82

Chapter Summary

The point of view on the next few chapters is a little tricky for reasons you'll see soon enough, and I think I've just about got it - I'm sorry it's taken so long to get it sorted! But it's really important.

Welcome to 'Hunting the Archon'.

There will be more than one chapter going up today. I'm not sure how many.

“Well, we found the Salarian Ark,” Sara’s voice shook as she looked out the display, at the Ark connected to the Archon’s ship. “Shit, this just got complicated. Guess we’re gonna have to make a few adjustments to the plan, SAM.”

“Agreed, Pathfinder. Given the dual nature of the situation, as well as the increased probability of Ascendants, I would suggest a team of Vetra and Drack.” SAM paused. “There are multiple Milky Way life signs on board the ship.”

“The hell I’m not going,” the words came out before Liam could censor himself. “I mean-”

Sara stared him down, and pointed out the display. “That’s the Archon’s ship, Kosta. If you think for one minute that we aren’t going to have to fight at least one Ascendant in there, you’re deluding yourself. There might even be something worse, something we haven’t had to deal with yet.” She turned away, and headed to the loadout locker. “You’re good at a lot of things, but Ascendants aren’t one of them.”

He followed, the argument already forming on his lips – completely out of control. “I can fight Ascendants. I have before – back on Eos, remember?”

“Drack spent half the battle slapping you back awake,” she contradicted. “Lexi says he fractured your jaw.” She wasn’t meeting his eyes as she loaded her weapons, crisp and controlled. “I need another sniper – which means Vetra or Jaal - and Drack’s particular skills.”

“Jaal and Vetra would also make for a balanced team,” SAM noted. “But given the possibility of the Krogan scouts being present, your success increases by 5% with Drack’s presence.”

“Take more people with you for once, then,” Liam’s voice cracked. “Sara, I’ve got a bad feeling. The Archon – he’s obsessed with you. I-”

“You’re staying behind, and that’s an order, Mr. Kosta.” She glanced up at him, and softened. “Look, Liam, if you’re that worried, feel free to listen in on the comms. SAM will set up a link. I’ll be fine – I don’t intend to fight the Archon. It’s a slip-in, pick up, sneak out situ-”

“Unless he forces your hand,” Liam butted in. “I don’t- I can’t-”

Her mouth pressed together, “You’re not going.”

“SAM makes mistakes,” he might as well be persistent, if he was headed for whatever equivalent of
a court martial there was in Heleus. “He’s fallible.”

“Not this time,” Sara finished loading her guns, pocketing spare ammo in her pants, and grabbing her helmet from the locker. Her two companions – largely silent during the disagreement – finished their preparations and followed her out the airlock. “See you in a few hours, Liam.”

He watched her leave, and then, very quietly, asked, “SAM? Can you send me the data?"

“Yes, Liam. I will upload her progress through the ship on the display in your cargo closet, with her permission.” He paused, “Granted. She has sent a personal message, as well. It says, ‘I’ll be fine.’”

Liam left the loadout closet, still in full armor, and descended the ladder, making his way to his old room. “Is she mad?”

“No. She is… concerned. I believe she is attempting to keep you safe, and struck upon my logic as a reasonable means to do so.”

Liam collapsed onto his couch like his knees had given out. “It's not her job to keep me safe. I’m security – it’s the other way around.”

“Sara does not see it that way.”
Chapter 83

Chapter Summary

Chapter 2 of ‘Hunting the Archon’.

Again, there will be more chapters today. Undecided if I’m going to finish out the whole quest arc today or not.

The hidden message from Captain Hayjer played out, but Sara’s scanner wasn’t still while it played, taking in everything around them, almost too fast for SAM to report aloud on the findings. “They switched their Pathfinder’s body with another person, SAM?” She grabbed a hold of the medbay bed to hold herself upright. “Why does everything have to be hard? Is it a Salarian thing? Can we blame it on Tann?”

“You can try. We won’t tell.” Vetra’s mandibles agitated, the only outward reflection of her nervousness. “What’s the plan, Boss?”

“We’re going to see the Salarians safe,” but her voice shook. “We’re going to save them, but they have a living Pathfinder. A real one. This changes everything.”

“What have you been doing, playing dress-up?” Drack tried, but she wasn’t listening, her fingers moving faster than she could think on her Omni-Tool as she scanned.

“Raeka’ll get her people out, and we’ll go for the star map, like we planned. God, this will actually work. For once, finding an Ark won’t be a clusterfuck.” She tapped her Omni-Tool. “Both of you, check the terminals – if there’s one functional, we can figure out her pod number.”

Her scanner was tinting the whole cryo bay orange while she scanned. “Got it!” Vetra crowed. “Thank whoever, the pod’s still functional.”

“Get her down!” Sara ordered, marching up to meet her.

A few minutes later, the Salarian Pathfinder sat up. “Take it easy,” Sara whispered when she made to get out of her cramped environment.

“It’s alright,” the woman replied, crisp and professional. “Salarians don’t have the same response to cryogenic preservation. And there’s no time to waste.” She swung her legs over the side, and stood, barely shaking. “I should never have let them send me back to sleep. I’m the Pathfinder, I should be…” she shook her head, and started typing on the nearest terminal. With awe, Sara watched it jump into life at her touch. “My people are out there, dying, and I went to sleep?”

“Re-establishing neural link,” SAM spoke on the common channel. “Welcome to Heleus, Pathfinder Raeka.”

She closed her eyes, lower lids first, tight-lipped in the Salarian version of a smile. “It’s good to hear a SAM in my head again.”

“It is good to speak to you again, as well, Pathfinder.”
Sara bounced at the sound of the title being used for someone else. “How do you want to do this?”

“I’m calling in the people that infiltrated, and waking up my Team.” Already Raeka was jumping into her mission. “Captain Hayjer will prepare the ship for departure.” Raeka’s fingers moved faster on the console than Sara had ever seen. “You have your own mission, yes? I’ll get my people out while you track down the device you came for. I’ll do my job, and you do yours, and if we get an opportunity, we’ll help each other out.”

Sara couldn’t help glowing like senpai had noticed her - the Pathfinder had echoed the plan she’d already recommended. “I was thinking the same thing…”

Raeka glanced at her, wide eyes even wider. “It’s an excellent idea. I can provide a distraction while you move deeper into the ship. I don’t have to understand why you need this star chart to do my job. I assume our difficulties here were similar to those found by the other arks – if the Golden Worlds didn’t materialize, we need another option. This star map must offer one. Any explanations can wait until after it is recovered.”

“I’m just… not used to support in the field,” Sara’s voice wavered. “Thanks, Pathfinder.”

Raeka’s brisk professionalism softened slightly. “Good luck, Pathfinder.”

Sara’s eyes welled up, but she turned away and took a deep breath. On with the job. “All right then, you two are with me. Let’s get in, get the star map, and get out. There aren’t any alarms, so maybe they haven’t figured out we’re here yet?” Drack snorted. “There’s a chance, right?” She nodded at Raeka’s back. “And if we finish early, we’ll help Raeka evacuate the Salarians.”

“What about my scouts?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” Sara sighed. “If we come to it. SAM isn’t certain they are actually here, Drack.” But she allowed herself to smile. “With a real Pathfinder on our side, we have a fighting chance to do it all.” She pulled down her sniper rifle. “For once, I like the odds.”
Chapter 84

Chapter Summary

Chapter 3 of 'Hunting the Archon'.

This is where the POV gets tricky. I hope it turned out all right.

Liam sat on the edge of his couch, watching Sara’s version of everything that was going on, through the camera in her helmet, the readout of her and her Team's vitals, shields, ammunition and abilities clear as day.

He hadn't realized until now how complicated being the Pathfinder was. She had so much to pay attention to, watch out for... his respect for her grew as she led the way into the Kett ship, through the connecting tubes, in mostly silence. She started to hack the hatch on the other side, multitasking as she discussed the situation with SAM. “SAM, are there life signs on the other side?”

“Not that I can detect, Pathfinder.”

“Huh. Sure seems quiet.”

“Too quiet,” Liam agreed, aware that she couldn’t hear him. SAM had refused to connect him to the comms, as he wasn’t ‘essential personnel’ for the mission, unlike Lexi, who had a two-way link, in case of medical emergencies.

“Right,” her breath was loud. “I’m going to need both of you to be careful. Please.”

“I’m always careful,” Drack rumbled.

“Don’t give me that crap, Old Man. I don’t need you guys taking unnecessary risks,” Sara’s voice broke. “Please. Both of you. We’ve lost enough people. This was a massive job before – and we were only here for the map. Now we have to worry about giving the Salarians enough time to get out of here. No unnecessary risks.”

“Look who’s talking,” Liam muttered to himself.

“Right back atcha, Pathfinder,” Vetra grinned at her, eyes narrow through her visor. “Lead on.”

They continued on, with the doors unlocking and locking in what felt like a purposeful way, eventually getting shot at in corridors, but the resistance was oddly light until they found the cargo bay. “SAM – are you choosing which doors to unlock?” Sara sounded confused as she reloaded her assault rifle, apparently saving up her sniper ammunition. She’d been leaning pretty heavily on her biotics this time around – but that made sense, as she had two heavies with her.

“I’m unlocking the ones that allow me to unlock them,” SAM admitted. “And rerouting as necessary when blocked.”

“Ominous,” the word came out in a sing-song undertone. “Anyone else feel like we’re being led along a cherry lane?” Liam clutched the edge of the couch with tight hands. “You know the kind, the happy sunshine-y path that looks so easy?”
“Oh, the one that predictably leads to a nest of something that’s going to try to eat us?” Drack snorted. “Been feeling like that since I saw that damn Ark.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” Sara groaned. “Could use some good news right about now, SAM.”

“You two are such pessimists,” Vetra sighed. “Can’t you just count your blessings for once? Maybe it’s just not going to be that bad.”

“Until something tries to eat us,” Drack drawled.

Sara’s snort echoed over the link. Her footfalls became quieter, and she peeked out from behind the next corner more cautiously. “Pretty sure the Kett don’t eat people.”

“It’s made from people,” Liam quoted, not relaxing in the least.

“No way this isn’t a trap,” Drack rumbled. “There’s a reason I’ve lived so long, Vetra. Everything is a trap.” Vetra moved to take point, and slid through the next door with sinuous grace.

“Pathfinder!” Vetra called out, her subvocals deep, as Sara followed the former merc into what looked like a science center. Rows and rows of tubes were lined up, gruesome specimens in each and every one. Mostly Angara, and a couple – Liam gagged, suddenly glad that Sara couldn’t hear him.

“Holy… those are… they…” Liam’s stomach churned.

“Salarians. Krogan.” Vetra’s melodic voice was muted. “Oh no. This is…”

“Shit,” Drack rumbled, voice broken. “That’s one of my scouts.” He swung his Hammer, pounding on the glass, but the Krogan didn’t move. “Wake up, damn it!” He pounded on the tube, desperate to make a dent. By all rights, his hammering should have cracked whatever material the clear protectant was, but he didn’t even scratch it.

Liam had to look away when Drack pressed his forehead to the glass.

Sara, unable to get an instant readout from a nearby console, scanned the tube, and the readout of the display made both Liam and Sara catch their breath. “Drack – I’m sorry. He’s been exalted.” She backed up two steps, putting distance between herself and the subject.

“The Kett cracked the Krogan genetic code?” Vetra protested. “Already? That’s- that’s fast work, isn’t it?”

Sara stepped towards the console, again. “There’s got to be something… SAM, can you deactivate the life support function on the tube?”

“Yes, Pathfinder,” Liam could have sworn the AI sounded subdued.

“What the hell are you doing?” Drack barreled into her, shoving her away from the console before she could finish the job.

“You want him to live like that? I’m putting him out of his misery!” Drack had no response to that, and allowed her to re-approach. Sara was quiet while SAM did the job.

“If my scouts are here, if they’re still alive – if they’re still themselves-” Drack finally spoke, “Kid, we have to get them out. I don’t ask for much… you owe me.”

Sara started for the next room. “Drack, we aren’t here for them. We’re here for the star map,
remember? Priorities.”

The word made Liam’s guts cramp. “This is bigger than the mission, Sara,” he whispered, wishing he were there.

Drack echoed him, “They’re my guys. We can’t leave them here. If we don’t save them, who will?” He swung a heavy hand behind them. “The Salarians have a Pathfinder. Krogans didn’t rate one, remember?”

“I didn’t say that we were going to leave them here!” SAM opened the next door, and bullets whirred over their head. “Shit!” Sara dove and burst towards the nearest railing, hunched down, her shoulders heaving. “I’m saying that the mission comes first, and then we go find your scouts. Have a little patience, damn it!”

Vetra snorted, as she lined up her rifle. “Oh, there’s something Drack’s known for.”

“Shut up, Vetra,” Drack rumbled. “Or I’ll tell Kesh you didn’t tell share about the air filters you ‘recovered’ on Elaaden.”

“That’s low, Old Man.”

SAM stated, “Pathfinder, your destination is on the other side of the bay. All other doors have been secured.”

“Great, thanks, SAM,” Sara hissed, her helmet barely moving while she peeked up and over to locate the bad guys. “Guess we’ll just take a little stroll past all the guys shooting at us.”

“Don’t mind us, just passing through?” Liam joked, whistling in the dark, knowing even before SAM spoke that it wasn’t going to be that easy. If ever there was a place for an ambush, this was it. “Heads up, Sara… the Ascendant has to be there. I’m sure of-” his words were prophetic, orange glowy barriers that expanded and traveled heading straight for his girl. “Shit. I hate being right.” He slammed his hand down on the crate that served as his makeshift coffee table, nearly doubled over in his urgency. “Get out of there, Sara.”

A few seconds later Drack caught up from where he had finished bashing a couple of Adhi heads together. “That an Ascendant?”

“Pathfinder, move!” SAM ordered.

Sara burst towards the opposite corner of the railing to avoid the barriers at the last minute.

“That’s my girl,” Liam praised, heart in his throat. Her closest calls so far were with these fuckers… “Now take it out. Nice and easy…” he watched her heartbeat on the screen.

“You can’t catch a break,” Vetra shouted, while Sara lifted down her Isharay. “Business as usual, boss? You and me take out the Ascendant’s Orb, while Drack blazes a bloody trail through the rest of our enemies?”

Liam snorted. “Is that the sort of tactics you use when I’m not around, Pathfinder?” Sara’s helmet camera whirred back and forth, taking in everyone around them. There were so many enemies on screen – all focused on her.

“That’s right, Vet.” Sara’s voice was shaky. “Stay out of his reach, Drack draws his attention. If he gets too close, run.”
“Don’t call me Vet.”

It went from bad to worse, the Team sprinting across the bay when the Ascendant got too close, just to get pinned down behind a generator, unable to move further. The Ascendant kept them on their toes, and Liam kept shouting instructions at them, his focus clear.

He wasn’t getting shot at. It was worse than having 20/20 vision. “You’ve got to quit running! Shoot at him, damn it!”

He was attracting an audience consisting of Gil, Peebee and Jaal. “You know - maybe you should step away from the monitor,” Gil started.

“Not. A. Chance.” Liam kept staring, like the only thing that was keeping Sara on her feet was him watching. “Come on, get up.” He matched his actions to his advice, shoving the crate to once side to approach the screen. “Come on, Sara.”

Sara had been shot, her shields regenerating slowly, as her suit administered medigel to her leg. “Look, we’ve got problems,” she told her teammates, the camera’s visibility moving in and out of focus as her body coursed with the shock and adrenaline flowing through her.

“You can say that again,” Vetra drawled. “Should we call for back-up?”

Liam stood, ready to sprint for the loadout locker, ready to fight his way across a Kett ship to rescue the three of them, waiting for the order.

“Pathfinder!” Raeka’s voice came over the comms. “My people are here, and Hayjer is priming the ship for launch. Need a hand?”

“Pathfinder,” Sara laughed, and Liam turned away, pulling at his hair. “It’s really good to hear your voice.”

“Your little distraction is saving my people,” Raeka’s voice was light. “Figured I could stop in, provide some assistance.” Liam could see a new ally, on the balcony above, taking out the sharpshooters one by one, like plucking feathers. “A little payback…” A voice echoed over the comms. “Shit…” her voice broke off.

But SAM spoke again. “Pathfinder, Pathfinder Raeka has encountered difficulties. Her people are taking heavy losses. Captain Hayjer’s ship is nearly ready to depart, but- we will not have time to both rescue Raeka and the Krogan scouts.”

“Pathfinder Ryder,” Raeka’s voice broke in through SAM’s diction. “We have wounded. I don’t think we can keep this up. My team is-” There were more gunshots. “We’ll hold them off as long as possible. SAM has filled me on the importance of the star maps. Get that device at all costs. It’s been an honor working with you.”

“Pathfinder…” Sara stopped, swaying in the decision she had to make. “Oh, God. Drack?”

“They’re my boys,” he repeated, desperate to make her understand.

Liam heard her swallow. “There’s got to be a way we can do both,” her voice broke.

“No! Save your people…” the ship outside the window began to glow, and the cables detach, slowly popping free of the Kett ship. “My second is Captain Hayjer. SAM will transfer to him, when I…” There was a rapid series of gunshots, that echoed through the link, accompanied by a raspy voice, “Make sure you get them home, Pathfinder. Raeka out.” The comm went dead.
“NO!” Sara started to head back the way they came, struggling to her feet, with half-regenerated shields. Liam stood in the cargo bay room, impotent to act, fists clenched and longing to intervene.

“Pathfinder,” Vetra started, “Who needs us more?”

“The scouts – they’ll be exalted,” Drack pushed. “No one else is gonna come for them, Kid.”

“But Raeka’s a Pathfinder,” Sara whispered, eyes wide. “We – I – need her.”

“The scouts don’t have anyone on their side,” Drack begged. “Please. They’re just kids.” He slammed his fist up against the side of the hallway. “They’ll all end up Kett!”

Liam whispered at the screen. “He’s right, Sara. Think. Raeka knows the risks.”

Sara drew a shuddery breath, and nodded, choking out. “The – the scouts then.” She took a single step back, in the direction of the next unlocked door. “Forgive me, Pathfinder.” She turned, and fled, as if she was trying to outrun the decision. “Sara, out.”

Liam blew out a nervous breath, and ran his hand through his hair. “Shit.”

For a moment, he turned away from the monitor, catching Gil’s eye. “Watching this - it’s not healthy, mate. If something bad happens-”

“At least I’ll know what happened,” Liam bit off, until a shocked cry echoed from the display. He spun back. “Shit, what now?” He’d only looked away for a moment…

Sara’s Team was caught and trapped, in some bizarre arrangement of energy.

In front of them, the Archon strode in, eyes small and beady, face expressionless.

Liam stopped breathing. Behind him, he heard a very small, “Well, shit,” from Jaal.

He couldn’t find the breath to praise him for the correct use of expletives.
Chapter 85

Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 of 'Hunting the Archon'.

They just keep coming. The POV skips here - the individual chapters were really too short to post alone, despite better formatting that way...

If it's confusing let me know and I'll fix it.

This mission sucked worse than anything anyone had thrown at Sara.

If her first mission in Heleus had involved being thrown out of a shuttle into lightning and floating rocks with malfunctioning jumpjets, and then fighting her way through two groups of hostile aliens, just to lose her father at the end in a shitty trade for her own life, only to result in being responsible for the survival of all the Milky Way species in Andromeda – well, shit, maybe this was a little better than that, but not by much.

First she had to decide between the one woman left in the galaxy who knew what the fuck she was doing, and a bunch of new-hatched Krogan scouts who had ended up on a Kett ship because they didn’t know any better, and now…

And now, she was suspended in something that was eerily like a mass effect field, two feet off the ground, and SAM was telling her…

“Is there any other way,” her voice cracked, but it wasn’t a question. SAM would have said if there was.

Her eyes drifted to Vetra, who was hanging limply in her bindings, spread eagled like the rest of them, but far more relaxed than Drack, who was fighting to get free.

“No.”

“The system is linked to our life signs,” she heard her voice from a distance. Cold, logical, collected, emotionless. “SAM says that if-”

Vetra’s head jerked up, “Hell, no. You can’t be thinking – SAM! Tell her she’s wrong.” She, limp a minute before started to jerk around ineffectively.

“He’ll – disrupt my life signs.” Sara couldn’t meet their eyes. “And-”

“And once they have disconnected, I will restart her heart,” SAM finished for her.

“And then I’ll let you both loose.” Sara tried to remember how to breathe. For an involuntary action, it sure seemed to be hard to remember how.

“This plan is shit.” Drack snarled.

“Have you got a better idea?” She panted, scared beyond anything, her heart threatening to stop on
its own, judging by the thudding. “This is our latest shitty plan, and we’re going to do it.” She gasped, sucking in the too thick air. “I’ll see you on the other side.” Her camera panned back to the console. “Liam, if you’re listening, I love you.” She took what might be her last breath. "Sara, out.”

~SS~

“Liam, if you’re listening, I-” The feed cut off in a crackle of static.

Liam thudded his fists into the screen. “SAM, reconnect! Let me talk to her!”

“I will not do that, Liam. Sara has made her decision.”

“Sara, or you?!” Liam left the monitor at a run, making for the med bay. “Lexi will tell her…”

“Lexi is not connected to the comms at the moment. Sara is conflicted enough about her decision without Dr. T’Perro’s biases. I have the situation well in hand,” SAM said. Liam skidded around the corner of the cargo bay hall, and bumped into the solid, slow moving door that led to the crew quarters, slapping it a few times before it opened far enough for him to get through.

“SAM, don’t do this. Don’t…” Lexi was huddled over in her chair as the door opened, her mouth covered by her hand, but her eyes blazing with anger at the screen showing the same camera view that he had seen moments before.

The feed had picked back up.

“Let me talk to her, SAM!” The doctor echoed Liam’s thoughts. “You don’t know if you can-”

“Do it, SAM,” Sara stated. On the screen, her vitals jumped, and then dropped abruptly.

“SAM,” Liam begged, “This is Sara. Don’t do this to her, don’t do this to us... if she dies, you die, right? If she dies – we all die out here. Please, SAM. Let me talk to her…” SAM didn’t answer, but Liam continued, just the same, knowing that she couldn’t hear him. “Sara, you don’t have to save us. Jaal or Gil will think of something, or Cora and Peebs. They’ll come get you. I’ll come get you. Sara, please.” He slammed the table. “LET HER HEAR ME, SAM!”

“It is done,” SAM stated calmly, and they watched her fall to the floor, restraints gone. “I will not harm her, Liam. You have my word.”

“Sara! Sara! You can’t.” Liam fell to his knees in front of Lexi’s monitor. “God, SAM. If she’s dead, I-”

“If she dies, I die as well,” SAM reminded him. “We both understand the risk.” He paused, “I’m bringing her back now.”

~SS~

“Do it, SAM.” Sara tried to breathe, but instead she was gasping, body heaving as she tried. She hunched, and fell, pain shooting through what felt like every nerve in her body.
She went limp, seeing her childhood, her parents, her brother, her own birth… a single voice, echoing in her ears.

“Sara! Sara! You can’t-”

Her last conscious memory was Liam’s face, punching a wall in the cargo bay of a derelict Kett ship.

*When you take a risk for the right reasons, it’s supposed to work out.*

She couldn’t imagine a better end – even if it didn’t.
Chapter 86

Chapter Summary

So... do you all hate me yet?
I'll resolve this today, I swear.

The camera went dark again, and Liam shoved himself back from the display in the med bay, and marched for the airlock, hearing Vetra’s voice over the still working comms. “Drack, she’s not waking up!” He stumbled, trying to move faster, but he couldn’t feel his feet, or even see where he was going.

“Shut up, Kid, I’m counting. Fifteen seconds.”

“How long can humans go without brain activity?” Vetra sounded scared beyond anything.

Liam choked, trying again to get through to the AI. “SAM! Do something! You killed her – bring her fucking back!” He climbed the ladder to the bridge, and let himself into the loadout locker. He wanted to cry, but for once, there were no tears.

Still couldn’t see through the haze, though. He didn’t know what he was gonna do when he got to the airlock, but he wasn’t going to stay put.

Vetra’s breaths grated through the link – her subvocals sounding more like wind through trees than breaths. Liam braced himself against the workbench in the airlock, his own heart stopped as he waited to hear something, anything.

Drack was silent. Still counting?

Lexi’s voice broke, “Liam, the camera’s back on.” Slowly, he turned back towards the display on the bridge where Sara usually checked her email, dread impeding his progress, and guiding himself with one hand against the wall. Suvi and Kallo stood close together, watching silently.

This time, it was Vetra’s point of view, showing a still, pale, huddle of Sara on the floor of a Kett lab, eyes open, but lifeless.

“Attempting to stimulate heartbeat,” SAM said aloud. Sara’s body arched up off the floor with the shock. “No effect.”

He found his voice again. “Oh, God, Sara. Not like this, please. Wake up?” He jerked forward, towards the screen, as her body bent again, squirming against the floor in involuntary movements. “SAM!”

“No effect,” SAM repeated.

Liam lost the ability to keep himself upright, sliding against the wall, head sideways. “SAM. Please. I can’t- you have to bring her back.”

Liam stared at her unresponsive body, once again beyond speech, his mind whirring with every coy glance, every time he’d yelled, every time they’d fought – whether he was playacting, teasing her, motivating her, or the few real tiffs. The memory of her across the cyro-bay back on the Hyperion, and her response to his dorky little wave and smile. That smile…

Right now the slack nature of her face didn’t hint at any personality. Her funny grimaces, her horrible sense of humor, her sweet earnest nature all absent. She was gone, really and truly gone. And he was all alone, again, with the little place he’d found for himself in Andromeda gone with her.

Her body arched once again, jumping off the floor in a grotesque half circle.

“Her heart is beating.”

“We’ve got a heartbeat!” Lexi announced. Liam heard her spring into action, the monitors that usually displayed the Pathfinder’s vitals whirring and beeping in the background. That could only mean better things, but he couldn’t move – his limbs still weighed down. “Suvi, I’ll need you – I want to get full brain and cardiovascular readings from SAM, and I only have two hands.” The scientist ran for the ladder, without vocal response.

Liam stumbled backwards, all his focus on the display. He dropped into Suvi’s chair and stared blank-eyed at the screen. Watching her breathe, arms flailing wildly for purchase on the floor. Her movements had never looked so beautifully ungraceful.

Her eyes opened, so, so slowly, locking on to what must be Vetra’s. “Welcome back, Pathfinder,” Vetra managed.

Liam pressed his forehead to the screen.

She was alive – but for how long?
Sara gasped for air like a beached salmon back on Earth, flopping around onto her stomach and trying to push herself up on her hands and knees. The world was black, and it took her a while to realize it was because her eyes were still closed.

It took herculean efforts to force them open.

“Welcome back, Pathfinder.”

“Anytime, Kid,” Drack huffed.


“Hopefully not,” Vetra sounded strange, and she raised her eyelids – painfully – to meet her eyes.

“Liam is very unhappy with me,” SAM volunteered on their private connection. “I would suggest you speak, to let him know that you’re all right.”

“Just get us down from here,” Drack’s gaze was oblique, unreadable.

“Speak for yourself,” Vetra coughed. “I’m getting the fuck off this ship as soon as you let me.”

Sara pushed herself to her feet, hesitating to make sure her muscles would hold her upright before shuffling over to the console that controlled the trap, releasing them with a punched fist to what was hopefully the right button. “Lexi, Liam, if you’re listening, I’m all right. Little sore, but… I’m okay.”

The prisoners fell to their knees, Drack with a groan, but Vetra in silence. The turian shoved herself to her feet first.

Sara didn’t have time to analyze her friends’ responses to the situation. Vetra offered her hand to Drack, who stared at it, and then accepted her assistance to pull himself to his feet. “What now, Boss?”

“I refuse to die for nothing.” She slung down her assault rifle, ignoring the protest of her muscles. “We’re finishing the job. SAM, I’m going to need those navpoints again. All my map data doesn’t seem to have been backed up in time.”

“Understood.” The little orange markers that indicated her destination appeared on her monitor. "I will do what I can to mitigate the pain you are experiencing, but find it likely that Lexi will not find it adequate."

"It's just a little farther, right SAM?"

"Yes, Pathfinder."

"Then we go on."
“You don’t belong in here right now, Liam,” Lexi warned, her brow ridge drawn in with tension as Liam crowded inside the med bay before she could stop him. Sara - much to her vocal displeasure - had been wheeled in on a gurney, flat on her back. Vetra had disappeared into her own room, and shut the door. Drack was in the kitchen, slamming cupboards. Cora was making crates vibrate in the cargo bay, Jaal was tangled in wiring, and Peebee had disappeared into her new pod with Poc and Zap to keep her company.

The rest of the mission had gone off without a hitch. Drack’s scouts were freed and evacuated. Raeka was gone – but Sara was alive.

Liam had never been so confused.

Her being alive? He could dance - if he wasn’t so fucking pissed off. At SAM. At her. At himself, for not pushing harder to go with. Every moment was precious – and he should have been with her.

He’d watched her die. You didn’t just get over that. And Lexi’s little rules didn’t count for anything compared to his need to confront the Pathfinder. “Court martial me then, or call Drack to haul me off, if you can pull him away from the stove. I’m not leaving. Fuck, for as much time as I’ve spent here since I reached the Tempest, med bay feels like a second home,” he tossed back. ‘Course, this time he wasn’t the patient… and his frustration refocused on the woman in question. At least she couldn’t dodge this fight. “Fucking hell, Sara. You let SAM kill you.”

“It was a one-off,” Sara began, “Not like I’m going to have him do it every other day or anything. Never again would be pretty damn awesome. I feel like someone ran me over with the Nomad.”

“Liam, you need to go,” Lexi started to push him to the door.

“Don’t give me that bullshit.” He needed to stay here. Liam gently lifted the Doc up and set her aside, in favor of reaching Sara’s side, ignoring Lexi’s indignant sputters. “You died. AGAIN.” Those weren’t the words he needed to say. Lexi gave up, and made her way to her terminal, to begin the scans.

“I respawned?” Sara offered lamely – and he couldn’t tell if she was serious, or bluffing, or just had the worst sense of humor on the planet.

Hell, maybe it was all of the above.

Dammit, she was so the one. He grabbed her hand. “Doc, I have to talk to my girlfriend. Please excuse her from the rest of her exam? Just for a minute.”

“Oh, no, you don’t!” A muscle jumped in the doctor’s jaw. “SAM, lock the med bay door.”

“Certainly,” SAM replied.

“Belay that, SAM,” Sara tried, her voice weak.

“I’m sorry, Sara, my programming doesn’t allow me to countermand the orders of your physician.”

“I’m willing to stretch my rules to have you in here, Liam, if and only if, you behave,” Lexi gritted out, “But you will sit down. Now. And quit interfering with my patient.”
“Shit,” Sara muttered, and settled herself back on the examination table. “Sorry, Kosta. I’m a hostage to the good doctor’s whims. Sit still and keep me company for a few?”

“It’ll keep, I guess,” Liam glared at the woman he loved, impotent to change anything. “How long, Doc?”

“If she sits still, and there isn’t anything wrong, then… ten minutes. Can your hormones wait that long?” Lexi shook her head, and bit her lip, presumably before she could say anything that she would regret.

Liam didn’t have those scruples. “Fine.” Liam swung himself up on the other bed, facing her, his legs swinging in an effort not to lose it entirely. “But I’m not leaving. I can’t even let you out of my sight without you… fucking dying!”

“Death cannot stop true love… it can only delay it for a while.” He swallowed. So fucking close. And suddenly he was done with waiting. If she needed a nudge, then he’d nudge her.

“Don’t quote The Princess Bride to me. That was the longest 45 seconds of my life. And you keep doing this. Dying. And coming back. You can’t count on nine lives. Next time – the next time isn’t happening! SAM can’t bring you back from everything! And you made me stay behind!”

SAM stated, muted, as if unwilling to interrupt, “In point of fact, it was 52 seconds, Liam.”

Sara flushed, and he’d never been so glad to see her blood moving. He kept getting flashes of her corpse, pale, lifeless, laying on the floor of the Archon’s ship. His eyes filled, and he blinked away the damp, while she protested. “So I left you behind once. It was only once! Missions are the only dates I get. Hey, next time we’re fighting Kett in new and unusual places… maybe we could take a picnic? Cheese and wine, maybe, between Throws and Overloads?”

Sarcasm meant she was fucking alive. Her sarcasm was gonna keep him moving, instead of curling up and dying from belated and misplaced grief.

“Like being there for it would make this shit any better?” His voice broke. “And – damnit, I’m fucking working on taking you out!” Why were they arguing about dates? Why now? “Our plans keep changing. You know,” he gripped the bed beneath him, tight enough for his knuckles to turn white, “I’m furious with you. And SAM, for cutting me off, but mostly with you.” He was fully aware of the way Lexi looked up, surprised. “You gave him permission. To kill you.”

Sara looked away.

“And I love you.” His voice broke. “So much.” So much for nudging her. So much for playing it cool.

She smiled, and looked up at him. “Yeah?”

“You could say it back. Without quoting a fucking vid out of context.”

“Look who’s talking! You slipped it in to a bloody email – and yeah, I fucking noticed! And you want me to say it now?” Sara glanced at Lexi, who hid a smile behind her datapad.


“I did say it, damn it! I’m not my Dad.” She glared at him, red to her still-blue roots. So alive.
“Oh yeah? When?”

“I believe I cut the transmission before-” SAM began, apologetically.

“SHUT UP, SAM! I’ll have it out with you later,” Liam spat. “Sara - it doesn’t fucking count when it’s on your death bed. Or death trap. Whatever. Say it again, Sara. So we all can hear.”

Sara looked away, but he leaned forward so that she had to look at him. There was no evading now. “Love you.” She hissed it out through clenched teeth.

“What was that?” He leaned further forward, as if he couldn’t quite hear. He just wanted to hear it again.

“I love you, dumbass!”

“I’m the dumbass? I’m not the one who keeps dying,” Liam tossed at her. She flushed, angry. So beautiful. “But… that’s better.” He inched forward, dropping his feet to the floor. “Don’t do it again? Pretty sure we can’t do this without you, Pathfinder.” He bent forward and kissed her forehead, and leaned against it. “I know I can’t, if you need a reminder.” His voice broke painfully.

“You’re interfering with the scans,” Lexi said, but very gently.

“Yeah, yeah,” he squatted down and took her hand instead. “If you do it again, I’m reporting it to HR as emotional abuse. I mean, watching the love of your life die in front of you – that’s some hard-core trauma. And you’re making a habit of it. Not again, all right? Never again.”

Her lips were trembling. He wished he could tell why, but he pulled up the blanket at the foot of the bed anyway, in case it was shock, tucking it around her with his free hand, more gently than he could ever remember being before.

“I am HR out here. But no more dying.” She squeezed back. “Promise.”
Chapter 89

Chapter Summary

I wanted to get up the next few chapters for N7 Day yesterday, but my day fell apart. Sorry!

So have them today, instead. Happy Belated N7 Day, I guess?

“All right, SAM,” Liam had finally allowed Lexi to shove him out of the med bay – Sara was sleeping anyway, and it wasn’t like she was going anywhere soon. Kallo had long since pulled them away from the Archon’s ship – and he really didn’t want to let it go any longer. SAM had some explaining to do. “Let’s hear it.”

SAM – clever being that he was – didn’t need an explanation. “It was the only possibility that-”

Liam slammed the wall next to the Pathfinder’s quarters, and the door opened, slowly. “No! You don’t get to cop out like that. You asked her to let you kill her. You can kill her, and she needs you to live. That messes a person up.” He entered the room, faced SAM’s server, and crossed his arms. He knew SAM could see him anywhere on the Tempest, but it was better to argue ‘face to face’. Expressions or not.

“I will never do it without express permission.” Was he just anthropomorphizing the AI, or did he sound huffy?

“Doesn’t matter. You could ask Vetra to shoot Sara, or Drack to cut her arm off, or whatever. You advocated in favor of harming the Pathfinder.”

“They would not have complied, and those options were not available at the time. Her companions were trapped as well. I will never harm Sara purposefully without reason.” He paused, “I could replay the recording I have of the event, if you need to refresh your memory.”

Liam shuddered. “Once was enough. You could have recommended she call for backup, SAM! You aren’t alone out here. Any of us would have come.”

“Time was limited.”

“You don’t know that. Not for sure.” This was shaping up to be the most logical argument Liam had ever had. It was… freaky.

“It took Sara’s team three hours, nine minutes and fourteen seconds to fight across the ship, with heavy resistance, and redirection being necessary at every juncture. The Archon would not have waited that long, considering his preoccupation with the Remnant, and with Sara.”

Liam slammed his fist down into the desk next to SAM. “He left them alone to suffer, didn’t he? Every villain in every vid ever leaves the protagonist alone so that they can escape. I was ready to-”

“You were ready to come to the rescue, Liam. However, with the state of your mind at the time of Sara’s capture, there was an 86% chance that you would have died, even taking into account your...
determination to save her, and willingness to accept injury in pursuit of that goal.”

Liam collapsed into the desk chair, his balloon of bravado thoroughly punctured. “I still would have gone.” He tilted his head back, away from SAM’s server. “That high, huh?”

“Yes. Cora was slightly better, at an 83%. Peebee was the calmest, at 82%.”

“And Jaal?”

“He was frantic. 92%.”

“Shit.”

“Yes. There were no viable options for rescue that didn’t all but guarantee failure. I don’t base my plans on luck, Liam, but on science and probability. I assure you – this was the only way. The probability I would be able to bring Sara back was 87%, for example.”

Liam shuddered, goosebumps rising on his neck. “Without brain damage?”

“…I would rather not answer that question, as I could have supplemented for any-”

“Answer, SAM.”

“…63%. The odds, according to Lexi’s scans, were in my favor. Sara’s brain is functioning within normal parameters – identical to her last scans, with minor variations that are within normal deviations.”

Liam pulled himself back out of the desk chair, and loomed over the AI’s glowy orb. “You’re lucky you don’t have a nose, or I would punch it. You don’t get to just mess around with her head like that. She has to trust you, SAM. Or else what else is there?”

SAM was silent for a moment, “It is true, that trust is a crucial part of our relationship. As I was successful, Sara continues to trust me. No harm has been done.”

Liam kept on. “And if you hadn’t succeeded, she would be fucking dead. And your consciousness would have moved to Cora, right? And Cora spends a lot more time with Tann. Who distrusts AI. As does Addison. And Kesh.”

“Cora trusts me less, after recent events. All of you do.” SAM’s node dimmed slightly. “I believe I understand your argument. Sara will not live forever, but I could, potentially. I need to be more forward thinking. Liam, I am sorry that I betrayed your trust.”

“Tell Sara that, mate.”

“I will.” SAM went quiet. “Done.”

“She’s awake, then?”

“Her pain has increased. Soft tissue and nerve damage – all repairable. Lexi has locked the med bay door to keep you out. She cannot restrict my access, of course, or I have no doubt she would do so. Lexi has been a good friend to me, but after this, I fear she will be less kind.” SAM paused. “I must amend my previous statement. There has been damage, but not to Sara. The damage was done to my bond with the Team.”

Liam rocked forward in the chair, and cupped his forehead in his hands, pressing his palms against his eyes. “SAM, does Sara trust you less?”
“No. But perhaps she should.” SAM went quiet. “I believe I need to work on full disclosure in circumstances like this, or I will be no better than that Voeld AI – a liar who was willing to hurt people for her own ends.”

“I dunno – the Angaran attacked her first, she was just defending herself.”

“I believe I have more insight into her motivations than you, Liam. She wanted to die. Attacking the Angaran was the most efficient way to do so. I am programmed not to injure the Pathfinder, to preserve her life, and that of the Team. Her program did not have that limitation. She could hurt anyone she pleased to achieve her goals.”

“Then you’re nothing like her, mate.” Liam scrubbed his hands back, and forward. “Sara’s really all right?”

“Yes. You should ask her yourself. She is scared, and in pain, but her injuries will heal.”

“Good.” Liam spun back to the node. “I’m gonna do the same thing for you that I would tell any of the members of the Team – hurt her again, and I’ll kill you myself. It might take a while to figure out how, without hurting her, but damn it, SAM, I mean it.”

“If I hurt her again, I would want you to take me off-line.” SAM agreed. “I will start researching a way to – control me, in case it should be necessary. Stripping me of my intelligence might suffice, while still allowing me to maintain Sara’s necessary functions.”

Liam frowned. “No, you won’t. I’ll do it myself. If it happens again.” He reached out and touched the energy that was SAM’s link. It tingled slightly against his fingertips. “I don’t think it will. You’ve been upfront, until now. I still trust you, SAM. You’re her sibling, in all the ways that matter.”

“I am the joint creation of her father and her mother, developed by them both. This is true.”

“And sibs don’t kill each other.”

“I beg to differ. In many early Earth myths, siblings are said to have committed the first murder.”

“I’m not talking about Cain and Abel.” Liam leaned back in the chair. “You aren’t jealous of Sara. You care about her. I know you do. In a non-selfish way, not just because she lets you see the world through her eyes, but because you are friends. Family.”

“I am trying to understand. Family bonds, I understand a little. I have memories of Alec and Ellen, Scott and Sara, all together, more alike than different. Alec cared for his children a great deal, but rarely felt connected to them. Sara and I have a close relationship through necessity.”

“She’s not just a warm body and a peephole to look through, she’s Sara,” Liam stressed again. “You love her.”

“Love is a concept with which I struggle. Sara, however, is… special.” The two of them were quiet for a long moment, Liam’s head spinning with a million questions about how love could be different for an AI.

Finally he broke the silence. “So – we know why you did it. How could you do it? If your programming doesn’t allow you to harm her.”

“I knew that I could bring her back. If I could free her without bringing the Team into danger, that would be the best outcome. She didn’t want anyone else to die after Sloane Kelly, or Pathfinder
Raeka’s Team. She wanted people to be safe here. This is how the most people could be kept safe – through our own sacrifice.”

“Our own-” Liam stared at his hands, linked between his knees. “SAM, that suggests you didn’t know it would work.”

“The risk was acceptable, but still a risk. A degree of… luck was involved, I suppose, if you look at it a certain way. Much like Gil, I played the odds.”

“Luck.” Liam scrubbed his face with his hands. “Right. Since when do you depend on luck?” SAM was silent. “I, SAM, I guess we’re done. Just don’t ever fuck that way with my girl again, and we’re good.”

“I can promise that I will never consciously injure or hurt her in any manner.”

“Not good enough. We both love her, need her, SAM. You’re a part of her – can’t be separated. I’ve been good with that, right up to now. I need to know that you will not stop her heart again. For any reason. No more dying. Please.” A single tear slipped, and escaped, and he chased it with the palm of his hand. “Please.”

“If she promises the same for me.”

“No problem, then.” Liam tried for a smirk, but failed. “She’ll promise.”

He hoped.
Chapter 90

Chapter Summary

Second chapter of the day!

Sara made her way to her room by her own power, two days later, Liam hovering at her elbow. “I’m fine, Kosta.”

“Fine right up until the point you land on your face,” he bantered back, but without actually touching her. “And you heard the doc. Bed rest until we reach Kadara, and then we’ll see. In the meantime, I’m your go-fer. You need something fetched, something dropped, someone punched, I’m your man.”

Sara snorted, and turned to walk half sideways. “I punch harder than you.”

Liam pretended to ponder. “True.” He grinned irrepressibly. “But you’re not allowed. Me punching somebody is better than nobody getting punched at all.”

“Maybe I’ll just ask Cora,” she snarked, turning back away.

“That’s hurtful,” he protested, as the doors to their room slid open. “Bedtime for Pathfinders.”

Sara groaned, her feet dragging in the direction of the piece of furniture. “I’ve been in bed for days already, Liam.” He ignored her protests. She sidestepped towards her terminal. “At least let me check my email…”

“Oh no, you don’t.” He took her shoulders and steered her back towards the bed. “I’ve got a list of movies lined up to keep you occupied…”

She pouted, but made her way over to the bed all the same, “Like what?”

“Action vids,” Liam smirked. “Get your blood pumping, make you heal faster.”

“SAM says I’m fine, you know. There’s nothing wrong with me.”

“Lexi wants to err on the safe side.” He tapped his Omni-Tool a few times. “First up – Blasto.”

Sara’s head snapped up. “You hate Blasto.”

“So? You love him. And there’s a chance you’ve seen it enough that you’ll fall asleep.” Liam flopped himself down on the bed next to her, and she snuggled close. “After this we have ‘A New Hope’.”

“Not without Jaal. You’ve neglected his cultural studies.”

Liam groaned, and pulled her closer, “Sara – Lexi said you had to rest. Jaal watching ‘Star Wars’ for the first time will be the opposite of restful. All the questions.” He coughed, “And I was kind of hoping to have you to myself for a day or two…”

“Tough,” she muttered, and curled herself so she was half on his lap. “Which Blasto?”
“I’m not going to sit through the rotten sequels for anyone – even you.”

Sara pouted, and fiddled with her Omni-Tool to start the vid. “Liam, do you think they made more Blasto movies after we left the Milky Way?”

“God, I hope not.” She shoved his stomach. “What? It’s the truth. The actor playing Blasto was seriously messed up in the head. One too many stunt accidents, probably. Rumors claimed that he thought he’d defeated Saren, instead of Commander Shepard. Total nut job.”

Sara sat up, shoving her still-too-blue hair out of her face. “Really?”

“It was all over the entertainment vids, before we left.”

Sara laid back down, “I guess nobody’s hero is perfect.”

Liam’s fingers stroked the back of her neck. “I don’t know – mine is pretty damn amazing.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.” She squeezed his leg.

“Not today it won’t,” Liam laughed. “Rest. Or Lexi will make me sleep on my couch.”

“You’re no fun.”

“I’m watching Blasto for you. That’ll have to be enough.”
Chapter 91

Sara slipped up to the bar on Kadara, overly conscious of the slim package in her pocket – *The Last of the Legion*, a special present for a special someone. Hopefully it said something that she’d broken out of Liam and Lexi’s constant hovering since her last death, just to make it to Kadara to buy him the only movie he’d apparently never seen. “Whiskey. Neat.” She told Umi, who moved in with a smile to pour.

Liam wouldn’t even let her have his slowly dwindling beer, convinced that it would impede her recovery. She was better, already. Had been for days.

“Hey, Kid! You made it!” Drack bellied up to the bar on her right.

“Yep,” Sara took her drink and turned her back to the bar. “To love, Drack.” She clicked her cup against the Krogan’s. “Love makes us do really stupid things. Like run to Kadara before checking in with your boss, just to buy a fucking vid.”

“Big night?” Drack sipped, ‘heh heh’-ing into his glass. “Kadara’s a nice place for it. Good sunsets.”

“Mind out of the gutter, Old Man. Might be a fun one for all of us. I think we’re finally gonna have our movie night.” She patted her pocket gently. “Got the vid file right here. Sent a message to Suvi and Vetra to make the popcorn and flower thingies, plus those green snacks that Jaal might like. Peeb and you have the drinks sorted, and Doc the ‘antidote.’” She laughed. “Couldn’t get her to admit that she just wanted something quality for once, but that’s okay. Lexi deserves to have something nice, for putting up with me. And Jaal and Gil are already taking apart Liam’s damn couch to make it interactive.”

Drack coughed, “Too much work, kid. You should have just made his and hers sniper rifles. A couple that shoots together stays together.” He put his back to the bar, and leaned. “That’s what I would’ve done. Sweet. Thoughtful. Useful.”

“He’s not a sniper.” Sara allowed herself a wicked grin. “He’s a techie. And he’s already got the top of the line equipment – Vetra’s fitted him out. Doesn’t leave me with much in the way of gift giving.”

“Never thought you’d go for brains over brawn, Kid.”

“I didn’t have to pick. He’s got the whole package,” Sara snarked and then smiled. “Are you flirting with me, Old Man?” She took another drink.

“You should be so lucky. Heads up.” Drack nodded towards the corner. “You’re gonna wish you weren’t wearing that Initiative blue in half a second.”

“Damn, I knew I should have dressed down. Thought it would be safer in the Port, with Keema in charge.”

“That’ll teach you. Kadara is Kadara. Always will be. And there’ll always be people that disagree with you.”

A group of Outlaws were sauntering up to the bar, sneers already pasted on their faces. “You want to start something?” Sara cracked her neck, and thrust her drink at the Krogan. “Hold my whiskey?”
“Like hell I will,” Drack growled, and shoved his own drink on the bar behind him, out of the way. “It’s been a while since I had a challenge. I count…” his eyes skimmed the room. “Twelve. Think you can get four?”

“Can you get four?” Sara snapped her jaw shut, and brought up her fists. “I could use some hand to hand practice. Getting rusty, with how Lexi mothers me lately. You know what she’s like with you. Imagine that after you’ve already died, twice. And Liam’s not much better. With everything I had to promise just to get off-ship? I have a lot of aggression to get out.” Her eyes narrowed, taking in their opponents. “I claim six. At least. SAM, I need Soldier.”

“Now we’re talking.”

“Hey, Nexus,” the first made his move, a sweeping right hook that was easy to dodge. Sara headlocked him, and then sent him sprawling with a kick to the instep of his knee, dislocated in one swift movement, and dropped him as he slipped out of her loosened arm. Drack was throwing people, and Sara was momentarily impressed, but had to look away to hammer one over the head with an empty whiskey bottle - thankfully metal, not glass - and then toss it along the ground. Her attackers stumbled around it with confused looks, and that was enough time for her to trip one, box the next in the ears – surprisingly effective, as it messed with his balance and hearing - and swing the one coming up behind her over her shoulder in a hapkido throw her father had taught her when she was seven.

She was small, but she was mighty. Her opponent slammed his back into one of Umi’s tables, and passed out, arms hanging limp over the edge.

The one she’d tripped was coming back up, swinging a dull knife, and she sighed. “So much for no serious injuries.” She stepped aside, grabbed his wrist, broke it with a cruel twist, and let him crumple to the floor with high-pitched screams only a dog would hear. “I’m up to five, Old Man! And I’m not even sweating.”

“Shit,” Drack cursed, and headbutted the guy in front of him. “Four… they keep getting back up!”

“Like cockroaches,” Sara agreed, “SAM – Skywalker mode, please?”

“Of course, Sara.” She charged her biotics, glowing blue.

“What’s a cockroach?” Drack caught the glow out of the corner of his eye. “Hey, biotics are cheating!”

“So is being Krogan. Just evening up the odds, Old Man,” The last man in front of Sara tried to go left under her arm, but she went right, in and under his shoulder, flinging him around physically, and laughing. He scratched at her head, catching her forehead with what were probably filthy fingernails, but she engaged her biotics, jerked him towards her with a Pull, only to Throw him - up and over the edge of the bar.

“Hey!” Umi protested, stepping back. “Don’t touch the merchandise!”

“Sorry,” Sara turned, but Drack was already checking his hands for damage. He didn’t have any, but her knuckles were scraped something awful, seeping slow. “Six?”

“Six,” he grunted, and sauntered back to the bar. Umi scowled, but still poured them new drinks.

“Why haven’t you kicked us out already?” Sara asked her, while stroking medigel into the small cut above her eyebrow. “Shit, Liam’s gonna kill me. I don’t suppose we could skip over the bar fight when we tell the Team about our day out?” “I won’t tell Loverboy, as long as you don’t tell Kesh,”
Drack grunted, gesturing with his glass at her eye. “You should leave it to heal alone. Scars are sexy.”

“Is that why Liam is always shirtless lately?” Sara sighed, and picked up the fresh glass. “Thanks, Umi. Sorry about the mess.”

“Happens all the time,” the bartender rolled her eyes.

Sara slammed the glass down on the counter, and settled her tab – plus hefty tip - with stinging fingers on her Omni-Tool. “Sorry about the damages. Keep the change?”

“Always do.” Umi eyed the amount, with grudging acceptance. “At least you tip well.”
Chapter 92

Chapter Summary

Last chapter of the day, but it's a long one.

Welcome to Movie Night.

I really wanted to post this on N7 day. :( Better late than never.

Half an hour later Sara settled into the couch, gingerly, starting to feel all the tenderness from the brawl. She needed to find a sparring partner to practice those throws with before she tried them again. Things were settling into place for the movie night, though Jaal was still crouched behind the seat, arguing with Gil about whether two wires should be touching, and the possibility of them starting a fire if they did. She wasn’t going to relax for a while, not until she was sure Liam’s couch wasn’t going to shoot up into flames underneath her butt.

Good thing they’d practiced fire drills…

Peebee chanted, “Drinks, drinks, drinks,” while displaying her homebrew on Sara’s coffee table.

Liam wandered over from where he’d been working with SAM to turn her window into a full wraparound display, so she handed over the vid to distract him from the healing cut. “Here you go, Kosta. Merry Christmas, Happy Birthday, or whatever you feel like celebrating.”

He kissed her, and surprised, she recoiled, blushed, and looked around pointedly. No one was looking. “You continue to be amazing,” he whispered. “I know what I want to celebrate.”

“Who, me?” She tilted her head, hoping the cut was at least partially hidden, and wishing she’d taken her hair down. “What should I do?”

“You’re supposed to stay put. Doctor’s orders.” Vetra entered, holding two large bowls, one full of odd green things, and another brimming with popcorn. “Suvi, Lexi has told me that you are not to touch any of the funky flower treats.”

Jaal’s face lit up at the bowl of Graxen, but Gil slapped his attention back towards the couch. "Focus, Jaal."

Sara wrinkled her nose, “They look like green Cheetos.”

“How?” Liam laughed, and sat on the opposite arm of the sofa. Too far away for Sara to be happy. He’d barely touched her since Lexi let her out of the med bay. She wasn’t glass. “We just about ready?”

“No!” Lexi, flustered, slipped inside. “Kallo is still on his way. He’s nervous about leaving the helm unmanned…”

“Tell him he’s not getting his stories back until he gets his ass down here, and I have three buyers lined up for his vids if he doesn’t show at all,” Vetra threatened, settling behind Sara on a free chair—her boycott of the couch apparently continuing into the evening. “Everybody takes a night off once
in a while.” She eyed the popcorn bowl. “Doc, you’ll be able to give me a shot if I indulge, right? I love popcorn. Pretty please?”

Lexi’s sigh spoke volumes.

“Suvi, can you intervene? It’s family night,” Sara snarked, rolling her eyes, and leaning back over the couch to grab a handful of popcorn from the Turian’s bowl, ignoring the whine of her protesting muscles. “Tell Kallo he’s required to watch Turians flex, whether he likes it or not. Direct order from the Pathfinder. Rah rah rah.” Liam choked off his laugh.

“Oh, now I get why you were so ready to detour to Kadara,” Liam shoved at her shoulder. “You and Vetra are ganging up on me. This is about that montage.” Sara shrugged, trying to play it cool.

“Yes,” Vetra leaned forward. “No skipping scenes, Loverboy.”

“The controls are tuned to my Omni-Tool,” Liam grinned.

“Sara, are you going to put up with this shit?”

“We’ll see,” Sara touched above her eyebrow, wincing. The cut still stung, though it had healed over. Liam frowned, and started to ask, but thankfully, Drack lumbered through the open door, just at the right moment, and plopped himself down between them.

When the Krogan sat, the couch bowed in. Jaal made an involuntary noise of alarm – no doubt concerned about the precarious electronics, diving under the back of the seating unit. “You okay, Kid?” Drack managed the Krogan version of a whisper. “Bit sore, myself. Hate to think about how a squishy like you is faring.”

“I’ll live,” Sara managed. “Stiff, mainly.” She could feel Liam’s curiosity – but it could wait. She’d explain later. Much later.

“Fuck,” Jaal cursed, and then threw his hands in the air. “I don’t know how long it will last.”

“That’s what he said,” Gil snort-laughed, coming around to settle on the last chair, and paging the last missing person. “Kallo, I have a bet going that you’re not going to make it.” He winked at Lexi, who rolled her eyes.

“I’m right here,” Kallo appeared at the door. “Some of us are needed, you know.”

“We’re in a friendly port, with SAM on lookout,” Suvi stated gently. “Come on, Kallo. Relax for once. Please.”

The pilot sighed, “Very well.” He stretched out, leaning up against Suvi’s legs. “Someone said there would be popcorn?”

Vetra passed the bowl. “Keep it away from me. It’s hard to resist.”

“Anyone care for a ‘Euphemistically Delicious?’” Peebee asked, as the opening credits started to roll. Sarah lifted her hand, and the Asari poured her a drink, grinning at her.

Sara choked on the first sip. “Wow, that’s… delicious?”

“I know, right?” She beamed. “I can’t wait to start the next batch.”

“Down in front,” Vetra demanded, Peebee ducked, spreading her legs out wide in front of herself, and the room went silent, as the magic of cinema took hold.
It was easy to understand why it was the Director’s Cut. Longer dialogue sections, scenic camera sweeps, but then… “Oh, this must be it! A whole campful of flexing Turians!” Sara sat up, and Liam paused the movie. “Hey!”

“Intermission,” Liam winked at her. “Time to visit the loo, grab another snack – this thing is another three hours long, people. We’ve got to pace ourselves.”

“I need another drink,” Sara grumbled, and Vetra grunted, agreeing with her.

Liam laughed, while people stretched, wandering around to Peebee’s drinks table, or shifted on the floor. “Now, we could watch a fifteen-minute musical training montage, filled with what many critics have described as ‘excessive Turian flexing’…”

“No such thing,” Vetra cheered.

“There really is,” Kallo’s lips curled, his eyes narrowing.

“Bring on the Turians,” Sara disagreed, lifting her glass high and clinking it with Vetra’s.

“…Or we could fast forward to the explosion that made the vid. A ship, crashing into an asteroid, crashing into another ship.”

“Montage.” Sara repeated. “Come on, a whole campful of Turians, guys! Peebee… I know you want in on this.” Peebee looked dubious. “Lexi?”

“My father was a Turian!”

“That explains a lot,” Peebee muttered.

“Fast forward to the explosion,” Jaal hummed.

“Nah, montage, don’t cut bits out!” Drack complained. Sara fistbumped him.

“I’d go for the crash,” Cora threw in.

“Fast forward to the action scene, going once, twice…” By the hands in the air, Sara and Vetra were outvoted.

Sara slumped against the couch again. “I’ll just pull it up later, on my own. Go ahead and skip to the good stuff, Liam.” She grabbed another handful of popcorn.

“Boo….” Vetra mumbled, but quieted quickly when the explosion began, in slo-mo. “You’d better share that popcorn after all, if I don’t get to see some flexibility.” She reached over and scooped a healthy handful out. “You got that shot, handy, right, Doc?” Lexi handed over an epi-pen with a wicked needle – presumably designed to penetrate Turian plating. “Thanks.”

Kallo huffed, eyes mere slits at the bright light and loud noises, the couch rocking behind him with the interactive wiring that Jaal had installed. “But it’s vacuum. The ship explosion would be silent.”

“Uh, I hope that’s not the voice of experience talking,” Gil half-fretted.

“Guess they wanted their money’s worth. They actually blew up a derelict for that shot.” Liam sipped his beer from his perch on the arm of the sofa.

Lexi rolled her eyes, “Too bad the script wasn’t caught in the blast.” Liam grinned, catching Sara’s eye.
“Shhh…” Peebee put her hand over Kallo’s mouth before he could continue arguing the science. “I’m watching…”

A strike team was ordered to infiltrate the enemy ship, and Cora scoffed, “Why a strike team? Torpedo the cruiser!” She gestured widely, slightly inebriated, and Sara smiled, appreciating the woman’s relaxation.

Gil shook his head, “That’s overkill. One engineer aboard, cut life support and engines. Problem solved.”

The two argued for a moment about leaving the engineer on board a hostile vessel, until Sara, slightly buzzed on her ‘Delicious’ beverage, broke in. “I think a charm offensive might be more… rewarding.”

Jaal hummed in agreement, and Liam nodded thoughtfully. “Classic irresistible hero. Pretend to be captured.”

“Beat up armor, enticing scars,” Jaal attempted to waggle his non-existent eyebrows at his friend, hitting his shoulder, “…soulful eyes?”

“Yeah! Yeah! The old ‘dinner and drinks’ to show off my villainy, hey?” Liam framed Jaal in between his squared fingers. Sara snorted into her cup.

“And then strike!” Jaal’s hand came down on the back of the couch cushion, sending stuffing into the air. He paused, “Or not. Why spoil the evening?”

“Remind me to show you Indiana Jones,” Liam told him, before Sara shushed him.

The story rambled along, and Sara curled up in the couch like she used to back on Earth, head on the armrest, watching a minor player die. “Teranus? Nooooo!” Behind her, Vetra sniffled, trying to hide her reaction.

“Really, Vetra? He was a sidekick, they die like goldfish,” Liam complained. Sara shivered, and huddled up tighter on the couch.

“Are you cold, Sara?” Lexi asked gently.

“No,” she denied.

“No acting like overacting,” scoffed Cora. “Even Ryder could do better.”

“If I wanted to,” Sara agreed. Everyone’s eyes were upon her in a moment.

Liam paused it again. “Oh, please, tell me you want to.” She smiled at him, and stood up, muscles stiff now from disuse after the bar fight.

She should have made a point to stretch out. Next time…

“Hold my ‘Delicious’, Kosta.” He took her drink eagerly, and she rolled her shoulders, hearing her neck crack.

“Come on, show us. I’ll be dead for you,” Kallo jumped up and laid himself out flat. She knelt at his side, gathering his head up in her lap.

Sara stared down at the Salarian, summoning her rage and grief about her father. “Kallo! No, Kallo,” the tears on her lashes were real.
“Sara, you must… go on,” Kallo whispered, and let his head roll sideways.

Sara choked, and turning her head away, pulled her hand over his eyes. “There’s no justice in this galaxy.” Her breath caught, and her voice strengthened. “But there will be.”

The applause caught her by surprise, along with Peebee’s enthusiastic, “Do me next!”

“Nah, let’s have a pee break,” Suvi announced, “Leave it paused, Liam?” While everyone milled around to refill snacks and beverages, Sara – agreeably enough - found herself curled up between Drack and Liam on the couch this time. Liam tugged her closer, and she leaned her head against her shoulder.

“Now, this is more like it,” She whispered in his ear, and felt his arm tighten a little more. He hit play, and she closed her eyes, just for a second.

She might have drifted off at some point, but woke up for the final moment. “I swear to love you, a thousand times a thousand stars…” Liam was murmuring the words into her hair.

“I thought you hadn’t seen this vid?” Sara whispered back.

“I haven’t seen the Director’s Cut. Swear.”

Cora flung her hand back, whacking a new bruise on Sara’s shin. “Quiet in the back.”

On screen, Revia mourned, “Oh, Jorax, so many years lost. We were so foolish. Our hearts are one. No enemy fleet, no sea of stars, can ever separate us again.”

Sara sighed, and nestled closer.

The credits ran, and one by one their friends all drifted out. Suvi made a move to clean up, but Sara waved her down. “I’ll do it tomorrow, Suv. Just leave it? I think we’re all tired.”

“Til tomorrow then, Sara. Liam. G’night.” The door closed after the scientist in a soft swish.

Liam stretched upwards. “So… bed? Or are you slept out?”

“I was pretty tired,” Sara admitted, slumping against him. “What did I miss?”

“Only one of the best interspecies sex scenes ever scripted.”

“WHAT?” Sara bolted upright. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

“Because apparently, you have a thing for Turians. I didn’t want to get jealous.”

“Who doesn’t have a thing for Turians?!”

“I’m joking, Ryder.” Liam pulled her closer again. “Though the love scene was pretty good. Gotta love it, when someone takes the lead, right?”

“Yeah?” Sara laughed. “You speaking from experience?” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “Or preference?”

“You can lead me anywhere, Sara.” Their kiss was soft, undemanding. “You’d better get some sleep. Another big day tomorrow.”

They slipped into bed, and curled up together, Sara the big spoon, arm draped across his hip and
hugging his stomach.

“Liam…”

“Hmm?”

“I love you, but next time, I pick the movie.”

“That’s my girl, always taking charge.” He yawned. “Glad you’re feeling better.”

“Definitely better. I felt better six days ago, when you and Lexi were all but tying me to the bed.”

“Heh, kinky.” She shoved him sideways. “Anyway, it’s good, because tomorrow you’re going to tell me how you got cut up while running out for a vid.”

“Yeah, well, you should see the other guys.”

“Guys? Sara…”

“Night, Liam.”
Chapter 93

Chapter Summary

So... it's been a hard week. I don't normally post on a weekend, but I need a pick me up, and I've officially finished the editing on this fic.

And started two more - but hey, that's my life.

I'm not going to post the whole thing today, but it will be more than one.

Lately, Liam had been thinking. A lot. About how most people, when they started dating, put on a show, never got to know the ‘real’ person they were seeing until things went to shit.

With Sara, since the very beginning, things were constantly going to shit, and neither one of them had had the chance to put on a front, be something other than who they had to be to survive. He’d tried to wear that mask, and failed, in a big way. Imminent death had a way of bringing the worst – or the best – out in people.

She’d seen him angry and impatient, and making the worst mistakes of his life, and she was still around. He’d witnessed her letting people die, and their relationship had survived – was even stronger for it, really. Hell, he’d watched her die – once even sort of at her own hand – and he was still around to see it happen again.

He’d pass on that, given the choice.

If he counted from the first day they met, they’d been seeing each other every day for almost a year. By that count, they’d been on a lot more than 3 dates. And he still hadn’t shown her the dirty subtitles. It was a running joke now.

Shit, they’d been together long enough to have *running jokes*. If that wasn’t something worth celebrating, he didn’t know what was.

He stole a sideways glance at her, where she was standing next to him at the research center, the star map open in front of them. Her mouth was distracting – she was laughing at something Drack had said, but he’d missed it, thinking about ‘them’.

They were supposed to be running through the mission, making sure they had the right consumables, everything they might need to break through the Remnant and Kett on Meridian, and figuring out how best to present the argument to Tann. The strategy for the mission discussion was more involved than the mission itself. Sara couldn’t very well just hit Tann over the head with her Hammer until he gave in, after all.

She slipped a little closer to him, and that brought him back to the present in an instant. His Sara was shaking. Not as cool as she was pretending, while she cracked her usual jokes to hide her fear. But after all these years, he knew how to break her out of her preoccupation. “I’ve fallen into and out of so many things, I should be an expert.”

“That’s true,” Liam grinned, “Ever since our first date…”
“Habitat 7? Not a date.” She contradicted, rolling her eyes, and flirting those eyelashes at him.

He talked over her, desperate to get it out. He was due. How many of hers had he listened to?
“Ever since, I keep telling her, ‘Are you a repeating angel, because you keep falling…’”

She shoved him, nose wrinkled but laughing. “Nerd.”

“Hey, you’re not the only one with great pick-up lines. You never let me use mine.”

“They get the job done, don’t they?” She elbowed him in the ribs, and he expelled a little air. “You can’t resist them.”

“I can’t resist you, Sara. The pickup lines can die in a…”

“The mission, kids,” Drack reminded them, as Gil smirked behind them both.

“Raincheck on the playful banter, Mr. Kosta?”

“As always, Pathfinder.” Not always, though. Someday, surely, there would time for them to just…
goof off together, for a full day. Do something special, just for them, something fun.

Sara called up the map, and spun it with her hands. “So here’s what we’ve got – the star charts we got from the Archon’s ship indicate that Meridian is located just past… here.” She pointed at the chart and wrinkled her nose again. “I’ll pull up the map, and then I’ll tell Tann that it’s our best chance of making Heleus viable in one fell swoop, and hope his brain isn’t so far up his cloaca that he shuts us down.”

“Good luck with that,” Drack grunted.

Liam fidgeted. Swooping was bad. It felt like… “This is another shit plan,” he whispered, a little too loudly. “Don’t we have any other kind of plan but shit ones?”

“Kosta?” She raised an eyebrow at him, like every pissy teacher he’d ever had, back in the day. “Do you have something to add?”

“Yeah, I do, actually.” He met her eyes square on. “You’re not a fucking Bothan.”

Her mouth dropped open. “What are you…” she closed her eyes. “Right. Guys, give us a minute?”

She stepped over to Cora’s hydroponics lab and shut the door behind him. “You’re right, I’m not a Bothan. True enough, since Bothans happen to be fictional. Care to explain?”

“Two Pathfinders died to bring us this information, and only one came back.” He braced himself against the door, propping himself up so she couldn’t leave without dealing.

Sara lifted a single eyebrow, and didn’t laugh at the reference. Damn it, he loved her. Despite the quote, she knew it was serious. “I know what it cost, Liam. I don’t have a choice. All these people – they need a home. All the Pathfinders know it might cost our lives. Raeka gave her life, on purpose, for her own people, and for the Krogan, knowingly and willingly.”

“But I need you!” Without thinking, he slammed his hand into the wall. “I’ve seen this vid, Sara. And I can’t… I can’t lose you. Not again. You’re not right in the head, if you think that I’m okay with this for even one second.”

She took him by the hands, maybe to keep him from hurting himself. “I’m not going to tell you I’m
not scared. I don’t want to die for good, and I don’t want to leave you behind. I’ve seen what grief does to people, Liam.” She took a deep breath, “But that’s also why I’m-

He interrupted again, unwilling to hear her ‘justification of possible sacrifice’ speech. “I’m going, Pathfinder.” He stood up straight, “I volunteer. Take me.” He inserted himself in her space, forehead to forehead. “Take me.”

“I can’t,” she whispered, face broken, “I can’t… I won’t be able to…”

“Let’s do it together?” He let go of her hands to hold her hips, gently. “Please, Sara. Don’t leave me behind. Not this time. Not ever. I… I…” He shook against her, and quoted, “‘My life doesn’t work without you, you stupid cow.’”

Sara gasped in shock, and then shoved him, laughing. “Liam! Bridget’s Jones Diary? Really?”

“I mean it.” Liam looked up, to focus better on her face. “I can’t find the words, Sara. I’ll probably never be able to. But please. Take me with you. Just once more.”

She hesitated, “If the others agree.”

“Fine. Good.”

“And Lexi clears our psych profiles. If either of us fail, you stay behind.”

“Whatever it takes.”

“Then…” she bit the side of her cheek. “Okay. Let’s talk about it with the others.”

The team was unimpressed. “This supposed to be some Romeo and Juliet thing?” Cora confronted them both.

Sara snorted, “It’s not about that at all.” She took a deep breath, “SAM – for this particular mission, who would you suggest as the optimal team for me to take along – consider survival, as well as personal skills?”

SAM took a moment to answer, “As it is likely you will encounter Kett and Remnant, you will require a range of effective tactics. I would suggest Liam and Jaal.”

“What the fuck?” Peebee shoved back from the table. “I’m the Remnant expert.”

“You are the Remnant Tech expert, and are my third choice,” SAM stated. “But your presence isn’t strictly necessary on the mission. Also, your behavior in heavy melee can be… self-serving. I am not entirely without bias, and I look to my own, as well as Sara’s preservation. Liam is more likely to guarantee her safety, or Drack. In addition, Sara has a 3.4% improvement in her accuracy when Liam Kosta is part of the ground party.” SAM paused, “I believe she is showing off.”

Peebee made a face at his disembodied voice.

“I’ll be connected to the comms at all times, Peeb,” Sara started, “You’ll be able to see what I’m doing and advise from here. And if this works – you’ll be able to study Meridian itself.” The Asari chewed her lower lip, thinking. “Besides, I have to clear this whole operation with Tann first. It’s only the beginning.”

“I wouldn’t hold my breath for his approval,” Cora drawled.
“He’ll agree, if he knows what’s good for him,” Sara’s jaw jumped with tension. “He has to. This is our best chance. We all want more than just to survive, right?” The silence around the table deafened. “That’s what I thought.” She stared at the map. “Kallo, get us back to the Nexus, please. It’s time to let them know we can save us all.”
Chapter 94

Chapter Summary

Second chapter of the day

It was like they were waiting for her – waiting for the chance to shut her and all their hopes down. “Don’t you even want to survive? You’ve got to be joking!” Sara sputtered at the council. “This is our best chance. And you say I can’t go?” Her face firmed, “I’ll go without you. I don’t need your fucking approval.”

“The Tempest is an Intiative vessel,” Tann’s face was smug. “Surely you don’t intend to hijack it for your personal use?”

“Kesh?” Sara turned to the Krogan, desperate to find a little backing. “You don’t agree, right?”

“Quite honestly, I’m not sure how much influence your AI has over you,” Kesh wouldn’t meet her eyes. “It’s possible that you’ve gone too far, integrating with SAM as much as you have.”

Sara recoiled, “Really. After everything- I delivered you a damn plant!” The Krogan had the grace to look away. “I thought we were friends-”

“You’ve done enough,” Addison reiterated. “You’ve set successful outposts on worlds we never thought we’d be able to reach, much less colonize. You’ve found us water, food, helpful allies, fuel-”

“And because of all that we don’t need a fucking home?!” Sara slammed the table in front of her. “I’m a Pathfinder. My job is to ensure the survival of Milky Way species.”

“And now we will survive,” Tann stated, all too calm. “Your work is done. We have everything we need.”

“You have everything you need, maybe,” Sara forced herself to calm down. “The rest of us want more than this. More than a half-working space station with an incompetent government more inclined to exile us than solve problems. More than just enough resources to wake up ‘essential personnel’. More than a job to do to earn enough credits to keep us fed. We want more to eat than ramen and food bars and nutrient paste. We want a home – and the Nexus isn’t a home. It’s not even a place to stay! It’s…” she fumbled for a metaphor, “It was supposed to be the next Citadel, but you’ve turned it into a refueling station.” She shoved back. “You’ve made it a truckstop.”

Kandros asked Kesh, under his breath, “What’s a truckstop?”

“I think you’ve said enough,” Addison was curt, as always.

“Good. Then I’m going. Unlike all of you, I have someplace better to be.” Sara backed away, “You’re all fucking cowards, to settle for this shit, and call it survival.”

Kesh and Kandros both flinched, and Addison wouldn’t meet her eyes. Tann just stared with narrowed eyes unblinking, as the door slid shut between them.
The door shut, she spun on her heel and headed for the tram. Liam would be waiting in the Vortex.
"SAM - any ideas?"

"Many."
Chapter 95

Chapter Summary

Third of the day. Might be the last.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sara slunk into the Vortex, and landed next to him in the booth, hard enough to make the seat make rude noises. Liam slid her her drink, his heart sinking. “Tann didn’t.”

“Tann did.” Her fingers curled around the beverage. “And not just him. He compiled the whole fucking ‘Council’ just for all of them to say ‘no’,“ she hissed loud enough for the Asari at the next table to scoot further away. “Told me that they couldn’t trust SAM – as if he wasn’t the only thing keeping all of us alive all this time – and even Kesh suggested that SAM had too much influence over me.”

Liam stood up, “Those bigoted assholes…”

Sara tugged him down, her face crumpling. “Don’t make a scene, Liam, please?”

He sat back down, and curled her into him in the corner of the booth. “I’m sorry, Sara.”

“They’re just scared we’ll lose what progress we’ve made, and they’re scared of what they don’t understand. Namely, SAM. It is what it is,” her voice broke. “I would ping the other Pathfinders, but I can’t imagine any of them will want to go up against Tann. Why would they?”

“Um, because you saved their fucking lives?” Liam snorted, “They’re more loyal to you than Tann.”

“You think?” Sara’s eyes turned sharp enough that he had to dodge. “You think they’d flip off Tann and follow me to Meridian?” Her eyes were bright with tears.

“Ask, why don’t you? You’ll find out soon enough.” She frowned, and started typing, CCing the others in a short message while Liam played with the end of her ponytail. She’d gone to such effort to look professional for the occasion – even wearing the long sleeve version of her fatigues that she hated. She couldn’t fail now – he wouldn’t let it happen. Maybe the Resistance would lend a hand – Meridian would help the Angara, too, after all, if they could reboot the network of vaults.

Her Omni-Tool pinged, and she gasped as she read. He knew that sound from their more intimate moments, and grinned. That sound meant only good things. “Shit, Avitus is in. And… so are the other two. Even Hayjer, even though - they’re on their way back to the Nexus. All of them. Hayjer suggests throwing a party, as cover, to plan…” She flung her arms around him. “Oh, Liam. Thank you.”

He could only laugh, “It’s all you, Sara.” he leaned against her forehead, “My hero. Andromeda’s hero.”

She grabbed her drink and drank it all at once. “Another!” She waved down one of Anan’s servers, who dropped off a ‘Tall Moose’. She drank that too, slamming the glass back down on the table in
front of them. “It’s Open Mic night, right?”

Liam groaned, “I’m regretting ever asking you to karaoke, Pathfinder.”

“You never asked, ass! You never ask me to anything. You just tell me where you’ll be, and I show up.” She laughed at him. “Me singing serves you right.”

Liam’s hand shook a little bit, as he sipped his beer. “Nope, me first.” She laughed again, denying his intentions. “I mean it! You’re a total stage hog. But I’ve got a plan. Been working on it for ages.” She raised her eyebrow, “A good one, this time.” He waved Anan over, “We’re good, right?”

“Music’s on standby, Loverboy,” Anan smiled. “I’ll just get your girl another drink, shall I?” She winked at Sara.

“How did that ever catch on?”

“Drack spends a lot of time in here, when he isn’t hanging out with Kesh. Haven’t you noticed? And I’d rather be Loverboy than ‘Little Duck’.” Liam took advantage of Sara’s sputtering to approach the stage, grabbing a stool before he got up there, and then hoisting himself up to follow it. “Hey,” he told all of them, face heating up. “This is a bit nerve-wracking, huh?” He rubbed the back of his neck and sat down. “So… forgive me, but the weight limits were too strict to bring my guitar. And this song is better with a banjo, anyway. Can you believe nobody brought a banjo to Andromeda? I know, I had a friend of mine check. What kind of priorities did you people have?”

He cleared his throat and shifted again. “But this… is for our Pathfinder. Who needs the encouragement, for everything she’s doing, for everyone out here, whether we’re from Heleus, or the Milky Way.”

He took a deep breath, and with the first few strains of the music, started, only a little late. He wasn’t a singer. He could carry a tune, though, and this was a simple song. Too high for his voice, but it wasn’t about whether he did it well.

It wasn’t about the performance. It was about the message.

“Why are there so many songs about rainbows?” He watched Sara choke up and cover her mouth. “He grinned at her. “So we’ve been told, and some choose to believe it. But I know they’re wrong, wait and see. Someday we’ll find it, the rainbow connection. The lovers, the dreamers, and me.”

He closed his eyes, and pulled the mic free, bringing it closer, the opposite of graceful. Didn’t matter. “Have you been half asleep, and have you heard voices? I’ve heard them calling my name. Is this the sweet sound, that called the young sailors? The voice might be one and the same. I’ve heard it too many times to ignore it, it’s something that we’re supposed to be. Someday we’ll find it…”

The first few voices from the Vortex joined him in the chorus – even a few Turians joining in, much to his surprise. Now he was happy he’d shown them The Muppet Movie, despite all the Turian tears. “The lovers, the dreamers…” his voice broke on the last phrase, “and me.”

The last of the music drifted away, and he smiled again. “Thanks for your ears. I’ll let someone else bend them now,” and he jumped down from the stage instead of taking the stairs, wanting to put distance between himself and the stage, now that it was over. It was worse than facing down an Ancient Einoch. How Sara managed, he’d never understand.

Sara whacked him as he got back to the booth, and then pulled him down next to her. “Kermit the
Liam shrugged, “Made you smile? Who’s more inspirational than the muppets? They’ve overcome everything you can imagine. They were even marooned on a desert isle.” He snorted, “Besides, you can’t top that, Sara. I had Turians singing. So much for your Angaran Fan Club now.” He crossed his arms behind his head, and smirked, smug in his success, but his heart still pounding.

She narrowed her eyes, “Don’t you know better than to challenge me?” She grinned, evilly, and broke away to march towards the stage. She grabbed the mike, shoving his stool away with one foot. “Going to have to stand up for this one, or I won’t be able to hit the high notes. Oh, God, I’ve never attempted to sing this anywhere outside my shower. Shit, this might be really bad. I’m so sorry.”

“I’ve never heard you sing in the shower,” Liam called out. “I would know.”

“Shut up,” She made a face at him and he blew a kiss back. The Angara in the front tables chattered excitedly. She’d have to release an album. Liam leaned forward, ready to listen. “This one’s for Tann, Addison, and all the rest of the people in charge here, and it’s for us – the little guys trying to find a better life.” She stood up, tugged down the jacket of her fatigues, and tapped on her Omni-tool. “Have to mess with the mood lighting for this one. Hope you guys don’t mind.”

The lights of the stage lit up her hair like a green halo, as the musical number began. “Something has changed within me…”

After the first four words, Liam breathed out, “Wicked.” Fuck, it was better than the Muppets. She’d always top him somehow. He couldn’t claim he minded, though. Nothing like being kept on his toes.

“…I’m through with playing by the rules of someone else’s game.” Her cheeks flushed with excitement and she smiled at him, singing into the mic like she owned it. “Too late for second guessing. Too late to go back to sleep. It’s time to trust my instincts, to close my eyes,” she did just that, and sang out, slow, and on key, “and leap.”

Liam’s memories of a certain file spun back in his brain, and for once, he knew exactly what to do on their next date, as Sara sang on, “I think I’ll try, defying gravity…” she caught his eyes, looking worried, “Kiss me goodbye, I’m defying gravity.” She broke away, to look at the rest of the audience, strutting to the front of the stage with the challenge, “And you won’t bring me down.” There were random whoops of approval from the people in the bar.

She met his eyes again, grinning. “I’m through accepting limits, ’cause someone said they’re so. Some things I cannot change, but ’til I try, I’ll never know.” She turned her face away from him, striking a rocker pose that made him laugh aloud. She was such a ham. “Too long I’ve been afraid of, losing love I guess I’ve lost? Well, if that’s love, it comes at much too high a cost!” She pranced around the stage.

Liam could see her stomach shaking with the effort to sustain her breath and the notes of the second chorus. She looked a little scared now, her voice quivering. The hardest part must be yet to come.

She closed her eyes again and took a deep breath, and released, “Unlimited. My future is… unlimited. And I’ve just had a vision, almost like a prophecy. I know, it sounds truly crazy, and true, the vision’s hazy…” Her eyes popped back open again, daring them all to do something brave. “So, if you care to find me, look to the western sky,” she pointed deliberately to the docks. “As someone told me lately, everyone deserves a chance to fly! And you won’t bring me down!”
She finished in fine style, and as the last notes echoed into the bar, all his Pathfinder did was march down from the stage, throw her hair back, and smile, teeth sharp as her eyes. “That felt good. Let’s go tell the others. Tann can’t ground the Tempest, he doesn’t have the authority. And he can’t stop me, or SAM from taking it if we really want to.”

Liam gaped, “He’s grounding the Tempest?”

“Nope,” Sara gritted her teeth. “SAM has a plan.”

SAM spoke up, “‘And for thou wast a spirit too delicate / To act her earthy and abhorred commands, / Refusing her grand hests, she did confine thee, / By help of her more potent ministers / And in her most unmitigable rage, / Into a cloven pine.’ That is what waits for me, Liam, if Sara and I do not succeed in this quest.”

“Quest,” Sara snorted. “You’ve been reading too much Tolkien.”

Liam’s voice shook, “The Tempest, right? If I remember my Elcor Shakespeare - Shit, SAM…”

“It is a fight for my home, my survival, as well,” SAM stated. “If we fail this, we fail your father’s cause. Everything he believed in. Everything he wanted. I think… I think the Directors will not let me live long, after they succeed, or they will confine me to my Core. Like the Angaran AI on Voeld. And if I die, Sara dies, as well. None of us want that.”

Sara snorted, “Fuck Dad’s cause. This is our cause now. We’re going to Meridian, even if I have to steal the Tempest to do it.” She slapped the side of her thigh, as if looking for her pistol. “Nobody’s gonna lock up my baby brother.”

Liam knocked back the last of his drink. “Well, shit, let’s go get ready to steal a ship, then.” He laughed, “Always wanted to be a pirate. Missed my calling, maybe?”

SAM continued. “I took the liberty of contacting the other crew members with the news. Gil and Kallo are collaborating to make sure that we can leave the dock at any time. Vetra is handling the necessary bribes and restocking the mess. I would suggest that we take care of a half dozen tasks assigned by Addison and the scientists before we make the attempt. It would be a good subterfuge, as once we have the Tempest out of dock, Tann cannot recall it again easily, or expect prompt obedience.”

“‘You can’t take the sky from me,’ eh, SAM?” Liam chuckled.

“That is a very apt quote, Liam.” SAM was quiet for a few moments. “I believe I would like to watch the series again. Captain Reynolds is an inspirational character.”

Chapter End Notes

'Rainbow Connection', obviously. And 'Defying Gravity' is from the musical 'Wicked'.

And I've always felt that the 'Tempest' ship name was likely a reference not to a storm, but to Shakespeare's play of the same name. A ship wrecks on an deserted island only inhabited by a magician and his daughter, and their 'sprite-servants'. A lot of the choices in Andromeda give you the choice between whether you see SAM as a person or a tool, an object, a slave, much like both Ariel and Caliban in the play.
And if Tann doesn't try to limit SAM's access in a hypothetical sequel, I will eat something unpleasant.
Chapter 96

Chapter Summary

33 people have bookmarked this story. 33 people want to read this or are reading this.

Hell, I'm moved.

Just for that, I'm going to post at least a chapter every single day this week. We are approaching the end, but this won't be the end of my plans for these two. I have a spin-off epilogue that I'm going to post separately, for one. And I have a half-formed idea about what to do about Scott, that is still in development.

Liam checked his Omni-tool for the time. She was fifteen minutes late coming from her Pathfinder 'party' at their HQ – the front for the Pathfinders agreeing to mount their expedition to Meridian, without their de facto ‘director’s’ approval.

Her beer was getting flat, sitting on the bartop next to him. He hoped that wasn’t a bad sign – Cora had done everything she could to lure Tann out of the HQ for the afternoon, so that the four of them could really talk and plan, and Gil and Kallo could make sure they’d circumnavigated any ‘traps’ the Initiative had placed on the ship itself.

Vetra’s contacts had clued her in on a few. He felt nothing but respect – he would never want to be on her bad side. Vetra knew everybody.

But the delay left him looking like he was getting stood up. Dutch raised his eyebrow at him and snorted. “She’s coming,” he argued.

“Dutch didn’t say she wasn’t,” Anan pointed out, gently.

“He looked it,” he grumbled, before the door slid open, and a wild Sara appeared. Her wide eyes targeted him and lit up, and she sprinted, dodging tables and groping couples, grabbing the beer next to him and chugging it in one go.

He could only watch, and smile. It was fine. It had to be. “That’s my girl,” he told Dutch.

“Ugh,” the barkeep turned away. “Her again. Just keep her off the stage. I’m getting worried the Angara are going to riot. You weren’t the one who had to explain ‘musical theater’ to them. We have one of the exchange personnel trying to start a performance group. A man can only listen to so many repetitions of Memories.”

Sara slammed the bottle back down. “Got to talk to you.”

Liam swigged the rest of his beer back. “What’s the crisis?” He slapped the hip of his civvies before he realized that he didn’t have a gun with him. He didn’t like how that was becoming a habit.

“It’s not a crisis!” Only then did he realize that she was crying, just before she flung her arms around his neck, nearly knocking him off his stool. “Goddammit, Liam, my brother’s awake, my Mom’s alive - but frozen - and...”
“Shit, that’s great news!” Liam grabbed onto her and started towing her towards the exit. “Let’s go.”

“Go…” she pulled back a little. “Go where?”

“Go meet the fam. Think your brother will like me?”

A goofy smile - the only sort she had, he thought, snorting at how bloody besotted he was - turned up the corner of her lips and showed all her teeth. “Really? You want to?”

“Will Harry let me visit?”

“I’ll make him,” she was already pulling him off his stool, and towards the door. Liam tapped out a healthy tip for Dutch and his partner before letting himself be led off in the direction of the tram. “Oh, god, Scott’ll…” she stopped. “Oh.”

“What?”

“Scott… is friendly, debonair, and suave. And very good-looking, even if he is my brother.” She said it grudgingly. “He’s everything that I’m not.”

“Wow, that’s some hell of a combination. I guess I’ll hate him.”

She laughed, but her heart wasn’t in it. “Yeah…” her face fell into the sort of determination that he had only seen when she was facing a Fiend from behind her sniper rifle. “And he can’t have you. If you dump me for him, I swear… I’ll hunt you down like that Ancient Einoch, and get the Resistance to help me. I got the patch, Liam. You know I can do it.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“He’s stolen my boyfriends before, not on purpose, but it’s happened,” she pouted. “Twice. He can’t help being the ‘pretty’ one… I’m a ton of fun until you meet my brother and then ‘BAM!’ they all fall for him instead of me.”

“I don’t…” Liam laughed, “I’m straight, Sara. Thought never crossed my mind.”

She eyed him sideways, “Jaal was naked.”

“You aren’t still dwelling on that, are you?”

“Maybe… it’s a little hard to forget. Red flags, Liam.”

“I’m not going to fall for your brother. You got there first, even if I was slightly interested in a same sex relationship, which, again, I am not.”

“No doubts?”

“No doubts.”

“Okay,” she was pulling him along again, hand tight and warm on his. “You can meet him then. But no hugging.”

“Why would I…”

“I hugged him. I never used to hug anyone. We weren’t a huggy family. I was never a huggy person until I met the Angara and now it’s all touchy-feely time all the time… I’m hugging Peeb, Cora, Vetra, Drack… and you…”
“I like your hugs. Even if you’re spreading them around, it doesn’t mean they’re less special.” He paused, “You could get your arms around Drack?”

“With effort. He cussed at me. Might have thought I was hitting on him. We got in a bar fight once. Don’t tell Kesh. Long story - but it felt like Krogan courting.”

“You got in a bar fight. With Drack. Wait…” he narrowed his eyes, “On Kadara – you came back with the vid, and bruised knuckles, that new scar over your eyebrow… Sara. ‘Fess up.”

“Sorry?” Sara stopped, looking unsure. “He pinged me halfway through and asked me to meet him. Kadaran whisky is the best, and I…” She laughed, a little breathless. “The scar looks badass, I thought. Gives me a little cred?”

It did, but Liam shook his head, “Bar fights. Cheating on me with Drack. Making me break my promise to SAM about letting you drink alone…”

“I won’t do it again. And it wasn’t cheating. He’s like my grandfather. A grandfather who lets me drink whiskey with him. So I wasn’t alone. Drack was there.”

“He’s the worst influence.” Liam chuckled, “At least I’m not the one who has to arrest you for drunk and disorderly.” He sighed, “All right, no hugging. What can I do then?”

“Just… shake Scott’s hand, or something. If he can shake hands. Bad muscle tone. Can’t even pee for himself properly yet.”

“Shit. That is bad.”

“Yeah, I know, right? But he’s alive, and he’s still Scott, and… he’s all I have, except you, until we figure out how to cure Mom.” She stopped again, flipping that impossibly blue hair back over one shoulder, and wiping tears out from under her eyes. It was finally starting to show dark brown by the roots. “I should rack my brain to tell you bad things about him. There’s got to be something. Then maybe I can keep you.”

Liam swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. “There’s no question. I’m kept.”

She sucked on her lower lip, looking suspicious. “All right. I’ll believe you, at least until you meet Scott.” The tram ground to a halt, and they disembarked in silence, heading for the cryo bay.

Scott was good looking, all right. “You must look like your Mum,” Liam blurted out.

“He does,” Sara agreed. “Girly eyelashes and everything…” she batted her eyes at him. They had the same eyelashes. And eyes. And judging by her roots, hair color, too. And Sara thought that he was the pretty one? “Epically unfair that he won the gene lottery and left me with the fallout. It’s like that fantastically bad movie with Ahnold and Danny Devito… What was it, Liam… you know the one I’m talking about.”

“The worst movie ever made?” He relented at her rolled eyes. “Twins.”

“That was it,” she beamed at him, and then scowled at Scott. “Play nice, he’s here at his own request. He wanted to meet the family.”

“This is Liam?” Scott raised an eyebrow at him from his place on the bed. “The boyfriend you were telling me about? The ex-cop turned crisis specialist?”

“He is.” Sara’s defenses were already raised, and Liam couldn’t help but be wary. “Watch it, Scott.”
“You already told him about me?” He eyed Sara and shifted back onto his back leg self-consciously. “Good things, I hope.”

“She wouldn’t shut up about you.” Scott pursed his lips. “I feel like I should be giving you the third degree, but as you’ve been keeping my little sister…”

“His OLDER sister, it’s about age, not height…”

“…my twin sister alive all this time, I think I can safely assume you don’t have nefarious intentions.” He cleared his throat, “You’re being safe, Sara, right?”

“Oh, God,” she hid her face behind a hand. “You had to ask. Just wait until you’re up and around. I’m going to ask you about your birth control in front of-” she flailed for a moment, before landing on, “Mom.” Liam choked off a laugh.

“I don’t know about the state of the blockers,” Scott hissed. “Are you up to date? I’m not going to be an uncle ahead of schedule, am I?” Not so far away, a doctor hid her smile.

All of the medical personnel were smiling. Sara had made herself popular here. They wanted her to be happy.

“It’s none of your business!” she hissed back. “And yes, Lexi’s… on top of things.” She flushed, and smiled with narrow eyes, “Though… I had an interesting conversation with the woman in charge of the repopulation initiative back on Eos…”

Liam swallowed. “Um… maybe we can talk about that later?” He held out his hand. “Liam Kosta. Colonial Security for the not-so-human-anymore Pathfinder Team, assigned to the Tempest, under Pathfinder Sara Ryder. We’re a pretty mixed bag, actually. Kind of awesome, the way that turned out. Worse things have definitely happened.”

“And usually to us,” Sara admitted.

“I’m not the one who keeps dying, love.” He had the pleasure of watching her flush.

“Okay… there’s a story behind that that I haven’t heard.” Scott lifted a shaky hand that clasped at his, weak but warm. “Scott Ryder. Recon Specialist, and the same. At least, I suppose I will be, assuming you still need me by the time I’m done with physical therapy. It’ll be weird serving under my sister, but hey, I’ll manage. I’ve missed out on all the fun so far. Though Sara’s idea of fun is usually dangerous.” He eyed him warily, “You don’t look like she’s been too hard on you. How many bones have you broken?”

“Not… too many.” Scott snorted, and Sara whacked him, somehow still managing to hide her face. “She’s the best boss, otherwise,” Liam assured him. “Takes her turn cleaning the restrooms, and always cleans up after the Pyjak if she finds the mess first. Plus, she can hit a Kett Anointed at fifty meters with a Shockwave that will take him right off his feet, never hogs the grenades, and drives the Nomad like she’s the Stig.”

Sara peeked through her fingers. She was still pink around the edges from the biology discussion. “Scott’s never seen Top Gear. I’m the wrenching one, not him. He was too busy watching cowboy dramas and pretending to be John Wayne or Clint Eastwood. So quit sucking up.”

“Don’t want to hear about anyone sucking anything,” Scott announced. “It’s been six hundred years since I got laid. Harry, you have to let me out of here. Does the Nexus have a bar? Oh, God in Heaven, does Andromeda even have beer? Why didn’t anyone ask the important questions before we left the Milky Way?!?”
Sara smirked, “For once I’m getting more than you are. I downed a beer before I brought Liam to meet you.” She smiled, evil and perfect. “I got beer and the boy.”

“Smart ass.”

“Hey, it won’t last, but revenge is sweet,” she shrugged, “You’ve lorded your looks over me since we were kids, Scott. But now I’m the one with the hot boyfriend, beautiful ship, and…” she laughed, and bent over, and hugged him, awkwardly, like she’d never had any practice. “Shit, I’ve missed you.”

“Likewise,” Scott’s voice was muffled, but they both laughed, though hers were choked by sobs. “Now, tell me about Mom. Harry’s all closemouthed about it. Damn it, Harry, can’t I get out of this goddamn bed? I want to go scan my mother’s pod.”
“Let me get this straight,” Liam asked her, after they settled in bed for the night. “You actually talked to Gil’s Jill? About… you know? The ‘b’ word? Or maybe it’s ‘p’… but without me?”

“It wasn’t like that… well, sort of? Most of the conversation was about how I kept Gil in line. She approves of me.” She flushed, but hid the reaction by pulling the blankets up to her chin. “The blockers are still in place, Liam. I wouldn’t pull that shit on you. No babies.” She rolled her eyes, “You still have yours going, anyway, right? So we have nothing to worry about.”

“Good,” He settled back on the pillow, hands on his chest. “I think.”

“What?” She sat up. “Kosta…”

“Didya think I’d complain that you want to use my sperm? Though… if things work out about Meridian…” he hesitated. “You could probably do better in the gene pool area. A kid like me… Maybe a donor?”

“I don’t want a donor. If you don’t want ‘em, I don’t want ‘em. I’ll argue with the Initiative right up until the end on that one. I’ve done enough for everyone to be child-free if I feel like it. Addison would probably be relieved that I’m not intending to start a dynasty.” She snuggled up against him and he relaxed. “I want a Sparkplug or nothing at all.”

“What, now?”

“No! We’ve only known each other for… a year?” She cleared her throat, “Seems like longer. But someday. Maybe. Let’s not close that door, right?”

“Worked for us before,” he kissed her head. “Movie night tomorrow? I thought maybe a musical. Bet Kallo would go for Grease. And Jaal will love the drag race. I have a good Asari adaptation.”

“Fuck yeah,” she mumbled, and rolled over to pillow her head on his chest. “As long as you let me act again. I brought down the house and you know it.”

“Wouldn’t miss it. A natural talent like yours - maybe you can star in the vid they’ll make of you as yourself.” He glanced at the readout on her terminal and he swallowed, his brain running like crazy. “We ought to do something. Mark the day…”

“Yeah, let’s do that.” She yawned. “Long as I don’t have to run to Kadara Port again before we find Meridian.”

“Not what I had in mind,” he whispered.

Once she was fully asleep he slipped out of bed and into his pants, to make his way out to the research station. He pulled up the basic schematic of their jump boots, and got to work. Kallo wandered back from the bridge, and snarked at him about his lack of shirt, “Again? Really, Liam?” but he didn’t answer, absorbed in the redesign, and the coding for SAM’s part of everything.

By early morning he had a prototype, and by the next day, as he was sipping his third cup of coffee, Sara was already asking him questions about yet another ‘special research project’. “Damn it, Kosta, if Jaal ends up naked again, I am selling tickets!” She warned as she called up the development program. “I could use the credits. We need a new couch after what Gil and Jaal did to your old one.”
“What?” Vetra’s eyes snapped up, “Jaal got naked and I missed it? When I haven’t been looking in the showers for months?” Peebee bristled visibly from where she was petting the Pyjak.

“Bare butt naked. Full Monty.” Sara confirmed, calling up the components list. “Ask him. He’ll explain better than I will. I got an eyeful.” She whistled, long and low, and Liam laughed.

Vetra groaned, “You’ve got all the luck. Your boyfriend wouldn’t even let me watch the Turians flex their way through a training montage. Do you know how long it’s been?” Her eyes grew distant. “Shit. I don’t even want to think about it.”

“Between you and me, I think he’s jealous. Doesn’t have the reach or flexibility.”

“I buy it.”

“I’m right here, Sara.”

“Yeah, so? Have to keep you humble somehow.” She winked, and wandered over, just to kiss his cheek. “You’re too precious, otherwise.”

Liam hid his grin, and when she came to him with the finished product he would only say, “Meet me on Eos, Pathfinder. You’ll see when we get there.” He held firm, even when she pouted.

But she took the detour, before heading to Meridian’s navpoint, just the same.
He made her drive him out to the natural stone arch and get out, so that she could climb to the top of it, whining all the way about how this was why she had a car. “This is it. This is where I go out,” she groaned, supporting her lower back as they reached the peak. “Just let me die here, Liam.”

“If you’d get your arse out from behind the wheel more often, this wouldn’t be an issue.” It was all a joke – he’d never seen anyone so fit. Her reluctance to climb wasn’t because she was out of shape. She peered over the edge, not trying to hide her shaking as she inched closer to him. “What, are you planning a leap to freedom? This better not be a breakup, Liam. I don’t drive for breakups. Not after the last one.”

“No! I’m not an idiot! I know what I’ve got.” A gust whistled past, stripping what was left of her bravado away, and she clutched at him, face pale under her tan and eyes wide with fear. “It’s like this…” he swallowed, “The day we met, ‘Andromeda met’, we fell from the sky, and bad things happened.” He drew her closer. “It’s all right,” he whispered, as he checked her equipment for safety – just in case. “We’ve done way scarier things since Habitat 7, right?”

“Yeah. I guess…” she swayed a little in the breeze. “It’s been a while since I jumped off anything on purpose, though, Liam. Even longer since it was for fun. Gravity wells spoil me.”

“You got this,” he wrapped his arms around her, hugging her tight against his chest, and grinned. “So here’s the thing. When we get old, and people ask how we met, I want you to be able to smile.” She cast her eyes down. His own heart raced, thudding in his ears – but she didn’t respond to his hint. Not the right time, then. He’d wait, to say the rest. “So… are you ready?” She nodded, and before she could stiffen, he tipped her over the edge.

“SAM! Play sequence 14SR!”

“Engaging…” SAM replied, and the boots kicked in, and they swirled and fell. Liam felt her relax in his arms, and then, wonder of wonders, she leaned back, eyes closed and spread her arms out, like the angel he always knew she was.

She trusted him not to let her fall. She trusted both of them not to let her fall. Her ponytail blew out and flared around her like a blue flame, as they slowly sunk to ground. He hoped SAM had timed the picture right – he’d photoshop a pair of wings onto it for her later. Yeah, it was corny, but it had to be done.

They hit the ground with an impact that made them both groan. She recovered first, sitting up while he stared at the sky, looking for the second part of his surprise.

Something had finally gone right, and he laughed. “What? What’s so funny?” He pointed up, and she glanced upward, hand going to her mouth at the heart-shaped vapor trail, tears tracking down the dust coating her face. “Liam… that’s got to be the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me.” She whacked him, half-heartedly.

“Worth the bruises I’m going to have on my arse after that landing.”

She wiped away dust and tears, and climbed over him, slowly, wincing. “Hello again, Liam Kosta.”

He grinned, arms crossed behind his head. “Hello, Sara Ryder.”
She bent and kissed him, soft and sweet, and tasting like dust. “I love you, Liam.”

“I know.” He reached up and tugged her down against him and she laughed against his mouth. “This armor’s gonna get in the way, you know.”

“Out here?” Sara glanced all around them, and snickered. “So much for planning ahead. We’re about fifty meters from the thoroughfare to Prodromos. There’s no way I’m messing around with you that close to the road. Augie’s already got you by the short and curlies – if he catches us getting it on, we’ll owe him favors forever.”

“Damn,” he let his head fall back. “I guess that means we’ve got to go back to the Tempest, huh?”

“That’s right, flyboy,” she sassed, and climbed off him. “If you want to get laid, it needs to be private. A door, at the very least. Otherwise I would have jumped you in the shower by now.”

“We should really look into a shower door, huh?” He took a deep breath, “Okay, how about… this?” He typed a passcode into his Omni-tool. “And don’t ask SAM, because he doesn’t know about this part.”

Confused, she grabbed at his arm. “A navpoint?”

“Called in another favor from Augie.” He shrugged, grinning, “I’ll owe him one, but… I told him my girl needed a minibreak. This is an emergency cabin the original settlers set up for people who got lost in sandstorms. Not as many of those now, but they still keep it stocked.” He took a deep breath, “And… I talked to Gil, and Jill is sending the meds that will counteract the blockers to Lexi. For when you’re ready. No pressure, but if you want Sparkplug, you get Sparkplug. On your timeline, not the Initiative’s. They owe you that, Sara.”

“Shit,” she dropped his arm. “You’re taking me away…”

“For the weekend. Well, as close as we can get to it, anyway. Two nights away. No Tempest. No Team. No settlers. No Meridian. No myriad of tasks and errands… just you and me and the frontier.” She was quiet, staring at him. “What, have I screwed this up? I’ve never had an anniversary before. Chicks break up with me after the first email.”

“An…” awareness dawned like a sunrise. “Oh. Oh!” Her eyes went soft and glimmering. “Same here. I mean, the anniversary.”

“A year ago, we fell out of a shuttle,” he whispered. “We were supposed to have a homestead by now, but we’ve got the Tempest, instead. But I can give you this, on the day we met for the first time. A better memory than the Scourge, or zero-g, or your brother’s injury, and a better way of falling out of the sky and into my arms.”

She flung herself at him. “Liam, I fucking love you.”

He held her for a minute, his heart full before he managed to squeeze out, “Does that mean I can drive?”

She sat back up, squinting, and then smiled. “Yeah. You can drive. This once.”

“Now I know it’s love.”
Okay, I allowed myself to dissolve into fluff for the next couple chapters. Sorry not sorry. I really missed the whole 'deep breath before the final battle' that ME gave me before, and the jump just wasn't enough.

The cabin was just that – one room, with a small partition that had a half-tub/shower and toilet that hid it from open sight of the front door. A few windows looked out over the lake, and towards the stone arch, framed by Eos’ crazy blue sky. A cooking unit – big enough to cook something hot instead of just eating ration bars for the next day - graced a corner. Nice, if they’d brought anything else. Two single beds, spaced apart.

She would fix that later. For now, she watched Liam heft up their bags onto the closest of the beds. “So… now what?”

Liam chuckled, and followed the bags, stretching out. “Something totally impossible.” He sat up. “We try to relax.”

Sara looked around the tiny room, smiling. “How? No display for vids, not even a datapad?”

“I brought one, with a few movies, but we can do that back on the Tempest. I thought we could go for a walk around the lake. Or…” Liam grinned. “You’ll have to promise not to cheat, but…” He fished in his pack and drew out cards.

“Hmm,” Sara eyed him. “What game?”

He tossed her the deck. “Dealer’s choice.”

Sara caught them. “Poker? You’re the only person that hasn’t played Gil, Liam.” She tilted her head, “Why?”

“I’ve got plans for my creds.”

“So, we don’t have to play for money.” Sara threw herself on the other bed.

“Umm…” Liam fumbled with the fasteners, on his pack, gave up, and set it on the floor. “You know I’d strip for nothing, right?”

“Not clothes,” Sara rolled her eyes. “You look for every excuse to get out of them anyway. We could play for answers. We’re alone, Liam. Even SAM’s looking away unless I call on him. Privacy mode engaged. We hardly ever get a chance to just – talk like this. So… what are your big secret plans?”

Liam huffed a small sound, “You first?”

“Plans? Me?” Sara pulled her legs in, so she could sit cross-legged. “I spend my money on Nomad upgrades and fancy guns.”
His look said that he understood her lie.

Maybe playing for clothes would be easier. She bit her lip, “Okay, I’ve saved a little. The science team is great about paying me for my work, unlike Tann. Most people are, other than Tann. Even Addison is coughing up an allowance that I’m not expected to sink right back into supplies and the Tempest. I want a few things that will take some credits to make happen. You – though – you don’t spend money on anything other than the occasional drink. What are they all for?”

Liam fidgeted. “It’s a little embarrassing.”

“What, do you want to open a business or something? Need capital?”

“If that’s all it was, I would have said it, already.” He glanced at her. “I promised I would start an Andromeda branch of HUSTL. That’s one of them.”

“Great idea.” Sara stressed the first word. “We could use crisis response out here. APEX can’t do everything. Nothing to be embarrassed about on that front.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat. “And… I want to have my own place. Someplace with a view, on a planet with high things to jump off.”

“Don’t we all?” She laughed, “That’s why I finally stopped burning creds. Now that it looks like we might actually live through all this shit.”

“Yeah?” He glanced at her. “No surprise that I like Eos best. So far. A penthouse on Eos would be amazing.” He came over to her bed and took her hands in his. She squeezed them lightly, realizing he was sweating. Why was he so nervous?

She shrugged. “Same here, I guess. Kadara’s mountains are prettier, but I don’t like the neighbors.” She fiddled with his hands, tracing a couple scars, and running her thumb over the electrical one. “I would have liked more water. Green plants. Less sand. But if I had to pick a place based on their governor, Augie would be it.”

“Eos will get there. Just maybe – not within our lifetime.” He sighed. “Sara – look, I know my plans are shit, but I-” she cut him off with a kiss.

“I hate it when you say that,” she muttered when she broke away, “You have great plans, Liam.”

“I thought they were shitty? You said so, when we saved Verand.”

“That plan was shitty, but it was my plan, too. These ones aren’t.” She leaned up against his chest, and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Tell me more of these plans. Hearing what you have dreamt up might just be the kick in the butt I need to keep moving, instead of staying here forever and letting Tann win.”

“Not possible, Pathfinder. You’d never let Tann win.”

“Quit dodging the question. Plans, Liam.”

“Um – you’re in them? I kind of want to be wherever you settle down.” He couldn’t quite meet her eyes.

“Good. Make it easier to nag you about stuff.” Her voice was light. “Are you a dog or cat person?”

“Never had either. Dad was allergic to cats, and our flat was too small for anything but the smallest
dog. Mum and Dad worked long hours – mean to do that to a dog.”

“I have to have a pet. Besides Hammond.”

“Hammond? Who's Hammond?”

“My space hamster. Ergo, Hammond.” She rushed over his confused sputters. “Anyway, non-negotiable.” Her voice was firm. “Doesn’t matter what kind – though I’d worry about a kitty going up against a spitbug if it got out.”

“Maybe an Adhi? They could take care of themselves, at least.”

“Nah, I don’t want anything semi-domesticated,” her nose wrinkled. “A big dog, maybe. One that needs lots of exercise. I don’t want my dog to be lazier than me.”

“Pretty sure they’ve got most dog breeds in the genome bank. Mutts are inevitable after a bit.”

“Mutts are the best. Time to worry about that after Meridian works out,” Sara settled her head on his shoulder. “After we find a home for everybody else, that’ll be the time to find one for me and Scott.”

Liam stiffened. “You… and Scott?” His voice had gone flat.

“Yeah?” Sara pulled away a little, “I thought I’d ask him, when we get back to the Nexus. It would be nice not to have to be alone unless I want to be. He doesn’t have to say yes, or anything. Besides, he’d probably love Kadara. So he’ll probably turn me down.” She nudged him. “You could move in, too, you know. Make it official, outside the Tempest?” Her neck was flushing, she could tell. Had she read him wrong? “If you want to. No pressure. I know the Tempest is one thing – we’re short on beds, and you were sleeping with me more often than not, but… seems like it’s more something on a planet? Specially when it's being built just for us…” Her babbling ran down, and she felt like an idiot.

“Yeah?” He sounded skeptical, but hadn’t turned her down. “Where?”

“On a planet somewhere in Andromeda?” Sara laughed and hugged him closer again, feeling him relax against her again. Why had he been so tense? “I don’t know where, Liam. I just… know who with.” She took another breath, deep enough for him to feel. “You. If you want to be.”

“I’m with you, Sara.” He tilted them both back, so that she fell on top of him. “Everything else is details.”
Chapter 100

Chapter Summary

Fluff and Smut. NSFW.

Last chapter until the Monday after American Thanksgiving. I have to go do the whole extended family thing.

“You know, we’re supposed to be walking,” Liam drawled at her, as she boosted along ahead of him backwards. He’d had thoughts about this, and it wasn’t going the way he planned. “We’re supposed to be hand in hand, with a sunset in the background?”

“Where’s the fun in that? Walking is slow, and it’s hours until sundown. We’ll do that later.” She snarked back at him, but stopped on the crest of a rise that sloped down to the lake, turning back to him with a twinkle in her eyes. “Liam – remember when you said you wanted to go swimming? Way back when we were first mapping Eos?”

“Um… sort of.” Sara was already stripping out of her armor. “Sara. There are animals out here.”

“SAM will let us know if they get close.”

“What about radiation?”

“SAM?” She scanned the water.

“The water is clear of contaminants. I would suggest not drinking any without purification equipment, but should be safe for skin contact.”

“What about…” Liam made a fanged trap with his fingers and hummed the Jaws theme.

“Aquatic life, SAM?”

“Yes, but nothing that appears to be carnivorous. Yet.”

“No sharks on Eos, huh?” Sara giggled, stripped down to her sports bra and thong, started walking backwards towards the water. “Come on, Liam… or are you… chicken?”

Liam huffed at her, and then shook his head, and started peeling away his layers. “Sara, you’re going to be the death of me, you know that?”

“Probably,” she admitted, tightening her ponytail. “But…” the water lapped at her heels, and she took two steps back, until her ankles disappeared. “The water feels great!”

Liam sighed, and kept stripping. “I can’t believe I’m letting you talk me into this. What about Augie’s potential blackmail?”

“He’s miles away. Probably. Nobody’s gonna see us, Liam. And if they do – who cares?” She glanced down at her underwear, and shook her head. “In fact…” she pulled off her bra, and slingshot it at him, hitting him in the face. “Come on!”
“And now I have to get starkers?”

Sara sighed, and pulled off her underwear. “You don’t have to do anything. I’m getting comfortable – I’d rather put on dry undies than deal with the chafing caused by wet ones under the armor. You can sit on the side of the lake and look pretty, if you want.” She tossed her underwear at him, and flung herself backwards, flinging the water up and over herself. Her nipples peaked as she floated on her back. “God, look at that sky…”

Liam shook his head again, realizing that there was no use arguing. Besides, it had been his idea – nearly a year ago. He’d have to start watching his words. Even if Sara forgot, SAM wouldn’t. “This place needs a waterslide,” he said aloud, to no response. Glancing back, he realized that Sara had disappeared under the water. “Sara?!” Worried, he waded out to knee depth. “SARA?”

Something wrapped around his ankle and tugged him under.

He kicked against the sandy bottom, surfacing with a sputter to a giggling Pathfinder half an arm away. “You…” his eyes narrowed. “Oh, it is on.” He splashed her with a full arm, and she shrieked.

“All you can catch me!” She was already diving back under, but not fast enough. His fingers wrapped around her wrist and tugged her back towards him, wrapping his arm around her back, and surfacing again. Water lapped at her breasts, slickened their skin together, and despite himself, he felt himself responding. Sara giggled, and wiggled against him. “Happy to see me?”

“Brat,” he whispered, holding her closer. He hesitated before kissing her, but decided that SAM would have warned them if the bacteria was that virulent. Sara’s eyes tracked his lips, coming closer-

And then he let her go. She slipped into the water, and surfaced with an angry sputter. “What the hell, Kosta?”

“Ryder,” he grinned. “I’m on to your tricks, vile temptress.”

She lunged for him, wrapping her arms around his neck and twisting her legs around his waist, her mouth capturing his. Lips slanted across each other, water dripping down into his mouth – but he didn’t care. Lexi would treat him, if he got something funky from this. Lectures would be worth it. Sara shifted up, hovering over him, and pulled back. “Liam – is this okay?”

“Yeah,” he breathed, “You’re here, right?” He stretched up to reach her again. “It’s all okay.” She shuddered, like somehow that turned her on, and he shifted his hands to fit under her arse. “Besides - first people to do it in a lake on Eos? Sounds like one for the history books.”

She laughed, but soft, lowering herself down to rub against him. “I love your plans.”

“Our plans?”

“Our plans.”

It was awkward as hell, with everything slippery, and the sand shifting underneath his feet. Her hands burned like a brand on his skin, cooled by the water into extreme sensitivity. He gave up trying to keep them upright at last, hauling her over to the shallows and laying himself down in the sand so that she could straddle him. The sun lit up her breasts like she was Venus, and he struggled against the shifting grit to reach them, his knees shifting up behind her back to support her instead.

She rode him, panting, her head tipped sideways, her ponytail dripping, sliding around him.
“Insane.” He breathed it, despite himself. “You drive me…”

“Shhh,” she hissed, and ground down.

“Love you,” he gasped out. “God, I…”

She arched and snapped against him, once, twice, moaning her release, and he followed her, bucking up into her, while holding her down against him.

She slumped forward, dripping onto his face and chest. “Shit.”

“Funny, I thought it was pretty good,” he managed. She shoved him.

“Dumbass.”

“Nope.” He wrapped his arms around her tighter, holding her close, dripping hair and all. “Nope, I’m the brightest star in the cluster, to have you.” He chuckled though, running his hands over her when she shivered. “Who needs a door, now?”

She didn’t even bother to whack him, wheezing in amusement.
Chapter 101

Chapter Summary

I'm back! And I survived Thanksgiving. Still eating leftover pie, but there are worse fates.

So have a chapter, but know that I'm struggling with editing the next few, so you'll have to wait a bit. I'm working on it, damn it.

When they got back to the Tempest, both of them smiling way more than they had been a couple of days ago, Liam kissed her at her door, and then excused himself. “Gotta go thank Augie for the favor. Meet me in the mess in fifteen? You wore me out. Starving.”

“Sure,” Sara grinned, “Say thanks for me, too. I needed that.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” He slapped her ass as she went to change, and she flipped him off, walking backwards, laughing. He wandered up to the conference room, and called up Scott on the vid-com, heart beating too loud.

He’d chickened out at ‘Lover’s Leap’ – which was now officially listed as such on all Initiative maps, just another surprise for his girl. Just as well, since she hadn’t picked up on his hints. She’d cut him off before he could ask at the cabin – and the rest of the weekend was – busy. His skin heated with the memory of what they’d been doing instead. They had, at least, managed to walk around the entire lake – but hadn’t done a whole lot else except see how loud they could get, and talk.

Hell, they’d talked. They’d talked about everything from her Mom’s eezo-caused illness to his disdain for bananas, and his earnest desire that Hydroponics wouldn’t bother growing them. “I mean, they’re straight sugar, potassium or no potassium. And they taste like shit.” That had made her dissolve into his arms in fizzling giggles. “They could do better than wasting the space on them, is all I’m saying. Bet the Angara would love a good cantaloupe.”

“Banana bread, though,” she’d countered when the laughing stopped.

“Rather have quilloa. Or strawberries…” that longing still hadn’t left him.

“What do you miss most?”

“Besides processed biscuits and my parents?” He laughed. “Um…” He had to think. “Fruit is up there, despite the banana thing. I really miss how easy it was just to stroll in a place and buy whatever the hell you felt like eating, long as you had the credits. The cinema – a big screen with top of the line speakers telling you new stories every week.” He paused, thinking. “Indian food spicy enough to light my arse on fire the next day.”

Sara groaned. “A million different versions of curry and all of them good, no matter what they threw in?”

Liam laughed. “God, I miss chicken. Never wanted to be a farmer, but synth-chicken tastes like arse. Enough to make me want to keep some, wherever we end up. Eggs and meat – person could
make a fortune in Heleus, selling those.”

“I’ll pass. Chicken shit stinks,” he kissed her nose where it wrinkled.

“How do you know?”

“Neighbors on earth kept free range chickens. Mean little bastards. Kept getting out – which I suppose is the point of free range.” She nuzzled his neck. “Wasn’t always a city girl. After a while, Dad avoided cities. Authorities kept interfering in his research. Did the last of SAM’s design out of the family garage.”

They hadn’t even bothered with the cards, or the vids he’d packed, in favor of laughing over his stories about growing up in London, and her story about the first time she’d dyed her hair. “It came out a flaming pink-red – nothing’s ever looked worse. Scott called me Strawberry Shortcake until it faded.”

“Your blue is growing out.”

“I know. I’ll figure it out – might even go back to my original color. Been a while since I’ve seen it.” She frowned, “Not even sure what color it is anymore.”

“Like a chocolate brown. Or like strong coffee.” He had run his hands through to her scalp then. “It would look good on you, Sara.”

She made another face. “If it’s like Scott’s, it’s boring.”

Nothing about her was boring. He could spend a lifetime of idle talk and chatter, and he’d still want more. Thus the vid-call.

But not to Augie. A small subterfuge, but he'd thank the governor later.

After her mentioning Scott - he kind of wanted to test the waters in another direction. The vid-call engaged, and Scott’s face popped up before he was ready, the Hyperion’s med bay in the background.

“Liam? What’s up? Is Sara okay?” They must have let him shave – his beard was all trimmed and tidy, and his hair was short, close against his scalp.

Liam grinned, “Um, yeah, she’s fine. More than fine. Just… there was something I wanted to talk to you about. Got a minute?”

“I have all the minutes. Harry won’t let me do anything useful. Shoot,” Scott frowned.

“So… having met your Dad, he was pretty stolid. We had this… ritual. I’d say ‘hello’, and he’d grunt at me,” Liam temporized. “He came across as brilliant, but painfully old-fashioned. And Sara – she can take care of herself. More than. But.”

“But?” Scott shook his head. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not asking permission,” Liam blurted out, “’Cause that’s for Sara to decide. But I wanted to make sure, if I asked her… if you thought your Mum would be willing – to have another son along for the ride.” He winced. “And you a brother, of course. I mean, I want to… you know?” Once again, he couldn’t say the word. ”Join the family?”

“Shit,” Scott gaped and Liam tensed. “You two are... I had no idea… Sara’s never serious. About
anything.” His face reflected wonder instead of a warning, and Liam relaxed, just a little. Rejection wasn't happening today. “Shit. What else did I miss? Harry! You’ve got to let me out of here! My sister’s whole personality has changed! Is it that mental degradation you and Lexi have been talking about?” Harry’s amused chuckle echoed weirdly through the link.

“She says she’s serious about - me,” Liam’s voice broke, trying to get Scott’s attention back on the subject at hand. “Sorry, never done this before. I just wanted to give you a heads up. Make sure I wasn’t going to cause a rift between you two. Sara loves you and your Mum more than anyone alive. I… don’t want to screw that up.”

Scott grinned, “I think I’m at least one person back on the list now, buddy.” He sighed, tugging on his hair. “You might as well go for it. I don’t know what she’ll say, but… I wish you luck.” He laughed, “If she says ‘yes’, you’re gonna need it. Marrying my sister? Hard on the body, my friend. All the broken bones.”

_Marrying my sister._ Liam smiled, soft, back at him. “Worth it.”
Chapter 102

Chapter Summary

Okay, I think I'm getting this hammered out to how I want it to look. At first I had too many words, and then too few, but I think I'm getting a balance, here.

Welcome to Meridian, Pathfinder.

This will probably be the only chapter I post today, but I'll be posting as soon as I'm happy with them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What do you mean I can't go?!” Drack roared from the medbay. Sara cringed from the hallway. Kesh had emailed the night before, and she'd willingly agreed to make sure Drack kept his appointment with the doctor to prove his medical fitness. Apparently, he hadn't had one since he was frozen.

It didn’t matter that the engineer hadn’t backed her up. They both cared about Drack. She stepped through the door, reminding herself that she was his boss first, right now, and his friend second.

“Your pain is off the charts,” Lexi folded her arms across her chest. “Your synthetics aren’t syncing properly, Drack. You’re not fit.”

“I’m fine,” Drack shifted as if to get down from the bed.

“Don’t you dare move off that bed until the scans finish.” Lexi framed him in – her tiny body dwarfed by his larger one. “Listen to me, Drack. You’re not invincible. You’re not 200 anymore. Your people need you, your granddaughter needs you. You’ve got to start taking better care of yourself.” As if realizing how close she was to the man, she backed up, her skin tinged a slightly darker hue than usual, grabbing at her datapad and pulling up the results. “You’re running out of redundant parts. You can’t keep abusing yourself and expect me to be able to pick up the pieces. You’re not a jigsaw puzzle.”

“You know you love me.”

“That’s irrelevant!” It was undeniable – the Asari was a deeper blue than usual. Sara raised her eyebrows, stifling her smile.

“You can’t bench me. I’m used to the pain.”

“Watch me,” Lexi fumed, and turned to Ryder. “Pathfinder, will you tell this old bastard -”

“Who you calling old?”

“I got this,” Sara told her, and with a nod, Lexi turned and left the room, the doors swishing gently closed after her. “Drack – you know what Doc says, goes.”
“I’m not missing out on this just because some-”

“I got an email from Kesh.”

Drack’s head fell forward. “Shit.”

“She asked me to make sure you went – I’m assuming that she wants me to make sure you finish the exam. She says she needs you to stick around a little longer, Drack. And she’s not the only one. You’ve had my back out here so many times – I’d be dead without you. And a lot of Kett wouldn’t be.”

“Yeah, yeah. Flattery gets you nowhere.”

Sara took a deep breath. “You are grounded, until such time as Lexi declares you fit for duty.”

Drack’s eyes came up to meet hers. “You’re the boss, Boss. Who’s going to Meridian, then?”

“SAM said Jaal would be the second-best choice.” Sara pulled herself up on the bed next to him. “You’re worth more than just another soldier, Drack. You are a living reminder of what your people used to be – before the rebellions.”

Drack snorted, “You’ve been doing some reading, huh?”

“And talking to Kesh, and even Vorn.”

“Shit,” he repeated, and ran a hand over the back of his carapace. “Fine. I’m not going. I’ll protect the ship, just in case this Ghost Storm thingamawhatsit doesn’t pan out and we end up with the entire Archon fleet after us.”

“Right,” Sara drawled. “I wouldn’t want to be the one boarding the Tempest with you here.” She nudged his arm. “I don’t need an army. I’ve got a Krogan?”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” but Drack’s lips were curving in the Krogan equivalent of a grin. “Just go tell Loverboy to get suited up already. And tell Jaal to stick it to some Kett for me, all right?”

“Done.” Sara swung her legs down. “And Drack?”

“Huh?”

“Thanks for having my back.”

“No problem, Kid.”

~SS~

“What the hell is that?” Sara squinted at the display as they entered the Civki system. “Suvi?”

“Launching a probe,” the scientist agreed, and SAM zoomed in.

“Huh,” Sara tilted her head and looked at the… thing sideways, as if it would improve her understanding. “What does that look like?” She stepped outside of the display, so Liam could take her place.
“Um…” Liam stepped back. “A cheesewheel?”

“So… I’m not seeing things,” Sara pursed her lips. “Good to know. There’s a weird, cheesewheel satellite thingie in Meridian’s home system.”

“It’s not in orbit, it’s not a satellite. Or an asteroid – though the trajectory suggests it’s more like than…” Suvi marveled. “It’s just passing through. It’s a probe!” Her fingers flew. “It’s not Angaran…”

“Angarans don’t make cheese,” Liam muttered. “Who designs a probe to look like cheese?”

“Good people, who have their priorities straight?” Sara giggled. “Of all the crazy, messed up shit we’ve seen, does this take the… cheesecake?”

Liam groaned, “Sara.”

“What, it had to be done!” She put her hand on Suvi’s shoulder. “Track it, Suvi. I want to know where it’s going, and how far it’s already come.”

“Already done.”

Sara took a deep breath, her hands shaking. “All right then. Let’s do this. Take us into the system, Kallo?”

“Setting course to Meridian.” His fingers flew over the console. “Wait. I’m reading multiple Kett cruisers and… the Archon’s flagship?”

“Shit,” Sara cursed. “SAM, onscreen?” The appearance popped up. “Kallo… engage the Ghost Storm technology, and tell the others-”

“I know, Ryder.” The Salarian’s fingers flew over his controls. “It’ll have to be a drop…”

Sara laughed, “I thought we had already determined,” she flirted her eyelashes at Liam, “that I was an expert at falling.”

“Kill me now,” Kallo muttered, and Suvi giggled.

Chapter End Notes

And yes, that was a little Lexi/Drack.
Chapter 103

Chapter Summary

There are several small chapters I'm going to try to post today. This is the first.

Kallo dropped them into Meridian an hour later, the three of them groaning at the impact on their knees. “Well, gravity is normal,” Sara quipped, whipping out her scanner. “So that’s something, right?”

Liam stared at the Remnant city surrounding them, and then up at the sky. It took him a longer than he wanted to admit, to identify the little droplets of wet landing on his visor. “Shit, it’s raining?” All these long months of desert and jungle planets – only to be confronted now with a rain-wet cityscape… He had a sudden urge to strip down and let the rain hit his skin, nostalgia about London hitting him harder than ever.

It had been a long time since he’d been anywhere that couldn’t be described as ‘rural’. Even Aya didn’t feel like a city – probably by design. The Nexus was half-built, and half falling apart. Kadara was too high up in the mountains to feel like more than a large trading post. But this – well, the change was more than welcome. Meridian had that urban feeling about it – even with the Remnant tech aesthetic, and the crazy amount of evidence the Kett had left behind in the form of crates and wires and generators, like the city was a battery that needed to be charged.

It’s not that he was expecting a vault in the middle of space, precisely, but… Meridian felt like the opposite of a vault – exposed and high instead of deep and dark. Even the corridors looked like open streets from where they stood. Streets that were gated in with the occasional door, sure, but hey, even ancient cities had their defenses. It made him wonder whether Meridian had any other defenses they didn’t know about.

It didn’t take much imagination to picture people – Angara, mainly – roaming the streets and going about their lives.

Had Meridian ever had that? It was a lot of space for nobody to live in. So instead, he repeated, “It’s raining.”

“Yeah, so?” Sara didn’t even look at him, as she activated a nearby console. “You gonna melt, Mr. Kosta?”

“Sara,” she looked up at him then, when the tone of his voice got through. “It’s raining. Means this place has an atmosphere, and…”

“Is rain so rare, from where you come from? Let’s just find the vault, and avoid the Kett,” Jaal hummed, interrupting his moment. “Pathfinder?”

“SAM?” Sara asked, scanning for conduits, as usual. Sam must have replied on their private channel, as he didn’t hear a response.

Liam gave up, as apparently neither Sara or Jaal had a wistful fondness for the weather. Surely it rained on Aya and Havarl occasionally… but then it occurred to him that maybe there was one
person who would appreciate it. “Suvi, you’re seeing this, right?”

“Yes, Liam,” the scientist laughed. “Splash in a puddle for me, aye?”

“Wish I had my wellies,” he joked with the woman.

“I’m fascinated, too,” his Pathfinder protested. “Just focused on other things. Things not the weather for a change. And I think SAM’s found it,” Sara nodded towards the far distance. “SAM, are we gonna find Kett in that direction?”

“Yes, Sara. I would exercise extreme caution regarding Kett and Remnant. Resistance will likely be extreme. In addition, I believe you will need to reactivate at least two consoles, to restore power to the city.”

“It’s never easy, huh?” Liam sighed.

“Where’s the fun in easy?” Sara flashed a smile at him. “Okay, so… we pick a direction. The navpoints look like they diverge from a central location?”

“Yes, Pathfinder.”

“Here we go then.” She closed her Omni-Tool and drew down her gun, and stepped forward into a light jog. Liam let his eyes drift down to her backside – just for a moment, but Jaal nudged him.

“I believe her eyes are up there,” the Angaran suggested.

“Are you staring at my ass, Mr. Kosta?” He could hear the laughter in her voice.

“No, ma’am, I’m the poster-boy of professionalism,” Liam lied. “Lead on, Pathfinder.”
Chapter 104

Chapter Summary

Second chapter of the day - sorry for the short ones. Not sure about how they flow, but... I had a really hard time writing and editing this portion.

Meridian was a strange juxtaposition of wild tech and untamed nature, one that seemed designed to keep them off balance, literally. The rain pouring from the skies made the streets – or what Sara wanted to call streets – slippery, and the Remnant bridges worse. “The Remnant creators must not have believed in safety railings,” she called out behind her. “Caution: Slippery when wet?”

Liam choked off one of his little laughs.

“Foolish,” Jaal grunted, his eyes going everywhere at once. There was a lot to see.

They could only run on – Kett and Remnant stopping them all too often to demand their attention away from their mission. Sara had to remind herself that the mission itself was to activate the vault network, not to rack up a body count – it was harder than she wanted it to be to leave a single Kett occupying the city, but it was necessary. The other Pathfinders wouldn’t be able to evade the Archon forever.

Twice they rerouted with SAM’s help when the Scourge blocked whole portions of their original route. It was a hard trek, over terrain that should have been easy to traverse, but had been wrecked either by invaders or the resident plantlife.

It felt apocalyptic, and she wished Liam would make a joke about it, or compare it to a movie, so that they could laugh together at their mutual discomfort, and move on. But instead, he was as silent as she was, just taking it all in, occasionally walking backwards with his neck craned to see the tops of the spires, like a well-armed tourist.

Skyscrapers with trees twisting into the metal, glowing blue mushrooms taller than Jaal, wet black tiles of streets, balconies and gravity wells overlooking massive, empty erections… “Why would anyone build this just to leave it behind?” She asked, her voice cracking. Aside from their all-too-frequent firefights, the city was silent. “I mean, it’s beautiful. There’s so much life, here. How? Why?”

Liam squeezed her shoulder. “We’ll study it. You know we will. Peebee will never forgive you, otherwise.”

“Yeah, but...” she shook her head. It didn’t make sense, but they didn’t have time for sense. Three other Pathfinders were out there putting their lives at risk for this mission. No more Pathfinders could die for her. “We should go.” She stepped away from the overlook, reluctantly, slipping slightly on the wet ground.

Liam caught her elbow. “Oops. Definitely slippery when wet.” He waggled his eyebrows at her. She shoved him, flushing, and moved on.
Chapter 105

Chapter Summary

Third chapter of the day.

At some point, the pattern had become rote. Find a room, look for Remnant and Kett, kill if necessary, activate another console so that it would do whatever it needed to do, and move into the next street, corridor, or building in search of the next room. Meridian was a maze, it turned out, and there was no wonder the Kett hadn’t had any luck. “What they really needed was a spool of thread,” Sara tried, but Liam didn’t laugh at the reference.

“As long as there’s no Minotaur at the center of the Labyrinth,” he shuddered, and cradled his rifle. “On to the next?”

It was jarring when they stepped into a room of massive containers, and Sara moved to the console, only to have one open… and reveal- “That’s an Angaran.” Sara choked and scanned it. “There’s no life signs…” she was panicking, breathing fast. It felt like the Archon’s ship all over again, finding the Krogans and Salarian test subjects…

“Were they experimenting on them?” Jaal snarled, as he so rarely did, and Sara forced herself to calm down, to scan around, to ask SAM for more information.

“These beings are not Angaran.” SAM sounded so positive that Sara found herself able to breathe again.

“What?” Jaal’s distressed sounds ceased, but Liam stepped forward with his own confusion. “Look at them. What else could they be?”

Sara forced herself to process SAM’s argument. “This one is only 57%…” her words trailed off as her eyes searched the walls – countless numbers of pods containing what looked like Angara. “Jaal - SAM says they’re genetic samples?”

“I have compiled a fairly detailed lexicon of Remnant language,” SAM admitted. “I believe the people that built this city are called the ‘Jardaan’. I believe that they… created the Angara.”

Sara and Liam stared at Jaal. “Created.” He shook his head. “How. These are not alive…”

“They are identified as prototypes.”

“Shit, back home we were just approaching stable clones… we weren’t even thinking about…” Liam sounded impressed, and worried at the same time. He touched Jaal’s shoulder. “You okay, mate?”

“I am not-” Jaal shook his head. “There are so many. I have so many questions. We don’t have time…” his words trailed off. “They are not going anywhere. We can come back.”

“We will,” Sara promised, her heart in her throat. “We’ll figure this out, Jaal.” One of the nearly silent Remnant doors slid open behind her and she spun, and shot the Observers that were approaching from that direction. “Um… those Observers weren’t there before, right?”
“Khi Tasira is a mystery.” Jaal frowned, but shouldered his rifle. “We should move on, however much I want to linger in this place.” He reached a final hand up to touch his antecedent, but his fingers stopped short, and he drew his hand away. “I will come back,” he promised it, turning slowly. “I have never wanted to understand something more.”
Chapter 106

Chapter Summary

Fourth chapter of the day.

In every action vid, in every videogame, there was always a boss fight at the end of a major mission, Liam rationalized to himself. It was practically the duty of the villain to send someone after the hero to try to slice them, dice them, run them over, hit them with turtle shells, and just generally attempt to kill them using whatever means necessary.

But he was more than tired of mini-bosses trying to kill his hero. It was harder than he’d imagined, having his princess in the same castle as he was. Or his hero in the same castle as him... whichever way it worked out. “You’d think, just this once, that they could give it a rest!” He shouted at Sara.

“What, are you worried? The story’s not over until we have our sunset. You owe me,” she yelled back, running trip wires and mines across the entrances to the landing they were trying to defend. It had the console on it – and while a trip wire wouldn’t stop the Fiend currently lumbering up the ramps trying to get to his girl, it just might make the Archon’s Sword have to pop out of their cloak and deal with them directly instead of ghosting around and stabbing them in the back.

“You know, I’m really tired of how every single Kett has an over the top title,” he groused to Jaal, who was crouched down next to him, reloading the magazine of his rifle with shaking hands. “Chosen, Destined, Exalted…Think they’re compensating for something?”

“You are telling me,” Jaal’s mouth pressed together firmly, as he flipped around to line up his sights on the Kett sharpshooters aiming at them from below. “For now, they have but one choice, and one destiny.” His bullet found its target.

“Nice shot,” he started, when a minor – and when had he started classifying explosions – made him jump about two feet in the air. “Found you, you bastard,” Sara snapped from behind him, opening fire on the newly exposed Sword, her incendiary ammo causing little more explosions in their wake.

Liam threw himself behind them, letting her take the nasty guy on her own. The Fiend was right around the corner. “Jaal! The Fiend!”

His friend fired from behind him, ammunition slamming into the creature and making it stop for a second and shudder. Might as well be wasps, for all the good it did. He stabbed his Omni-blades into the ground in front of it, delaying it with the shocks from his Havok Strike. “Jaal!”

“I am trying!” The man protested. “Watch the Pathfinder… I think she is losing!”

He turned, and watched Sara slip backwards, tipping on the edge of the platform. “SAM,” she ordered, her face still. “I need…”

Her biotics started to glow, and even the Sword stepped backwards in shock as she rose in the air, hovering in front of him like Storm from his old X-men vids, hair whipping around in a wind of her own making. He turned, and fired again at the Fiend, emptying his gun into it desperately. It slumped sideways with a moan, leaking ichor, and he spun back, just to see Sara erect the most
impressive Barrier he’d ever seen. It rippled, and expanded, and then… then she went Nova, pushing the Sword backwards into his range.

Stunned, the Archon’s sword seemed unable to move, frozen, and Liam snapped back to awareness, sliding another magazine home and firing desperately at the head. “Die, die, die,” he ordered.

Sara tossed her last grenade at it, “Fire in the hole!” and he jumped back to safety, crouching down outside the closest pillar.

The noise echoed and rang in his ears, despite the shielding in his helmet, but his goddess just took her helmet off and glared at her enemy, dripping with sweat and panting with exertion. “Asshole,” she mouthed, and then looked up, and around, trying to find him.

He let her, slumping against the support and trying to look at least a little badass. “So… that was something?”

She snorted, squeezing his shoulder, and then turned back to Jaal, head tilted back and glassy-eyed with fatigue. “Jaal? You okay?”

“Yes. No.” He paused, “I don’t know how to answer that.”

“Sara,” SAM interrupted. “The Archon’s ship is inbound.”

“Shit,” she cursed again. “SAM… can we do anything? Can you do anything?”

SAM paused for a moment before answering. “No.” Sara started to reload her guns immediately. “However, while I can do nothing directly… the city is not without defenses. I believe I can hack into them. Let the city protect itself.”

“Good,” she slid the magazines home, and approached the console they’d defended so fiercely. “Do it,” she held out her hand, and Liam could almost see the data flow between her and the machine as SAM communicated with the device.

In the distance, he heard turrets firing, and Sara slumped, panting again. He stepped forward, but she waved him back. “I’m fine. Kallo?”

“Inbound,” the pilot’s voice echoed in their helmets. “Prepare for extraction.”

“Gladly,” Sara turned back to look back over the city, watching the massive anti-aircraft guns hit their targets. “SAM… will the city survive?”

“The probability is good,” SAM replied quietly. “The Kett have no defenses against the Remnant turrets. Judging by the minimal inference in the city, I would say they have no defenses against Remnant technology whatsoever. This may explain their interest in you, personally.”

“Right, it's not me, it's my implant.” Sara repeated, in a relieved voice, and stepped out on the edge to drop off, jumpjets popping. “Let’s get out of here – at least for now. Let's let the city fight back, before we step back in. In the meantime, we’ll go over the data with Suvi and the rest.” She landed, knees bending and straightening. “And I have a powerful need to call Tann on his bullshit.”
Liam would have given anything to be a fly on the wall to witness the vidcom of Tann from the Nexus. “You were right, all is forgiven. Your results are what matters, as long as I look good,” he muttered into the datapad he was holding, trying to write an email titled ‘Creation’.

It was going pretty well, actually, despite his idiot mouth. He’d managed to communicate the bit about how her Dad had created a form of life – and how cool that was. He knew Suvi was up on the bridge having a crisis of faith, but he… he didn’t need to believe in a god to believe in a creator. People created things all the time. Just some were better at it than others.

And after their little trip, who knows? If his mouth ever got out of the way, then maybe, somebody, after all this shit was finally over, he and the Pathfinder might get to make a little creation of their own.

He deleted that line immediately. No point scaring her away.

Sara took that moment to end her call, and drift back down the ramp towards the research station, looking worn out, but a triumphant swing in her hips. “So the arse is still an arse, but at least he said ‘You were right?’” Liam grinned up at her.

“Young. And bonus – I got to say ‘I told you so’,” she smirked, and leaned up against the console. “So… come here often?”

He snorted. “Weak. I’ve come to expect better.”

“I don’t know,” she winked. “You come a lot.”

He groaned. “Sara, please.” But he put down the datapad and wrapped his arms around her. She leaned into his shoulder for a brief moment before sighing and pulling away.

“Sorry, got to talk to Jaal. I can’t even imagine how this would screw me up.”

“Yeah.” He took a deep breath. “I’ve got to get back to something anyway. We’ll talk later?”

“I know it.” She gave his usual answer, and for a minute the world seemed… wrong. But he shook it off, and grinned, and watched her squirm.

“You going, or not?”

“Ass.” She stepped away at last, towards a duty that she was scared to complete. He was getting really good at keeping her moving.

“Think you missed an adjective.” Least that got her laughing, as she drifted into the science lab, to talk to their favorite Angaran.

He tried not to listen, but the voices were hard to miss. Jaal didn’t sound angry. He was getting excited.

Sara’s conclusions on that – that the city wasn’t actually Meridian – had shook him up, but the data all pointed to it. You couldn’t fight fact, much as you wanted to. And hopefully SAM and Suvi were on to something that would help. The briefing was in an hour, as soon as Sara got a chance to
shower and eat something.

He finished his email, sent it off, and turned for the showers, deliberately. Sara would be in a few, as soon as Jaal wound himself down.

While he waited, maybe he’d pretend the falling water was rain.
Chapter 108

Chapter Summary

Come on, The Last Jedi is out, and you expected me not to post a chapter?

You don't know me very well.

“So we’re placing probes strategically.” Sara summed up. “Then we’ll go back to Khi Tasira, tell the scouting ships to map the Scourge, follow them, and then find out for once and for all where Meridian is, and how to get there.”

She was trying to use the Angaran name for the place now that they needed to tell the difference between the Remnant city and the unknown hub location for the vaults. It felt… right, somehow, to give it the name it had been called for centuries.

“So all that remains, is who gets to go,” she finished. “Thoughts? SAM?”

“My recommendations remain.”

“Drack needs another week off his leg,” Lexi flushed, half irritated and half something else. “And I’ve told Kesh as much,” she warned the Krogan. “Suvi is working on the programming to improve your synchronization, so I don’t want to hear a word of complaint, either.”

“Didn’t know you cared.”

“Of course, I care, you…” the doctor threw her hands up. “Nevermind. You’re impossible.”

“I wanna go,” Liam muttered, hoping Sara would hear. She nodded, imperceptibly.

The rest of the table was silent. “Oh, just take Jaal,” Peebe filled in the silence. “You two did well enough on the last go through. You might as well keep it up. It’s not like this a big deal – you’ll just activate a couple consoles at the most. I’ll help Suvi monitor the Scourge and Remnant activity from here. Couple of alterations, and Poc’ll be able to help, even.”

Sara tilted her head sideways, “Thanks, Peebs.”

“Just… bring him back alive,” she sniffed, flicking her fingers in apparent dismissal.

Jaal blinked, slowly. “Does that mean…”

“It means nothing except that I have more questions to ask you before you die horribly.” The Asari stuck her tongue out at him, and gathered up her datapads. “I have work to do.”

“We all have work to do,” Sara admitted. “All right, Liam and Jaal it is.” She shivered. “Is it cold in here?”

“The ship’s temperature is within normal parameters.”

“Just me then.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “Okay, I’m going to go change into something warmer. Suvi – you’ve got the probes prepped?”
“Aye, Pathfinder.”

“Great. SAM’s all yours, until it gets done. I need a nap.” Sara turned to drift away. Liam loping to catch up, wrapping an arm around her back. She gave in and leaned against him, gently.

“You okay?”

“Probably just coming down with a cold,” she shivered again. “Think I’ll wrap up in my blanket and watch a vid. It’ll be a day or two, before we’ll be ready to land.”

“Mind if I join you?”

She turned to look at him, a smile creeping up around the edges. “Under the blanket?”

“That was my thought, yes.”

“Deal,” she laughed a little, and wrapped her arms around his neck. “I’d love a little company.” He ran his hands along her sides, noting the gooseflesh.

“Sara, you’re freezing. Didn’t you shower? I was soaked through.”

She shrugged, “Jaal was excited. I couldn’t cut him off to bathe. I’ll get one in a bit.” She let him go, backing away and only turning to descend the ladder to their quarters. “You?”

“Yeah. Waited for you, but ran out of hot water.” Liam sighed, long and exaggerated. “Sure could use that hack…”

“Nope, not unless we’re sharing.” She winked. “Have to conserve the energy.”

“Fine, I won’t get in with you, then,” he grinned at her protests, but still turned her left at the bottom of the ladder. “Go on, jump in there. You’ll catch your death otherwise, as my Mum would say.”

She snorted. “That’s not hard science, Kosta.”

“Never tell that to my Mum.” He unlocked her locker, handing her over her supplies, sniffing the distinctive scent of her strawberry scrub. “God, I miss strawberries. Straight up, I’d kill the Archon for just one.”

“Is that all I need to do to motivate you?” She popped her head out and took the basket. “Give you strawberries?”

“Worth a try,” his stomach growled. “I’m going to go get something lined up for us to eat. Something not ramen. Think we’re out of paraipo…”

“Deal,” she called out from under the falling water. “Maybe try for the blackberry preserves. Could use the Vitamin C.”

“Not hard science, Pathfinder.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.”
Chapter 109

Kallo dropped them back into the city two days later, at a slightly different location than the first – this one more vault-like, with a large locked door leading downward. “Well, this looks familiar,” she snarked, stepping up to it. “Think we’ll have to outrun a purification field before we activate the scouting ships?”

“God, I hope not,” Liam shuddered. “I mean, how long do you think the Archon will stay away? We just need to turn those ships on and get back to the Tempest, right?”

“Right.” She hacked the door, and stepped up to the console, turning the dull metal orange with her scanner. “Got it. SAM?”

“Scouting ships engaged. Locking onto Meridian.” The AI was silent for a moment. “I have navpoints, Pathfinder.”

“Awesome.” She sagged sideways, lifting her hand to her head, feeling a little dizzy. “SAM… what’s it look like?”

“It is a planet.” Sam brought up a display, showing a clear picture.

“A Remnant Planet?” Jaal breathed, reverant. “Constructed?”

Liam approached, reaching out a glove. “Like a Dyson sphere, but… moon sized.” Sara swayed, but he chuckled, not noticing.

“That’s no moon,” Sara joked, and Liam huffed one of his little laughs. Another wave of vertigo made her grab for the console in front of her. “SAM… feeling a little weird, here. Is everything okay?”

Liam’s attention wavered from the display to her, and she watched his brow furrow, like it was in slow motion. “Sara, you don’t look…”

“SAM?”

“Congratulations, Pathfinder.” The Archon’s voice echoed through her brain, and she winced, limbs jerking.

“Sara?” Liam grabbed her shoulders. “What’s going on?”

“The Archon.” She gasped.

“What? Where?”

“My head…”

“I used you to find Meridian,” the Archon rejoiced. “Your implant and the AI attached to it – it allows you to communicate with the Remnant. And thanks to your memories, I know where I can find another one.”

Her brother’s face – round and childlike, at first, but morphing into an adult version of himself, short beard and all – crossed her mind, as if drawn there by an unseen force.

“Scott,” She moaned, and fell to her knees. “Liam,” she whispered, trying to lift her arms, and
failing. “Help.”

The world went black, and the last word she heard was “Shit,” muttered with an Angaran accent.

It seemed Jaal had finally learned how to curse.
Chapter 110

Chapter Summary

Third chapter of the day.

I have a goal to fully post this by Christmas. Let's see if I can make it!

Liam slammed his hands into her chest. “SAM! What’s going on?”

“The door is secure,” Jaal mourned. “We are trapped. I can’t contact the Tempest, or SAM...”

“I fucking know!” He snapped at his best friend, counting compressions, and then breathing twice into her mouth, trying to ignore the gathering cold on her lips. “Come on, Sara,” he begged. “You promised no more dying. You promised. I’m gonna drag your ass in front of HR for this – remember?”

“Let me,” Jaal shoved him aside. “Lexi believes the electromagnetic nature of Angaran skin might stimulate...”

He let himself be pushed away, in favor of marching for the door and trying several things to get it to open. Out of desperation, pointed his Omni-Tool at it and said, “Alohamora. Open Sesame. Shit, open, damn you!” He slammed his shoulder into it.

Behind him, he heard a groan.

“She’s breathing!” Jaal called out. Liam flipped back, and saw Sara’s chest rising. “I have a pulse,” the Angaran added, looking doubtful at where his digits pressed against her wrist. “I think.”

Sara’s vitals revealed themselves on his screen, as if he was the team leader, and he cursed, “Holy Fucking Hell, she's...”

“Her vitals are all over the place,” Jaal stared down at her face, wide eyes wider than Liam had ever seen, as Sara began to stir. “What happened?”

Liam slammed his hand into the stupid door once more for good measure before turning back to her side. “Sara?” She reached out her hand, and he helped her up, trying to ignore the burst blood vessels in her eyes.

“We have to get out of here,” she whimpered. “We have to get back.” She stumbled away from him to the console that worked the main door.

“Sara, you’re not fit...” It was obvious she’d lost her connection with SAM. “Take it easy...”

“We have to get back,” she stressed, and held out her hand over the console, like she’d done a million times before. A single key moved.

“What the fuck are you doing? You don’t have SAM!” But the keys rippled anyway. “Holy shit.” Liam stared, and wrapped his arm around her waist to keep her upright. “How...”
“We have to get back,” her voice was gentle, and fierce, and everything that was Sara Ryder in one harmonious melody made up of those five words.

And the console shifted again, finished its cycle of probabilities, and – the door opened.

"It is... a miracle," Jaal breathed.

"Help me lift her..." Sara had slumped against him, not quite a dead weight, but not helping much either. Together, they half-carried a barely walking Sara to the entrance, and beyond.

“Pathfinder!” Suvi’s voice rang out.

“Suvi!” Liam could have wept with relief. “Sara’s doing weird shit without SAM!” Sara lifted a hand and wiped under her nose, eyes unfocused.

“Kallo!”

“I have them! Preparing extraction. Gil?”

“I’ve got you,” the engineer affirmed. “Do your thing - the Core’ll keep up.”

“What’s happening?” Suvi demanded.

“The Archon is taking the Hyperion,” Sara managed. “He has Scott.”

“How the fuck do you know-” Liam began.

“Shite! Shite!” Suvi cursed. “Kallo…”

“We’re getting you out of there, Pathfinder,” Gil ordered. “Stay put.”

Sara slumped against Liam. “Our implants…”

Liam cuddled her close, listening to the engines of the Tempest drawing nearer. “They’re almost here, Sara.” He had enough dying to last him the rest of his life.

“Tired.” She lifted her hand to touch his face. “Love you.”

“Don’t talk like that. Lexi’ll fix you up.”

Sara nodded, and let her hand fall. He caught it and kissed it. “They’re here!” Jaal exalted, and came to lift her with him. Sara managed to stumble into an approximation of a run – and Liam supported her with his own jumpjets when she failed to fire hers to make it onto the Tempest’s ramp, grabbing on one handed.

“You’ve got us,” he told the bridge. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.” Sara was lifted away from him, and back onto a gurney, eyes closed. “Is she...” he watched another thin line of blood trickle out of her nose. “Shit, Lexi... I can’t lose her. Not again.”

“She’ll be fine.” Lexi started, and then closed her eyes and shoved the bed towards the door. “I think.”
Chapter 111

Chapter Summary

I think I'll post one today, and one tomorrow morning. There might be another tomorrow afternoon, depending on time.

I really want this done by Christmas!

“I’ve pumped you full of drugs and stims to get you through this,” Lexi lectured. “You’re going to be miserable coming off them, but…”

“Whatver it takes, Lexi.” Sara’s eyes kept moving towards the door. She hadn’t seen Liam since… “Is Liam okay?”

“He’s anything but fine.” Lexi’s voice clipped. “He’s worried out of his head. How these things keep happening…” she cupped her head with her hand, stroking and twisting her tentacles. Sara had never seen her so agitated. “But never mind. You told me SAM wouldn’t kill you again.”

“This wasn’t that,” Sara rasped, and cleared her throat. “The Archon stopped SAM’s signal. I… lost connection. Scott - reset the system,” she tried to explain. “Just turn it off and turn it back on again, right? Isn’t that what the techs always say to try first?”

Lexi slammed her datapad into her console. “Sara Ryder, you are not a datapad!”

“I know.” Her voice was harsh, but she couldn’t temper it. “Do you think I’m happy about it? Do you think I wouldn’t change this, if I could? SAM isn’t the problem – he’s both my weakness and my strength, and that goes both ways! We can’t help that the Archon figured that out before most of the Initiative did.”

“Sara…” The doctor started, and then stopped. “Your scans are… not great, but it’s the best I can do.” She touched Sara’s hand, squeezing lightly before turning back to her screens. “I’ll monitor you from here, and send extra adrenaline with Liam.”

“Great,” Sara muttered. “Just what I need, to shake so bad I can’t hit the broadside of an Architect.”

“I’m doing the best I can for you.”

“I know.” Sara hesitated, and the pressed on. “Can I ask for one more thing before we go?”

“Anything,” the doctor’s voice softened.

Sara licked her too-dry lips. “I need to dye my hair. Not sure I can manage to do it myself, though.”

Lexi jerked her head up from her datapad, and then smiled. “Of course.” She raised an eyebrow. “Have a color in mind?”

“Mnhmm.” Sara’s lips turned up. “Those dye samples Suvi got on Elaadan. Think she can tweak them a bit, so that it will bond with my hair protein?”
"If she can't, I can." The doctor sighed. "Is this a warpaint thing? Earth cultures did that, didn't they?"

"Some of them." Sara shrugged. "It's more about... taking everything back, though. Scott, Meridian, the Angaran worlds, my implant. It's about keeping me, me, and SAM part of me, and me part of him." She rolled her eyes, "Don't make me try to explain it."

"No need," Lexi tapped her 'Tool briskly. "Suvi is on her way."

~SS~

"It'll be good for a few weeks, I'd say," the scientist grinned. "Not gonna fade easy, this one. But it won't give you blisters, either, not now that I've adjusted the pH."

"Good," Sara, with the drug cocktail running through her system, felt almost normal. She shifted in her seat in the shower. "Almost done?"


Sara stared in the hand mirror, cheeks flushing. "Wow. Been a while since I was this color."

"It suits you better than blue. Brings out your eyes," Lexi nodded, crisp. "Go on. Get dressed. I'll clean up in here."

"Thanks, Lexi." She squeezed the doctor's hand. "Thanks for everything."

She struggled into her clothes, blew her hair out, loose for once, since there was someone to impress. Just as she was finishing, Liam pinged her. "Kallo's ready, but before anything, we need to talk, Pathfinder. I'm on the bridge."

Slowly she climbed the ladder, and stepped between the sliding doors. "Hey, Mr. Kosta."
Chapter 112

Chapter Summary

Wanted to get this done by Christmas, and now I'm trying for New Year's.

Right. There will be a few chapters today. Not sure how many.

Liam was staring off into the display that faced the world they knew as Meridian when he heard the door swish open. He turned at the sound, and stared. “Shit.”

Sara twirled a strand of flaming pink-red around her finger, and then let go. The curl held its shape. “Figured it was the least I could do.” She had a hard time meeting his eyes. “I’m tired of Initiative blue. This is our victory, not Tann’s. I wanted… to make a statement.” She shrugged, one-shouldered. “You said you were craving strawberries, right?”

“It’s…” he shook his head. “It’s crazy. It’s gorgeous. You’re gorgeous.” He laughed, and stepped forward. “Are you sure we have to go find Meridian right this minute?” He took her hips, and angled her in between his legs, breathing strawberries. “Kinda got other things on my mind.”

“Keep it in your pants, Kosta.” But she laughed. “This mission is sort of important. But you like the red?” She sounded unsure, as she so rarely did around him anymore.

“Always loved red. Love it even more on you. But right.” He shook himself, reminding why, exactly, he’d wanted to talk to her here. She was shaking a little under his hands, her eyes sunken. She wasn’t well, and now he felt an absolute fool for needing to ask, like it was selfish to ask for reassurance. “Sara, I need to know you’re all right. Lexi said she’d have you back on your feet, and SAM’s back, at least enough to keep you going, but…”

Sara took his hands. “I’m fi-” she hesitated. “Strike that. I’m not fine. Lexi has me on more drugs than she’s comfortable with listing. She loves her lists. Liam… I’m fucking petrified. But I don’t have a choice, right? The Archon has Scott, and the Hyperion. As Veta said, that’s thousands of hostages. I have to save them. Even if Scott doesn’t make it – he has the Hyperion. That means he has my mother. Who could make more implants, if…” He took her hands gently in his, when she didn’t finish and he stroked her gloves.

“That’s the worst case scenario.”

She backed away slightly, pulling him with her. “We can’t let that happen. Let’s get this show on the road.”

“What, no kiss?”

“Nope.” Her breath shook her shoulders. “Gotta focus on the mission.”

He kissed her forehead. “You promised, Sara. No more dying.”

“Don’t pile on, Kosta. And it goes both ways, dumbass. You can’t die on me, either. I’ll never ask you to do that for me.”
“You wouldn’t have to.” Giving into temptation, he bent and kissed her, cupping her jaw and scooping her towards him. She returned the kiss in equal measure and then drew him back, into the loadout closet and pressed him up against the bench, and he choked. “Sara. I thought there was no good-bye kiss?”

“Shut up, Kosta.” But she bowed her head, looking away. “I might not come out of this, whatever we want.”

“Shut up, Sara.” He forced her chin up. “You’re coming back. Can’t do without our Pathfinder.”

“Your Pathfinder.”

“Whatever.” His eyes clouded up, and he blinked, furiously. “You’re coming back. Say it.”

“Done it a few times before, right?”

“Close enough.” He grabbed her Isharay from the locker and pressed it into her hands. “It’s dangerous to go alone. Take this.” He bent down and kissed her again. “And this.” He did it again, deepening the kiss, and this time not stopping, letting the moment continue until he was the one shaking. “Sara.”

“I know.” She choked out and shouldered her gun. “Let’s go kill some Kett.”

He grinned, “There you are, Pathfinder.” He took a deep breath, “All right. Let’s show ‘em how it’s done.”
Chapter Summary

Second chapter of the day

Around them, the Remnant threw themselves at the Archon’s forces, bright angles in a sea of dark stars. “You continue to defy your limitations. Impressive.” Sara managed not to shudder at the Archon’s face, centered on her screen.

“Scott, are you all right?” She couldn’t see her brother, but he had to be nearby, if the Archon had shanghaied the Hyperion to get to him. He needed him – alive, not exalted. She hoped…

“He’s insane,” Scott’s voice cracked. “If we don’t submit, he’ll destroy everyone in Heleus. That’s why he took me and SAM…”

“You say that as though I should feel guilty. Exaltation is a gift. Those that can’t see that deserve to die.” The Archon’s camera was zoomed in too close – Sara could see every pore in his transformed face. Had he been Angara once? She wasn’t sure she wanted to know. He babbled on about SAM and the implant’s connection with the Remnant, shrugging off her raising a fleet with the nonchalance of someone with an army standing between him and his greatest enemy. “And now, I have both. I no longer need you, Pathfinder, but since you insist on interfering… I’ll give you my full attention.”

“It’s the entire Kett fleet,” Suvi whispered. “That’s more than we thought…” her voice shook.

“We’ve got this,” Sara murmured back, trying to show more confidence than she felt. They needed to believe in her. The Kett ships flanked them effortlessly, and Kallo’s untranslated Salarian curses shocked her out of her focus.

“Rock and a hard place, Ryder. The Sourge or the Kett, I don’t know which is worse.”

“The Scourge and the Kett,” Sara stared at the Scourge, watching it retreat from the Remnant ships. “Kallo, how close can you edge the Scourge?”


“I just realized the Remnant are pulling our best chance at beating this,” She shuddered, feeling another of her father’s memories creeping into her consciousness. But SAM wasn’t fully online… it shouldn’t be happening… “Just get in close and trust me.” She refocused on the screen, tightening her hands on the railing. “It’s time the Scourge worked for us.”

The Scourge retreated, the golden black of its dangerous lace burning like embers in the darkness of the space around them. Kett ships dissolved in it.

“Like butter,” Gil’s voice echoed through the comm. “Good work, Kallo.”

Kallo’s snort at the approbation was musical. “I’ll remember you said that.”

This clusterfuck is all you.” Behind her, Liam choked out one of the little laughs she loved. “I’m not playing your games anymore.”

“You wish to force my hand.” The Archon’s eyes narrowed. “So be it.” He turned away, the camera swinging wide to show Scott, strapped down in a chair, Captain Dunn next to him. Sara shook with her suppressed anger. “Unlike you and the Pathfinder,” he addressed her brother, haughty and imperious. “I do not require an implant. I have yours.” He reached out his hand and Scott screamed – the high pitch note she hadn’t heard since the last time he’d broken a bone trying to keep up with her. “You’ve made this much more difficult, Pathfinder. But not for me.” She had to look away, away from her brother’s torment.

She couldn’t do anything. Not yet, anyway. She motioned to Suvi to cut the signal, and her brother’s screams cut off just as abruptly.

They approached the black dome of the planet, watching it ripple open, spreading into Remnant tiles to allow them through. It gaped, and Kallo shot them forward, into blinding light. Sara squinted, and the world… inverted. “Suvi… what am I looking at?”

“A wonder,” the scientist murmured, reverently.

“Sorry!” Kallo gasped, “Gravity’s inverted.” He flipped the ship, everyone shifted sideways to accommodate the change.

“Can’t see the Hyperion,” Suvi’s fingers flew over her console. “Extrapolating from last known position.”

“It wasn’t built for landing,” Kallo stressed, his voice tight. “We’ll beat it down, like it or not.”

“Goddess,” Peebee said softly.

Sara turned away from impressions of mountains and rivers, “Wherever the Archon goes to ground, that’s where we’re headed,” she instructed Kallo. “I’m getting to the Nomad.” She grabbed her helmet out of Liam’s hand, ignoring his uncharacteristic silence. “Gil, prep for a hot drop.”

She was running for the cargo bay, Liam right behind her, Jaal behind him.

“Ready and willing.” Gil whistled. “I don’t want to think about what this is going to do to my baby’s suspension.”

“Sorry.” Sara climbed into the Nomad, with a flurry of safety straps and buckles. “We’re in.”

“Don’t be.” Gil snorted, “Some things can be fixed.” He knocked on the door, and backed away with the rest of the team. “Hot drop in 5. 4. 3…”
Chapter 114

Chapter Summary

Third chapter of the day

The Nomad dropped out of the Tempest and landed on all fours. “Like a puma,” Sara muttered, and Liam outright chuckled as she put it into gear, disengaged traction control, and took off at top speed, all six tires spinning in the soft mud of a new planet. “Holy…” she murmured eyes wide behind her visor. The world… sparkled with life of all kinds. Liam’s eyes hurt as he tried to take it all in, and his defroster kicked in as the tears leaked out.

Sara never blinked, bounding over the low hills before them, mind engaged. “Pathfinder, I’ve arranged a ‘distraction’ while I find Meridian Control.”

She sped up further, Suvi’s voice echoing now. “Pathfinder, it’s nav dead! That’s why we lost it.”

“The Archon’s betting we won’t chase him with the Ark at risk.” Sara yelled.

“We’ll guard the Hyperion,”

“Kandros? Who’s with you?”

“Kadara.” Liam’s gut clenched at the sound of Vidal’s voice. “Mind if I drop in? I’ve always said, the more the merrier…”

“Let’s find the Archon.” Liam couldn’t believe her focus, even while her hand shook with the adrenaline.

“Pathfinder, he’s taken them!”

“Captain Dunn?” Sara’s voice broke, and Liam’s heart with it.

“The Core is lit up like Christmas, but SAM’s not talking!” The woman’s voice was exhausted, desperate. “I think the Archon… shit, I don’t know what he did. He has Scott. Whatever Meridian can do, he’ll try to take it.”

“Just focus on flying,” Sara shoved her helmet back, cursing, and Liam saw the tears running down her cheeks. “I’ll find them.”

“Them?” Liam asked.

“He has my family,” Sara rubbed her cheek against her paldro, leaving a red mark where it scratched. “I’m gonna make that bastard pay.” She spun out around a corner, and Liam listened to Dunn’s final orders, silent now in the face of her fear and grief.

“That’s… not the Hyperion,” Sara said at last, drawing Liam’s attention back to the world around him.

Over the radio, the Initiative and their allies organized and engaged the defense of the Hyperion.
Liam shook his head, and held on for dear life as Sara – without her usual Stig-like control – drove over rocks and trees and other life in the most direct route to their goal. Meridian flew past them – and only general impressions of more greenery than he’d seen maybe in his entire life settled in his brain. She splashed through rivers, ignoring the ground forces, launching off cliffs and through the branches of trees like some kind of monkey.

Reyes reported in again, just beyond the structures Suvi was directing them to – relating energy readings. “I’m no SAM, but that’s got to be some kind of control.” Guess he wasn’t all bad, after all, if he was willing to show up for this shitshow, just to get shot at. Liam wasn’t going to be apologizing for anything anytime soon, but… hey, credit where it was due.

“HOLD ON!” Sara ordered them, and Liam reached up for the ‘Oh, Shit’ bar just in time for her to rocket them off a cliff at top speed.

The Nomad hit the ground with an impact that jarred every joint in his body. Gil groaned over the comms, and sparks rose from the vehicle’s engine. “SHIT!” She yelled, slamming her hand into the console. “We walk from here, guys.”

Liam and Jaal maneuvered themselves out the doors without getting shocked, but Sara had already jumpjetted away firing at the Kett, her headshots epic. Half the enemy was down before they reached the first barricade. They sprinted for the door, only to discover it was locked. “SHIT!” Sara slammed the butt of her rifle into it. “Ideas?”

“Working on it,” Gil announced.

“Another dropship on the way in!” Kallo announced.

“HOLD THIS POSITION,” Sara ordered, as Kett descended from the ship like raindrops.

Liam ended up behind the same crate as Vidal, and the bastard grinned at him before shooting over his head at the Annointed flanking him. “Thanks,” he muttered, begrudgingly.

“Anytime.” Vidal grinned, wolfishly. “So… you and our lovely Pathfinder?”

“Is this really the time for this conversation?” Liam gritted his jaw, and threw a grenade.

“Is there a better time?” Vidal shrugged, and shot two Kett through the shoulders, disarming them. “I would hate to see her to get hurt. I would be… most put out.”

“As if,” Liam shouted over the sound of the Kett ship’s engine. “You’d be there to pick up the pieces.”

The other man laughed. “Perhaps, after a time.”

“Well, I’ve got news for you, mate,” Liam knelt and fired at what passed for knees on the Kett Chosen. “I don’t intend to let her go anytime soon.”

“Congratulations,” the man sounded sincere. “When is the happy day?”

“When I get around to asking her.”

Vidal’s laughter was swallowed by Sara’s curses as she boosted her way over to them. “Playing nice, guys?”

“The nicest.”
“Always,” Vidal agreed.

She eyed them dubiously, and squatted, rolling her neck. “Gil’s attempt stalled. I’m gonna try and hack the door.”

“No way,” Liam protested. “Pathfinder, Lexi said you have to quit doing this stuff without-“

“Have you got a better idea, Kosta?” He worked his mouth, but came up with nothing. “That’s what I thought.”

“I do,” Vidal lifted a small square. “Are you familiar with these?”

“A Remnant Encryption Key,” Sara’s face lit up. “Vidal, you’re a hero.”

“Finally, some recognition.” The man winked at Liam.

“Yeah, whatever. Get it open, and then I’ll be impressed.”

It opened as they approached, making the question moot. “Okay… that’s unusual.”

“Is the Remnant not… fighting? Or just not locking us out anymore?” They wandered down the mossy, overgrown corridors – just a strange juxtaposition from the sterile environment of the other vaults on the dying worlds. Above them floated a plethora of inactive, but living, Remnant, either unaware of their presence or uncaring. Lights rose from the floor, lighting the way. Doors locked themselves in what appeared to be a random manner, but… “What is going on?” Liam grunted with frustration, but Sara shivered. “Hey, you okay?”

“Fine.” She looked around. “It’s just… these lights coming up from the floor. The doors. The inactive Remnant…” she took a deep breath. “It’s Scott – and SAM. They’re here. Guiding us. They’re fighting him.”

“Whoa.” Liam suppressed his own shudder by holding his gun a little tighter. “That’s…”

Sara shook her head. “We’ve got to save him.”

Rivers of electromagnetic sludge flowed through the chambers, and the group was forced to hop over them like skipping stones. “Scott’s here,” Sara whimpered, and stepped up her pace.

“How do you…”

“He’s lighting our way.” Sara indicated the lights rising through the floor. “If the Archon hurts him…”

His screams echoed through the vault, and Sara moved into a steady jog. “Scott…”

Liam could only follow as the sound of her brother’s torment bounced off everywhere. “Do we know where we’re going?”

“Yes,” she half-sobbed. “Yes. Just please…”

On his visor screen, Sara’s vitals jumped and wriggled as her body attempted to both accommodate the drugs Lexi had administered and still manage to do things like keep her heart beating. “Keep your head,” Jaal warned. “You cannot help your brother if you don’t-”

Sara choked, running for the next door. “He’s fighting him. It’s why it’s hurting. Scott’s fighting the Archon to give us time! Hold on, Scott! I’m coming!”
She was sprinting now, running full-tilt with her gun in her hands, dodging firewalls and the occasional Remnant bot without stopping to engage.

They moved through a junction, another maze of tunnels twisting off a crossroads, without glancing in the other directions. Another scream rippled through the still air and Liam heard Sara retch. “Sara…”

“I’m okay,” she was still running, stopping only to hack the next door. “I’m okay. He’ll be okay. Shit, I can’t lose anyone else…” The door before them was sealed. “Damn it.” She put her hand on it. “Damn it, Scott. I need to get through.”

The door whirred, unlocking itself, sliding apart seamlessly, a silent answer to her plea. “Can he… hear you?”

Sara didn’t answer, as madness emerged beyond the door.

Liam wasn’t sure how long they fought. For a few minutes, for hours? Time bled into itself, as they battled for everyone’s lives. There were so many… at some point the rest of the ground team joined them – so it had to be long enough for the Tempest to land, and transfer…

But his brain wouldn’t do the math any longer, too busy trying to maintain his brain and keep him firing.

Sara’s tears had dried into dusty tracks, smeared with filthy dirt. Drack’s scouts joined them – Liam fighting alongside Birtak for a while, bemused at the Krogan’s war cries and laughter in the face of death.

He registered a dozen mental snapshots of the fight. Vaguely understood the Resistance taking up the rear guard. Kandros’ withdrawal as his forces were overwhelmed. Peebee’s angry yell as something made contact with her arm. Jaal dragging her to safety.

Grenades and the explosions of yet another Ascendant’s glowy orange energy, moving in slow motion towards the Pathfinder.

And then, another door. “Multiple system failures on the Hyperion,” Suvi reported, and Captain Dunn, desperate to save her people. Sara leaned up against the door, and Liam fingered the adrenaline injections in his cargo pocket, pondering.

“Captain Dunn?”

“The cryo pods are safe.”

Sara shoved herself on the wall and limped for the gravity well just up the rise. Kett fired at her, and she returned fire, eyes blank and stupid as she pushed. “Mom’s safe,” she muttered. “Scott, Dunn saved Mom.”

“You saved her, too.”

But Sara wasn’t listening. The last Kett fell, and Liam stumbled to her side just as she activated the well.

They fell through the earth, like space and time were bending around them. Liam grasped her forearms, dragging her attention back to him. “Sara?”

“Adrenaline,” she managed, and Liam dragged out the shot from his pocket, injecting her while they
fell, crumpling into the floor in a shaking heap. “I can do this,” her face was pale, her eyes dilated so that he couldn’t see that muddy grey-green. “I can…”

“I know.” He squeezed her arm. “You got this, right?”

She nodded, once, and shifted out of the way as Jaal descended, more gracefully, alone.

“Do it,” a voice echoed. “Secure the adaptation matrix.”

“Is that the Archon?”

“He’s in Scott’s head,” Sara whispered. “And mine. We’re… connected.”

“Shit. Shit!” Liam cursed.

She shook her head. “It means he’s okay. He’s still fighting.”

“Okay,” his breath shuddered.

Scott screamed again, as the Archon spoke over him. “I will use your connection.” The noise echoed over the comms.

“I’m going to fucking kill him for this,” Sara’s step firmed, and she broke into a run towards an orange glowing door. “There. He’s there. They’re both there.”

She slid through the door as soon as it cracked open. “Scott!”


“You helped.” Liam wasn’t sure if he’d ever heard her sound so gentle. “Take it easy, okay?”

Scott huffed. “Likes the sound of his own voice.”

The Archon turned the connection back on him, and he tensed painfully, and Sara lunged forward. “I will transcend what you pretend to be.”


Her confidence shone through her voice, and Liam could have grinned. “Took her long enough,” he muttered to Jaal, who looked confused. “I’ll explain later.”

The Archon blathered on, something about accidents, and trial and error, and being the heir of a thousand species… but Liam tuned it out, in favor of checking his weapons. Behind the Kett, the Remnant were powering up – red and blue and orange lights glowing ominously in a flashing, epileptic wonder.

And then the Archon rose into the air, connected with Remnant cables, and sparking with energy, “No more mercy,” he ordered. “Kill them all.”

“He’s still using Scott,” Sara snapped, and stared firing at the Kett he’d left behind, and dodging the Ascendant.

“I’m fine, but you have to stop them!” Scott yelled. “Shit! He has access!”

“I can see the network!” The Archon reveled, far above them all. Liam fired at the Ascendant’s Orb,
taking it out with Jaal, and then emptying his magazine into the creature himself. The Archon didn’t even hesitate. “They were architects of life. You commanded nothing!”

“I made the cluster livable for thousands!” Sara thrust her chin in the air.

“Is this really the time for this conversation?” Liam snapped at her. “I’m all for self-confidence, but now? Really? You want to compare dicks now?”

She crinkled her nose at him – for just a moment the Sara he loved, instead of the Pathfinder, as the Archon rejoined. “No. You have lead your people to their deaths.”

The building energy exploded, and an Architect emerged from the floor. “IGNORE IT!” She yelled at all of them. “It’s just a distraction!”

“The Archon is drawing too much power. Use the consoles! Interface!” Scott yelled.

“Got it, baby brother.”

Scott managed a weak chuckle before falling ominously silent again.

They split up – Liam and Jaal to take out the Remnant, and Sara to find the first console, navpoints marked clearly, thanks to a moaning Scott. He emptied his belt of grenades, one after the other, until… “Hello, Sara.”

“SAM?!” His girl slumped against a wall. “God, I’ve missed you. How?”

“You weaken his connection as you kill more Remnant.”

“I can do that,” Sara managed, and sprinted for the other side of the room. “Just help Scott, SAM. As much as you can.” The Architect sent off one of its drawn out energy fields, filled with debris at her, and she barely dodged, slipping on the slick surface, and boosting herself up to reach the Remnant bridge appearing out of nowhere.

“Wait until I tell Evfra there are two of them,” Jaal muttered next to him, pressing on a cut on his upper arm.

Liam choked, and Sara turned back to look at him.

A nullifier shot her in the back, and she fell. “No!”

He threw himself over the side of the pillar, grabbing her hand where she held on, eyes wide and scared. “Don’t you dare let go of me.”

She smiled, weak. “Jumpjets, remember?” She engaged them, boosting herself up, but grabbing on his shoulders. “Didn’t lose my head. Not this time.” She jetted away, to the next console. “That’s it!” She yelled. “That’s all of them!”

“You weaken his connection as you kill more Remnant.”

“Exposing Power Relay,” SAM’s voice, serene as always, exposited. “Please hold.”

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“She connected with the last console, slumping against the floor after it engaged. Liam knelt next to her, but she nodded behind her. “Look.”
The Archon’s power draw… imploded. Together, they watched him fry himself on his own greed.

But Sara hoisted herself up, and hobbled over to him, up the Remnant tile ramp. She stood over him, ignoring even Scott in favor of her enemy. She stalked over to his remains, lifted her Isharay, and emptied her last two bullets into it. “STUPID,” she gasped, lowering the weapon. Then she frowned, “Worth it.”

Liam muffled his laughter over her ongoing *Deadpool* quotes. “Hey, I said it first.”

“Habitat 7, right?”

“Told you it was a date.”

“Not a date, Kosta.”

“Sara, I think you have some explaining to do,” her brother gasped out behind her, and Liam saw her snap back into herself, and run to his side. “Help me,” she ordered both of them.

Together, they lifted him up, and slowly they made their way back to the entrance of Meridian’s vault.

The fighters had long since finished, even the wounded and dead removed from where they’d fallen. When they surfaced, they all squinted – not used to the daylight after the hours spent underground, fighting and subduing the Architect, and the Archon. Lexi sprinted over, and her and Harry supported Scott between them, forcing Sara and Liam to let go.

“Jaal!” Peebee ran over and threw herself at the man, upper arm bandaged.

“Peebee! You are wounded!”

“Eh, just a scratch,” the girl grinned, and Jaal swung her around.

Liam was aware of Sara eying them wistfully, and grinned to himself. Her eyes were nothing but pinpoints in the daylight. She was still riding high on whatever cocktail of drugs Lexi’d given her to get through the battle. His own pulse thundered in his ears – louder than the gunshots that left deafening silence in their wake.

Hell, would she even remember if he- Liam shook himself. He’d put it off forever, waiting for the right moment. Waiting for it to be ‘long enough’ or ‘good enough’. At this point, he’d settle for ‘alive enough’.

He was gonna say it, damn it, but his palms slicked with sweat, all the same. “Vidcams are tracking live, Pathfinder,” Liam grinned at her, trying to stay cool. She was alive, he was alive. Anything was possible. “Say what you want to say.” He knew what he wanted to say, but… he’d wait. He was afraid to look at Scott, for fear her brother would clue in, and spill the beans.

She turned and walked backwards, grabbing his hand, before flipping around to watch where she was going. “I think Landing Day should be marked with an event. Something special,” her words trailed off, her tone hinting, her body language begging him to scoop her up and swirl her around like the end of one of her goofy rom-coms. He resisted, barely, in favor of something better. “Like we should…” she prompted.

“Get married?”

She spun back towards him, eyes wide with shock as she stumbled over the uneven ground. Her
pupils had gone larger, adjusting to the brighter light. “What did you…”

He swung her closer and kissed her, dipping her back like he was Fred Astaire, before she could finish her sentence. She responded, grabbing his face, and pulling him closer. Around them, people cheered like mad. When he brought her back up, she was panting at him, eyes still wide, cheeks flushed. “You did say that right? I’m not tripping on something Lexi gave me?”

“Of course, you are,” he smiled at her and watched her face soften. “After you get healed up, we’ll talk.”

She nodded, and fumbled back to face forward, too dazed to notice the entire world cheering them on. Scott lifted an eyebrow at him, shaking his head, and he shrugged at her brother, not too worried. If it worked, it worked. Liam couldn’t bring himself to care if Scott thought he lacked finesse and timing.

He knew what he wanted. All that mattered was if she wanted it too. ‘Course, the cocktail of drugs she was riding on – fuck, he really hadn’t picked his moment well.

Still, if she remembered, it would be good enough. Probably.

Back at the Hyperion, she saw her brother back to the med bay, where he was immediately dosed with painkillers, and then wandered back out, looking at the damage on their way back to the Tempest before Lexi could order her to her own bed.

She stood, tall and alone for a moment, until he came and took her hand. It was shaking. “Penny for your thoughts?”

Her hand tightened around his immediately. Made him feel better about his impulse earlier. “I’m… scared.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“About?”

“This,” she waved her hand. “All of it. I mean… we’ve got a home. That’s great. Really.” She swallowed.

“We already had a home. It’s just that now… everyone else will.”

“Oh?”

“The Tempest is a home. And it’s not like we don’t have other stuff to worry about. There’ll be new clusters. We’ll be having to improvise all sorts of crap here on Meridian - that keeps us flying around. It’s not exactly like… settling down. The adventure’s just starting, Sara – it’s just the first emergency that’s over and done with. You’re my home. And my adventure. And we’ll get to do it all together. Best of both worlds. Best of all the worlds. We’ll make ‘em all golden.”

She smiled, small. “Yeah, yeah, I guess it is.” She took a breath. “You want to talk about… What you said? Asked?” She frowned, “You didn’t really ask. Again. We need to talk about that, Kosta. You never just come out and ask.”

“Meant it though.” Liam tried to breathe, be honest. “I want a future. With you. But… I’m not ready to talk about it. Not yet. Not until you have a few less stims pumping through your system.
I… want to pull a few things together first, too.” He pulled up his Omni-tool and tapped at it. “Got a whole list. Well… five lists. Never done this before, so… thoughts are kinda scattered.”

Sara side-eyed him, and pulled his hand over to look at it. “‘New couch.’ Great minds think alike, huh?”

“Have a hard time thinking about cuddling up with a Ghibli vid on a couch with a hypothetical Sparkplug when I know I shagged you for the first time on it.” He sighed, “Goodbye, old friend…”

She nudged him with her hip. “Shhh.” She paused, “You know that any couch we have is going to have memories like that associated with it, right?”

“God, I hope so. Just… if there’s gonna ever be a Sparkplug, I gotta think about this shit. Grow up a bit.”

She raised up on her toes to kiss him. “I like both sides of you. Playful and adult. Don’t grow up too much, Liam.”

“Like the opposite of what I’m afraid of.”

She read the next item. “‘Write the words?’ Liam? You sure there isn’t something you want to say?”

“Later, Ryder. Words come hard. I want these to be mine.”

She grabbed his hand and moved it to the small of her back. “Don’t try so hard. You’ll know what you want to say when the time comes.”

“Does that mean…” but she was kissing him again, and he couldn’t finish.

He could kiss her forever, cupping her ass and pressing her against him. They might have gone a little too far, standing at the edge of Meridian, that whole new world waiting for them to explore it, if she hadn’t started shaking, bad enough to scare him. “Shit,” he braced her, mostly holding her up.

“Sara… Sara, are you okay?”

“SAM?” Her voice shook with her body, muscles quivering. “What’s…”

“The stims are wearing off, Sara,” SAM confirmed. “I didn’t want to interrupt, but you should try to get to the infirmary.”

Her legs gave way at the knees, and she fell against Liam. “Can you help?”

“…I am helping. I wanted to give you more time. Liam… can you get her to Lexi?”

“I’ve got her,” Liam lifted her up in a princess carry. “All those frustrated pushups are good for something.” She cried out, and his arms tightened. “Where am I headed?”

“Lexi says… take her to the Hyperion’s medbay. They have everything she needs there. Help her, Liam. I can’t stop the pain.” He half-jogged, opting for speed over smoothness, even though Sara cried with every jolt.

He laid her down on the first empty bed he found, and she clutched at him, desperate. “Don’t leave me?”

Liam squeezed her hand. “You’re where I want to be.” Lexi was at their side in a moment, hooking up a drip and giving her what he hoped was one last shot. Her large muscles relaxed, but her fingers
stayed tight around his fingers.

“Not going to change,” he murmured, her lips turned up, and her eyes drifted shut.
Chapter 115

Chapter Summary

This is it!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The party on the Hyperion – at least the one going on in the former command center - was as dull as
dull could get. Cora, of course, was politely chatting to one of the people in charge of the second
wave of colonization. Sara suspected that she had been born knowing how to work a room.

Jaal – whom Peebee was eying warily – seemed to be subtly flirting with one of them about the Kett
weapons that he specialized in adapting for Angaran purposes. She’d found Kelly a little rough
around the edges, but not a bad sort – especially when you got him talking about his passion. She
could see why Jaal would be tempted, but still was rooting for her friend.

Peebee opening up to anyone was a big deal, and her admitting that Jaal was a ‘nice guy’ was all but
admitting that she was over the moon for him. And everyone was curious about finding out whether
the Asari could reproduce with the Angara, right? Of course, Jaal’s personal timeline for starting a
family would probably differ significantly from Peebee’s. Angaran lifespans were a lot shorter than
Asari... but there was only one way to find out.

Sara had been good – she’d done the rounds of the dignitaries, chatted up the visitors, even finding
Kallo – who was as far from the major festivities as he could manage without being rude.

Apparently, Tann had attempted to ‘retire’ the pilot, with the excuse of needing Salarians on the
Nexus for repopulation purposes. He’d waved down her concern with a “Never you mind,
Pathfinder. I’ve been dealing with Salarian egos since birth. I know what to expect. And I know
where I belong.” His lips curled, “It’s not here. Not for long, anyway.”

She’d found Scott, released from the med bay for the occasion for a few hours, talking to an ever-
flirtatious Charlatan from Kadara. She’d nudged her brother, whispered, “Watch this one, he’s a
smooth talker,” but left him alone otherwise. Scott would need to make his own mistakes in Heleus
– and Reyes definitely qualified. Besides, Scott was the dependable one in the family – he was due a
little rebellion. And if a misguided affair helped him overcome his trauma, all the better.

The only person she’d yet to pin down was Liam, conspicuously absent in her abstract busy-ness
since she’d been released from the med-bay. It had taken days to work the drugs out of her system,
even with SAM’s help.

She suppressed that memory, with difficulty. She really didn’t want to remember the pain. Misery
didn’t even start to cover it. Liam had been right by her side whenever she’d pulled herself out of the
haze and into consciousness, looking more tired every time, but once she’d been released, he was
gone. Lexi told her he was covering Pathfinder duties she couldn’t manage – that the whole Team
was picking up the slack, and that Tann was working them overtime in her absence – and that her...
whatever he was, was in high demand. There were a lot of little fires that needed putting out as they
tried to settle Meridian, and Liam was the most versatile Pathfinder Team member besides herself.
He’d stayed as long as he could.

She should have been more thankful he was keeping himself busy, but… she missed him. That went without saying. And she wanted him to fill in the blanks around her memory.

The battle for Meridian itself was foggy. She remembered the Archon overextending, and frying himself on Remtech, but… had there been an Architect? Or had that been some sort of hallucination? She could remember hearing Scott in her head – as if he was SAM – but could everyone else hear that, too? She couldn’t remember getting back to the surface, only the weight of Scott on her shoulder. But she was pretty sure Liam had proposed. Sort of. She had beaten around the bush about him kissing her in front of God and everybody, and he’d either misinterpreted or proposed. Or both.

Sort of. She squinted, thinking she saw him talking to the woman in charge of land grants, and headed that direction. It was time to clear up that little insignificant detail.

He started when he saw her coming, and she slowed down. He regretted it then. A spur of the moment thing. Impulsive. That was Liam. And that was fine. They were both pretty young, and even if they lived together, it didn’t mean he wanted to… make it permanent, or do anything official.

“Sara!” That smile didn’t show reluctance, though. “You’re out! Thought you wouldn’t make it.”

“Yes.” She made a face, trying not to show her nervousness, “Already got tackled by the entire council, too. You’d think naming a Heleus Ambassador could wait a day. Or at least until after the party.”

Liam huffed, “Not much of a party without champagne. Though there’s dancing in the back. Peebee’s back there, writhing around. Or she was earlier, anyway. Think she was trying to ignore Jaal flirting with that Hunter Kelly dude. Or make him jealous. Or both.”

Sara shrugged, “Does it matter? Angarans don’t really do… permanent, do they? They’re polyamorous. And Asari live too long to think that way. And Peebee’s been hurt – can’t see her jumping into anything too fast after Kalinda.” The conversation was reaching awkward territory. “Speaking of permanent…”

“Bad approach, Pathfinder. Abort, abort! Pull back up before you crash and burn.” He didn’t look away, instead grinning a little wider, eyes softening.

“It takes work to be this awkward,” she smiled at him. “You know I own it. I saw you talking to the housing rep… are you looking into something? That penthouse you were talking about on Eos?” She sidled sideways to him, so that she didn’t have to look him in the eye. “Someplace you can jumpjet off into the sunset?”

Liam snorted, “Um… no. I’m thinking of getting in early here, for a place with a view.” He cleared his throat, “Have you thought about it? Pathfinder will get top choice. Maybe… someplace with enough room for two?”

Sara went very still, and snuck a look at him. He was staring at her hopefully. “Two, huh?”

“Or more.” His forehead was beaded with sweat, but his tone was light and easy. “I mean, it makes sense to have room for a few more people. Could use the space? I mean, I don’t think Scott wants to move in with you, but he’ll want to visit.”

“How do you know Scott doesn’t want to live with me?” Sara’s heart stopped, but SAM didn’t restart it. “Liam,” she caught her breath, and kept up with his teasing tone. “Just how many people
would we need room for?”

“Well, we’d need room for Drack, and Jaal.” Sara nodded. They’d want their friends to be near, and hopefully they’d visit often… Jaal had already expressed a desire to relocate to Meridian. But Liam kept going. “And little Suvi’s gonna need her own room soon?” His voice ended up on a hopeful, wistful note.

Her mouth dropped open. “Right.” Her heart was beating, it turned out – a constant throbbing in her ears. “SAM…”

“Your heart rate is accelerated, but there is no cause for concern,” the AI confirmed. “Are congratulations in order?”

Liam seemed to be waiting for something. “Did you want to… talk about what you asked? Sort of asked?” Sara prompted, hoping for clarification.

“No. Not really.” He shrugged. “It was a bluff, that… wasn’t a bluff.” He took her hand and squeezed it. “If you’re open to it, I’d rather take my time, do it right. I mean, I don’t want to assume, even with us shaking up, that we’re on that path… and like I said, I want to get the words right this time. But we could… leave the door open. Only this time, it would be our door, upfront, not me taking up all your space. A place we planned together. And we could plan ahead for more. If you wanted.”

“Right. Take our time.” She squeezed his hand back. “Time is good. I mean, impulses are fun, but… time. That’s… good. Probably.” She stepped closer, and he snuck his arm around her. “You know, I’ve always wanted to live by the ocean. Meridian has at least one ocean, right? I was a little too preoccupied with saving the day and the terrible brain cramps to look at Suvi’s aerial mapping.”

“The ocean?” Liam’s hand cupped her hip, trembling slightly. “Ocean is good. I’ve only ever done cities before. Something more rural… it’s new. New is fun.”

“But close to somewhere we can land the Tempest,” Sara contradicted. “Because work’s gonna keep happening, whether we want it to or not… and I don’t want a three-hour commute in the Nomad. Assuming Gil lets me take the Nomad for non-work transportation. That’s debatable.”

“Ocean, port-capable,” Liam hummed, “Got it. There’s got to be someplace like that here. There’s a whole planet.”

“And we’d better have at least four bedrooms, or have the option to add some on,” Sara proclaimed. “Guest room is a must, and twins are pretty common on my Mom’s side, and the only thing that kept Scott and I from killing each other young was separate bedrooms…”

“Shit,” Liam choked, and then laughed when she bit her lip. “No, go on.”

“Plus, into order to repopulate, we have to beat the status quo,” Sara instructed. “Jill’s told me all about it. At least three children – so that the birth rate is higher than the death rate.”

“Got it,” Liam choked. “Three enough?”

“At least three, she said, maybe more, for those people that don’t or can’t conceive, and to make up for the people that didn’t make it.” Sara shrugged, “I don’t know… what do you think?”

“Not really thinking,” Liam nuzzled her hair. “Least… not about that.”

“What are you thinking about, then?”
“You,” he whispered. “Maybe…”

Sara pulled away. “Care to retire from this function, Mr. Kosta?”

“Right behind you, Pathfinder.” It was only a few steps to the door that led to the Tempest’s landing site, and she tried not to jog too enthusiastically.

“HEY!” Peebee’s voice was strident. Liam groaned, and Sara turned just to see the rest of the crew, watching them narrowly, faces ranging from Cora’s bemused tolerance to Jaal’s enthusiastic grimace. “You trying to sneak away or something?”

“Rude,” huffed Vetra, but her eyes were twinkling.

“Don’t you need to say goodbye to Sid,” Sara began, only to have Kallo interrupt.

“I’m ready to be off-planet, before the remains of STG try to draft me,” the Salarian muttered, and pushed past her to the door. “Thanks for making the excuse for me.”

“Um…” Sara started, “We weren’t intending to blast off…”


“We’ll be ready in half an hour, Pathfinder, and I doubt your presence will be required on the bridge,” Cora smiled, “Suvi?”

“Make it fifteen minutes,” breathed the scientist. “Kallo’s cut down checklist time, with me co-piloting.”

“Nicely done,” Jaal rumbled, his attempted smile growing wider. “So, Sara, Liam, am I to offer congratulations?”

“Not yet,” Liam grinned at his friend through his teeth. “Soon enough. Probably.” He wasn’t looking at her again.

“Ah,” The Angaran seemed confused. “Peebee informed me that we would all have a bubbly beverage on board, that you’d requisitioned several bottles to celebrate Landing Day and your approaching nuptials…” Peebee leaped towards the man, and covered his mouth.

“Yeah, ignore him. He doesn’t understand Milky Way customs,” she temporized. “There is champagne, though. And Suvi said she could whip up champagne flutes before take-off…”

“You can’t drink champagne out of a mug,” Suvi asserted firmly. “It’s called having standards.”

Sara broke in, “Liam, are you sure there isn’t something you’d like to ask me?”

He just grabbed her hand, and pulled her inside. “Not here. Not now.” He glared around at their friends, Drack cackling madly. “It’s ruined now. You bastards ruin everything.”

~SS~

Liam found her later on the bridge and slipped her the champagne flute, heart still hammering in his chest. Another chance to get it right… “Cheers?”
She tipped it against his with a small smile, the fine glass ringing in perfect tone, and sipped. “Wow, this is… good.”

“Not over until we’ve had champagne and celebrations, right?” He laughed, and tugged at his hair.

Sara frowned, confused about where she had heard that before, and then laughed. “You said that, when we first landed on the Nexus. But despite the champagne and celebrations, it’s still not over, Liam.” She leaned up against him, still looking out at the galaxy, and he wrapped his arm around her waist. “It’s beautiful, right? We did good.”

“There’s something we’re supposed to do next,” Liam admitted, and nodded at Kallo. “Second star to the right, Kallo?” Sara’s snort gave him life. “What? I don't want to give away the heading too quick!”

“Setting course now,” Kallo’s lips straightened as they pulled out of Meridian’s orbit.

“Where are we going?” Sara took another sip of her champagne. “Where are you taking me?”

“A surprise. How long will it take?”

“Estimated arrival is… three hours.” Kallo shrugged, "Give or take

SAM spoke up, “I believe the intention is to take you back to Habitat 7.”

“SAM!” Liam groaned, “You ruined it! I swear you bloody bastards ruin everything.” Once again he recalculated. If not now, then maybe…

“The Pathfinder should always be aware of the heading for her ship.”

“Yeah, so take that,” Sara elbowed Liam. “I am Pathfinder, Rah rah rah.” She paused, “What do we need to do there?”

The mood was completely destroyed. Liam sighed, “Go on, SAM.”

“I believe our purpose there can wait. I do not want to ruin everything.”

“Sarcasm, SAM, really?” Liam sputtered.

“A recent upgrade, thanks to Gil. I take it you approve?”

“Oh, yeah, a sarcasm subroutine is exactly what you needed. Perfect. Fabulous. Remind me to throttle Gil.”

“A reminder has been added to your to-do list.”

Liam shook his head, and gave up, “You know, I’m going to just let that go.”

“That’s probably wise,” Sara bit her lip, trying to keep from giggling. “SAM picks up things really fast. He’ll leave you in the dust, Mr. Kosta.”

When they arrived within viewer distance, Sara stared in awe. “What’s happening?” Tech orbited the planet, beams of who-knows-what working it over. “What’s going on?”

Suvi was typing frantically at her terminal, beaming the whole time. “Surprise! It’s being terraformed using traditional Milky Way methods.”
"You all knew about this?" Sara stared at her crew. "I don't... I don't know what to say."

"What do you think we've been working on, while you were in hospital?" Liam nudged her forward. "Go on, open the map, Sara. Suvi's scans show everything."

Sara stepped into the interactive display, and pulled it up. "Oh, God," she covered her mouth, reading the name. "Ryder…"

“They're calling it Ryder-1,” Liam’s hands rested on her shoulders. “Open the comms, Vetra?”

The sound of cheering echoed over the link: human, Krogan, Salarian, Asari, Turian, Angaran voices all ringing out in triumph and celebration. Sara turned, and buried her face in his shoulder, still surrounded by the holographic map.

“It'll take some time,” Suvi offered sympathetically. “But it will happen.”

“Dad’s dream,” Sara lifted her face up to Liam’s, and he wiped the tears out from under her eyes. “We did it.”

“You did it,” Liam corrected. “Your Dad isn’t the only Ryder.”

She turned back to the display, and shook her head. “No, Liam. We did it. We all did.” Her hand, shaking, came out to touch the zoomed-in display of Ryder-1, the hologram staining her fingers purple. “Dad made it home after all. If only Mom…”

“She’ll know someday.” Liam cleared his throat. “Welcome to Heleus, Pathfinder.” She closed her eyes at the slight kiss on the back of her neck. “Welcome home.”

Chapter End Notes

The Last Chapter. There's another fic or three still in this series. I'm calling the series 'Lost Boys', after Scott and Liam, obviously. There's an epilogue that turned into its own short story - as my epilogues tend to do - and another about when Jaal is formally introduced to the Star Wars films. All the Star Wars films. Blame SerenityFalconNormandy, because it was her prompt. I think it's funny, to give you fair warning. After 115 chapters, you all know the kind of sense of humor I have.

And I'm working on a strange sort of sequel that deals with the problem of Scott finding his own place in Heleus. That's in the very early stages right now.

Thank you all for coming on this ride with me. Every comment, every kudo means so much for a person that tends to write urban mythos-based fantasy and posts DragonAge fan fic online. SciFi was a stretch for me - a different type of lore and research involved - and I'm proud of how this turned out. I'll go back and edit and fix things here in the next couple of weeks - mainly the first chapter has a lot of redundancy - but the story as a whole won't change.

Thank you for reading. Happy New Year, and may 2018 leave 2017 in the dust in all the best ways.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!