Weakness versus strength

by RogueSolo

Summary

"Be careful, Pathfinder. Don't allow your enemies to confirm your weakness. They'll never stop using it against you . . . or the one you're trying to protect."
"Not again," Kallo grumbled as the opening riffs of an electric guitar reverberated throughout the ship.

Gil's comm quickly followed, "Kallo –"

"Yes, we can hear her all the way up here, I'll try and keep us steady," the salarian grudgingly replied.

"Mind if I borrow Suvi? She might be able to help me keep the biotic damage to a minimum this time?" the engineer asked.

Suvi had been silently hoping for an excuse to head back to the hold and watch the festivities. Ryder's combat training sessions had become something of a spectacle the entire crew enjoyed, well, except Kallo and Gil.

With a slight jerk of her head toward the door she asked, "Should I go help?"

"Might as well," he sighed before adding, "Maybe if Ryder sees you she'll behave."

The scientist's steps faulted as she left her seat, she couldn't suppressed the stammer when she asked, "Wh - what's that suppose to mean?"

Turning back to his controls, Kallo shrugged before saying, "Nothing."

Suvi eyed him for a moment longer before heading for the door. Wringing her hands as she shuffled along the catwalk above the crew quarters, her thoughts drifted to her partner's comment along with a few others she'd been receiving over the past few weeks.

It had all started after a Kett ambush on an Angara research team on Voeld. Ryder was still recovering from rescuing the Moshae, when the Tempest picked up the distress call. Without any regard for her health, the Pathfinder had told Jaal and Drack to suit up. Despite Lexi and SAM's best efforts to persuade her to reach out to the Angara first, Ryder wouldn't listen. During the whole ruckus, Suvi had quietly forwarded the distress call to the Resistance. As Ryder pushed past Lexi for the ramp, Suvi shouted out.

"We're receiving a transmission from the Resistance."

All movement stopped as she patched in the communication.

"Pathfinder, thank you for your assistance, my scouts have reached the team and took out the Kett. Please give your Doctor Anwar our thanks for pointing out the network of caves leading to the sight. They never knew what hit them. Stay Clear."

When the transmission ended no one moved, all eyes bounced between Ryder and Suvi, who now stood preparing for the dressing down she was about to receive for going behind the Pathfinders back.

"Doctor, I don't recall giving the order to forward that transmission," Ryder growled, anger rolling off of her in waves.
To Suvi's credit, she firmly held her ground while saying, "No ya didn't. The Angara were closer and could respond faster than our team. It was a judgment call, and I –"

"It wasn't your call to make," Ryder snapped.

"With all do respect, you're in no condition –"

The Pathfinder took several aggressive steps towards Suvi and once again cut her off, "My condition is none of your concern."

"Of course it is," Suvi shouted back.

If her outburst shocked Ryder, it didn't show. The rest of the crew, however, appeared captivated by the verbal sparring between them. Peebee's eyes alone were the size of saucers, while Gil's mouth hung completely open.

Suvi continued her outburst, "You are the only hope the Initiative has in surviving Heleus and the Kett. It's incumbent upon all of us to keep you alive! You're not immortal, Ryder, no matter how many times SAM brings ya back from the dead!"

Both women were now breathing heavy with anger and neither one appeared to be backing down. Each holding the other's gaze unflinchingly, and it was in that moment, Suvi saw it. The burden of responsibility Ryder carried but never openly showed. The pain she was truly in from her injuries, the mental toll the mission was taking on her. The weight of all the Milk Way's hopes and dreams in settling Andromeda, all of it, slowly consuming every ounce of her being leaving nothing left. When Ryder finally blinked the wall of bravado and sarcasm was once again firmly in place.

Her shoulders relaxed, and a sly smile tugged at her lips as she chuckled, "Didn't know you cared so much, Doc."

Flustered by her sudden change in mood and tone, Suvi scrambled to keep up, "I-that's not what – we all care."

It was too late, the Pathfinder made a show of winking at her, before allowing Lexi to usher her back to the med bay. After that show down, the crew began seeking Suvi's advice or support when it came to Ryder. As if she some how possessed more influence on the woman than anyone else.

It didn't make any sense. Sure, she and Ryder flirted, and for a time she hoped it meant something, but the doctor soon realized that Ryder was an unabashed flirt with everyone. If they had a pulse, than Ryder was making eyes and smiling at them. She would never admit it, but Suvi was jealous. She was jealous when Peebee and Ryder would openly flirt on comms during a mission, or when Jaal and Ryder would have deep conversations about the Angara at crew dinner. Hell she was even jealous of SAM, at least he knew what was happening in that head of Ryder's.

"The Pathfinder isn't getting enough sleep, Suvi. I'm concerned she's trying to conceal PTSD symptoms," Lexi had whispered to her one day.

"I've asked SAM to have her meet me in the med bay when they return, I'd appreciate it if you joined. Maybe two Doctors getting on her case to sleep will be better than one."

Of course the meeting never happened, another crises pulled everyone’s attention away from the Pathfinders health, but Suvi had made a mental note about it.

As the doors to the cargo bay opened, the deafening sounds of an old 20th century rock and roll song nearly knocked her over. Ryder seemed to have a fondness for the genre. Gil, Lexi, and Vetra
were all standing on the deck above over looking the hold. As Suvi made her way over to them, she glanced down to see Ryder and Drack warming up with light sparing. Cora and Peebee were using their biotics to move objects around, while Liam and Jaal pulled different targets to use.

"You see what those brutes did to my Nomad?" Gil asked her.

Glancing down, she saw the Nomad on its side propped up against the ramp.

"At least it's out of the way this time," she said sympathetically.

Gil snorted, "A whole lotta good that'll do when Ryder's chucking objects out of her way. A one woman wrecking ball that one is."

"I have a few ideas on ways we could possibly reinforce the deck platting," Suvi said while bringing up her scanner.

Waving her off, Gil smirked, "I was just giving you an excuse to come down. If you don't think I've been working on reinforcing this place since their last little performance, you're a bigger nutter than Ryder."

"No one's a bigger nutter than me, Gil!" the Pathfinder shouted over the music.

Leaning over the railing, Gil yelled back, "SAM stop amplifying her hearing."

Ryder's laughter echoed through the room for a moment, pulling Suvi's attention with it. The doctor watched her dance around the krogan. Her skin was beginning to glisten from the exertion, and Suvi couldn't help but admire Ryder's taut arms and shoulders. She began to fantasies about what it would feel like to be held by them.

"All right. Kids, ready to go," Drack announced as he moved away from her.

Ryder quickly stretched her neck and rolled her shoulders before glancing up to the spectators.

"Enjoying the view?" she called up to them.

Vetra responded with, "Bottle of asari ale says you get knocked on your ass in five minutes."

With a lop sided grin, Ryder crowed, "Better get ready to pull in a favor then."

"Please don't break anything," Lexi called out after.

"No promises," Ryder threw over her shoulder as she turned her attention back to Drack and the others.

Liam and Jaal would be the first sacrificial lambs, coming in replicating Roekaar or Kett tactics in close combat. They would rotate in and out until one or both took too much damage. Drack would follow next, along with Cora or Peebee using biotics to throw objects in to keep Ryder on her toes.

Tonight followed the same pattern, and once Ryder had made it past the five-minute mark without getting touched she shouted up to Vetra, "I'd prefer a vintage bottle of the ale please."

"Yeah, yeah," came the turian's defeated reply.

With a crack loud enough to echo off the walls and over the music, Liam was quickly pulled out of the fight despite protesting that he could still go with a broken rib. Once he started spitting up blood, his protests subsided.
"Damn it," Lexi cursed as she made her way over to the ladders on the far wall.

Drack finally made an appearance into the fray, which normally marked the half waypoint of the entertainment, except something was different about tonight. Ryder was in a rhythm, her movements were fluid, leading from one flip to another kick, ducking out of the way of an object Peebee threw then using her biotics to toss the Krogan aside. It was mesmerizing to watch, and Suvi found herself captivated by it.

"She's in a zone tonight," Gill said just before Drack yelled out in frustration.

The krogan charged just as Cora positioned two targets to circle Ryder, it was normally around this point the Pathfinder would start making mistakes or getting caught, but not tonight. She used Drack's momentum to take out one of the targets then butterfly kicked over the second one before using a biotic throw to destroy it. Everything seemed to be progressing naturally until Suvi notice the biotic glow that normally surrounded its user wasn't dissipating. A human biotic needed to recharge, unlike an asari who could hold a barrier or shield for hours. Her suspicions that something wasn't right were confirmed when Cora shouted to Peebee.

"Stop pulling my targets!"

"I'm not doing that, I thought you were," Peebee replied with slight panic.

The biotic energy was beginning to affect the ship, and as Ryder slammed a target down into the floor, the shockwave rippled and knocked everyone down in the lower hold. Ventra and Suvi grabbed hold of the railing, while Gil slid his way back to engineering, locking down both doors.

"Ryder, enough!" Lexi shouted from an alcove she had pulled Liam and Jaal into.

Suvi could see Lexi's scanner was active and pointed at the Pathfinder. She quickly followed and watched as Ryder's vitals bounced all over the place.

"That's not possible," Suvi gasped as the ship rocked from another collision.

"RYDER, STOP!" Cora yelled as she tried to hang onto something when the ship pitched.

Drack grunted, "She's can't hear us!"

"SAM, what's happening? Why isn't Ryder responding?" Suvi asked over the open channel so the whole team could hear.

When the AI didn't reply, Lexi followed up, "SAM?"

"The Tempest can't take much more of this," Gil's worried voice cut in.

Without thinking, Suvi scrambled to make her way over to the ladders.

"Doctor it's not safe!" Vetra shouted after her as another shockwave knocked them down.

At this point the whole ship wasn't safe, so Suvi didn't see the difference.

"What is going on back there?!!" Kallo's frantic question went unanswered as Suvi tried to climb down the ladder.

An object rocketed right into the wall a few inches from the doctor's head, causing her to curse, "Bloody Hell."
She was only a few feet away from the bottom when the ship pitched once more, causing her to lose her grip and fall to the floor. Ignoring the shooting pain in her elbow from slamming into the deck plating, Suvi scrambled to get up and make her way towards the Pathfinder. The problem was trying to find an opening as too many objects were whizzing by in every direction, and as Suvi attempted to move forward Cora had to yank her behind a cargo crate to avoid being knocked out.

"Are you crazy?!" Cora exclaimed.

"We have to shock her out of this," Suvi explained as another object flew over the crate before being pulled back.

Cora shook her head before saying, "It's too dangerous."

"We don't have a choice."

"Shit."

The former commando peaked over the crate, most likely to assess the situation.

"Peebee, on my mark we're both gonna hit Ryder with singularities," she instructed.

The asari clearly thought Cora had lost it when she replied, "You want to create not one but two singularities on the ship?!!"

"They might slow her down if we place them on either side of her. What other choice do we have?"

"Well this wasn't how I saw my night going," Peebee's sarcasm wasn't lost on Suvi who just rolled her eyes.

"Ready, mark!"

Both Cora and Peebee popped out of their hiding places long enough to throw the dark energy on either side of Ryder. Suvi peeked out from behind the crate and watched as the Pathfinder was pulled in two different directions, the objects that had been floating slowed down, and she finally found her opening.

Without a second thought, Suvi darted out and moved straight for Ryder. She had almost reached the Pathfinder when she was knocked down to the ground from behind. Rolling onto her back, she looked up to see Ryder had broken free of the singularities and launched herself in the air, and would land directly on the doctor if she didn't move. She struggled to get up, but the wave of energy forced her back down like the undertow of the ocean. Looking up she watched as Ryder twisted and prepared to land with a deadly blow.

With all hope lost, Suvi screamed out, "RYDER!"

Bracing herself for the inevitable pain, she squeezed her eyes shut and covered her face. The rush of biotic energy stole her breath away as she felt the deck tremble with the force of Ryder's landing, but then everything was silent. Confused, Suvi blinked several times before slowly pulling her hands away from her face. There, mere inches from her, was Ryder. Her breathing was erratic and Suvi felt the fading pulses of energy ripple from her body. Some how the Pathfinder had landed in a protective fashion, straddling Suvi on one knee with a closed fist by the doctor's head. Had the crew not been around, the doctor might have enjoyed the intimate proximity the two women now shared.

When Ryder finally opened her eyes, the dark energy gave her pupils a devilish like glow. Suvi
watched the light slowly fade away, and once it was gone, Ryder's eyes finally focused.

"Suvi?" she panted before looking around to see what had happened.

With a gulp of air, Ryder breathed, "You're not suppose to be down here."

Studying her eyes, Suvi saw the confusion but that's not what caused the doctor's chest to tighten or her heart to race. The genuine concern, and perhaps something else, something she couldn't quite describe, laid bare for her to see. Ryder's face was so close that the doctor couldn't help it when her eyes traveled down to look at the Pathfinder's flushed lips. All Suvi had to do was sit up and she would know what Ryder tasted like.

"Did I hurt you?" the Pathfinder asked in a low whisper startling Suvi out of her trance like state.

"Doctor Anwar has sustain a sprained elbow along with several contusions," SAM finally made his presence known by answering the question.

Suvi watched helplessly as the concern in Ryder's features turned to horrified realization that somehow she had been the cause of the doctor's injuries. Before Suvi could protest, Ryder moved off of her and took several cautious steps backwards.

"I don't understand," the Pathfinder said with continued confusion.

Cora finally emerged from her spot behind the crate, clearly awestruck she stated, "I've never seen anything like it."

"It's like you were possessed, not in a good way either," Peebee piped in.

As Drack helped Suvi up, he added, "Almost like you were in a trance. I've only seen something like that with battlemasters. Didn't think a human had it in them."

"I believe I might know the cause of what happened," SAM began, "In an effort to help enhance the Pathfinders use of biotics, her brain pattern was altered to that of an asari."

"You altered her brain patterns?" Lexi asked with alarm.

"It is how the Pathfinder has been able to communicate with the remnant technology, I alter her brain patterns to match that of the remnant creators."

"I did all this?" Ryder's voice was small and almost child like, when she asked the question.

"It would appear so, Pathfinder," SAM answered quickly.

Suvi continued to keep an eye on Ryder as she surveyed the room, taking stalk of all the damage she had done not only to the ship but also her crewmates. The doctor could see guilt begin to wrap itself around the Pathfinder like a blanket.

"I think we should get you to the med bay and –"

Ryder cut Lexi off, "Take care of everyone else first."

"But –"

"Please," Ryder's emotional plea caused Suvi to take a step towards her.

"It wasn't your fault," she said tenderly as Ryder matched her step forward with a step back.
Shaking her head, the Pathfinder couldn't hide the shame in her voice when she muttered, "Yes . . . it is."

Before Suvi could reply Lexi called out for her help in getting Liam and Jaal to the med bay. Desperate to get Ryder's attention one last time, Suvi kept looking back as she helped gather the injured. As the group stood on the lift, the doctor watched Drack and Vetra take up positions near the Pathfinder. No one spoke, but their presence was clearly enough as Ryder slid down to the ground burying her head in her hands.

"Don't beat yourself up, kid," the krogan's voice finally broke the silence.

Ryder's despondent reply was the last thing Suvi heard before the doors to the hold closed.

"I could have killed her, Drack. How can I forgive myself for that?"
"Did you get her number, Suvi?" Gil teased as they walked through Kadara Port.

The doctor blushed and shook her head at his comment, before asking, "What are you on about?"

"I believe, Gil is referring to the angara who followed you around the trading stalls," Kallo dryly explained as he shifted a box of supplies in his hands.

"Hang on, I was talking about the asari dancer at the pub," the engineer injected.

"Ah, I thought perhaps she was enamored by my natural charm," boasted the salarian.

Suvi couldn't help but laugh at the pair of them.

"There it is, told ya we could make her laugh," Gil said with a smug smirk of satisfaction.

"You two, ganging up on me now?" Suvi asked as she looked between the pair of them.

Kallo nodded, "It seems all Gil and I needed to get along was our very own special mission."

"Exactly," the engineer's cheeky smile was contagious as he continued, "We even had a name for it, 'Help Suvi Get Over Ryder.' Pretty basic, but to the point."

"Step one of the mission, remind our dear doctor there are plenty of other females to mate with in Heleus," Kallo stated.

Gil quickly corrected him, "I believe the word he's looking for is date, not mate."

The salarian arched an eyebrow, "But I thought human's mated, while dating?"

"Yeah, but you make it sound like one of those science docu's where some old sod is whispering about the mating habits of Hanar or something."

"But isn't the goal for her to find someone to help relieve her sexual frustration?"

"Oh my god," Suvi muttered to herself as her cheeks burned from the rush of blood to them.

Gil continued his speculation, "I think she's looking for something more than a one night stand. Our girl Suvi isn't the love'em and leave'em type."

Throwing up her hands, Suvi final snapped, "Alright, enough."

She stopped and pointed at the both of them.

"Stop talking about my," she fought through her humiliation to finish, "mating or lack there of."

"We're just worried about you," Gil said tenderly.

Some how, the pair of them looked like scolded puppies with their eyes pleading with her not to be mad.

With a sigh of frustration, Suvi relented, "I know, but you don't have to be."

"We don't have to worry that you have a massive crush on someone that half the cluster wants to
"NEXUS!"

The trio had been so caught up in their own conversation they hadn't noticed the alley they had cut through was deserted. Now, a group of Outcasts stood at one end of the alley blocking their retreat, while a second group approached them from the other end. Suvi discreetly tapped her Omi Tool to call for help.

"SAM," she quickly whispered.

"I have alerted the Tempest, help is on the way," the AI replied with a low rumble.

"You three get lost?" a human male with a thick accent asked as his group approached them.

Nodding his head, Gil nonchalantly replied, "Yeah, looks like, appreciate the help."

Stepping between the thugs and Suvi, Gil tried to pass but was blocked. The doctor glanced over her shoulder and noticed Kallo had positioned himself between her and the other group of Outcasts. They never went on missions but they, along with Lexi, were the central nervous system of support staff that kept the Pathfinder and the crew alive. Only the four of them could understand the burden and blessing those rolls entailed.

A turian from the second group stepped forward, his eyes never leaving Suvi. His predatory smile sent shivers down her spine.

He leered at her while shouting to the human male, "You seeing what I'm seeing?"

"Aye, Sloane, won't believe our luck," the human thug replied.

"You two can go," the turian motioned to Kallo and Gil.

Kallo drew himself up to his full height and kept his body between the turian and Suvi, before saying, "She goes with us."

"I said move salarian," the turian growled.

Gil attempted one more diplomatic approach, "We're not looking for trouble, just let us go."

"Like we said, you're free to go, mate," the human said while taking a step closer and pointing to Suvi, "She's coming with us."

The human moved to grab Suvi but Gil quickly shoved him back. The air charged with biotic energy as both Gil and Kallo were attacked. One of the Outcasts used the butt of their rifle to slam into Kallo's head, while multiple thugs ambushed Gil.

"Suvi, Run!" he shouted before being knocked to the ground.

The doctor tried to make a break for it, but she was quickly grabbed and shoved into a wall. On instinct she kneed her assailant giving her an opening, but before she could get away, another thug backhanded her across the face. Momentarily stunned, she tried to get her bearings but the thug violently grabbed her throat and shoved her back against the wall.

"I've never fucked a ginger," the rough voice of the thug tautened in her ear, "I'm gonna enjoy making you scream."
His tongue dragged along her cheek, causing Suvi to whimper in disgust. His grip tightened around her throat, and the doctor felt she was losing her battle with consciousness. Just before the darkness claimed her, the beautiful glow of bluish purple biotic energy dashed past her, consuming the thug with it. Suvi nearly collapsed to the ground when she felt a pair of strong arms hold her. Looking up she saw the face that had haunted her dreams these past few months.

Ryder's eyes burned with a mixture of rage, fear and concern. Her armored fingers gently touched Suvi's jaw, allowing the Pathfinder to see the full extent of the damage the thug had inflicted. Suvi desperately tried to speak but no words could form. All she could do was watch powerlessly as the rage won the battle of emotions warring within Ryder. The Pathfinder's focus shifted from the doctor to taking out the rest of the Outcasts.

A primal scream erupted out of Ryder as she barreled into the fray, taking out everything and everyone in her path. Like a hurricane, she destroyed whatever lay before her. Suvi hated that she took pleasure in seeing harm come to anyone, but some primitive coding in her human DNA exhilarated in knowing Ryder was marking her territory, and claiming Suvi as part of her protection. When the last Outcast tried to run, the Pathfinder used a biotic pull to bring the kid back to her. In one fluid move, Ryder caught the boy and slammed him into the ground. Raising her fist, she kept it cocked and ready to strike as she yanked the kid by the collar so they were inches apart.

"Tell Sloane, if she ever goes after any of my crew again, broken bones will be the least of her trouble," Ryder seethed, before grinding out, "Understand?!"

The terrified young man nodded.

"Say it!" the Pathfinder snapped at him.

"I-uh-I tell Sloane if she goes af-after any of your cr-crew again, brok-kenn bo-bones w-will be the least of her-t-t-trouble," the boy struggle to say through his shaking.

The high pitch of his voice alerted every to the boys youthful age, and Suvi released a breath she didn't even know she was holding when Ryder's anger subsided. Pulling the boy up to his feet, the Pathfinder finally looked at him. His dirt covered face and armored body hiding his true age.

"How old are you?" she asked gently, clearly understanding she had scared the shit out of him.

The boy tried to avoid eye contact as he mumbled, "Fourteen."

"You're just a kid," Vetra gasped.

Even Peebee seemed concerned, "Where's your family?"

The boy seemed to struggle with how to answer and Suvi noticed his eyes kept darting to her, as if she reminded him of someone he knew. Taking a deep breath, she carefully moved over to him.

"What's your name?" she tenderly asked.

The kid finally looked up and answered, "Shamus, ma'am."

"You from New Glasgow?"

Nodding, he said, "Aye, tink you knew me Ma. Beverly Howard?"

Suvi couldn't suppress her shock when she heard the name.
"Dr. Beverly Howard? The quantum physics? She's here in Andromeda?"

"No," Shamus began, "No, she was helpin' Commander Shepard with some top secret Specter ting'. Came home one day, said she was signin' me and my brother up for the Initiative, wouldn' take no for an answer. Seemed spooked about somethin'.'

"Where's your brother?" Ryder asked.

Shamus sighed, "Still in cryo."

The Pathfinder put her hand on his shoulder, and asked, "How'd you end up here?"

"I'm a biotic, assigned t'an advance team. Suppose t'work with the Krogans. Woke up, got put onto a transport. Ended up here."

Drack finally joined the conversation, "Were you part of Tango Team?"

Shamus nodded "Aye, we were assigned t'protect early settlement of Elaaden."

"Spender," the Krogan growled.

Ryder looked to Drack before inquiring, "You think Spender had something to do with this?"

"Maybe," the krogan pondered.

"Pathfinder, my records show all members of Tango Team were awoken out of cryo early, it appears all were exiled," SAM informed the group on their private channel.

With this new information, Ryder eyed Shamus carefully before asking, "I still need you to deliver my message to Sloane."

"You're sending him back?" Vetra's question sounded more like an accusation.

The Pathfinder appeared to ignore the outburst for a moment as she asked Shamus, "Think you can make it back to the Tempest tonight, after you give Sloane the message?"

Shamus stood a little taller as if the prospect of a real mission gave him purpose, "Might take a bit, but I can get to the ship before sunrise. Will your commando let me on?"

The group chuckled knowing he meant Cora.

"I will scan your bio sign on approach and can help guide you toward the ship," SAM advised.

Shamus looked startled by the voice, as he asked, "Is that a VI?"

Suvi could see Ryder was struggling with how to answer and decided to interject, "It might be wise to head back to the Outcasts before your mates wake up."

With a new confidence, Shamus agreed, "I won' let ya down."

Clearly the kid was taken with Suvi as he looked at her before nodded to the Pathfinder and leaving the alley.

"Looks like you have a fan," Ryder teased as she finally looked over to Suvi.

"Be careful Pathfinder," the velvet voice of Reyes Vidal echoed through the alley.
All eyes watched as the smuggler emerged from the shadows. He looked directly at Ryder as he carefully approached the group.

"Be careful of what?" the Pathfinder's voice had a flirtatious tone to it, and Suvi couldn't help but feel a sting of annoyance.

The smuggler now moved into Ryder's personal space. The air became electric with tension, as two alphas danced around each other. Feeling a bit territorial, Suvi glared at the man unabashedly, hoping he saw her disgust. The Pathfinder and Ryes' faces were now inches apart as he spoke.

"Don't allow your enemies to confirm your weakness," he rumbled before continuing on his way.

His eyes drifted over to Suvi, who watched as he chuckled at her reaction. Looking down the doctor finally realized that she had unconsciously balled her hands into fists. Perhaps it was seeing her reaction or perhaps he was trying to get a rise out of her, but Ryes stopped and turned back to Ryder. Once again their proximity to each other was rather intimate and the Pathfinder seemed eager to engage.

"They'll never stop using it against you," Reyes continued, "Or the one you're trying to protect."

"Care to elaborate?" Ryder sweetly asked.

With a devilish smirk, the smuggler shook his head, "Tend to your people Pathfinder. I will find you when I have answers."

Suddenly a door opened within the alley, and Ryes stepped through it without a second thought. When the door closed, Ryder looked around at the group before saying, "Hey SAM, might have been helpful to know there was a secret entrance to the alley."

"Yeah, like twenty minutes ago," Vetra added, causing some to laugh.

"Drack you have Gil, I'll get Kallo. Dr. Anwar you can walk?" Ryder's formality wasn't lost on Suvi as she nodded in response.

An hour later it seemed like the entire crew had squeezed themselves into the med bay. Gil and Kallo having bore the brunt of the assault were both laying on bio beds with multiple medi gel packs applied to their injuries. Gil even had an IV hooked up to his arm to help in his recovery. Suvi sat on the last bio bed holding an ice pack to her cheek while she waited for Lexi to treat her. A warm hand briefly brushed against Suvi's, as a familiar presence sat beside her and took over holding the ice.

"Chicks dig scars," Ryder's voice was full of mirth as she carefully kept the ice in place.

"I see the HNS headline now, 'Respected Initiative scientist Dr. Suvi Anwar was arrested today for inciting a riot at Vortex. Witnesses say she challenged a krogan to a head-butting contest. This is HNS,,' Ryder joked.

"Not likely," Drack teased from across the room.

It seemed so strange to be making light of being attacked like this, but that was the effect Ryder had on everyone. They all rolled with the punches and kept moving forward, not allowing themselves to wallow in self pity, well, not yet anyway. Gil was attempting to crack jokes at Kallo's expense but both of them could barely form a sentence that it ended up sounding like a
bunch of mumbling. Luckily their endeavors were keeping most of the crew entertained while Suvi enjoyed having the Pathfinder all to herself. The ice pack moved in an awkward way causing Suvi to wince.

"Shit, sorry," Ryder whispered with concern as she repositioned the ice.

Suvi gave an embarrassed smile, "It's alright."

The Pathfinder looked as if she wanted to say something, but couldn't quite find the words. The pair locked eyes for a moment, and Suvi felt like a month drawn to a flame. Her body responded to Ryder before he mind could catch up, as she seemed to be leaning into her touch. Before she could muster up the courage to say something, the Pathfinder was once again pulled in another direction.

"Ryder," Vetra called out.

"You'll be alright?" the Pathfinder asked in earnest to Suvi.

Finally feeling bold, the doctor replied, "Only if you promise to come back and keep me company."

Suvi couldn't hide the blush spreading over her face. She'd never acted this way before, than again she'd never felt this way before.

Ryder clearly enjoyed seeing this side of her and leaned in to whisper, "Hold that thought, Doc."

With a wink, she handed the ice pack back to Suvi and made her way over to Vetra. The doctor couldn't suppress the goofy grin that was now plastered on her face. She never wanted this feeling to end. For the first time in weeks, Suvi felt hope that perhaps Ryder did feel something more. She had faith that God had brought the Pathfinder into her life for a reason, now she just prayed it was for more than friendship. However, Suvi's optimism was silently crushed the moment she turned to look at Vetra and Ryder.

The Pathfinder was holding a data pad in her hand having just finished reading its content. She was engaged in a heated discussion with Vetra, when both turned to look at Suvi. The doctor felt as if someone had dumped the ice pack over her body. She watched as Ryder's eyes turned from deep affection to cold detachment. Suvi could almost see the barrier the Pathfinder was putting up between them.

"Ryder?" she weakly called out, "What is it?"

She avoided looking back at Suvi as she quickly left the med bay calling for Vetra and Drack.

Tears stung Suvi's eyes, but she blinked them back quickly as she struggled to keep herself together. Lexi finally appeared and began to carefully apply the medi gel to her injuries. If only there was a salve the asari could apply for the wounds of the heart.
Chapter 3

"Damn it," Suvi huffed as she assaulted the keypad at her station.

The scientist was trying to analyze the effect of the vault activation on Elaaden, but without physical samples she had to resort to using SAM's scans. As thorough as they were, actual samples would make Suvi's life a little easier. However, the doctor had been denied permission to leave the ship for the past three weeks. Ever since the incident on Kadara, Ryder had refused all of Suvi's requests. In fact the Pathfinder had done everything in her power to not only avoid the bridge, but Suvi all together.

She couldn't understand what she had done to be shunned in such a way it was beyond hurtful. Yet, as Ryder pulled back, it seemed the rest of the crew was doing everything in their power to keep her occupied. Cora, Liam and Drack had all insisted that Gil, Kallo, Lexi, and Suvi be trained on weapons. The first few sessions had been highly entertaining.

"Doc, hold the gun like this," Drack had instructed.

Suvi tried to emulate his stance and while shifting her hands accidently squeezed the trigger. Unprepared for the force of the kickback, Suvi fell flat on her ass.

"Suvi, you okay?" Cora asked as she rushed over to her.

The doctor couldn't help but laugh at how ridiculous she looked, the laughter became contagious, as soon the whole cargo hold had joined in the frivolity. There was something cathartic about lying there uncontrollably laughing. For the first time in days Suvi felt normal. Dusting herself off, she got back up and tried again. By the end of the sessions she'd knocked down more targets than both Kallo and Gil.

Several days after that, Suvi was reviewing a summary Dr. Aridana had forwarded to her, quietly sipping tea in the third floor conference room, when she heard Ryder arguing with someone.

Carefully making her way to the railing, Suvi made sure to stay out of sight as she tried to ease drop.

"Kid, you need to tell her," Drack grumbled.

"He's right, avoiding her and keeping her trapped on the ship isn't going to change anything," Vetra's voice floated up to Suvi.

"I can't, not yet," Ryder insisted.

"She thinks she's done something wrong, why don't you talk with her," the turian clearly sounded annoyed by the Pathfinders pigheadedness.

"Because I'd rather her be mad with me and alive, than dead," Ryder snapped.

"Yeah know, sometimes you're more stubborn than a korgan," Vetra sighed.

The conversation had been constantly replaying in Suvi's mind as she tried to figure out what Ryder was possibly hiding. Her console chimed startling her out of her reverie. The phrase "Insufficient Data," flashed on her screen again causing her to growl in frustration.
"That's it," Suvi said abruptly as she stood up.

Kallo gave her a curious look before asking, "Where are you going?"

"To find the science," she said with determination.

The salarian began to stutter, "Wait, you can't, the Pathfinder hasn't –"

"Hell with her," Suvi threw over her shoulder as she marched off the bridge to grab her gear.

The doctor packed whatever she could fit in a satchel and changed into her hot weather gear. Within fifteen minutes she was confidently striding down the ramp of the Tempest and into the scorching sun of Elaaden. Luckily the ship was now parked on the sight of a possible Initiative outpost near the krogan camp. The massive rock formations she wanted to study were no more than a twenty minute walk.

As the blazing sun kissed her skin, Suvi took a moment to recline her head and enjoy the feel of a real atmosphere, and not the climate controlled environment of the Tempest. With a deep cleansing breath she set off in the direction of the rock formation.

"Dr. Anwar, if you do not return to the Tempest, I will be forced to alert the Pathfinder of your departure," SAM's voice broke the blissful silence Suvi had been enjoying.

"Go ahead, SAM. I didn't sign up for the Initiative to be stuck on a ship," she said slightly out of breath as she climbed over a hill.

For a moment the AI was silent, his hesitation akin to that of a human.

After another beat, SAM finally said, "I do not wish to cause any more trouble between you and the Pathfinder."

That got Suvi's attention. Finding shade, she stopped to take a sip of water before asking, "Oh, why's that?"

"The Pathfinder considers your safety paramount to her survival," the AI began, "When you called for help on Kadara, her heart rate and stress levels were higher than when she has been engaged in combat situations. This would indicate a level of affection greater than friendship."

Scared to hear his answer, Suvi nearly whispered her next question, "Why you telling me this?"

"Since bonding with the Pathfinder, I have recorded numerous instances of grief and hardship. The few instances of happiness have all come from her interactions with the crew and settlement personnel. The rare instances of what one might consider joy have centered on her interactions with you. As Ryder and I have a symbiotic relationship, I want her to be happy," SAM explained before finishing with, "She's at her happiest when she is with you."

Suvi tried to hold back the flood of emotions that slammed into her like a tidal wave upon hearing that revelation. Struggling to keep her voice even, she murmured, "If that's true, why is she avoiding me?"

"I have been ordered not to answer that question," his monotone voice stated.

Taking a moment to calm her nervous, Suvi evenly said, "It seems we are at an impasse, then."

"It would appear so," SAM agreed.
Suvi discreetly prepared to disconnect her Omni Tool from the Tempest network, essentially becoming invisible and alone. With one finally adjustment she took a deep breath before speaking again.

"I'm sorry, SAM."

Hitting the button, she watched as her connection to the Tempest was terminated. A momentary flair of panic rose up within her, but as she soaked in the vista that lay before her, she knew it was for the best. No great discovery was without sacrifice, and she didn't forsake her family and friends to sit behind the controls of a ship while others put their lives on the line. Despite whatever good intentions Ryder might have had for keeping her on the ship, the Pathfinder was going to have to deal with the same thing Suvi felt every day. Fear. Fear that Ryder could end up hurt, or sick . . . or worse. That was the risk of living, and it was a risk Suvi endured every time she watched the N7 armor encompassed Ryder.

An hour or so later, she was surrounded by samples she had collected. So wrapped up in her own little world, she never heard the footsteps of the scavengers as they approached. It wasn't until the barrel of a pistol dug into her head that she even realized other people were around.

"Nice equipment you have there," said the salarin scavenger.

Thinking quickly, Suvi shrugged and pretended not to care as she replied, "It's alright."

"She's from the Nexus, look at her uniform," A turian voice said.

Suvi started to get up but whoever was holding the gun pushed it further into her head.

"I wouldn’t if I were you,” the salarin chided.

"What's the Nexus doing on Elaaden?" came another salarin voice.

Finally a human voice piped up, "Did you have something to do with the planets environment changing?"

"Why are you asking her that?"

"No one cares."

"Maybe they're trying to help?"

Suvi listened as they bantered amongst themselves for a moment before turning their attention back to her.

The salarin holding the gun was clearly becoming agitated as he asked again, "Why is the Nexus here?"

"The Pathfinder has found a way of communicating with the remnant technology. We're trying to make the planet habitable."

"Pathfinder? The human ark arrived?" the human couldn't hide her surprise.

The news seemed to cause dissension throughout the group. Arguments popped up all around Suvi then suddenly it was silent. The pressure of the gun to her head vanished before she heard the sound of a body hitting the ground. Glancing to her right, she saw where the unconscious salarin had landed. A data pad fell out of a compartment in his armor. Her fingers were inching to grab it
but she didn't dare move.

"Dr. Anwar?" came the gruff voice of a krogan.

"Yes?" Suvi quickly answered but kept her back turned just in case.

A familiar voice rang out, "Is alright, ma'am. You can get up."

Quickly pushing herself up off the ground, Suvi turned to see Shamus. Krogan scouts surrounded the young man, and that's when she noticed the clan emblem on Shamus' chest. They were all part of clan Nakmor. Her gaze then turned to the unconscious bodies of the scavengers strewn on the ground.

"How'd you – "

"That AI of yours told Drack 'bout your Omi Tool malfunction, he sent us out here t'come find ya," Shamus explained

"The boy was able to pick up your tracks from your last known coordinates," one of the krogan scouts added.

"You're part of clan Nakmor?" Suvi asked as Shamus and the others helped her pack up her samples.

"If the Pathfinder is successful in negotiatin' the settlement here, she's gonna have me brother assigned t'he first wave of settlers, and I'll join the patrol group," the boy couldn't suppress the excitement in his voice.

Suvi was happy for him as she said, "I'm glad she was able to help you."

Shamus gave a bashful smile, then offered to carry Suvi's bag. As the group started to head out, the doctor remembered the data pad by the salarin. She quickly went back and grabbed it.

"Almost forgot my pad," she fibbed.

As the group hiked back to the krogan encampment, Sui began reading through the scavenger's logs and correspondents. She didn't know what she was searching for, until she came across a general alert from the Outcasts.

FROM: OUTCASTS

_Sloane Kelly is willing to pay handsomely for the abduction of Dr. Suvi Anwar, Nexus scientist serving onboard the human Pathfinder's ship, the Tempest. Anwar pictured below. She is to be brought in ALIVE, preferably unharmed. Information on the doctor can be sent to Outcasts drop sights._

Suvi's hands were trembling as she scrolled down to see pictures of her taken on the Nexus. She was having lunch with the science team in one. The other picture was taken with Ryder. The Pathfinder had been cut out of the picture but Suvi remembered exactly where they were. Her mind was reeling from the information. Not only was Sloane Kelly trying to take her as a hostage, Ryder had clearly known about it and kept it to herself, but why?

Suvi's thoughts drifted back to the night in the med bay, when Ryder had pulled away, no before that. Reyes. Reyes had said something to the Pathfinder about not showing her weakness to her enemies.
"She blames herself," Suvi whispered out loud.

Luckily no one had heard her as she continued her quiet contemplation. It finally all made sense, Ryder suddenly pulling away, not letting her off the ship, the argument with Vetra, and SAM’s comments. The Pathfinder cared for Suvi so much she was willing to sacrifice her own happiness to keep the doctor safe. Still lost within her own thoughts, she didn't notice Drack waiting for them by the Tempest ramp.

"Any trouble?" he asked his scout team.

"Couple scavengers, nothing we couldn't handle," reported one of the krogan.

Drack grunted before saying, "Let's keep that part to ourselves."

His team laughed as they headed back to the encampment. Shamus handed Suvi back her bag and gave a shy goodbye. When the scouts were out of earshot, the krogan finally spoke.

"So, your omni tool broke?" the question was more of an accusation.

Tossing the data pad to him, she rebutted with, "So, Sloane Kelly is trying to kidnap me?"

Suvi folded her arms while Drack leveled her with a stare, both seeing who would crack first.

"Well," he finally sighed. "At least you know why the kid's been a basket case."

The doctor couldn’t help but chuckle at Drack's blunt honesty.

She nodded as she said, "I do."

"Though, I guess I can't blame her," he rambled while turning to walk up the ramp.

Suvi arched an eyebrow as she replied "You can't blame her for keeping me hostage on the ship?"

"Mom dies a few months before going into cold storage. She wakes up from a 600 year nap and in the same day gets thrown out of a shuttle trying to save the human ark with her father. He dies saving her, makes her Pathfinder, and while all that is happening her brother becomes trapped in a coma. To say the kid has serious abandonment issues is putting it mildly," the krogan flatly stated.

The doctor stopped in her tracks, "Of god, you're right."

"Course I am," Drack chuckled.

"Now what?" Suvi asked.

"We say you intercepted correspondence between Kelly and some scavengers," Drack began, "You were pissed we'd been keeping it from you, and I had to talk you out of leaving."

The doctor gave Drack a curious look as she asked, "That seems well thought out."

"Yeah, Vetra came up with it a few nights ago, figuring you were gonna find out. She's given everyone the line to use when we see Ryder."

"Wait, did everyone but me know?" Suvi inquired.

"Uh, we should probably reconnect your Omni Tool, before the kid gets back," he deflected.
"Drack?" Suvi called out as the krogan continued to walk away.

Hours later she was preparing for bed when a message came in on her personal data pad.

TO: Dr. Suvi Anwar,

FROM: Drack

*Got the kid to finally agree to let you off the ship with an armed escort. Send us the location you want to study. We'll meet in the hold at 0500.*

*You owe me one.*

The following morning Suvi was able to load all of her equipment onto the shuttle with the help of some of the krogan scouts. As they approached the location she heard the pilot chat with an advance team asking if the LZ was clear. Minutes later, Suvi was standing on the summit of one of the larger mountain ranges. The sky was turning a lighter shade of grey as the stars gave way to the sun. The krogan helped to move her gear into position before the sun crested over the horizon.

The brilliant colors of dawn blanketed the group an hour later. Suvi took a moment to commit to memory the feeling of standing on a new world as day broke. As she looked out over the majestic view, the silhouette of a familiar human caught her attention. Cautiously moving toward them, Suvi suddenly didn't know what to say.

"Beautiful view, Doc," Ryder's voice broke the silence.

Nodding, Suvi took a step closer as she said, "It's breathtaking."

"Would make anyone believe in a higher power," Ryder mused.

The doctor remained quiet as she kept herself just out of the Pathfinders vision.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Suvi finally whispered.

Ryder looked down at her feet, as she struggled with an answer, "I . . ." she hesitated then finally spoke, "I put you danger, I have to fix it."

Finally taking the last step to stand beside Ryder, Suvi replied, "I knew the risks when I signed up for the Initiative."

"Yeah, I doubt the pamphlet mentioned psychotic outlaws trying to kill you because the human Pathfinder has a thing for you," as Ryder finished the sentence, her face reddened as she clearly didn't mean to admit her feelings.

"I mean, yeah know, as a member of the crew and all," she quickly tried to play it off.

Suvi decided not to push that Freudian slip, but made a mental note to revisit it later.

"You can't keep me locked up on the ship forever."

"You sure? I'm tempted to try," the Pathfinder joked.

Suvi giggled as she nudged Ryder's shoulder, "You know what I mean."

They were both quiet for a moment before Suvi added, "I feel so helpless sometimes when you're out here. All I can do is sit on that ship and pray you come back to me."
"I'll always come back to you," Ryder's voice was suddenly serious.

"You can't promise that, no one can," Suvi breathless replied.

Ryder finally turned to look at her. Those eyes, which had been cold and distant, now conveyed the affection and warmth Suvi had fallen for all those months ago. Knowing another crisis could pull them apart at any moment, the doctor decided to take a chance.

"Every time you put on your armor, I feel terrified it might be the last time I see you, but I wouldn't ask you to stop. I feel safer knowing you're out there making a difference, despite my fear in what it might cost you. I know this is your burden to bear, but let me –"

"Pathfinder," SAM's voice interrupted.

During Suvi's little speech the pair had unconsciously began to lean towards one another, when SAM broke the spell, Ryder pulled back and took a deep breath.

"Gotta work on your timing, SAM," she chided.

"My apologies, but I am picking up a Kett signal to the north."

"Right," Ryder sighed as she looked up at Suvi, giving her a regretful smile before whispering, "Duty calls."

The Pathfinder's shoulder slumped as she moved down the rock formation to check out the possible threat.

"You look cute when you're pouting," Suvi called out.

The compliment clearly did the trick as Ryder's sly smile returned when she looked up at the doctor.

"So do you," the Pathfinder said with a wink.

It would take some work to undo the damage of the past few weeks, but Suvi felt hopeful they could finally get past it.
"Ready," Ryder enthusiastically warned, before shouting, "GO!"

Every member of the Tempest was downing a shot of some angara liquor which Jaal had promised would produce a longer buzz and different feeling than Milk Way alcohol. Even Lexi had joined in, mostly because of the peer pressure from the rest of the group and Peebee loudly stating she was scared.

"Well done," Jaal, happily exclaimed as he looked around to his compatriots.

Drack gave an approving grunt, "Stuff wasn't half bad."

"Now we can truly be free to share stories," Jaal declared.

"Oh, I didn't need alcohol to share some of my stories," Peebee flirtatiously announced.

Lexi quickly chimed in, "The rest of us needed alcohol before hearing them."

"The doctor's got jokes!" Veta laughed with the group.

Suvi's cheeks were sore from all the smiling and laughing the group had engaged in over the course of the evening. They all sat on a private terrace overlooking Aya's stunning landscape. Tomorrow they would be present during the ceremony to open the Nexus embassy, once the ceremony was done Ryder had indicated they would be departing to get back to hunting the Archon. Gil was still working on getting power to the transponder and the Pathfinder was trying to navigate the tensions between the Outcasts and the Collective in an effort to place a settlement on Kadara.

Yet, those responsibilities were for tomorrow, tonight, the group had a respite from their worries, as the Moshae had acquired an entire floor of a complex to allow the weary travelers a night in their own beds with their own rooms. The Moshae had even taken the time to stop by in person to make sure their accommodations were satisfactory. Suvi had enjoyed speaking with her and some of her advisors.

"Pathfinder, have you considered any of the marriage proposals?" Jaal asked as he poured everyone another round of the curious liquid.

Ryder actually spit out the water she had been drinking causing another round of laughter to erupt around Suvi. She tried to join in the carefree nature of the room, but the question had felt like a sucker punch to the gut.

"Uh, not really no," Ryder chuckled before stealing a glance at Suvi.

Cora clearly feeling the effects of he drink piped up, "Jaal, what marriage proposals?"

The angaran smirked as he said, "Several prominent angara have proposed a marriage between Ryder and themselves in an effort to foster relations between the Milk Way and Aya."

"Have they even met Ryder?" Liam teased.

Vetra nodded at Liam's comment and added, "Yeah, I'd want to take a look at the merchandise before buying."
"Oh, I'm worth it," Ryder boasted as she stood up and twirled around.

"I can attest to that." Peebee chimed in with a confident smile.

Suvi couldn't suppress the shock on her face at that statement. It seemed her worst nightmare was confirmed. Ryder and Peebee's flirting had been consummated in some way, perhaps multiple times. The thought alone made her chest hurt.

"Any angara suitor would have to compete with Dr. Anwar for the Pathfinder's affection," SAM decided to join in the conversation.

The room became deathly silent as everyone absorbed what the AI had just revealed. Even Suvi was shocked he would say something so personal to the group, but to Ryder's credit she just rolled with it and looked straight at the doctor.

"So what do you say, Doc, any of these guys look worthy of marriage," Ryder asked in a jovial manner.

All eyes turned to Suvi, and for a moment she panicked, but Ryder's eyes never left hers and something in them told her to play along. With a deep breath, she projected a confident smile and sassily stated, "No dear, I don't think any of them can handle you."

The crew chuckled as a sense of normalcy was restored.

Jaal nodded in amusement as he stated, "Perhaps you can impress them with your dance moves."

"Say what now?" Ryder asked completely flummoxed.

"During the reception, you will be required to dance," Jaal said.

Ryder looked alarmed at the prospect, "Uh, no one mentioned dancing."

Jaal stood up and made his way over to the Pathfinder, stating, "It is a traditional dance my people have done for centuries. Let me show you."

"This oughta be good," Drack's low voice chortled.

Suvi watched as Jaal dragged Ryder to the center of the terrace. He placed one hand on his hip, and the back of his other hand was up in the air. He gestured for Ryder to place the back of her hand on his, and mimic his movement.

"Just follow my lead," Jaal's voice soothingly instructed.

The crew watched as Ryder had many false starts, which provided entertainment for all, but within an hour she had gotten the steps down to a point where the movement was fluid. One move leading to the next, and the beautiful dance was finally revealed as the crew silently enjoyed the show.

"You will do well tomorrow," Jaal said with pride.

She smiled at him, and said, "I had a great teacher."

"All right everyone, we have an early day tomorrow, I'm off," Lexi announced as she stood up. The group began to break up, some stating they were going out to the tavetaan, other's retreating back to their rooms. Suvi waited to see where Ryder might go, but she and Jaal appeared to be in a deep conversation. With a heavy sigh she decided to head back to her room and perhaps catch up on reports from the science team.
A few hours later, after she struggled to try and sleep, Suvi got up and headed back to the common area to see if anyone else was up. The lights had been lowered giving the large room a dreamlike appearance. As she poured herself some water, she could hear someone still out on the terrace. Silently padding over to the door, Suvi peeked out to see Ryder. She was practicing the dance Jaal had shown her earlier in the evening.

"SAM how was that?" She asked out of breath, clearly she had been at this for a while.

The AI's monotone voice quietly said, "If you do not wish to offend the angara I recommend you continue practicing, however it might be beneficial to have a physical partner."

Ryder let out a sigh of frustration as she leaned against the terrace wall. The soft lighting accentuated her features and Suvi couldn't help but enjoy the view. Realizing that this might be her chance to have Ryder all to herself, Suvi hesitantly walked onto the terrace.

"Do ya need help?" she asked quietly.

Ryder turned to look at her. Her gaze was piercing as her eyes raked the length of Suvi's body. The doctor felt a sudden spike of excitement at her core at the prospect of the Pathfinder lustily gawking at her.

"I'll take whatever I can get," Ryder suggestively said, clearly leaving the statement open to interpretation.

Like a magnet, Suvi felt herself being pulled towards her. With measured steps she closed the distance between them.

The doctor whispered, "Show me."

"Place your left hand on your hip, the back of the right out like this," Ryder's voice lowered to a seductive level that caused Suvi's head to buzz.

She followed the Pathfinder's instruction and felt the butterflies in her stomach grow as the back of her hand touched Ryder's. The dance began rather simply, but as the music swelled, the turns and spins became a touch more complicated, and soon Suvi found herself spinning and stopping and twirling and dipping. It wasn't until the end, when she spun back into Ryder, causing their bodies to press into each other, that the doctor could finally feel the erotic tension between them. Both of their hands were above their heads, their faces inches apart as they struggled to catch their breaths.

"Very good, Pathfinder, perhaps one more round," SAM's voice seemed so distant as Suvi and Ryder continued to hungrily watch each other.

The pair reset for the beginning of the dance, but this time, their movement was not robotic or stiff. Their hands improvised and began to caress one another freely as they changed direction or position. The lingering touches conveyed what neither could vocalize. At one point, Ryder had Suvi's back flush against her body and both hands anchored on the doctors hips. They grinded into each other, and the doctor could feel the Pathfinder's grip tighten for a moment before turning into the next move. This time when they finished, their breath's mingled as their lips nearly brushed against each other.

"Suvi," Ryder panted before licking her lips.

The doctor saw the unfiltered desire in Ryder eyes, as she breathed, "Yes?"

Ryder's hands were once again on Suvi's hips and ever so gently pulled on them, collapsing
whatever space was left between their bodies. Their lips hovered close to one another for a heart
beat more before Ryder's gently captured Suvi's. The doctor's entire body tingled as her lips
playfully teased the Pathfinder's. Her need for Ryder only grew as the slow burning kiss turned
from hesitant affection to passionate expression.

Suvi couldn't help the soft moan that escaped her lips as one of her hands wove into Ryder's hair.
Clearly feeling emboldened, one of the Pathfinder's hands traveled lower until it cup Suvi's ass,
squeezing it as her own hips grinded into her. Ryder's lips began to travel down the doctor's neck,
nipping and sucking, eliciting a gasp of pleasure from Suvi.

The back of the doctor's legs bumped into the table, before she could register what was happening,
Ryder hoisted her onto the top of it and covered Suvi's body with her own. The doctor's hands
slipped underneath Ryder's tank, her thumbs crept underneath the Pathfinder's bra to stroke her
breasts. All the while, one of Ryder's hands methodically massaged her hip before it dove past the
elastic of Suvi's pajamas.

The anticipation of the hand reaching its target caused Suvi to whimper, "Yes."

The doctor's body was on fire, she had woken up alone in her bunk many a nights dreaming of this,
and now Ryder's hand was just a hairs breath from reaching its goal and taking her over the edge.

Suddenly the sound of bodies falling on the ground caused the Pathfinder to stop and blink the
haze of passion from her eyes. Glancing over her shoulder, Ryder gingerly extracted herself from
Suvi and placed her body in front of the doctor's.

"Stay behind me," Ryder breathlessly whispered as she crept toward the living area.

The adrenaline high from their tryst now changed to that of heightened awareness of what might
possibly be on the other side of the apartment door. As they crept through the large living area
hearing another body hit the door, Ryder raised her scanner up.

"It would appear, Peebee, Drack, and Vetra are quite intoxicated, Pathfinder," SAM explained.

A sigh of relief escaped Ryder as her head hung for a moment, her one arm still protectively
wrapped behind her to shield Suvi. The doctor possessively held the Pathfinder's hip as she let her
forehead fall to her shoulder.

Ryder growled, "Assholes."

"We should let them in," Suvi whispered behind Ryder.

The Pathfinder closed her eyes and hummed, "Can't really think straight with that sexy accent in
my ear."

Suvi swatted Ryder's stomach as she moved to open the door, but the Pathfinder quickly pulled her
back into an intimate embrace. She leaned her forehead against the doctor's.

"We could just go back to my room, finish what we started," Ryder suggested with a wiggle of her
eyebrows.

"Oh, I plan to," Suvi said while caressing Ryder's cheek before adding, "After we get them to their
rooms."

Ryder let out a grunt of frustration before moving to the door. Punching in the code, the pair
watched as Vetra, Peebee, and Drack all fell into the room.
"Peebee," Vetra called out in drunken frustration.

The asari giggled, "It wasn't me."

"Hey guys," Ryder feigned excitement to see them.

Vetra looked up and gulped, "Heeeeeeyyyy"

"Don't worry, we're good," Drack stated as he tried to get up but failed multiple times.

"Uh huh," was all Ryder said as she helped the krogan up.

Peebee finally spotted Suvi and waved, "Hey Suvi! What are you doing up?"

The asari started to look between Suvi and Ryder when suddenly her eyes enlarged and her mouth formed the shape of an O.

"Did you guys finally do it?" Peebee asked with excitement.

Vetra gave a goofy smile as she said to Drack, "Hear that, you owe me a case."

"Kid didn't confirm," Drack muttered before turning to ask Ryder, "Did you?"

Ignoring their questions, Ryder looked over at Suvi as she said, "I'll get the krogan to bed. Can you help the other clowns find their rooms?"

With a confident nod, Suvi turned to the ladies and instructed, "C'mon you two."

"Notice neither one is denying it," Peebee commented.

Vetra nodded, "Totally did it."

"A lady doesn't kiss and tell," Suvi scolded as she watched Ryder struggle with getting Drack in his room.

"C'mon, old man," the Pathfinder grunted as she squeezed into the door.

Ryder nearly fell into Drack's room trying to get the krogan through the door. Just before the door closed, Suvi saw the Pathfinder give her that trademark wink and lop sided grin. Knowing the seductive meaning behind the gesture, made Suvi's body immediately react.

"Was it good? I bet it was good," Vetra asked as she glanced back at the doctor.

The asari preened, "Oh, Ryder knows what she's doing."

As the trio filed into Peebee's room, the asari looked at Suvi and gloated, "Just a friendly tip, there's a spot on her neck that if you find it, will drive her wild."

The doctor's cheeks burned with embarrassment and jealously, this wasn't how she saw her night ending. Discussing tips on how to excited the Pathfinder.

"Don't be embarrassed, Suvi," Peebee called out as she went to her private bathroom, leaving the door open so she could say, "Ryder and I were just blowing off steam."

"Blowing off steam in the shower, in the escape pod," Vetra began to list off as she poured a glass of water from the little kitchen area.
"Don't forget the Nomad," Peebee called from the other room.

Vetra looked disgusted, "Ugh, I'm gonna have to scrub it down now."

Suvi’s face must have gone pale as the turian placed a gentle hand on her arm.

"Hey," Vetra kindly started, "That was all months ago, I know she hasn't been with anyone in a while."

"I think she also hooked up with Ryes, he might have some tips," Peebee continued to shout from the other room.

Vetra rolled her eyes and responded, "Shut up, Peebee."

"What?" the asari asked as she reentered the room dressed for bed.

The doctor missed the silence exchange between the pair, as she was lost in thought second guessing Ryder's intentions.

"Hey Doc," Peebee was now standing on the other side of her, as she said, "I'm sorry I wasn't trying to -" 

"It's alright," Suvi tried to sound nonchalant about it, but neither of her crewmates was buying it.

Vetra added, "Ryder cares about you."

Suvi's emotions got the better of her, as her voice cracked while saying "Be nice if I heard it from her."

"Oh honey."

The turian's motherly instincts showed as she pulled Suvi into a crushing hug. Peebee joined and the trio stood there holding each other for the next several minutes.

"I've never had this," Peebee's voice was small and timid.

Vetra pulled back to look at her, then asked, "Friends?"

"You know what I mean," Peebee snorted, before pulling away and shoving Vetra. "Besides, I'll deny it if you tell anyone I was being sappy."

"What do you say we have one more round of shots before the night ends?" the turian asked as she moved back to Peebee's kitchen.

The idea sounded appealing to Suvi, allow her to cool down and think about what she truly wanted from Ryder. Yet, the small voice in the back of her head yelled out what her heart already knew. She wanted the Pathfinder all to herself, not some casual fling left open ended. Suvi wanted to walk into a room on Ryder's arm and let the whole cluster know that they belonged to each other, no one else. What the doctor was desperately trying not to admit, even in her own mind, was that she loved Ryder.

"Dr. Anwar," SAM's voice broke through her internal struggle as he said, "The Pathfinder has been desperately trying to leave Drack's quarters. However, the krogan appears to be telling stories from the war and she fears she will not be able to leave anytime soon."

Suvi was about to reply when Vetra cut in, "Tell Ryder that until she gets her act in gear and treats
Suvi with some respect, Peebee and I aren't letting her near the doctor."

"That's right!" Peebee happily added then quietly said, "Wait why are we saying that?"

Vetra shrugged as she replied, "Thought it sounded tough."

With a sigh of exasperation in dealing with her inebriated crewmates, Suvi called out, "SAM."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Ryder and I need to talk, perhaps you can find a time for us to speak privately tomorrow," she asked the AI.

"Of course."

"So, shots?" Vetra excitedly asked.

Peebee started dancing to find cups for them to use while the turian popped open the bottle. As the two were properly distracted, the doctor tapped her omi tool to speak with SAM once more.

"SAM, it's important I talk with Ryder tomorrow," she whispered.

"I shall make it a priority," his voice quietly replied.

Of course, they never had the chance to talk the next day. Once the ceremony was completed they'd received a distress call from Eos, then a potential lead on the turian ark took everyone’s attention. As the day’s passed, Suvi once again felt Ryder pull away. It seemed they were stuck in the constant loop of two steps forward, one step back.
"Stimulating the cardio vascular core," SAM transmitted.

Suvi's knuckles had turned white from the force of her grip on the console.

"God, please," she pleaded, "Bring her back."

"Zero activity."

"No!" she cried out, her chest aching as she struggled to breath.

The AI's voice transmitted again, "Stimulating the cardio vascular core."

Tears began to prickle Suvi's eyes at the thought of never seeing that cocky smile, which caused her stomach to knot. She'd never feel the Pathfinders lips consuming her own, or the security of their bodies perfectly fitting together in an embrace. The contagious laugh wouldn't ring out through the ship, and those eyes. Those deep blue eyes would never send shivers through the doctor again. The one person who accepted Suvi for all her flaws, all her quarks, was now dead on the kett ship. It felt as if SAM had stopped her own heart. When hope was all but lost, the sounds of Ryder gasping for air filled the bridge.

"That's twice now I've come back from the dead. Can't say the experience is improving," her voice was unsteady, but she was alive and that's all Suvi needed.

Releasing a shaky breath, she blinked back the tears and looked up to the heavens silently mouthing her thanks. As much as Suvi wanted to take a moment to compose herself, the sight of the salarin ark still attached to the kett ship helped pull her focus back onto the mission.

Twenty minutes later Ryder was transmitting from the Archon's chamber.

"Pathfinder, this is the relic the Moshae described. It does seem to be a map," SAM's voice echoed over the comms then added, "I'll overlay the chart we uncovered in the vault on Eos."

After another moment of silence, Ryder's voice broke in, "It's Meridian."

Another fight ensued as the team blasted their way to the top of the kett ship with the help of newly freed krogan scouts.

"Tempest, we're going topside. Track for extraction," Ryder called out to them.

Kallo quickly replied, "Understood."

"I have them," Suvi called out to the salarin pilot.

"All crew, prepare for emergency extraction," Kallo commed the rest of the ship.

Suvi continued to track the bio signs as they moved to the top of the kett ship.

"Port side," she called out.

The Tempest swerved and then pivoted it's position to allow the ramp to touch down. Kett were
firing from every direction as Suvi watched Ryder wave to Drack and Vetra to move forward to the ship.

Alarm klaxons wailed from several key ship systems.

Kallo shouted into the comms, "Ryder, now! We've got to go!"

"All bio signs aboard," Suvi shouted as she continued to monitor the power on the kett ship.

With a flick of her thumb she switched her comms to call the salarian ark, "Captain Hayjer what's your status?"

"Board is green, ark is prepared to make the jump," came the captain's reply.

Suvi's fingers flew over her console as she replied, "Relaying coordinates now for first jump."

"Coordinates received, ready to jump on your mark."

Suvi was about to answer when Ryder stormed onto the bridge.

"Sitrep?"

Kallo answered, "Both the ark and Tempest are cleared to jump."

"Good, let's get the hell outta here," she commanded as her eyes tracked the salarian ark.

Both Suvi and Kallo quickly did all their calculations and as they watched the ark disappear, the Tempest was not far behind.

"Tell Captain Hayjer, we're going to initiate security protocols, Foxtrot Omega. We'll rendezvous at the final coordinates at," Ryder instructed as she used her omi tool to calculate the time, "1400 Nexus time tomorrow afterno—"

Ryder yelled out in pain as she collapsed to one knee.

"Dr. T'Perro to the bridge," Suvi quickly tapped her console to call for the doctor.

Jumping up from her seat, she climbed up to the Pathfinders perch as Ryder continued to clutch her chest and struggle to breath.

Cradling her face, Suvi calmly whispered, "It's okay, just breathe."

"Suvi," Ryder wheezed as she was once again assaulted with a painful spasm.

"I'm right here, stay with me," the doctor kept her voice even as she caressed the Pathfinder's cheeks with her thumbs.

"SAM, status," Lexi demanded as she entered the bridge with Drack, Cora, and Liam right on her heels.

"The Pathfinder is crashing from the adrenaline high of being resuscitated, and it is straining her heart."

Lexi looked at the krogan while saying, "I need to get her to the med bay."

"On it," Drack mumbled.
He kneeled down next to the Pathfinder and whispered, "I got ya, kid."

As he began to pick her up, Ryder groaned in pain. Suvi's hand flew to her mouth in an effort to keep her composure as she watched Drack carefully cradle the Pathfinder to his chest. Lexi continued to speak with SAM, as she, Drack and Liam left. Cora watched them go before turning to Suvi and Kallo.

"What were her orders?" Cora asked.

Suvi stood on the Pathfinder's platform, eyes fixed on the door as her mind and body went numb.

"She um, she wants us to initiated security protocols Foxtrot Omega, and inform Captain Hayjer we'll meet him at the final coordinates at 1400 tomorrow," Kallo despondently said as he too watched the door.

"Dr. Anwar," the commando said sharply to get Suvi's attention.

Startled, Suvi cleared her throat before saying, "Yes, ma'am."

"Relay the Pathfinder's orders to Captain Hayjer, then sweep for any signs of kett ships in pursuit."

Suvi gave a small nod and moved back to her seat. Cora quietly spoke with Kallo about the calculations for the next set of jumps to help break up any trace of radiation the kett might be able to use to track the ships. It took the doctor three tries to properly type up the orders before sending them to the salarian ark.

"Dr. Anwar," the voice of SAM filled the bridge as he stated, "The Pathfinder has been successfully sedated and is no longer in pain. I will update you again within the hour."

The roller coast of emotions was beginning to take its toll on Suvi as she suddenly felt drained of all energy. Pinching the bridge of her nose to fight back any tears, she suddenly felt the comforting hand of Cora on her shoulder.

"Why don't I get you some tea, Doc?"

With a weak smile, Suvi looked up and said, "Thank you."

For the next several hours, Kallo thankfully distracted Suvi, as did checking in on the salarian ark as they zigzagged around the cluster to lose any possible pursuer the Archon might have sent. Cora continued to stand on the bridge as second in command and help answer any questions Ryder would normally handle. It was late, and everyone was beginning to yawn frequently.

"You two get some shut eye, SAM can handle the ship for the next few hours," Cora instructed."

"With all due respect, Commander. I'd prefer – "

Cora cut Kallo off with, "That's an order."

"Should I encounter any anomaly's, I shall not hesitate to contact you," SAM's monotone voice chimed in.

Without any more arguments, the pair wearily left their seats and shuffled to the crew quarters. Suvi used her hot water rations to take a shower in an effort to cleanse away the stress of the past twelve hours. After she had changed into her tank and sweatpants, she threw on the Initiative sweatshirt and shoes and cautiously made her way to the med bay.
The lights were dimmed to emulate the night cycle of the ship. All the different monitors and machines glowed in the darkness. The different colors washed over Ryder's face as Suvi approached the bed. Glancing at the main monitor above the Pathfinder, she noticed her vitals were stable for now, but that she was still sedated. No longer in her armor, Ryder was wearing the long sleeve white top and pants one would find in the medical hospitals back in the Milk Way. The fibers embedded in the garments helped speed up the recovery process. The Pathfinder's golden hair, normally pulled back in a well kept ponytail, was matted around her face. She was sweating and twitching, her face rolled back and forth as she mumbled something incoherently.

"SAM," Suvi whispered, "Is she in pain?"

"No, Doctor, she is experiencing a reoccurring nightmare," the AI replied just as quietly.

"Nooo," Ryder softly groaned.

Heartbroken by the sight, Suvi pulled up a chair and sat by the bed. Taking Ryder's hand and giving it a squeeze, while using her other hand to affectionately stroke the hair from her face.

"You're safe, Ryder," she cooed, "I've got ya."

The unconscious woman's voice slurred in response, "Su-vi."

The doctor continued to whisper words of comfort and affection as she watched Ryder's heartbeat and blood pressure finally lower. When the Pathfinder finally appeared to be resting again, Suvi looked up and asked.

"How often does she have nightmare's?"

"It is nearly a nightly occurrence," SAM replied, "The circumstances differ but the pattern is clear."

Suvi couldn't explain why but she needed to know, and asked, "And what's that?"

"The Pathfinder has an overwhelming fear of not being good enough, or fast enough to save the people she cares about. Whether the enemy is the Archon, Sloane Kelly, or remnant, she can never save the person in jeopardy and must watch them be exalted or perish."

"Am I one of the people she can't save?" the doctor asked in a timid voice, as if she was scared of the answer.

"Her inability to save you has caused the Pathfinder the most distress," the AI willingly answered. The lump forming in her throat prevented Suvi from replying, instead she leaned in to kiss Ryder's forehead before resting her own against it.

"Dr. Anwar, might I ask a personal question?"

Placing another kiss on Ryder's head before she moved away, the doctor sat back up to respond, "Of course."

"Do you fear for the Pathfinder's safety?" he asked.

Unconsciously nodding, she replied, "Yes, every day."

"In researching love and lose throughout human literature, I came across a poem by Lord Alfred Tennyson in which he states, 'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.' I have seen this sentiment repeated throughout multiple species literature and media and wonder why
you and the Pathfinder have not subscribed to this logical conclusion?"

Suvi couldn't suppress the smile as she whispered, "Whoever said love was logical, SAM?"

"You would classify your feelings for the Pathfinder as love?"

Without hesitation she breathed, "Yes."

Finally vocalizing what she had been fighting all this time seemed to take a weight off Suvi's shoulders. Leaning over the bed, she placed her head beside Ryder's and continued to hold her hand, as sleep tugged at her consciousness.

Just before she drifted off, she tenderly placed a kiss on Ryder's lips and murmured, "I love you."

The next morning when Suvi began to stir, she noticed she was in a bed, and that her arms didn't hit the ceiling when she stretched. As she turned to roll over, she also became aware that the bed was bigger than her top bunk in the crew quarters. Rubbing the sleep out of her eyes she finally sat up and looked around. The expansive space of the Pathfinder's quarters greeted her.

"Good morning, Doctor," SAM spoke from his terminal across the room.

"SAM how'd I get here?" she asked with slight alarm.

"You fell asleep next to the Pathfinder in the med bay. Dr. T'Perro discovered you there several hours ago and had you moved here to get proper rest."

Getting out of bed she grumbled, "I'm gonna be late for my shift."

"Dr. T'Perro alerted Commander Harper that you were to be undisturbed, however I do believe several scans you were running over night have completed."

"Thanks, SAM," she gratefully replied as she left Ryder's quarters.

Later that afternoon, Suvi watched as Ryder was finally released long enough to meet with Captain Hayjer to discuss the escort the Nexus had dispatched to intercept the ark. A sense of dread had fallen over the doctor as she ran the same test for a third time to confirm her fear that the Archon had indeed intercepted Ryder's memory flashes when she died.

One of the memories that flashed by prominently was that night on Aya, and the doctor could already predict Ryder's reaction to the Archon having this little bit of information. Not only was Suvi a target for Sloane Kelly, but now the Archon. It would be a miracle if she could use the bathroom without Ryder providing an APEX assault team as an escort. Suvi couldn't suppress the chuckle at the thought.

Getting up she moved to the science station in the aft of the ship. Vetra and Liam were moving around from different stations as she approached. Glancing up to the third floor conference room, she nodded her head towards it as she asked.

"She still meeting with Captain Hayjer?"

Vetra nodded, while replying, "Yeah, but they're wrapping up. Asked his shuttle to prepare to depart."

As they spoke, Drack walked through the door of the cargo hold and went straight to the conference room.
"What's that about?" Liam quietly asked as he moved to stand beside Suvi and Vetra.

Vetra finally looked up from her station, and whispered, "The captain agreed to take Drack's scouts back to the Nexus. I'm sure he wants a personal guarantee they'll make it."

"Old feuds die hard, ay?" Liam quipped as he went back to his station.

Suvi just shook her head as she went into Jaal's room to finish up her analysis. The angara looked up from his own terminal and smiled warmly at her. They exchanged pleasantries before going back to work on their own projects. An hour later, the results Suvi had feared were confirmed.

"Damn," she frustratingly sighed.

Jaal looked up and gave her a concerned scowl, "Are you alright?"

"Ya," she immediately replied then said, "No," before finally settling on, "Idunno."

The angara stepped away from his task and moved closer to her, as he simple said, "Something troubles you."

Suvi glanced at the data again, as she gave a slight nod.

"Am I correct that it has something to do with the Pathfinder?"

With a snort, Suvi asked, "Am I that transparent?"

Jaal's kind eyes and soothing voice replied, "How you both feel about each other is."

He took hold of one of her hands and gave it a squeeze.

"Whatever it is, face it together," he advised.

Something about the way he spoke filled the doctor with confidence, "Thank you, Jaal."

"Stay clear."

Suvi collected the data and put it on a pad for Ryder to view. After confirming with SAM that she was still on the third floor, Suvi gathered her courage and strode up the walkway. When Ryder looked up, she gave that sassy smirk and was clearly about to say something cheeky, but stopped when she noticed how seriously Suvi was carrying herself.

"There's something I need to show you," the doctor said as she handed Ryder the pad.

As The Pathfinder watched the memory flashes, the doctor noticed her eyes reacted ever so slight when their night on Aya was part of the group.

"What is this?" she asked with concern.

Suvi took a deep breath before explaining, "Your implant began projecting these memory flashes and the Archon's device recorded it before we could purge it from your system."

"The Archon saw my memory flashes? He got that from my implant?" Ryder couldn't mask her annoyance.

Keeping her eyes on the pad as the Pathfinder handed it back to her, Suvi responded, "His device went deep. Our connections were wide open when SAM . . . killed you"
She couldn't hide the emotion in her voice when she mentioned Ryder's death. Stealing a glance at the woman, Suvi was shocked to see guilt behind the Pathfinder's gaze.

"He'll know how much we need Meridian. We have to warn the Nexus. We have to move."

Taking her statement as a dismissal, Suvi started to leave when Ryder called out.

"I'm sorry."

That statement alone was loaded with so many possibilities that Suvi had to remember to breath when she turned back to face the Pathfinder.

"For what?" the doctor hesitantly asked.

Ryder attempted to conceal her remorse by leaning her hands against the holo vid table, partially shielding her body away from Suvi as she spoke, "I've made you a target again. First Sloane. Now the Archon."

Something Jaal and SAM had said stuck with the doctor as she took a step back towards the Pathfinder.

"We're all targets, everyone on this ship, on the Nexus, the outposts. Every human, asari, turian, salarain, and krogan," Suvi began as she continued to creep closer to Ryder. "We all have to fight if we're going to survive in Heleus, but what will that matter if we don't have anything . . . or anyone to fight for."

Their proximity was dangerously intimate, but Suvi couldn't stop herself. With one final step she moved into Ryder's personal space, and without hesitation Suvi's lips crashed onto hers. The kiss was quick but forceful, everything the doctor wanted to convey in the span of seconds. She broke the kiss just as abruptly as she'd started it, noticing Ryder's dazed expression. Without waiting for a reply, Suvi left the Pathfinder to her thoughts.
Chapter 6

"There she is!"

"Pathfinder!"

It had been an exhausting several weeks for the crew of the Tempest. After their encounter with the Archon, Liam had coerced Ryder into helping a friend of his, resulting in the team being trapped on a stolen kett ship full of pirates.

Then someone stole the seed farm from the krogan encampment. As they were searching for the shuttle, the team ended up rescuing a krogan named Vorn, who apparently was in love with Kesh. The ride back to Elaaden was highly entertaining to watch Vorn avoid Drack. Ryder had insisted on crew dinners both nights and clearly enjoyed the awkwardness between them.

The last few days had been harrowing as they'd found the asari ark, and fought to retake the ship. Now, at the strong urging of Lexi, the crew was getting a few days of well deserved R&R at the Nexus as they restocked supplies.

The crew, being protective of Ryder, made sure to encircle her when they disembarked. Small crowds had begun to gather to great them whenever the Tempest docked at the Nexus, and some eager folks had gotten a little too pushy with the Pathfinder in the past. As they gathered in the auxiliary ramp leading up from the dock, people were already shouting out to them.

Suvi noticed Ryder stuck to her side like glue as they waited for everyone before locking down the ship. Once the group was on the move, Ryder's fingers kept caressing Suvi’s. They had yet to actually discuss what was happening between them, but over the course of the past few weeks, Ryder had been the pursuer in finding moments to pull Suvi into dark corners and make out like teenagers.

"Hey," Ryder whispered as they approached the security checkpoint guarding the entrance to the Tempest.

"I have a few Pathfinder things to do today but I was hoping maybe later we could have dinner together," she sounded nervous as she asked, "Just you and me?"

With an impish grin, Suvi leaned in to say, "Are ya asking me out on a date?"

"Do you want it to be a date?" Ryder countered with her own mischievous smirk.

Suvi laughed as she shook her head and said, "I asked first."

"Yeah, but I'm the Pathfinder," she countered.

"And?"

"And that means you have to answer first, clearly, says so in the manual," Ryder playfully replied.

Suvi was about to answer when a familiar voice called out.

Keri T'Vessa, the asari journalist, pushed her way through the crowd and smiled at Ryder in a way that made Suvi uncomfortable.
"Pathfinder, you've been busy," she didn't even hide her flirtatious tone.

Ryder actually blushed at the compliment as she spoke, "It's a team effort, everything we've accomplished, we've done together."

"Dr. Anwar," Suvi blurted out awkwardly as she stuck out her hand.

The asari didn't miss a beat and eagerly shook her hand while saying, "Dr. Anwar, I hear nothing but praise from the Nexus science team regarding your work. I would love to actually schedule an interview with you if you have time before the Tempest departs."

Ryder gave Suvi the, "You asked for it," look as the doctor sputtered to come up with a response, not expecting the reporter to actually want to speak with her.

"Uh-sure, yeah, how 'bout tomorrow?"

Keri pulled up her omni tool, and looked at her schedule as she said, "I have time tomorrow afternoon, I'll send you my offices information."

Suvi feigned excitement, "Great, thanks."

"Pathfinder, I was hoping to get some time with you as well. Perhaps tonight?"

Ryder gave an apologetic smile, as she quickly glanced at Suvi before saying, "Bit busy tonight, but let me know what your schedule is tomorrow and I'll see what I can do."

"Count on it," Keri said before taking off.

Suvi gave Ryder a look.

"What?" she said innocently.

"Pathfinder," Tann's assistant now appeared, "The Director is waiting for you."

Ryder just rolled her eyes as she grumbled, "I just stepped off the ship, and I need to meet with Harry on the Hyperion. Tell the director I'll see him afterwards."

She then turned to Suvi and said quietly, "I'll see you later."

With a wink and a goofy grin she was gone, and the doctor couldn't help but feel her absences immediately. The Pathfinder had the type of personality that could fill up a room. One minute she can make you feel like the most important person in the world, and the moment that bright spotlight is gone it reminds you how lonely the darkness can be.

The day dragged by as Suvi counted down the hours until dinner when she would finally be able to talk with Ryder. The science team was enthusiastic to speak with her in person and discuss progress around the different settlements. Everyone was holding his or her breath that Ryder could pull off a miracle and find a way of settling Kadara, but Sloane was making the task impossible. Luckily, Reyes had kept the team updated on his progress with possibly getting a sit down with the Charlatan.

Heading back to the apartment complex the crew had whenever they were on the Nexus, Suvi began to worry that she hadn't heard from Ryder yet. As she entered the common area of the apartment she spotted Vetra.

"Have ya seen, Ryder?" she asked.
Vetra nodded, then said, "About an hour ago she was headed to Pathfinder HQ."

"She's been on the Hyperion this whole time?"

Peebee entered, flopping down on the couch opposite the turian she added, "Yeah, guess that doctor wanted to run a bunch of tests on her, someone said she was able to talk with her brother using SAM and their implants."

"She spoke with him while he was in the coma?" Suvi gasped as her mind started to think of the possibilities.

"Suvi you wanna join us for dinner?" Liam asked as he joined everyone.

"Well actually – "

"Dr. Anwar, it appears the Pathfinder will be delayed and asks if she can reschedule for tomorrow," SAM stated.

The group began to hoot at the implication of what SAM had just revealed.

"Were you two going on a date?" Peebee excitedly asked.

Ducking her head, Suvi couldn't stop the rush of blood to her cheeks.

"Congrats, Doc," Liam happily ribbed.

Vetra pretended to cry as she said, "Our girl's all grown up."

"Oh, shut it," Suvi retorted flatly.

Hours later the group was casually strolling through the Nexus enjoying a late night desert from a newly opened angara vendor. Jaal was exceedingly proud of them all for trusting him to try the delicious treat. They were about to head back to the apartment complex when Kandros rounded the corner with a full head of steam.

"Just the crew I was looking for," he grumbled.

"What did Drack do now?" Cora asked.

The head of security clearly wasn't in the mood for jokes as he hurriedly said, "He's waiting for us outside Vortex."

"Outside Vortex?" Liam questioned.

Cora kicked into commando mode, as she asked, "Kandros, what's going on?"

"I'm about to arrest the Pathfinder for inciting a riot," he growled.

This got everyone’s attention as they fell in line behind the turian. Within minutes they arrived at the entrance to the makeshift bar. A line had formed as people were waiting to try and get in. Drack looked impatient as the ruckus sound coming from the bar could be heard down the corridor.

"Kandros this better be good," the krogan complained.

Cora injected, "It's Ryder."
The krogan sighed, "Shit."

As the doors to the bar opened a wall of humidity hit them, as the mixture of smoke, sweat and body heat had created a sticky atmosphere. The rhythmic sounds of rock and roll roared all around them. The group stood by the entranceway trying to figure out how to push their way further into the bar. Suvi looked at the stage and saw that the normally sparse band had tripled in size, and that some how a piano had made it's way onto the stage. That's when she noticed a familiar head of hair bobbing up and down behind it.

"Don't give us none of your aggravation, we had it with your disciple! Saturday night's alright for fighting get a little action in," the asari singing belted as the crowd sang with her.

"There," Suvi yelled to the group as she pointed to the stage.

Ryder's face was drenched in sweat, her disheveled ponytail flopped in all directions as her fingers slammed into the keys. Multiple empty bottles of booze decorated the top of the piano, along with her jacket and scarf. Suvi watched as the Pathfinder lost herself in the music. Her eyes closed as she whipped her head back, leaning away from the keys before stretching to run her hand up the length of the ivories. It was almost spiritual how she let the music take hold of her. Suvi was enamored by it.

"Let's head that way," Vetra called out as she pointed to the back by the bar.

The group began the arduous task of slowly wading through the sea of bodies. At the end of the song, Ryder had a brief solo that caused the crowd to go crazy. Assaulting the keys with a final flourish, she pointed to the asari before taking a long chug off a fresh bottle of booze. After a minute, Ryder's fingers were once again tickling the keys, as the opening of another rock song sent a few in the crowd wild. Suvi was surprised by how many people started singing the song with the asari.

"Like a visions she dances across the porch as the radio plays."

As the song began to build it became harder for the group to move. People started dancing with them or trying to pull one of them away from the group. Mostly it was the females who kept getting grabbed, with Liam or Jaal getting the occasional caress or pull from would be suitors. Suvi found herself yet again captivated by Ryder. The way her body appeared to almost feel the music as she played, foot stomping away, hands flying up and down the keys, head thrown back then forward. The piano was thunderous as the song ended with a solo from the band.

The asari and the band all took a bow, and Suvi noticed that Ryder began to look around, as if SAM had alerted her to the crew's presences. She called the asari over and clearly gave her some type of instruction, because when she returned to the mic it wasn't to sing.

"All right folks, looks like we get one more song before we have to shut it down for the evening."

The crowd immediately booed. It was quite a sight to see humans, asari, turians, salarians, krogans, and even a few angara, all packed together in this tight place want to keep rocking the night away. Suvi wondered was it the music, or was it Ryder. Was her presence here enough to give people a sense of comfort, or was the act of a communal concert, the familiarity of it, that brought the room together.

The band and asari singer all looked to Ryder to give them the cue. With another quick swig of the bottle, she settled in behind the piano. Then unexpectedly she turned to the crowd, gaze scanning once again. Suvi tried to catch her eyes, but too many bodies were in the way. The doctor watched
as Ryder closed her eyes and took a deep breath before her hands hovered over the keys. There was a moment of anticipation, as the crowd grew still waiting for what Ryder would give them. When the gentle notes of a love song floated over the mass of humanity, the energy in the room changed.

A few seconds later, the asari finally leaned into the mic and softly sang, "When the rain is blowing in your face, and the whole world is on your case. I could offer you a warm embrace. To make you feel my love."

The sorrowful song captivated the crowd as all eyes watched the asari heartbreakingly sing of potential love. During the bridge of the song, Ryder went into a delicate solo, her mannerism completely different from the demonstrative actions of the rock songs. In fact to Suvi, it appeared as if her eyes were still closed. When the song came to it's delicate end, there was a moment of silence as the crowd absorbed what they had been gifted. The applause turned into chants asking for another song, but Kandros had taken the opportunity to get to the stage and ask everyone to leave. As the crowd thinned, the crew stayed together back by the bar.

"Who knew she could play?" Cora asked.

The group all shrugged before Lexi's concerned voice got their attention, "I did."

All eyes turned to her, as Dr. T'Perro kept her watchful stare on Ryder.

"I was at Ellen's funeral," she began to explain, her voice trembled with sadness as she continued, "Harry asked me to go with him, said it would be too hard to go alone. During the reception afterwards, Ryder sat at a piano tucked away in the corner. Scott eventually made his way over to her. That's when she finally began to play."

Vetra was the first to speak, and quietly asked, "What did she play?"

"That song," Lexi said, as she looked visibly upset, "The one she just played. It was Ellen's favorite."

It was clear, demons were chasing their Pathfinder, and the crew now seemed to understand tonight’s display had some deeper source of pain for the young human than stress of the job. The group made their way to the stage and Suvi decided to hang back as Drack, Lexi and Vetra took the lead in corralling Ryder from the stage.

"You guys see me play?" Ryder, happily in her drunken buzz, asked.

They all took turns giving her their praise as they took discreet side hallways and entrances Kandros had given them to get her back to the apartment without too much notice. When the crew walked into the apartment, Cora and Lexi offered to help Ryder take a shower, while the rest hung back.

"I'm gonna make some tea, would anyone like some?" Suvi asked feeling the need to keep busy.

Everyone declined and soon they began to trickle back to their own rooms, sending their wishes of a good night to Suvi as they left. The doctor absently stared at the two mugs of tea she was letting steep when Lexi appeared.

"She's asking for you," Lexi sympathetically said.

Suvi felt an odd spike of pleasure in Ryder wanting to talk with her before a feeling of foreboding followed. She still had no idea where she stood in the Pathfinder's life, would she actually open up and talk with Suvi or was this some drunken carnal need to possibly use physical pleasure to hide
away from what was bothering her. These thoughts still consumed her as the door to Ryder's room automatically opened.

Ryder sat on the edge of her bed, staring out at the view of the Nexus during its night cycle. The small sparks of someone welding in a far off section of the station gave the impression of tiny fireworks. The Pathfinder seemed enthralled by it, and Suvi hesitated to announce her presence.

"I lied to him," Ryder declared, her voice strained with emotion.

Suvi cautiously took a seat beside her on the bed, and softly asked, "Lied to who?"

"Scott," the Pathfinder confessed with overwhelming guilt.

Stealing a glance at her, the doctor saw the tears Ryder was fighting to keep contained.

"He asked about dad," Ryder's voice quivered as she stood and walked to the window.

Her shoulders heaved for a moment, as the Pathfinder continued to struggle to keep her emotions in check.

Shaking her head, she finally turned to look at Suvi as she desperately asked, "How could I tell him?"

A slight sob escaped her lips before she continued, "How could I tell him he died saving me?"

The tears finally won their battle and silently escaped down Ryder's cheeks as her voice cracked, "I've lost everyone."

The anguish in her features was palpable as she looked away in shame at her show of emotions.

"First, mom – then dad. I can't loss him too," her voice was nearly a whisper.

Suvi stood, fighting the urge to wrap Ryder up in a hug. Instead she placed an affectionate hand on the Pathfinder's back, tenderly rubbing circles around the tense muscles in an effort to help alleviate her pain.

"He's gonna be okay," Suvi soothed.

"You don't know that."

The doctor gave a small smile as she said, "Of course I do. He's a Ryder, and if he's half as stubborn as you, he's not going anywhere."

This got the desired effect as the Pathfinder gave a soft snort before looking at Suvi with an intense stare that took her breath away.

"I can't lose you either," Ryder breathed.

Suvi caressed her cheek as she said, "You won't"

A sad smirk tugged at Ryder's lips, "You can't promise that, no one can."

The doctor's own argument being thrown back at her caused Suvi to fumble with how to respond. The Pathfinder took advantage and passionately kissed her, all coherent thoughts immediately left Suvi as she hungrily responded. When the need for air was too great, the pair finally parted, leaning their foreheads against each other. The doctor's head screamed at her for answers. She kept
her eyes closed as she found the courage to speak.

"Ryder, don't do this to me," she desperately began to whisper, "Not unless you really mean it."

Opening her eyes, Suvi couldn't hide the distress in her voice as she said, "My heart can't take –"

"Do you remember the last song I played tonight?" Ryder asked as one of her thumbs softly stroked Suvi's cheek.

The doctor tried to fight through the prickling waves of excitement coursing through her with every caress from the Pathfinder.

She stammered as she asked "The one for your mum?"

A stunned look crossed over the Pathfinder's features as she started to say, "How did you –"

"Lexi told us, you played it at her funeral, that it was one of her favorites," Suvi quietly replied.

Ryder's hand left Suvi's face, causing the doctor to suppress a groan of disappointment.

"It was her favorite," the Pathfinder admitted while looking down at the ground, before adding, "But I wasn't playing it for her tonight."

"You weren't?" Suvi breathed.

Looking up at her, Ryder shook her head then took both of the doctor's hands in her own.

"I could make you happy, make your dreams come true, nothing that I wouldn't do," the Pathfinder began to weakly sing, her voice almost inaudible.

The blood rushed to Suvi's head while her heart felt like it was hammering against her chest, she almost forgot to breathe as she watched Ryder.

"Go to the ends of the Earth for you," Ryder's voice broke as she murmured the end, "To make you feel my love."

"Do ya mean it?" Suvi asked as her lips hovered over Ryder's.

The look she gave the doctor chased away any lingering doubt as she whispered, "Every word."
"Can I keep you?" Ryder's voice rumbled in Suvi's ear.

The doctor was still drifting in that space between consciousness and sleep. The past twenty-four hours had been blissful as the new couple spent whatever free time they had with each other. The crew had done their best to give them space to enjoy this change in their relationship. In fact, yesterday morning when Suvi left Ryder's room after their first night together, Cora had caught her tip-toeing back to her own room. The commando had just smiled and gave a head nod that the coast was clear. Last night when Drack cooked the crew dinner, no one was surprised when Ryder had made sure Suvi sat beside her. It was as if they had been together for years and the crew was use to it.

Enjoying the memories, and not wanting to fully wake up she just hummed her response, "Mmm hmm."

Ryder's hand protectively wrapped around Suvi's stomach as she kissed that sensitive spot on the back of the doctor's neck, all the while pulling Suvi's body flush against her.

"I could get use to this," Ryder continued to speak in a low sultry voice, "Perhaps I should just retire."

The Pathfinder's hand snuck under Suvi's tank and lazily began to draw circles, while her lips placed gentle kisses on her shoulder. The effect was causing a slothful arousal to build within the doctor as she sighed her contentment.

"Stay in bed . . ."

Ryder's foot began to weave its way between Suvi's, her hand left her stomach and leisurely drifted over the doctor's hip and down her thigh. Her fingers curved ever so slightly to stroke the inside of Suvi's thigh as it gently tugged on the leg to lift up. Ryder's knee inserted between the doctor's legs while her hand drifted back up to Suvi's lower abdomen.

". . . with a beautiful woman in my arms . . ."

The low timber of Ryder's voice was all adding to the desire building within Suvi as she continued to enjoy the feeling of sleep mixed with unadulterated lust. With every orbit of the Pathfinder's fingers, the trajectory inched lower, pushing past the band of the doctor's shorts.

". . . letting me have my way with her . . ."

The Pathfinder's fingers were now caressing the junction of the doctor's hip and leg and with the new space created by Ryder's knee, she had easy access to go further. Trying to tease Suvi into insanity, Ryder's finger's drift lower before slowly pulling back. After a minute of this torture, the doctor's hips gave the smallest jerk to cause Ryder's fingers to inadvertently brushed past the spot she'd wanted, sending a spike of pleasure through her.

Ryder playfully laughed in Suvi's ear, "Impatient this morning."
Before Suvi could reply, the Pathfinder's teeth nibbled on her ear lob, tugging and sucking on it. Her mouth moved back to that particular spot on the doctor's neck, which provoked a soft moan from her. Ryder's fingers had reached their destination, stroking the entrance to Suvi's core and fueling her need for Ryder to be inside of her.

"Ryder," she panted.

The Pathfinder blew on the moist skin of Suvi's neck, sending shivers down the doctor's body while Ryder's thumb pressed down and gradually rubbed back and forth over her clit. Again, Suvi's hips involuntarily bucked, but the Pathfinder kept her pinned against her body.

The doctor moaned, "Please."

Two fingers slide inside of Suvi, eliciting a gasp.

"So wet," Ryder mumbled against the doctor's neck as she set a methodic pace with her hand.

The maddeningly slow rhythm was agony as Suvi's hips rocked back and forth. Another minute passed before Ryder's fingers curled to fondle her sex.

"Yes," Suvi whimpered as the momentum of pleasure was reaching its breaking point.

Ryder bit down on the doctor's shoulder as her voice growled, "Let go."

The thrust of Ryder's hand quickened as Suvi's orgasm neared. Her body tensed as the Pathfinder continued to take her closer to the edge. Suvi reached behind her head to grab hold of Ryder's shoulder, bracing for the wave of pleasure about to hit. When it finally happened, she cried out in ecstasy as the orgasm rippled through her body. The Pathfinder's motions slowed but didn't completely stop, helping to elongate the climax.

Suvi took the time to enjoy the high, letting her body push into Ryder's as she did. When the spasms had subsided, the doctor quickly turned and rolled the Pathfinder onto her back. She pinned her hands above her head as she straddled her hips, finally seeing the face of her lover. Ryder wore a smug grin as her eyes filled with excited at Suvi's new position.

"Yer turn," the doctor purred.

It took the pair another hour before they finally left Ryder's room dressed and ready for their last day on the Nexus. Entering the common area hand in hand, they were greeted by the site of Peebee, Vetra, and Lexi all sitting cross legged on the floor as Cora seemed to be guiding them through some sort of meditation.

Ryder clearly couldn't help herself as she asked, "Did someone lose a bet?"

Peebee silently raised her hand while Vetra and Lexi both pointed at her. Suvi chuckled at their reaction as she pulled Ryder into the kitchen.

"Tea?" she asked.

The way the Pathfinder watched her caused Suvi to laugh nervously.

"What?"

With that cocky smirk, Ryder shrugged as she said, "Just wonder why we even left the bed."

Feeling bold, Suvi reached out and tugged at the Pathfinder's pants causing Ryder to stumble
forward and land flush against her.

Arching her eyebrow, Suvi teased, "Someone was hungry."

"Famished," Ryder breathed, a ravenous look in her eye.

"Pathfinder," SAM interrupted.

With an exasperated sigh, Ryder leaned her forehead against Suvi's before answering, "SAM, this better be important."

"Captain Dunn is asking for you presence on the Hyperion."

This got Ryder's attention as she took a step back from Suvi, and asked, "Did she say why?"

"She did not, but requested that you speak with her immediately."

Unconsciously nodding her head to the AI, Ryder look to Suvi, "C'mon, we can grab lunch after."

"Pathfinder," SAM spoke again, "She requested to speak with you alone."

"Of course she did," Ryder muttered in frustration.

Suvi tenderly rubbed the Pathfinder's arm as she said, "S'alright, I can grab us lunch and meet ye after."

"I'd prefer to have lunch in bed," she wiggled her eyebrows as she spoke.

"Ryder," Suvi lightheartedly scolded while swatting her arm.

Slowly backing out of the kitchen, the Pathfinder played innocent as she said, "What? My girl is sexy as hell, especially when she whispers naughty things in my ear."

Suvi pointed as she said, "Yer just trying to get a rise outta me."

"Already did that," Ryder countered as she left the room with a wink, but then a few seconds later shouted out, "A few times!"

Once she was gone, Suvi took a moment to absorb what the Pathfinder had called her. A blush crept over her cheeks, and the doctor couldn't fight the bright smile taking over. She was indeed the Pathfinder's girl.

An hour or so later, the doctor finished up with the science team and proceeded to pick up lunch for her and Ryder. She casually strolled by a few vendors looking through their supplies when the sound of children's laughter caught her ear. Two kids, a brother and sister, were playing with model ships as they circled their parents. It was a rare sight to see, and Suvi was so caught up in it that she didn't hear SAM the first time he spoke.

"Dr. Anwar."

Snapping out of her musing, she answered, "Sorry, SAM. Lost in thought."

"I do not wish to cause alarm, but I believe you are being followed," the AI's voice was low.

Suvi froze for a moment then looked down at her feet and pretended to adjust her boot.
"What should I do?" the doctor quietly asked.

"Continue to walk through this section of merchants, as I continue to analyze."

Turning to look at a case full of items Suvi asked, "Where's Ryder?"

"She is now speaking with Dr. Carlyle on the Hyperion, I am trying to find a moment to alert her of the situation," he stated.

"Don't," the doctor quickly said.

Moving onto the next stall, Suvi continued, "She'll come charging down here and do God knows what."

Suvi began to play with an angara object as she continued to discreetly speak with the AI, "If they think I'm alone, we'll have a better chance of finding out who they work for."

The doctor was met with silence for a few moments before SAM replied, "Agreed. However, I will alert Nexux security the moment I feel your life is in peril."

A smile formed as Suvi said, "Deal."

After a few minutes of window browsing, Suvi realized she was running out of vendors to look at.

"Where should I go?" Suvi warily asked.

"Hydroponics," SAM replied.

Trying to keep her movement casual, the doctor made her way over to all the lovely foliage and plants. As she looked around she noticed samples from Havarl and Eos on display.

"Doctor!"

Suvi jumped as Keri touched her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," the reporter apologetically said.

Taking a moment to catch her breath, Suvi shook her head, "Yer alright, I get lost in my own head."

"Beautiful aren't they," the asari gestured to the alien plants.

With a bit of pride in her voice, Suvi agreed, "Yes, very."

The reporter looped her arm around the doctor's and guided her to a secluded corner of Hydroponics as she spoke in a hushed tone, "A mutual friend asked me to get a message to the Pathfinder, a rather delicate and time sensitive matter."

"I find these to be my favorite," Keri said in a more normal voice.

"Uh, yes, Havarl flora is lovely," Suvi tried to mimic the asari.

Leaning in, the reporter whispered in the doctor's ear, "I know you're being followed, I can give you a window to get to Ops. Pick up a data pad from Sid, she thinks it's a supply manifest for her sister."

As the asari backed away, she kissed the doctor's cheek.
"Take care of her, doctor," the reporter's voice was suddenly serious before she turned to walk away.

Completely flummoxed by the encounter, Suvi couldn't help but stare at the asari's retreating form. It took another moment for her to realize that the reporter had planted something in one of Suvi's pockets. A small data chip.

"Doctor, I shall network with your Omni Tool and read the information on the chip," SAM instructed.

Bringing up her scanner, Suvi held out the chip so SAM could extract the information.

"Fascinating, in the azalea bush behind you is a construction helmet. Please place that in your bag," the AI instructed.

It took the doctor a few minutes to find the object, as she had to stop every now and then when someone walked by. Once the object was safely secured away, she brushed herself off and looked around.

"Now what?"

"Standby," the AI replied.

Suvi waited for what felt like minutes, trying to look relaxed she continued to enjoy the flowers near by, but SAM's silence was becoming worrisome.

"SAM," she impatiently whispered.

"Standby."

With a huff, Suvi began to drift back to the main corridor and that's when she spotted two human males dressed in maintenance uniforms working on a panel. Suvi made eye contact with one of them, and within an instant she knew, they were the ones following her.

"SAM," she couldn't hide the urgency in her voice.

The AI replied, "Proceed to the tram for Ops."

Keeping an eye on the two men, the doctor quickly moved to the tram. She tried to keep calm, and even fought back the urge to comm Ryder. She couldn't keep running every time someone went after her because of her relationship with the Pathfinder. As she approached the tram terminal, the doctor felt a wave of relief. There, waiting for the next tram, were construction workers wearing the same helmets Suvi pulled from the bush. Confidently weaving her way into the middle of the bunch, the doctor discreetly pulled out the helmet and put it on. The group all piled into the next tram and as the doors closed, Suvi could see the two maintenance workers looking into the tram. They never spotted her, and as the tram departed, the doctor breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well done, ma'am," SAM quietly said.

With a grateful chuckle, Suvi replied, "Thank you, SAM. We make a good team."

"Indeed."

The next several hours were a whirlwind. Suvi retrieved the data pad from Sid and SAM immediately decrypted the message. To everyone's surprise it was from the Charlatan, and warned
the Pathfinder to sweep the Tempest before contacting him on a secure channel. Sure enough, as the crew did an extensive search of the ship, multiple devices were discovered. They kept them all active until they departed the Nexus, and the moment after they made their first jump, Suvi had found an old satellite to attach the trackers and recording devices too. Using her powerful scanner, Ryder conducted one more final sweep of the ship, before it was given the all clear. The entire crew gathered around the vid table as Ryder followed the instruction on contacting the Charlatan.

The shadowy outline of a person flickered to life as a heavily synthesized voice greeted the group.

"Pathfinder, it is an honor to finally speak with you."

Ryder kept her face stoic as she replied, "I'd say the feeling is mutual, but the whole cloak and dagger effort for this call, gives me pause."

The Charlatan laughed, "I'm sure you can understand my precaution."

"I can, but I'm also curious how you knew about the ship being bugged?" the Pathfinder asked.

"The same way I knew Dr. Anwar was being followed, Pathfinder," the man calmly replied.

Suvi made sure to look busy trying to trace the source of the call, and not look at Ryder.

"It is my business to have eyes and ears everywhere," he explained.

Vetra leaned over to Cora and mumbled, "Shadow Broker 2.0"

"A delicate matter has come to my attention and I believe you have the other piece of the puzzle," said the Charlatan.

Ryder continued to play her cards close to her chest and replied, "And what would that be?"

"I shall discuss it with you in person," came his cryptic reply.

Still trying to keep her composure, Ryder evenly responded, "Great, give us your coordinates and we'll come pick you up."

A distorted chuckle echoed around them, "You'll have to find another mode of transportation, Pathfinder. If the Tempest is spotted in the system it could tip our hand."

Beginning to show her aggravation, Ryder asked, "What system would that be exactly."

"Kadara. I'm sure one of Ms. Nix's contacts can smuggle you on one of their supply runs."

The entire table looked troubled by the notion of heading to Kadara without back up.

"Something to look forward too," the Pathfinder flippantly said.

"Yes, I am quite anxious to finally meet you in person . . . and Dr. Anwar of course," the voice distortion caused the comment to sound menacing.

"That's twice now you've mentioned the good doctor," Ryder began to say, "Hate to disappoint ya, but I don't think you're her type."

Once again the shadowy outlined laughed as he said, "Funny you say that, Pathfinder, because I have it on good authority she's not yours."
The comment caught Suvi completely off guard.

"Not blue enough was it?" the Charlatan mused, "Or perhaps wrong gender."

"Bad intel," Ryder growled.

"Doubtful," he retorted before adding, "The delicate matter revolves around a biological event. We have acquired a sample and we need her to verify it."

Ryder impatiently replied, "Kidnap one of the Outcast doctors than."

"None of them have studied the accelerated growth of Havarl wild life and the biological implication," the figured explained.

"But your Doctor Anwar, she's quite valuable with all those reports from the Nexus science team and outposts rattling around in her head."

"She's not going anywhere near Kadara," Ryder grinded out.

"Ah yes, Sloane's bounty," the Charlatan casually stated, "As a show of good faith, should we succeed in our little mission, I can personally guarantee Dr. Anwar's bounty will be lifted and no harm will come to her."

The muscles in Ryder's jaw were twitching as she tried to contain her temper.

"Give me a few hours to coordinate with my team."

"I give you one hour, Pathfinder," came his smug response.

"That doesn't give us much time."

"Time," the Charlatan began, "Is what will determine whether we survive Andromeda. Time... and you."

Chapter End Notes

Thought there was a way to rate a chapter as explicit, but looks like I have to change the whole story's rating.
"Options," Ryder snapped the moment the call was done.

Lexi took a step forward, her voice contemplative as she spoke, "He said biological event."

She then turned to Suvi and continued, "And he specifically mentioned your knowledge of the accelerated growth of wildlife on Havarl."

Like a thunderbolt, Suvi realized what Lexi was getting at as she blurted out, "A biological weapon."

"Exactly," Lexi grimly agreed. "Some type of mutated virus using the Havarl acceleration perhaps?"

"Been down this road before, doesn't end well," Drack grumbled.

"More importantly who is trying to develop this possible weapon," Cora chimed in.

Jaal nodded as he said, "And for what purpose?"

"Maybe it’s a weapon to use against the keet?" Liam tried to spin the possible positive.

"Anyone in position of this weapon would hold a lot of sway in the cluster," Vetra added.

While the crew continued to discuss the possibilities, Suvi watched as Ryder took a step back, her eyes lost focus, which happened more frequently now that she learned how to speak with SAM on their private channel. When the Pathfinder looked up, she saw Suvi watching her.

"TH-314," Ryder said to her from across the table.

All other conversation stopped as the crew looked between its leader and the doctor.

"Did you say TH-314?" Lexi's gasped.

Suvi couldn't believe it as she shook her head, "That's not possible, every person was screened before –"

"It was dormant, bring her out of stasis triggered it," Ryder explained.

"Who?" Peebee asked.

Typing on her omni tool, Ryder projected Ruth Bekker's profile to the middle of the table.

"Before we left the Nexus, Captain Dunn and Harry asked me to quietly try and find her before she reached stage 3. Her nephew is on an APEX assault team, she's his only family."

"Someone got to her first," Cora sighed.

Ryder just nodded, "It would appear so."

"Only someone from the Milky Way would know how deadly that disease is," Lexi mentioned.
Jaal finally spoke up, "What is this disease?"

Suvi stepped forward and said, "It's one of the few disease that can kill humans, turians, asari, salarians, and krogan."

"One disease, that could take out the entire Milky Way," Jaal mused out loud.

"Roekaar?" Ryder speculated.

Jaal appeared deep in thought as he spoke, "Possibly, I'll see what the Resistance has heard."

The Pathfinder nodded as she turned to look at the rest of the group before giving her orders, "Doctors, work together to see what equipment Dr. Anwar will need to analyze a potential biological weapon."

"For TH-314?" Lexi asked.

"We can't assume that's what it is, and I'd prefer to have this little advantage on the Charlatan. But, I want Dr. Anwar to be prepared for anything," Ryder instructed as her eyes lingered on Suvi.

The Pathfinder turned to Vetra, "We need a ride, and to not look like we just stepped off the Nexus."

"On it," Vetra confidently said.

"Drack, think we could borrow some scouts?" Ryder asked.

The krogan happily chuckled, "This should be fun."

"Cora coordinate with his team," Ryder said before looking to Kallo, Liam, Peebee and Gil, "You four need to do some digging for me. SSV Normandy, ever hear of it?"

Kallo's eyes lit up, "That became the human specters ship, what was her name?"

Ryder nodded as she answered, a hint of reverence in her voice, "Commander Shepard."

"Is it true you met her?" Cora asked with great interest.

"A few times," the Pathfinder's voice softened as she told the story, "My mother helped design the L2 and 3 implants most biotics use. Both Shepard and I are biotics, not as powerful as Cora mind you," this got a laugh from the group, "So we went through the same Alliance training. When she heard about my mother . . ."

Ryder paused her eyes fixed on the table as she took a steadying breath to continue, " . . . she was very kind to my family when she didn't have to be. Even after everything that happened with dad."

With a sad smile she looked up and said, "Just before we went into cryo I saw her on the Citadel, she looked like the weight of the galaxy was on her shoulders, but she took the time to talk and wish us luck."

The Pathfinder refocused to drive the point of the story home, "My father mentioned once, the Normandy was being built with stealth technology."

"Stealth how?" Gil asked.

"The Normandy's IES stealth system temporarily stores the heat generated by the ships systems in
"lithium heat sinks deep within the hull," SAM piped in.

Gil looked panicked as he said, "I really hope you're not asking me to try and build that."

Ryder laughed, "No, but I want to know if there is a way to manipulate our heat signature output to appear as a shuttle. Maybe some of Peebee's Remtech might help."

"Ah well, kinda impossible but less insane than building a stealth system," Gil happily complained.

"We've got fifty six minutes until the Charlatan calls back. I need answers in forty," Ryder commanded.

The group broke up to divide and hopefully conquer this latest crisis. Suvi and Lexi went to work in the med bay creating a list of equipment she'd need to fully test a lethal biological sample. When the group reconvened, everyone had at least some answers for the Ryder.

"Pathfinder," the black outline of the Charlatan reappeared.

Ryder took a deep breath before addressing the shadowy figure, "My team and I can be there in two days. I'm sending a list of equipment Dr. Anwar requires to properly test this biological event."

"Very good," the mechanical voice cheerfully began, "Look for your associate Reyes Vidal when you arrive."

"Understood," Ryder acknowledged, preparing to terminate the connection.

"Oh, and Pathfinder," the Charlatan called out stopping Ryder's movement.

"I went to great length to acquire a piano. I hope you'll indulges us with a performance while you're here."

"I'll make sure to brush up on my Moonlight Sonata," Ryder quipped back.

The Charlatan laughed, "I shall leave the choice to you maestro, until then."

"Know any of the Nutcracker?" Cora asked to lighten the mood.

This got a laugh from the group, as everyone seemed to breath a collective sigh.

"We'll rendezvous with my contact Faloln Belbeni at 1100 tomorrow," Vetra explained, "And just to warn everyone, she's a bit different."

"Different how?" Liam couldn't hide his concern.

Vetra was clearly trying to soften the blow, "Uh, I'd say a mix of Ryder's sarcasm and your jokes?"

Liam's confused look seemed to only fuel everyone else's laughter.

"What do you mean, my jokes?"

Ryder just shook her head at the young man before stepping in and saying, "It's been a long day, I recommend we finish up what we need to and get a little shut eye."

"I'll have dinner ready in an hour," Drack added as he headed for the ramp.

Sure enough, an hour later the crew piled into Ryder's quarters and discussed their current crisis as
they ate Drack's new stew. Suvi couldn't help but feel slightly irritated that the group continued to hang around well after they had all finished eating. It was selfish of her and she knew it, but the doctor wanted to have some time alone with Ryder. The Charlatan's comment still taunted her.

"I'll take your plate, Suvi," Peebee's statement startled the doctor out of her own musing.

Looking up, Suvi realized that almost everyone had left, except a few stragglers speaking with Ryder. The asari seemed to give the doctor an understanding look as she took the doctor's dishware. Suvi lingered until everyone else departed. There was a tension in the air when Ryder turned back to look at her.

"You okay," the Pathfinder gently asked.

The question caught the doctor off guard, as she was still trying to cope with everything that had happened in the past twelve hours.

"I – I dunno," Suvi confessed a hint of anger in her voice.

Ryder took a deep breath before asking, "Did you know you were being followed?"

Looking the woman dead in the eyes, the doctor challengingly stated, "Yes."

"Were you going to tell me?" Ryder asked while firmly staring back at Suvi.

"Since returning with the data pad, Pathfinder, Dr. Anwar has had no opportunity to discuss –"

"Stay out of this SAM," Ryder snapped.

Her eyes briefly darted over to the AI's terminal in the corner before return to Suvi.

SAM's monotone voice injected, "I can not, as I made the doctor aware of her pursuers and analyzed that we would have greater success in discovering who they were working for if we did not alert you or security."

There was a momentary flare of aggravation in the Pathfinder's eyes before she shook her head.

"Et tu, SAM?"

"I do not understand, are you implying I stabbed you repeatedly for crimes against the Roman Empire?"

His question caused both the doctor and Pathfinder to laugh, releasing the tension in the room.

"I think she's implying we're conspiring against her," Suvi answered.

"There was no conspiracy to keep this information from you, Pathfinder. As you have instructed, I take the doctor's survival as seriously as your own, I would not have allowed any harm to come to her," the AI stated.

Ryder suddenly found the floor to be fascinating, appearing to try and hide her embarrassment at SAM blurting out what had clearly been a private instruction, though the AI most likely didn't infer that meaning when it was given. Yet, maybe SAM was craftier than Suvi thought. Perhaps, he was trying to alleviate Ryder's concerns while also letting the doctor know just how important she was to the Pathfinder. During Suvi's quiet reflection, Ryder had closed the distance between them, taking both of the doctor's hands in her own.
"I'm always going to worry about you when I'm not around," she whispered.

The doctor squeezed her hands as she replied, "Just like I'll always worry about you when yer out there fighting for our survival."

"We're like a bad holo-drama," Ryder joked.

"Well," Suvi began as her hands wrapped around the Pathfinder's waist, "Not all bad."

A smirk graced Ryder's lips while saying, "I have a very important question for you."

She paused for effect before asking, "When do we get to play doctor?"

"Ryder!" Suvi exclaimed as she smacked the Pathfinder's ass.

"I've been a bad, girl. You should do that again," Ryder seductively teased, "But a little harder."

Suvi extracted herself from Ryder as she sighed, "Oh for heaven sakes, yer incorrigible."

The doctor began to head for the door.

"Where you going?" the Pathfinder asked, a confused look on her face.

"It's late, we need to get some sleep," Suvi said equally confused by her partners confusion.

Pointing to the her bed, Ryder earnestly replied, "The bed's that way."

"Oh," Suvi suddenly felt the rush of blood to her cheeks as she stammered to reply, "I didn't want to assume – I mean we never really talked – about – us."

The familiar lop sided grin appeared as Ryder walked over and took Suvi's hand, pulling her in the direction of the bed.

"The only time we're going to get to just be us, is the three minutes before we pass out and the two minutes in the morning before someone bugs me."

They quickly took off their uniforms and settled into bed. Suvi propped her pillows up as she had one more report to read. Ryder haphazardly threw an arm and leg over the doctor as she rested her head on Suvi's chest. The lights had been turned off and all was quiet.

"There's another reason I want you to stay with me," Ryder sleepily admitted.

Suvi smiled, the fingers resting on the Pathfinder's back playfully caressed her skin when the doctor replied, "What's that?"

Ryder murmured, "I can sleep when you're here."

The comment broke the doctor's heart. She squeezed the Pathfinder closer to her body and kissed the top of her head before she whispered, "Then I'll stay, love."

The Pathfinder just hummed a reply, her arm tightening around the doctor's waist. It only took Suvi a few more minutes to finish the report, but she found herself staying awake to watch Ryder. The doctor forgot how young she was, and in the soft light of the stars, the Pathfinders youth showed. For someone so young she projected the confidence and experience of someone twice her age. Suvi wondered if they had met back on the Citadel or on Earth, would Ryder even give her a second glance.
"The Pathfinder has reached deep sleep, Doctor, you can reposition her without waking her," SAM softly spoke.

With a small chuckle, Suvi thanked him and rolled Ryder onto her side before curling up behind her.

It felt as if she had just closed her eyes when SAM spoke again, "The time is 0600."

Suvi stretched and enjoyed having the bigger space to wake up to in the morning. As she began to move towards the edge of the bed, Ryder's arm suddenly pinned her to the mattress.

"Shh, don't move, maybe he'll go away," came the groggy voice of Ryder.

Looking over her shoulder, the doctor could see the Pathfinder had buried her head under the pillows.

"Not a morning person, are we?" Suvi cheekily asked.

Releasing her hold on the doctor, Ryder grumbled, "Five more minutes."

Scooting back to her, Suvi lifted one of the pillows up and kissed Ryder's head before whispering, "C'mon, love, I'll make ye a cuppa."

The Pathfinder tilted her head just enough to see Suvi and give her a sleepy grin.

"Say that again," she affectionately whispered.

"What cuppa?" Suvi asked not picking up on what Ryder was fixated on.

Rolling her eyes, the Pathfinder now propped her head up with one hand as she said, "Before that."

Suvi tried to remember what she'd said.

"You know for a scientist you can be pretty dense sometimes," Ryder playfully teased before adding, "But it's also adorable."

"What are ye on about?" Suvi asked.

"I dunno, love, maybe it'll come to you," Ryder said with a wink as she finally got up and left the bed.

Suvi mentally kicked herself when she finally realized what the Pathfinder had been asking.

Getting up, she stealthy pinned Ryder to the wall and kissed her.

"Good morning, love," she whispered in the Pathfinder's ear before leaving for the showers.

Hours later, Suvi found herself standing in a line with Vetra, Drack, Jaal, and Ryder as Faloln Belbeni, an eccentric female salarian, assessed their attire.

"Nyx, your armor is pretty standard but we'll need to change your head gear, and facial tattoos," the salarian started then moved on to Jaal, "Never seen any of your kind dressed like you before, so you'll stand out like a sore hanar. I have some standard resistance gear which should help you blend in."

"What is a sore hanar?" Jaal asked Vetra who just shook her head at him to forget it.
Faloln moved down the line to Drack, and said, "Clan Nakmor, seen your scouts around Kadara, not as pushy as some of the other krogan. Still safer to change your armor colors to a mercenary group, maybe Blood Suns?"

"Some how I doubt the Initiative would have allowed them to join," Drack flatly replied.

"Perhaps, I'll let you choose the colors just don't pick anything stupid," the salarian stated before moving on to Ryder.

"Pathfinder, your N7 armor is impressive for someone who did not officially acquire the designation."

Ryder just looked down at Vetra who shrugged apologetically.

"Both the Outcasts and Collective have been experimenting with some impressive pieces, I can put something together for you that should match if not surpass this armor, along with a facial piece to hide your identity."

"Thank you," the Pathfinder grinded out.

Faloln finally appeared in front of the doctor, the salarian eyed her carefully.

"First we will need to color your hair."

Suvi immediately balked at the idea, "What? No!"

"You have a bounty on your head doctor, and one of the distinguishing qualities listed is that of your fiery hair," Faloln simply stated.

"Don't worry Suvi, it'll wash out," Vetra tried to sound reassuring.

"I would also recommend a voice modulator," the salarian continued.

Ryder quietly pouted, "Not the accent."
"You're still sexy to me," Ryder quietly comforted Suvi as they sat on the floor of the shuttle. Suvi nearly cried when she saw the mousy brown hair on her head after they had finished dying it. Now, she sat sulking, tucked away in the corner of the shuttle. There wasn't much space so Ryder jammed into the corner with her, giving the couple a touch of privacy, though they could hear everything happening in the cargo hold. Jaal found a space to laydown under, while Vetra had somehow created a bit of a throne for her to sit on out of the different cargo containers. Drack being the biggest of them all leaned against the shuttles ramp.

"You can't even tell it's me," Suvi pouted.

Ryder pretended to be looking at her from different angles before quietly commanding, "Look at me."

The doctor just turned toward the Pathfinder, her eyes never leaving the floor of the shuttle. The gentle touch of Ryder's finger tipping Suvi's head upwards, forced the doctor to finally look at her partner.

An endearing smile encompassed Ryder's face as she whispered, "There you are."

The pure tenderness in the Pathfinder's gaze caused Suvi's chest to ache.

"As long as I can see those eyes, they'll always guide me home," Ryder affectionately added.

Taking one of the doctor's hands, she brought it up to her lips and placed a kiss on the back of the glove.

"Ryder," Suvi barely found her voice as she breathed, "That's beautiful."

The Pathfinder seemed to blush as she looked down for a moment before asking, "Feel better?"

The doctor just nodded.

"Good," Ryder cheerfully said, "No one likes a sad Suvi, especially me."

Without another word, the Pathfinder leaned the side of her head against Suvi's as she held onto the hand she had kissed. The doctor closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of being with her. After a few minutes Suvi remembered something she had thought about the night before.

"Do ye think," she quietly began, "Do ye think we would have met back home?"

Ryder didn't hesitate in her answer, "Of course."

She then looked up and smirked at the doctor, "It's fate."

"You don't believe that," the doctor chuckled.

"Says the scientist with faith in a higher power," Ryder retorted.

Suvi begrudgingly replied, "Touché."
Another moment of silence passed, when Suvi added, "I just don't know how we would have met. I'm six years older than ye."

"Dr. Suvi Anwar, cradle robber," the Pathfinder teased.

"Ye make me sound like a perv," Suvi said with a nudge of her shoulder.

Ryder arched an eyebrow as she continued her silliness, "What kind of perv? Were you a Madame, Madame?"

The doctor laughed, "Yer not right."

"You two are having too much fun in that corner," Vetra's voice floated over to them.

The Pathfinder quickly answered, "Don't worry Nyx we're only partially naked."

"I like a good show," the turian replied.

Jaal joined in the conversation, "As do I."

Suvi was completely embarrassed and covered her face when Ryder shouted out to Drack, "What about you, old man?"

"Doc ain't the same without the red hair."

"Drack!" nearly everyone yelled at him.

To his credit, he waited a beat before innocently saying, "What?"

The group continued to talk amongst themselves, going over situations and possibilities of what they might have to deal with. When it was time for bed, Suvi put her back against one of the containers and had Ryder sit between her legs so that she could lean back into the doctor.

The Pathfinder was slightly confused when she looked at the set up, "Wait, I should be holding you."

Suvi wrapped her arms around Ryder's waist and whispered in her ear while she pulled her back, "I'm older remember."

"And?" Ryder asked with a smirk.

Suvi couldn't hide the sincerity in her voice as she softly spoke, "And, how 'bout ye let someone take care of you for a change."

She could feel Ryder relax into the embrace. Her head leaned back to rest beside the doctor's.

The next morning Suvi was jarred awake by the shuttle entering the atmosphere. A second later, Ryder bolted up as if preparing for a fight. Suvi quickly wrapped her arm around the Pathfinder's shoulders and gave them a squeeze.

"S'alright. Yer okay." Suvi whispered to her.

Feeling Ryder sag back into her, the doctor breathed a sigh of relief.

"We'll be landing in ten, start prepping your gear," Falon's voice echoed over the shuttle's comm.
The group began moving around the cargo hold putting on any last minute gear. Suvi watched as Ryder began to attach the hideous mouth guard that covered half her face. The doctor didn't know why, but she had a bad feeling about this trip, and the need to express her affection for the Pathfinder became overwhelming. Aggressively pulling Ryder around the corner of a container for some privacy, Suvi hungrily kissed her. It was desperate and affectionate, frenzied and passionate, and when they finally pulled apart the Pathfinder appeared slightly daze.

"Shit, do that again," Ryder begged with a goofy grin.

Happy to oblige, Suvi once again pinned the Pathfinder up against a container. Their bodies slammed together as the doctor wove her hand into Ryder's hair. When the Pathfinder attempted to take control, Suvi quickly pinned her hand above her head.

"You don't always have to be the alpha," the doctor panted, before kissing her one final time.

Completely out of breath, they rested their foreheads together, Ryder caressing Suvi's cheek with one of her hands.

"What was that about," she asked with a hint of concern in her voice.

"I-I just have this feeling," Suvi confessed with a desperate whisper.

Ryder shook her head not understand, "Feeling about what?"

"Like I'm gonna lose ye."

The fact Ryder didn't have some snarky remark or bravado to throw out caused the doctor even more distress.

The Pathfinder pulled her into a crushing hug and whispered, "You're not getting rid of me that easily."

"We're two minutes out," Vetra called out from the other end of the hold.

"Understood," the Pathfinder quickly replied.

The couple shared one last look, before putting on the final elements of their gear. An hour later the group had partially broken up. Jaal was meeting with members of the Resistance, while Drack and Vetra had gone ahead to scout Tartarus, the bar Reyes frequented. Ryder and Suvi hung around the upper levels of the port waiting for the signal from the first team.

"Deep breaths," Ryder quietly said to Suvi.

The doctor just nodded as she tried to settle her nerves. When they received the signal, the Pathfinder led the way down to the seedy bar. Suvi had heard some of the team members mention this place, but their descriptions did not do it justice. The only thing she could compare it to, were the stories she'd heard about Omega. Dancers behind cages along with the bar tender, fights breaking out in every corner, beings puking, and amidst all that you had the brazen individuals mating in one way or another. As they climbed the stairs to the second level, a human male had an asari wrapped around his waist, and Suvi could see they were in the middle of intercourse when the asari spotted her, she winked and called out.

"Wanna join."

So stunned by what she saw, Suvi couldn't form a sentence. Instead, Ryder had to turn back and
pull her away from them and up the rest of the steps. The music assaulted the doctor's ears as they
moved through the crowd towards a private room in the back. When they arrived at the door,
Drack and Vetra joined them. Ryder hit the button and to everyone's surprise the door opened right
away. The group shuffled in and when the doors closed, Suvi felt like she could finally breath.

"My, my," the silky voice of the smuggler got everyone's attention. "You do know how to impress
a man, Ryder."

Snapping off the mouth guard, the Pathfinder sarcastically replied, "Have a thing for people with
breathing impairments?"

"When they wear it as well as you," Reyes charmingly said.

He took Ryder's hand and kissed it, giving her a wink in the process.

Turning to her team, Ryder introduced everyone, "I believe you remember Vetra Nyx, and Nakmor
Drack."

"Of course, a pleasure," he said, nodding to both of them.

"And this is Dr. Suvi Anwar," the Pathfinder stated, Suvi noticed the little extra pride in her voice.

"Ah, the famous Dr. Anwar, I've been looking forward to meeting you."

"Ye have?" Suvi couldn't hide the suspicion in her voice and also the shock on her face at what her
own voice sounded like with the modulator.

Ryder shook her head, "Figured a voice modulator would help disguiser her better, but I might
destroy it in a fit of rage."

The smuggler laughed as he held up a hand before saying, "I wouldn't. You could harm that
beautiful face."

Taking the doctor's hand, he kissed it than quietly said, "Always nice to meet the competition."

Their eyes met, and in that instant Suvi realized the dread she was feeling wasn't about Ryder's
physical safety or the mission, it was this man. He was the type that once his mind was set on
something he would go to whatever lengths to get it. It was alarmingly clear that his sights were set
on Ryder.

Turning back to the group, Reyes continued, "Your precautions paid off. It would seem Sloane and
any other interested party's are not aware of your presence. However, Kadara is a powder keg on
the verge of exploding. You intercepted the latest supply run to the Outcasts from their Nexus
contact."

"Actually, the doctor was scanning a comet on the way back to the Nexus and detected an
anomaly. Once we got closer SAM was able to scan the supplies and alert us they were all reported
stolen. Dumb luck on our part," Ryder sighed.

"Better to be lucky sometimes," Reyes said with a smile than added, "However the circumstances,
to say Sloane isn't happy with you would be putting it mildly."

The smuggler began to pace as he explained, "There's rumor of another supply run happening
within the next day or so, which has put all of the Outcasts on alert. The Charlatan was going to
have you shuttled to the location of the mobile lab, but we could get shot out of the sky."
"Yeah, let's avoid that," Vetra muttered.

"If we wait until dusk, we can move almost undetected in a ground vehicle," Reyes stated.

"Lots of places to get ambushed from," Drack grumbled.

Turning to the krogan, Reyes asked, "Would we not face the same thing in your Nomad?"

"Nomad's kitted out with shielding, armor, plus the kid drives like a lunatic," Drack bluntly replied.

Ryder had a smug smile on her face until she turned to look at Suvi who was concerned by this news.

"It's not that bad," she tried to play it off, however the Pathfinder didn't see Vetra behind her nodding vigorously that it was.

Reyes gave a confident smirk to the group as he said, "I can assure you the vehicles will be heavily armed."

The smuggler than typed a few commands on the terminal closest to him.

"Speaking of arms, I know you had to travel without your normal weapons cache. I have a locker in the room next door if you'd like to add anything."

"You two check it out first, I'll look when you get back," the Pathfinder instructed Vetra and Drack.

Reyes chuckled, "Don't worry, Ryder, I can make sure no one runs off with the doctor."

Nodding in agreement, Suvi gave the best smile she could muster. These next few minutes alone were going to either prove her right, or prove she'd become slightly paranoid. Within moments of the door closing behind the team, Reyes turned to her and smiled.

"So," he casually began while taking a seat, "You and the Pathfinder?"

Trying to project confidence, Suvi echoed the question as a statement, "Yes, me and the Pathfinder."

A sly smile tugged on Reyes' lips as he continued the verbal sparing, "Impressive for someone so . . . common."

"Says a common criminal," she rebutted.

Reyes laughed, "Oh, I'm much more than that."

"As am I," she stated with authority.

The smuggler took a moment to regard her, a hint of respect in the slight nod he gave.

"Yes, I think you are, which will make this even more satisfying."

Shaking her head, the doctor stated, "We're together, nothing will change that."

"Yes, I've bedded the Pathfinder as well, on multiple occasions. I'm curious if she admitted her fear of failure to you late at night while the sweat cooled from your bodies."
He stood up and stalked closer to her as his voice lowered, "Have you felt her tremble before screaming out your name only to have her beg for more?"

Taking another step he nearly whispered, "Has she confessed her darkest desires to you and you've fulfilled them?"

Reyes scoffed at the doctor, "No, of course not."

He turned and took a seat at the table.

"Because it's safe for her to be with someone like you, someone who doesn't push her or challenge her," the smuggler said with disgust before adding, "She's a queen who deserves someone strong enough to fight beside her, not hiding on a ship. You – you will just be consumed by her, and when she's finished, will move onto the next pretty thing that floats by."

"What bothers you more, that she didn't choose you, or that she chose a woman?" Suvi tried to sound cool and collected, but the smuggler was getting under her skin.

Reyes laughed, "You think this has something to do with what's between your legs? Come now doctor, I'm a man or taste, and if that taste happens to be a woman or another man, so be it."

He took a long sip of his drink than said, "No, this is about you holding her back from greatness. This is about you being a weakness not a strength."

"This isn't about her, it's about yer hubris," Suvi nearly growled, "You don't care about her, you care about winning. She's just a prize to you."

"She is a prize, and more," Reyes snapped back.

Suvi was about to reply but the doors opened, she turned away and pretended to be fascinated by something.

"Do you normally carry a small arsenal around, Reyes, or are you just happy to see me," Ryder happily said as she entered.

"Only the best for you, my dear," the smuggler crowed.

The flirtatious exchange cut deeper now that Suvi knew there was true intent on Reyes' part. She gave him a look before turning to the group.

"I have a few more things to attend to before we leave, please stay, this room is yours while you're here," the smuggler graciously offered before getting up and heading for the door.

The group thanked him and settled around the table, Ryder threw her arm around Suvi as they discussed strategy and when they might hear from Jaal. The doctor possessively kept her hand on the Pathfinder's leg, her mind still reeling from the discussion with Reyes.

"Hey," Ryder quietly said with a nudge, "You okay?"

The question caught Suvi off guard as she looked up at the Pathfinder, "What? Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

"You just seem quiet," Ryder began to say, "More so than usual."

"Just thinking about a few things Lexi said before we left," Suvi lied.
Ryder studied her face, her eyes bore into Suvi's, almost as if she knew the doctor was lying but was debating whether to call her on it.

Rubbing Ryder's leg, Suvi forced a smile as she said, "Don't worry, love."

Later as they gathered by the ground vehicles, Ryder was helping Suvi put on armor plating. If the doctor weren't keeping tabs on Reyes, she would have enjoyed the Pathfinder's commentary.

"So these go through there, and now with one last adjustment, "Ryder grunted as she pulled on a strap.

"There, now you're almost bullet proof," she said while knocking on Suvi's chest plate.

"Now, I know how ye stay in such good shape," Suvi struggled to breathe for a moment.

Ryder quipped, "By forgetting to eat until you or Lexi yell at me?"

"No, though ye do need to eat more, especially for a biotic," she said in her most doctor voice.

"Time to go," one of the driver's shouted.

The group piled into the vehicle, and as they took their seats, Suvi struggled to figure out the straps. Ryder gave her a teasing wink as she reached over and helped her. Reyes who had taken a seat across from them just gave a sarcastic smirk. As if her helplessness was proving his point.

In a momentary flash of annoyance, Suvi decided to stick it to the smuggler. Just as Ryder finished checking the straps, the doctor caressed her face as she unsnapped one side of the mouth guard and kissed the Pathfinder thoroughly. With great care, she put the piece back into place but let her hand linger. Ryder didn't question the action, instead just took Suvi's hand and held it.

For the next twenty minutes, she enjoyed the feeling of Ryder's hand in hers, a smug smile on her face whenever Reyes looked at them. All that changed however, when alarms suddenly went off in the vehicle, and the driver shouted for everyone to hold on. The next thing Suvi remembered was her world had turned upside down.
"Ryder!" Suvi coughed through the smoke that was building in the cabin.

Sparks flew all around her, as the sounds of gunfire echoed outside the vehicle. Suvi was still trying to get her bearings as the cabin looked right side up but when she looked outside the rest of the world was upside down. Gravity was pulling on her and causing the doctor to slip from the straps. She was about to call out again when Vetra appeared, though she looked upside down.

"I've got ya, Doc," she shouted over all the noise.

The turian quickly went to work on trying to free her.

"Hold onto my shoulder," she instructed.

Suvi did as she was told though she noticed her ribs were already sore from the straps.

"Ready?" Vetra asked.

"Ready!" the doctor shouted just before Vetra released the final strap causing Suvi to fall from the ceiling into the turians arms.

"SAM, which way?" Vetra choked as she put the doctor down and pulled out her gun.

The AI replied, "The rear exit has been secured by the Pathfinder and Mr. Vidal."

"Stay behind me," Vetra instructed as they made their way to the back of the vehicle.

As they approached the exit, Suvi could hear Ryder yelling. Stepping through the smoke, the doctor watched as the Pathfinder charged with energy and then darted out into the night. When she came back, Suvi noticed blood dripping down her face, mixed with black ash from the crash. It was a startling contrast to the playful smiling kid the doctor was used to seeing on the bridge.

"They're trying to flank us, we gotta move," Ryder instructed as she looked at the group.

"You two take point, I'll watch our six," Vetra offered.

The Pathfinder nodded then pulled out her pistol and handed it to Suvi.

"Stay behind us," Ryder commanded.

The doctor watched, as Ryder and Reyes seemed to have some unspoken langue. She would nod her head and he would move and provide cover while she advanced. He would point and she would throw out some biotic energy, then at some point they both started laughing.

"You really know how to show a girl a good time," Ryder shouted over to him.

Reyes replied, "Who needs a quiet dinner when there's fighting to be done."
The battle cries of a krogan got everyone’s attention.

"Drack," Ryder spoke into the team's comms, "Where do you need us?"

The krogan sent a body flying into the air, "Target practice."

Ryder quickly rolled out of her cover behind a rock and shot the body repeatedly. Suvi watched as it crashed to the ground with a sickening thud.

"Dr. Anwar, to your right," SAM said with as much urgency as a monotone voice can.

Suvi looked and saw an Outcast member taking aim at Vetra from behind some containers. Without thinking, she raised her gun and emptied the clip in his direction.

"Enemy killed," SAM stated.

Vetra took the pistol out of Suvi's hands and inserted a new clip. Shoving it back at the doctor, Suvi felt sick at the thought of using it again.

"Let's go," Vetra instructed as they repositioned themselves.

"They're regrouping on the hill," Ryder said into the comms, her scanner pointed in the direction of the attackers.

"Whadda say we join the party," Drack said with enthusiasm.

The Pathfinder looked at Vetra as she said, "Reyes, Vetra, fan out and give us cover."

Ryder's hardened gaze fell on Suvi, she quickly added, "Stay hidden."

The doctor could only respond with a nod, as she was fighting fear, adrenaline and shock all at once. She helplessly watched as Ryder and Drack went charging up the slope of the hill. At the same time Vetra and Reyes opened fire trying to distract the attackers. In one fluid motion Ryder jumped into the air, charged and slammed into them, sending bodies flying. Her omi tool came to life as she slashed one attacker, dipped under another and then impaled him. It was brutal, and Suvi tried to tear her eyes away but something Reyes had said was becoming quite clear. Ryder indeed had a dark side.

She was a master of death and destruction, taking life just as easily as she drew breath. Those same hands that could ignite Suvi with unbridled passion were now skillfully killing others. Those same eyes that could convey such depth and warmth were cold and calculating in measuring their master's sentence of judgment. That same voice which rumbled in Suvi's ear whispering words of affection, now gave a battle cry as another life was taken. The doctor realized she never truly saw the aftermath of Ryder's missions. The crew would come on board and either head directly to the med bay or to the showers to clean up. She never saw them scrub the blood from their hands and face or wash it off their armor. The full impact of what this mission was slammed into the doctor as she struggled to breathe.

"Doctor, please roll underneath the vehicle behind you," SAM's voice cut through her distraught thoughts.

She hesitated for a moment, fear keeping her glued to the rock, which had kept her safe for the past few minutes.

The AI's voice repeated, "Doctor, you need to roll underneath the vehicle, now."
Mustering whatever courage she had left, Suvi quickly moved and rolled underneath the vehicle. She watched as a pair of turian feet came into view.

"Doctor, roll out the other side of the vehicle and circle counter clockwise," the AI instructed on their private comm.

Suvi waited a beat for the turian's feet to be pointed away from her. She then rolled and moved in the direction SAM had instructed. She cautiously peaked around the corner to see the turian looking under the vehicle where she had just been before turning back to the fighting.

Taking out a sniper rifle and kneeling down to use the rock for support, the turian spoke into his comms, "I have a shot on the human biotic."

Aware that he was talking about Ryder, a protective instinct kicked in and Suvi's body was moving before her mind could catch up. Pistol drawn, she silently moved to the turian and pushed the gun into his head.

"Drop it," she tried to sound tough but her voice wavered.

The turian didn't move as he snarled, "Or what?"

"I don't want to kill ye," Suvi sounded desperate as the gun shook in her hands.

"You're on the wrong planet for mercy," he growled before quickly turning and disarming the doctor.

He pushed the barrel of the gun into Suvi's forehead just before saying, "You picked the wrong side."

The doctor had forsaken her family and friends, slept for 600 years while they lived and died, to explore a new corner of the universe. Nevertheless, she would be joining them not even a year into exploring this new undiscovered cluster. What a cruel thing for God to have planned.

Suddenly a bullet pierced the turian's head, faintly spraying the doctor's face with his blood. Suvi watched as he fell to the ground in a heap. Shaking uncontrollably, she turned to see Ryder, illuminated by the burning fire of some object from the initial blast. Her face was covered in blood, sweat and soot, her gun drawn in confidence, while her eyes were wild from the thrill of action. She resembled a creature akin to the tales of old, a hero born from tragedy forced into harrowing situations. Yet, those heroes had to give all of them self, leaving nothing left of their humanity. The doctor wondered, when Ryder defeated the Archon, what would be left of her.

"We got a live one," Reyes shouted.

Ryder's head snapped in the direction of the smuggler, as she left Suvi. The doctor felt numb as she shuffled over to where the group was gathered. Reyes had his boot pressed down on the injured arm of an asari.

"Why did you attack us?" he asked forcefully.

The asari squirmed in pain, she spoke between gritted teeth, "I don't know."

Reyes boot tilted, causing her to cry out in pain.

"Not good enough."
"We were just told to keep the valley clear of any unwanted visitors."

Ryder, put her hand out to Reyes to signal for him to stop hurting her. Kneeling down, the Pathfinder looked at the young asari.

"Why?" she calmly asked, her voice distorted by the mask.

"I don't know, Kaetus wouldn't say," the asari grunted between painful breaths.

Reyes and Ryder shared a look before the Pathfinder turned back to the asari and said, "Kaetus? Not Sloane?"

"Haven't seen Sloane in weeks, rumor is she's planning something."

"Planning what?" Reyes quickly asked.

The asari shook her head while saying, "No one knows."

Reyes took his boot off her arm and dug into his pocket, pulling out credits. He shoved them into her good hand.

"You were the only survivor," he instructed.

Clearly understanding his meaning, the asari repeated back, "I was the only survivor."

Ryder offered her hand and helped the asari up, patting her on the back before letting her run off. Once she disappeared over the ridge, the Pathfinder pulled up her scanner.

"SAM?"

"Tracking device is active, I am receiving her coordinates," the AI informed the group.

"Any of your men survive?" Vetra asked Reyes.

The smuggler shook his head, "They were all the Charlatan's."

"That last vehicle looks like it's in decent shape to move, how far are we from the meeting point?" Drack asked.

"Not far, I'll send a message alerting them of the patrols," the smuggler said while walking towards the transport.

The group moved to the last vehicle, passing by several dead bodies along the way. This seemed to be the breaking point for the doctor.

"Oh God," she breathed right before ducking behind a rock and emptying her stomach.

A reassuring hand gently rubbed her back, as the soothing voice of the Pathfinder startled Suvi, "I got ya."

Flinching away from Ryder's touch, Suvi tried to catch her breath and say, "I'm fine."

Looking hurt by her reaction, the Pathfinder took a step back and just nodded.

The ride to the Collective's camp was quiet, as everyone seemed to be dealing with the attack in their own way. Ryder was driving with Reyes up front, while Drack and Vetra sat in the back with
the doctor, both giving her words of advice for how they handled their first kill.

When they finally made it to the entrance of a cave, a full squad of Collective personnel was there to greet them. The group was escorted to a private area for them to shower and change. The doctor was on edge as she felt her emotions jump all over the place. She was angry one minute, and completely devastated the next. It felt as if she was going crazy.

"After you ladies, I'll find where the chow's at," Drack said after putting some of his gear on a cot.

Ryder began removing her armor as she said, "Suvi why don't you go first, it'll help with – "

"It'll help what?" the doctor snapped, "It'll help get the blood off my face or out from under my finger nails."

"Doc – " Vetra began to say but Suvi quickly put her hand up cutting her off.

"Don't," she began as he voice quivered with emotion, "Don't try and justify this."

She took a deep breath before adding, "We're killing our own people."

"Who have been killing their own people for months," Ryder growled.

"You're not judge, jury and executioner, Ryder," Suvi countered.

The Pathfinder just scoffed, "No, I'm just the asshole who has to jump down alien vaults, fix planets so their habitable, try and play diplomat to a new race of species, and oh by the way try and defeat an enemy who wants to exalt us all. So, I'm sorry if I don't have time to honor the rules of engagement!"

"That's not what – "

Ryder's anger was building as she cut Suvi off, "You don't think a part of me dies when I kill someone from the Milky Way? Knowing I'm taking the life of one of our own, someone who volunteered to leave everything they knew to travel for 600 years! Only to be killed by the very person who was suppose to help them settle this new galaxy!"

Ryder's yelling was growing, causing Vetra to try and step in.

"Ryder," the turian said calmly, but Ryder couldn't hear her, she was too far down the darkness of her own anger.

"Why do you think I wake up at night, screaming?" Ryder seethed.

Realizing her error, Suvi tried to back track and calm her partner down, "Love, I didn't – "

"Don't call me that," the Pathfinder shouted, "Cause you clearly didn't mean it, if you didn't realize this is what I have to do. You can't cherry pick the parts of me you like and the parts you don't."

Ryder's eyes bore into Suvi's, the doctor desperately regretting what she'd said.

"Maybe – maybe this was a mistake," The Pathfinder's voice broke, her eyes glistening, "Maybe we were a mistake."

"No," Suvi vehemently shook her head as she moved towards Ryder, but the Pathfinder backed away from her.
The doctor nearly cried, "Please."

The room grew quiet as Ryder looked at the ground, refusing to meet Suvi's gaze.

"Doc, why don't you shower first," Vetra's calm voice injected as she said, "When you go through something like this for the first time, you're going to be on edge. Say things you might not normally say."

The turian's eyes moved from Suvi to Ryder.

"Ryder, why don't you get some air before you say something you might regret."

Kicking a rock, the Pathfinder huffed, "Right."

Suvi moved to follow her, but Vetra cut her off.

"Doc, give her space," the turian whispered.

Looking completely lost, Suvi mumbled, "I didn't mean . . ."

She couldn't finish the sentence. Her words drowned out by the soft cries she couldn't hold back.

"I know," Vetra soothed as she pulled the doctor into a hug.

Gut wrenching sobs were muffled by Vetra's armor as tears streaked down the doctor's face. The physical pain, the mental roller coast of the attack and the ache in her heart at the possibility of actually losing Ryder, all culminated in that moment. The turian, to her credit, held the doctor close and comforted her until Suvi had regained some composure.

"Took me three weeks after my first gun fight to do that," Vetra quietly confessed, "Tried to hold it in, prove I was tough, but I was just delaying the inevitable."

Resting a hand on the doctor's shoulder, Vetra gave her a proud smile, "You're tougher than you realize, but I think Ryder knew that, even if you didn't."

Suvi's voice was horse as she said, "Thank you."

Minutes later, the doctor was standing under the warm water of the makeshift shower. Tonight, she had been baptized in the fires of battle and now she let Kadara's newly cleaned water wash away the physical remnants of that rite. It also felt as if she was washing away her innocence when it came to Heleus. She had been present during the uprising, but she and the science team stayed locked in their labs, trying to work. When she boarded the Tempest she still had romanticized notions of exploring this new cluster. Those idealistic thoughts were still present, but the weight of reality now pulled on them, balancing her expectations.

Later that night, the images of the attack invaded Suvi's dreams turning them to nightmares. She awoke with a start, bolting upright in her cot, desperately trying to catch her breath.

"You're okay," a familiar voice rumbled beside her.

Suvi felt a hand tenderly rubbing her back while another set of fingers squeezed her own. She kept her eyes closed, desperate to savor the feeling of being in the arms of her love once more.

"Deep breaths, "Ryder softly instructed.

Finally opening her eyes, the doctor turned to the Pathfinder and asked, "This what it feels like for
"It's worse for me," she quietly admitted, then said, "More things haunt me."

"Tell me," Suvi breathed.

Ryder began to shake her head, "You don't want to – "

Squeezing the Pathfinder's fingers, Suvi insisted, "Tell me."

Taking a seat on the side of the doctor's cot, Ryder looked down at their interlocked fingers.

"When we rescued the Moshae," she weakly began, "They pulled an angara from his pod. We were trapped in an ancillary room, SAM was working on unlocking the door, and all we could do was watch as they stabbed him with these two prongs. I can still hear his screams as he transformed from an angara to a kett. Jaal desperately banged against the door, trying to save him, but it was too late."

Suvi's free hand itched to touch Ryder's face, but not knowing where they stood at the moment, she feared overstepping. She would take what Ryder could give, and deal with the fall out of the mission once they were back on the Tempest.

"I need you to get some rest, Doc" a sympathetic tone in Ryder's voice, "Tomorrow's going to be important."

Suvi nodded, as she said, "I know."

There was an awkward moment of silence between them.

"Well, goodnight," Ryder whispered.

She began to stand up, but Suvi quickly grabbed her wrist stopping her movement.

The doctor breathed, "Ryder, I'm . . . "

"Let's stay focused on the mission for now," the Pathfinder gently cut her off.

Hurt by her words, Suvi swallowed, "Yeah, sure."

Ryder's lips affectionately kissed her temple, lingering a few moments longer as her head leaned against the doctors. Then, like a thief in the night she was gone, taking with her Suvi's heart and hope.

Chapter End Notes

Unexpected work trip will cause a delay in posting, my apologies for leaving you hanging. I'll try and bang out another chapter before I leave, but can't promise anything.
"Piss off," Drack growled to a Collective thug who was attempting to sit at the same table as the Tempest crew.

The four friends sat huddled together, discussing everything Suvi would have to do to test the sample. She and Ryder sat beside each other and to an outside observer, it would appear as if the pair was fine, but to the team, they knew better. Still, despite whatever issues they needed to work through, it was clear Ryder was determined to keep Suvi's head in the game. The Pathfinder had even instructed the Charlatan to have Earth tea readily available. The doctor was already on her second cup as she tried to focus. While finishing their breakfast, Reyes approached them.

"The lab is ready whenever the doctor is," he simply stated.

Even the smuggler seemed on edge about what the doctor was about to do.

"Let's get on with it then," Suvi projected confidence, though on the inside she was ready to scream bloody murder.

As the group headed for the clean room, Ryder made sure to stick close to the doctor.

"SAM, will integrate into the safety protocols they've set up," Ryder said quietly.

They turned down another cavern heading deeper into what appeared to be the Collective's base.

"Vetra, Drack and I can have our helmets on within 5 seconds if SAM needs to blow the containment chamber," the Pathfinder continued to repeat protocols they had been over a hundred times already.

As the lab and clean room came into view, Ryder appeared more nervous than the doctor.

"You sure you don't want another pair of hands in there?" she asked earnestly.

Suvi couldn't help her response, "If I needed another pair of hands I'd ask Vetra, ye'd be a bull in a china shop."

"Are you trying to say I'm clumsy?" Ryder teased, clearly not taking offense to Suvi's comment.

The doctor laughed, "No, I'm saying you're a blunt instrument."

How easily they fell back into their old pattern of banter only solidified Suvi's faith that their first fight was only that, a fight of misunderstanding and trepidation. Seeing the Pathfinder's anxiety as they approached the door to the clean room, Suvi tried to ease her fears.

"This isn't my first BSL-4 protocol," the doctor explained, "I was chosen to be a part of the advance science team for a reason."

Ryder smirked as she flippantly said, "Accent?"
"Don't be a tosser," Suvi chided while swatting the Pathfinder's stomach.

Grabbing hold of the doctors hand, Ryder softly said, "Be careful."

"I will, love," the doctor didn't realize she'd added the endearing term, until she saw Ryder's mournful reaction.

The Pathfinder's eyes conveyed what she couldn't vocalize, and the doctor tried to reciprocate it, both wanting to say more but too uncertain and hurt to take the chance. With one last squeeze of her hand, Suvi moved to the first door.

The first chamber was simply a room for her to disrobe and bag her current clothing. Once she was down to her panties and tank, she hit the button for access to the next room. Here she unwrapped the bag holding her contamination suit.

"Doctor, the Pathfinder wanted me to remind you how to communicate between the different channels," SAM's voice startled her as she pulled the containment suit over her hips.

Shaking her head in exasperation, Suvi said, "I tape my thumb and index finger once to speak on the general comm., twice if I want to speak on the Tempest comm., and not at all if I'm just speaking with you."

"That is correct," SAM replied.

Curious, Suvi asked, "What's Ryder's vitals?"

"Her heart rate and blood pressure are currently elevated," stated the AI.

With a deep breath, Suvi fastened the last seals around the headpiece.

"Scan for complete biosafety level," the doctor instructed.

The AI replied, "Suit is completely sealed, you may proceed."

Stepping into the antechamber of the lab, the doctor waited as the door sealed behind her. A green light flashed and Suvi hit the button to proceed into the lab where the sample was waiting. A rush of air pushed down on her as the door opened.

Suvi's breathing echoed in the suit, reminding her of old terrain movies with early human space travel. Stepping into the lab, her eyes immediately went to the observation wall at the far end of the room. Her entire team stood watching, well Ryder bounced, but they were all there. Reyes stood a few feet away with his arms folded. The Charlatan's representative, a human woman, stood beside him both seemed to be talking quietly amongst themselves.

A case sat in the middle of the main table in the center of the room. Making her way over to it, Suvi decided to check the comms.

Tapping once, she said, "Comms check."

"Good, check, doctor," a voice she didn't recognize replied.

Turning to the observation window, Suvi saw a salarian and asari scientist with monitoring equipment.

The salarian waved before saying, "Sorry, should have introduced ourselves earlier. I'm Dr. Riks and this is Dr. D'naala, we're support staff monitoring containment and here to assist should you
need it."

"Thanks," Suvi replied.

Tapping twice, she turned her back to the window as if checking out the lab before saying, "Tempest check."

"Good, check, Doc," Ryder quietly replied.

With a deep breath, Suvi prepared to open the case.

"Ready, SAM?"

"Ready."

Suvi keyed in the code Reyes had given her and watched as the case sprang to life and opened in half.

"Oh shite," she muttered in a panic as she backed away from the table.

There, sitting in the middle of the case was indeed a vial with liquid inside, but the vial was attached to a makeshift explosive device.

"Suvi, what's wrong?" Ryder's concerned voice echoed over the comm.

Turning to the observation wall, the doctor pointed at the case and stuttered, "It's a uh – it's uh."

"The biological sample is attached to an explosive device, Pathfinder," SAM explained.

"WHAT?!" Ryder yelled loud enough that Suvi could hear it through the glass.

The doctor watched as Drack, Vetra, and even Reyes to an extent were holding Ryder back as she accosted the Charlatan's representative.

Suddenly Ryder's comm. cut back in, and the doctor heard, "You tell that son of a bitch to get his ass down here, NOW!"

The Pathfinder looked at Suvi and stated, "I'm coming in."

"No!" Suvi quickly shouted, "We can't risk ye being infected."

SAM spoke up, "Pathfinder, I can safely guide Dr. Anwar through disengaging the sample from the explosive."

The doctor nodded as she said, "I can do it."

The Pathfinder took a step closer to the observation window.

Suvi could see her swallow a lump in her throat as she struggled to say, "Alright."

The AI began his instruction, "Doctor, there are medical tools in the drawers beneath the micro scanner."

"Right," she breathed as she moved to grab the equipment.

She laid out all the instruments carefully beside the case. Her hands trembled slightly as she tried to even her breathing.
"I have detected there is a single triggering mechanism," he started to explain, "Unscrew the plate covering holding the vial."

Picking a tiny looking scalable, Suvi went to work meticulously taking the plating cover off. Sweat began to drip down her face as she slowly lifted the cover up and placed it to the side of the case.

"Lift up the wiring. You will see a battery. Disengage it from its position and the vial will be released from the explosive."

Following the AI's instruction, Suvi lifted up the wiring and saw the circular disk battery. Grabbing another tool, she carefully inserted it underneath the battery and began to apply pressure to pop it out.

"C'mon," she grunted while readjusting the tool and trying again to pop the battery out.

With a click, she felt the disk disengage, but to her horror, when the vial was released it immediately began to roll off the device. Suvi snatched it before it could hit the table. Her free hand braced against the table as she breathed a huge sigh of relief.

"Well done, Doctor," SAM quietly spoke.

Looking up she panted, "Thanks, SAM."

Suvi stole a glance at the wall and saw Vetra pacing with her hand on her forehead, Drack looking down, and Ryder with her face pointed up to the heavens mouthing the words, "thank you."

Tapping her fingers together, Suvi announced, "Sample successfully extracted, moving to analyze."

Suvi walked the vial over to the micro scanner and began typing instructions into the keypad beside it. She watched as several beams of light began to pass over the vial several times. Images of the cellular make up of the liquid appeared on the viewing monitor.

"I'm detecting human red cells," Suvi spoke to SAM directly, "Someone recently out of cryo by the lack of degeneration and oxygen levels in the blood."

"I have scanned the sample and found properties of TH-314, but it has been altered," SAM's monotone voice said.

The doctor nodded as she looked at the viewing monitor, softly replying, "Reengineered with some type of accelerant, environmental markers indicate Havarl."

"It would appear the Pathfinder was correct in her assumption."

Making sure to look away from the observation wall, Suvi said, "Have ye told her."

The AI spoke, "I have."

Looking back at the glass wall, Suvi watched as Ryder's eyes lost focus for a few moments, then snapped up to look at her.

"Doctor, what are you finding?" came the voice of Dr. Riks.

A spike of panic shot through the doctor as she replied, "Give me a moment."

Turning back to the monitor, she whispered to SAM, "What does Ryder want me to say?"
The AI didn't reply for a few moments so Suvi tried to keep busy assessing the liquid with other tests. It felt as if a few minutes went by, so the doctor glanced at the glass wall and saw people running in all different directions. Ryder appeared to be in deep conversations with Reyes, Drack, and Vetra. Getting up she made her way over to the wall.

"SAM, what's going on?" she urgently asked.

"Stand by."

Putting her hand on the glass she tried to see if she could read Ryder's lips, but they were all so closely huddled it was impossible. Watching the rest of the world move as if something dramatic had happened, caused Suvi's patience to wear thin.

"SAM?"

Again the AI ignored her, so she began to knock on the glass, hoping to get their attention. The group finally looked back at her and moved to the wall to include her in the conversation.

"There's been some sort of attack on Kadara Port," Ryder explained over the comm. "Jaal says the Roekaar started shooting everyone."

"Is he okay?" Suvi asked.

Drack stepped forward, "Scouts are saying Sloane and the Roekaar were having some sort of meeting, things went south. They blasted their way out of the port."

"We need to go, Ryder," the smuggler actually sounded worried.

Nodding, she said, "I'll meet you by the caves entrance."

"Be there in 5," Reyes insisted.

The Pathfinder waited until they were relatively alone to address her crew.

"Drack and I are headed to the port to assess the damage and see if we can find out where this weapon came from. Doc, you and Vetra are going to meet with the scouts and get that sample back to Lexi to start working on a cure – "

"Ryder, they hadn't cured this in the Milky Way. What makes ye think Lexi stands a chance?" Suvi cut in.

The Pathfinder had that look, determined to fight death itself if she had to.

"Cause, she's got SAM and you."

Drack typed on his omni took and added, "They'll get you back safely to the Tempest."

"And leave you three here with no back up?" Vetra questioned.

The krogan shook his head as he muttered, "We'll still have a squad available if we need it."

"We shouldn't split up," the doctor insisted.

Ryder grimly replied, "We don't have a choice. That could be just one of a hundred bio explosives ready to deploy. One of those put in the Nexus ventilation systems and the Initiative would be done."
"But – "

"You have your orders," the Pathfinder commanded giving the turian and doctor a hard stare that ended any more debate.

"We'll contact you when we know more," she added before taking off with Drack.

Vetra turned to Suvi and asked, "Will that case keep the sample secure for transport?"

"Give me a minute," the doctor said as she walked back to the micro scanner.

"We gotta sneak this out while everyone is distracted," Veta said with concern.

With a sigh, Suvi said, "Understood."

As she began to secure the sample, the doctor spoke with the AI, "SAM do ye have all the data collected so far?"

"Yes, doctor, all scans you've completed along with my own."

It took Suvi another five minutes to properly secure the sample. She then made her way to the antechamber. This time when the door sealed, sterilization sprays erupted from every angle. When they were done, another blast of air hit before the green light flashed that she could continue onto the next room. Quickly discarding the suit and changing back into her clothes, Suvi saw Vetra waiting for her when she exited the clean room holding the case.

"Let's move," Vetra hurriedly said.

Organized chaos greeted them, as instructions were shouted from every direction. Vetra and Suvi tried to keep their heads down as they purposefully moved through the caverns.

"Do ye know where we're going?" Suvi asked the turian.

The AI spoke up, "I am assisting in guiding you both out of the cave to a landing site for the scouts."

"You two!" someone shouted behind them.

The turian put her hand around Suvi's arm and kept her moving forward as she whispered, "Keep going."

"Hey, stop!" the person continued to shout, but no one seemed to pay attention to her.

The pair cut down another passage in the cave and appeared to lose the woman. A minute later, Suvi could see sunlight peeking through an entrance. The foot traffic had died down, leaving the pair exposed. Just as they were about to step out of the cave, they could hear faint shouts about the sample missing.

"Run!" Vetra hastily breathed.

They sprinted down towards the valley floor where the shuttle was to pick them up. In the distance, they could see the inbound aircraft, but when Suvi glanced over her shoulder, a squad of Collective thugs poured out of the cave. Vetra was desperately typing on her omni tool as they continued to run towards the landing area.

"We see the bogeys inbound, we'll cover you Tempest," came the grumblings of a krogan on their
Suvi watched as the shuttle took up position between them and the Collective thugs. When the doors slid open, several scouts had their guns drawn ready to fire if the need arouse. Suvi jumped into the shuttle, followed by Vetra. Within seconds they were airborne and safely away from the Collective base.

"General distress call to any medical personnel in the system, this is Kadara Port we are urgently in need of help. I repeat, general distress call to any medical personnel in the system."

The shuttle was quiet as they all absorbed the message.

"We have to help," Suvi said to Vetra.

The turian shook her head, as she replied, "We have our orders."

"People are dying, down there."

"You're a scientist, not a medical doctor," Vetra countered.

"Drop me off at the port," Suvi yelled to the pilot.

Vetra shouted, "Belay that."

"The scouts can drop off the case to the Tempest, we don't need to babysit it," Suvi insisted. The turian looked like she was starting to think about it.

Suvi continued to make her point, saying, "Ye said so yer self, we can't leave them down there without back up."

"Damn it," Vetra muttered before shouting to the pilot, "Drop us off at the port."

Suvi handed the case to the closest scout and said, "Get this to Dr. T'Parro on the Tempest."

"One minute out," the pilot shouted.

"What are we gonna tell her?" Suvi asked.

Vetra just smirked, "That it was your idea."

Before the doctor could respond, the doors to the shuttle opened and they quickly disembarked.

A gasp escaped Suv's lips, as she looked out over the port, "Dear, God."

Chapter End Notes

Rushed to get this up before I left, apologies for the grammar/spelling, didn't have time to do a proofing pass.
"We're here to help!" Vetra tried to calm a fellow turian as Suvi began to assess his injuries.

"SAM, I don't see an exit wound for the bullet," Suvi quickly spoke to the AI.

They had been working for the past ten minutes trying to help the most injured they could find, which wasn't a difficult task. Take a step in any direction and Suvi would stumble over a body. The cries of beings in pain echoed all around them. The blood slick streets made it impossible to move quickly. It was a horrifying scene to behold, and all Suvi could do was keep her head down and focused on whoever she was trying to help.

The AI answered, "The bullet has logged itself in the femur, we will need to prep a tourniquet."

"No!" the young turian began to shout, "I can't lose my leg!"

Ignoring his pleas, Suvi quickly went to work ripping another piece of her clothing off to use as a tourniquet. Once SAM announced the turian was no longer in danger, the doctor and Vetra moved onto the next body. An angara was bleeding from her side, she was crying out for help but none of the Milky Way species would stop for her.

"Let me see?" Suvi gently asked as she dropped down to one knee.

The female angara removed her hand showing the stab wound, blood pouring out of it.

Looking up at Vetra, the doctor said, "I need to cauterize the wound."

"There is a small debris fire ten yards to the left," SAM instructed.

The turian looked in that direction and began nodding her head as she said, "I see it."

"Take that metal rod, there, and put it in the fire until the end is glowin'," Suvi explained as she continued to apply pressure to the wound.

"Right," Vetra breathed as she scrambled to move.

A few minutes later, the turian returned with the now glowing metal rod. The angaran's eyes grew wide with panic.

"Hold her down," the doctor said to Vetra as she took the rod from her.

Shaking her head, the angara weakly pleaded, "No, no."

"This is the only way," the doctor sympathetically implored, "Please, you don't have much time."

With a small nod, the angara closed her eyes. Suvi looked at Vetra before taking a deep breath. She positioned the metal above the wound then swiftly pushed the object against the alien flesh. The angara screamed out in pain, but the turian kept her from moving as the doctor held the object to the wound for a few seconds.

"The wound has successfully been sealed," SAM announced.
Suvi pulled the rod away and was careful to position the still scalding end away from anyone. She turned back to her patient and assessed the damage. Angry flesh was cooling from being melted down but the bleeding had stopped.

"Doctor, your presences is required elsewhere," the AI spoke.

Suvi ripped another piece of cloth from her arm and placed it over the angara's wound while grumbling to the AI, "I'm needed here, SAM."

"Sloane Kelly is dying, and the Pathfinder needs critical information from her, your assistance might help," said SAM.

The doctor glanced up at Vetra who looked just a shocked as Suvi.

"Fine, where is she."

As the AI guided them to the Outcast compound, the doctor quietly contemplated what she would say to the woman who'd put a bounty on her very life. She was filled with momentary rage, but the emotion was so foreign to the doctor's core make up she couldn't hold onto it. Her mind did, however, drift to what the Pathfinder's reaction would be to seeing her. Somehow she'd gotten the impression SAM had not told her, which could make for an interesting moment.

When Suvi and Vetra entered the large room, their eyes were drawn to the thrown like chair in the middle now charged by the bomb. The explosion had destroyed half of the room. Bodies strewn about in awkward positions while blood covered those standing. The doctor finally spotted Ryder and noticed the Pathfinder was favoring her left ribs as she stood over Kelly's body. Deciding not to announce herself, Suvi pushed her way through the group.

"Out of the way," she commanded before kneeling down beside the exile.

Half of Sloane's body was burned. Her skin damaged to the point of revealing bone on parts of her arm. Suvi forced herself to ignore the stench of charge flesh emanating from her.

Looking up at the wounded Outcasts, she asked, "Do ye have a medical emergency kit?"

Kaetus, Sloane's second in command who was also damaged by the bomb, barked out orders for someone to get it.

Sloane began to laugh which caused her to cough as she said, "Dr. Anwar."

It was then Suvi realized she hadn't turned her voice modulator on. Her Scottish brogue had indeed given her away.

"How apropos," Sloane wheezed.

Suvi continued to check the rest of her wounds while, saying, "Yes, God clearly has a sense of humor."

"A scientist . . . with . . . faith," Sloane struggled to speak, "You are full . . . of surprises."

Before the doctor could reply, the Outcast thug returned with the kit and handed it to Suvi. The doctor began to prep several drugs to inject into Sloane when the Outcast queen put her hand on Suvi's to stop her.

"Don't use . . . on me," the exile breathed, "Save . . . others."
Kaetus cut in, "Sloane she can help you."

With a small shake of her head, the exile weakly said, "I'm . . . not going . . . to make it."

There were times Suvi's gut instinct to do something worked, and of course other times it failed miserable, but something about this dying woman facing her fate gave her the courage to blurt out.

"Then tell us about the weapon," Suvi pressed.

A smirk tugged at Sloane's lips, "What weapon?"

"The one using TH-314," the doctor stated plainly.

"Doctor!" Ryder snapped.

Kaetus spoke up, "What are they talking about?"

"Your boss helped the Roekaar create a biological weapon," Reyes who had remind quiet, finally spoke up besides Ryder.

Sloane struggled to defend herself, "I . . . didn't know . . . about disease."

"Is that why they attacked you?" Suvi asked.

The exile just nodded.

"Sloane, you can make this right, just tell us what their plan is?" Ryder forcefully asked.

The two powerful women eyed each other, neither giving ground as the final battle of wills played out before the group.

"Water . . . filtration system . . . Nexus," the exile grounded out.

"When?"

Sloane could only shake her head.

Ryder followed up with another quick question, "Where are they keeping it?"

Before Sloane could answer she began to cough up blood, and moan in pain. Suvi quickly reached out and kept Sloane's head steady.

"Vo-V-Voeld," with a dying breath, the leader of the Outcasts gave the answer.

After carefully putting Sloane's head back down, the doctor ran her hand over the woman's eyes, closing them for the last time. The room was quiet for a few moments as the remaining Outcasts mourned her death, while the rest of the room absorbed what she had said.

"Jaal," Ryder quietly spoke, "We need to get to Voeld, ask the Resistance if they have any ships they could lend us. The Tempest is more than a day out and we can't wait for them."

"Of course," he said before leaving.

Suvi stood up and watched as the Pathfinder turned to Kaetus, Keema Dohrgun, and several Collective agents.

"This is what's going to happen, and it's none negotiable," Ryder's voice was that of a thunderstorm
on the brink of cresting over the horizon.

"For now, the Collective will take over operation of the Port."

Kaetus looked incredulous as he blurted out, "You don't have the authority – "

"DRACK!" Ryder snapped cutting off the turian as she seethed, "How happy would Overlord Morda be if I asked her to invade Kadara Port with my best APEX teams?"

The krogan happily chuckled, "Oh, she'd like that, any excuse for a fight."

"Ryder," Reyes tried to step in, but the Pathfinder's head whipped over to him and they shared a look.

Pointing at him she shook her head as she growled, "You lied, and now you'll deal with the consequences."

Turning back to the rest of the group, the Pathfinder continued, "As I said, the Collective will take over operation of the Port until an independent council can be created."

"Who will be on this council?" Keema politely asked.


Ryder made sure to look everyone in the eye as she continued, "This is the deal, we move forward together. Do I make myself clear?"

Everyone grumbled their agreement.

"If I find out any member of your organizations attack the Initiative settlement you're faction is kicked off the council. You want to keep attacking each other have at it, but the Initiative is off limits."

"And if a settler attacks one of our people?" Kaetus griped.

Ryder kept her icy stare firmly in place as she said, "Then the council will deal the punishment."

"Seems reasonable," Keema said.

Reyes nodded, "I'm sure the Charlatan would agree."

Suvi noticed Ryder and Reyes once again looked at each other, something important had happened and it made the doctor feel uneasy.

"Looks like I don't have a choice," Kaetus muttered.

Ryder didn't hesitate in her response, "You don't, now go tell your people to stand down and start helping the wounded."

She turned to Keema and Reyes, "I'll contact the Nexus and ask for medical supplies and personnel to be sent right away."

Keema nodded, "I shall reach out to the Moshae as well. In the mean time, perhaps you and your team would like to use the residential pods to wash up. Your Dr. Anwar looks as if she's been through multiple surgeries."
"You three go ahead, I need to contact Cora and Tann," Ryder finally turned to look at her team.

When her eyes landed on Suvi they weren't completely cold and distant, but they were devoid of any mirth or warmth she'd come to expect when speaking with the woman. The doctor just gave a tired nod of understanding before Ryder took off to use a communication terminal.

Minutes later, the doctor stood in front of a mirror and looked at her blood soaked clothes and body. A Collective agent had provided her with a fresh set to change into but the doctor found she was beginning to miss her science uniform. Stepping into the shower, she tilted her face to the spray of water and stood motionless as she let the water cleanse away the horrors of the day. Whether she wanted to or not, she was beginning to understand why Ryder would always shower after a mission. Leaning her head against the wall she watched as the blood stained water swirled around the drain before disappearing, taking the evidence of her actions with it.

Twenty minutes later, she was walking back to the large room, refreshed and refocused. Part of her was hoping to steal at least a moment alone with Ryder. She needed to make sure she was all right. It was becoming clear the young woman put up a brave face more often than Suvi realized. As she rounded a corner she could hear Reyes speaking with someone. Slowing down to easy drop for a moment, the doctor's blood turned cold when she heard a familiar female moan. Completely numb as she walked into the room, Suvi was greeted with the site of Ryder's upper armor removed and the under armor skin rolled down to her hips, leaving only her military bra covering her chest. For a split second, it appeared as if Reyes was between her breasts and the doctor felt as if someone had shoved an ice pick into her heart.

"You should have your doctor look at this," Reyes tenderly said.

Ryder was looking up at the ceiling breathing through her teeth as she gritted out, "Yeah, I'll get right on that."

Reyes finally stepped to the side and Suvi saw that he was helping apply medi gel to Ryder's ribs. Fierce black and blue marks decorated her side. Ducking behind a stack of supplies, Suvi took a second to breath and calm her nerves. She'd clearly jumped to conclusions, but knowing Reyes, he would absolutely take advantage of this moment.

"We make a good team you and I," He said as he returned with another pack of gel to apply.

Peeking around the supplies, Suvi watched them closely. Ryder's features turned warm, like the way she'd look at the doctor when she'd walk onto the bridge.

Ryder softly replied, "Yeah, we do."

"Imagine what we could do together," he said with a flirtatious tone.

"Reyes," there was a warning in her voice.

His fingers tipped her chin upwards forcing her to look at him, "Tell me you don't still think about those nights."

"I'm with Suvi," Ryder confidently said.

"You didn't answer my questions," the smuggler replied with just as much confidence.

Putting her hand on the smuggler's chest, the Pathfinder slowly pushed him back as she slid off the table while saying, "Actually, I did."
"Mmm hmm, then why did you ask me to help you with this and not her?"

Ryder didn't answer him, just looked down at the floor.

The smuggler packed up the medical supplies and smiled as he crowed, "You can't deny what's between us, Ryder, no matter who's legs you hid behind."

With a wink, Reyes exited the room through a side entrance. With renewed determination not to let the smuggler be the last thought in Ryder's head, Suvi moved back to the entrance of the room and pretended to walk by.

"There ye are," she feigned surprise as she walked up to the Pathfinder.

Suvi felt her heart leap when Ryder brightly smiled at her for a moment, before she cringed with pain.

"Hey," she muttered, struggling to put her under armor skin back on.

Cocking an eyebrow, Suvi asked, "Do ye need help?"

With a dejected pout, Ryder sighed, "Yeah."

It had been several days since the doctor had seen the Pathfinder's body, and she instantly felt excitement build between her legs as she reached out and delicately touched her partner's ribs. The well toned muscles of Ryder's abs and arms were on full display and Suvi was going to take advantage of this moment for as long as she could.

"Enjoying the view," Ryder quipped.

The doctor's hands playfully began to roll the under armor down further as she whispered, "It could be better."

The Pathfinder stopped her hands as she regretfully sighed, "We can't."

"Just a little fun," Suvi teased as she kept her body pressed against Ryder's.

She answered with unfiltered passion as she breathed, "If we start, I won't be able to stop."

"Who's asking you to?" the doctor murmured as she let her eyes rake over the Pathfinder's body.

The heated look they gave each other could have melted Voeld itself, and for an instant Suvi considered taking Ryder right then and there. But something changed in the Pathfinder's gaze and she felt her back away.

"The Pathfinder needs to talk with Dr. Anwar for a moment," she struggled to say.

It took Suvi a moment to understand what Ryder was saying, but then she realized she was trying to avoid another misunderstanding like what happened in the cave. Following her lead, the doctor took a step back and nodded.

"You disobeyed my orders," the Pathfinder couldn't hide her agitation.

The doctor nodded as she explained, "We heard the medical emergency call on the shuttle. I knew people were hurt, I had to help."

Ryder took a deep breath and began to pace, every now and then glancing at Suvi.
"If this weapon is released tens of thousands will need your help," the Pathfinder countered.

Bowing her head, Suvi said, "I have all the scans and analysis SAM and I gathered, we already have a few working theories."

"That, right?"

"Doctor Anwar, has proposed reverse engineering the virus to work against itself, I am currently running simulations while Lexi and the science team work with the sample when it arrives," SAM chimed in.

Ryder nodded as she listened before saying, "You'll keep us updated, SAM?"

"Of course, Pathfinder."

There was a moment of silence before Ryder finally looked at the doctor then asked, "If I take you with us to Voeld I need to know you'll actually obey my orders. There's still a heavy kett presence, and the Roekaar will know we're coming."

"I'm not a solider, Ryder, I can't promise ye that I might not think there's a better way or perhaps see an alternative option. If we hadn't received that distress call, I'd be on that shuttle still," Suvi answered honestly.

The Pathfinder seemed to struggle with her response, so the doctor decided to take advantage.

"Can Suvi talk with Ryder now?"

But Ryder didn't answer, instead she used her good arm to pull Suvi into a hug and hold her for several minutes. It seemed that this was all she was able to give at the moment, and the doctor would take it, but she still felt like they were on unsteady ground. She knew the journey to Voeld would take a few days, so she'd wait until they had a quiet moment on the ship to talk. She only hoped the smuggler wouldn't be joining them.
Chapter 13

"We've narrowed down the possible Roekaar encampments to three," Commander Do Xeel said over the vid comm.

"Pathfinder, we can have some of the ice runners fly by and scan these encampments," Captain Blake added.

Ryder stood at the head of the small vid comm. table aboard a resistance ship, with the rest of her crew and several resistance fights behind her. On the conference call, Suvi saw the faces of Commander Do Xeel, resistance leader on Voeld. Captain Blake was in charge of the Initiative outpost Ryder had helped negotiate several months back. Cora and Lexi from the Tempest, and Reyes back on Kadara.

"Captain, adjust the scanners to look for a female human bio sign," Ryder instructed.

Captain Blake looked confused as she asked, "A human female?"

"Ruth Bekker to be exact," Lexi injected, "Patient Zero."

"Unless the Collective has found her on Kadara," Ryder stated as she looked over at Reyes. The smuggler shook his head then said, "We're still looking."

"Okay, let's reconvene at 0800 tomorrow morning. Tempest, Kadara stay on the call a moment.

The two connections from Voeld ended, and Ryder looked over at the captain of the angara vessel.

"Could my team have a moment of privacy, Captain?" she asked politely.

With a smile, the angara captain nodded, "Of course."

Waiting a moment for the angara to file out, the rest of the Tempest crew joined Ryder at the table; Vetra and Drack on either side of the Pathfinder with Jaal and Suvi taking up positions on the other end.

"So, Charlatan, what are your Nexus contacts saying?" Ryder asked Reyes.

Vetra did a double take as she looked at Ryder then at Reyes before saying, "Wait, he's the Charlatan?"

"I am full of surprises, Ms. Nyx," Reyes said with his usual charm.

Cora snorted, "That's one way of putting it."

Ignoring her barb, Reyes explained, "We were able to get a message to Kesh, she's assigning people she can trust to the water filtration system, though Spender has been sending people down there unannounced."

"I knew it, that son of a – "

"We can't prove anything, yet," Ryder calmly cut Drack off then looked back at Reyes as she said,
"I'm going to need whatever forces available to you, to start heading for the Nexus."

"I've never seen the Roekaar engage in a full on assault," Reyes said in disbelief.

Jaal cleared his throat and spoke up, "If they have someone on the inside, they will be able to sneak their forces onto the Nexus un-detected. Akksul is not foolish, but he is an opportunist."

"Kandros won't have the man power to handle an assault," Ryder sighed with resignation.

Reyes' tone was understanding as he said, "I'll speak with Kaetus and see what we can come up with."

"Thank you," Ryder said softly almost with a hint of affection.

"Ryder," he began just as affectionately, "Be careful."

The two shared a look as Reyes continued, "They blatantly attacked Sloane in her own compound. They will not hesitate to take out the one person from the Milky Way who the Moshae trusts."

The smuggler paused for a moment before saying, "If given the chance, Akksul will not hesitate to kill you."

It might be the only moment in their history that Suvi and Reyes felt the same sense of panic and fear. She could see it in his features and she knew the same worry reflected on her own face. Ryder was always a target, but this time, without the Tempest as back up, or an APEX assault team on standby, she was truly going into a fight alone. The realization was like a weight on Suvi’s chest, pressing down and squeezing the very breath from her body.

"Then I won't give him the chance," the Pathfinder smirked with her usual bravado.

Yet, no one seemed to laugh as the enormity of the situation hovered like a cloud around them all.

Ryder looked at Reyes as she added, "I'll contact you tomorrow before we land."

The smuggler just nodded before terminating his connection, leaving just the Tempest on the vid call.

"At present speed, we should only be about four hours behind you," Cora spoke first.

Nodding, Ryder commanded, "If the ice runners find Bekker's bio signature, I want you, Liam and Peebee to get her out of there alive. Lexi, where are we with the sample?"

"Dr. Anwar and I have been in constant contact with the science team, everyone is working on this," Lexi sounded tired as she spoke.

"Sounds like you need a nap, Doc," Ryder teased.

The asari scoffed as she said, "To quote a Pathfinder I know, 'I don't have time.'"

This got a light chuckle from everyone.

"I trust you know your limits, Doctor, I'll confer with Dr. Anwar tomorrow before we land."

Cora quickly spoke up, "Should we not at least tell the other Pathfinder's about this?"

Suvi watched, as Ryder appeared to consider the question.
"Perhaps, but not until I have something to update them with."

The commando nodded and said, "Understood, we'll speak with you again at 0800."

"Thank you, both," Ryder gave a tired smile as she signed off with the ship.

Jaal gestured to the door as he said, "Come, the crew has prepared a meal to share with you."

Pinching the bridge of her nose and leaning against the table, Ryder sighed, "Jaal, I'm not really in the mood."

"That is precisely why you need to join," his low voice rumbled.

The four Milky Way beings followed their angara friend into the packed galley. The room hushed for a moment as they noticed their honorable guests had arrived. Jaal escorted them to their table and poured them all a drink as the room slowly went back to normalcy. It wasn't until they had finished the main meal that angara began walking by Jaal and whispering questions to him.

"Okay, Jaal, out with it," Ryder chuckled as she put her fork down.

The angara sat beside Suvi and glanced at her for a brief moment before blurting out, "Several angara want to know if the doctor's true hair color is red."

Ryder glanced out at the crowd who was now captivated by the alien visitors.

"Actually, it's the color of sunset on Havarl," the Pathfinder said to the room before turning to wink at Suvi.

The doctor could only roll her eyes and smile at her partner. For the next twenty minutes the questions revolved around Vetra and Drack's species and questions about the Milky Way. Finally a young female angara in the back shouted out something to Jaal that turn the conversation back to the humans.

"What did they ask?" Ryder looked at Jaal who seemed slightly embarrassed.

Clearing his throat, Jaal calmly said, "They asked if it was common in the Milky Way for a commanding office to take their, the closest wording you have for it is the joining of souls?"

"The phrasing is . . ." Suvi paused as she glanced up at Ryder hesitant to say it.

Yet, the Pathfinder didn't flinch as she finished the sentence smiling at the doctor, "Soul mates."

The angara began murmuring amongst themselves, but Suvi couldn't hear them, she and Ryder had fallen under their own spell and continued to hold each others intense gaze.

"You can almost see their energy shift when they look at each other," one of the commanding angara spoke.

"Wait, what?" Ryder asked as she and Suvi both turned to him with curious looks.

"Though humans are not as demonstrative in their affections as angara, there is an energy between you and the doctor," another angara answered.

"That's one way to put it," Drack grumbled before grunting from an elbow Ryder poked him with.

Taking the opportunity to understand the species better, Suvi asked, "What do you mean energy?"
"Patterns," Jaal spoke up, "Because of our higher bioelectrical field, it allows us to see patterns in bio-energy between beings."

"Pathfinder, there is a darkness to yours," one of the angara shouted out.

Jaal nodded and added, "Yes, like Peebee's or Dr. T'Perro's. I believe because you are biotics."

"Is it true you can move objects?" another young angara asked.

Lifting her hand up, Ryder used her biotics to lift up the angara's cup and move it to another table. For the next several minutes she put on a small display of her powers, which enthralled the angara. Finally one of the commanders mentioned shift change and the group in the galley got up and made their way to the crew quarters.

Ryder, Vetra, and Suvi followed one of the female officers to the women's bunks, while Jaal escorted Drack down another corridor. Once in the female quarters, Vetra and Suvi were shown to a bunk bed, and the commander walked Ryder down to a slightly enclosed area for the officers.

"So," Vetra started to say, "You two gonna talk or are we gonna have to deal with this sexual tension for the foreseeable future?"

Deciding to give Vetra a dose of her own sass, the doctor said, "Exactly when would ye have liked me to have this conversation? When I was defusing a bomb, or perhaps when I was putting people back together?"

The turian smirked, "Oh, feisty, Suvi, is always the best Suvi."

"Don't ye start," the doctor chuckled.

Leaning her elbow against the top bunk, Vetra mused, "They are right ya know."

"What's that?" Suvi asked.

"When the angara said you could see an energy shift when you and Ryder look at each other," the turian began, "I might not see the energy pattern but it does feel like you two are destined for something."

"Exaltation?"

Vetra threw a pillow at the doctor's face then said, "I'm taking the top bunk, that way you can sneak off and make up with Ryder in the middle of the night without bothering me,"

"Ye know something I don't?"

After she was settled on the top bunk the turian propped herself up on her elbow and spoke in a low voice, "Ever since I've met her, she'd been dealing with PTSD night terrors. From everything I've heard about what went down on Habitat 7, doesn't surprise me. Even Cora and Liam don't talk about it much."

Vetra snorted as she cheekily added, "And if Liam won't talk about it, you know it's bad."

Looking back to Suvi, she quietly finished, "There's only been a hand full of nights I can remember that she slept through. She was either sedated in the med bay, drunk out of her mind, or . . ."

The turian paused for effect.
"Or?" Suvi asked impatiently.

"Or she was with you, Doc."

With a satisfied smirk, Vetra rolled on to her back and cheerfully said, "Night!"

The lights in the general room dimmed and Suvi quickly scrambled to get into bed. Closing her eyes, she tried to get some sleep, but her thoughts were a jumbled mess of calculations, vivid images from the port and from the attack, and possible solutions to finding a cure. Then they slowly shifted to memories with Ryder. Their first night together on the Nexus began to replay. The Pathfinder had awoken from nightmares and the doctor whispered sweetly in her ear and held her tightly while she tried to catch her breath. Something about that memory caused Suvi to wake up with a start, her eyes darting around as she tried to get her bearings. That's when she noticed a familiar figure silhouetted by the hallway light. Carefully getting out of bed, she decided to follow them.

Ryder quietly sat in the darkened galley, sipping on a glass of water as Suvi entered. This was the opportunity the doctor had been waiting for, and she would tread carefully as she spoke. She hovered by a table behind the Pathfinder, debating how she would broach the subject of their relationship.

"I'm sorry," the quiet voice of the Pathfinder startled her.

Taking a moment to recover, Suvi was about to speak when the Pathfinder continued.

"For keeping my distance for the past twenty four hours," Ryder simply stated.

"If it's about what I said – "

Standing up, Ryder finally turned and looked at the doctor. She appeared to be deeply conflicted about something, to the point of it causing physical discomfort. Suvi desperately wanted to hold her in her arms, but something screamed at the doctor to wait. Ryder needed to work through whatever it was in order for them to move forward.

Cutting the doctor off, Ryder gently said, "You were in shock and I should have known better, for that you have my apologies again."

Suvi just looked confused as the Pathfinder began to pace and say, "But that's not why I've kept my distance."

Ryder's voice dropped as she said, "There was a moment, when the caravan was attacked on Kadara, that all I could think about was pulling you out of the vehicle and getting you to safety."

The Pathfinder struggled to continue, "I should have been focused on taking out the attackers. I should have been focused on the mission."

Suvi noticed the Pathfinder kept a table between them as she spoke, as if the physical barrier would allow her to get through whatever it was she needed to say.

With a gulp, Ryder timidly admitted, "I never saw you coming . . . I've never felt this."

The doctor was floored by the admission, and muttered, "Is that such a bad thing?"

"It is when I'd choose saving you over the Nexus or an arc."
"Ryder – "

Taking a step towards Suvi, the Pathfinder interrupted, "If I had to choose between letting the Archon destroy the Initiative or saving you, I'd choose you, and it scares the hell outta me."

Shaking her head, Ryder moved away from Suvi as she grounded out, "I'm a Pathfinder, my singular focus should be fighting the Archon, activating the vaults."

"I've seen ye charge into battle, consequences be damned," Suvi began, "I've seen ye show compassion were lesser men wouldn't, and I've seen ye take a rag tag group of beings and mold them into a family."

The doctor continued, "I trust ye, Ryder and I know you'll make the right choice if ye had to."

Ryder shook her head, getting upset as she said, "How can you trust me, when I don't trust myself?"

Running her hands through her hair, the Pathfinder frantically added, "When you were in that lab with the bomb I nearly shot the whole thing to hell to get you out of there."

"But ye didn't," Suvi gently said, "You trusted me, and you trusted SAM."

The Pathfinder scoffed, "I showed self restraint once."

"I never said it was easy," Suvi retorted before adding, "When SAM . . . killed you . . ."

The doctor's voice cracked, and she had to take a steadying before saying, "I couldn't think, it felt as if he'd stopped me own heart."

Looking at Ryder, Suvi confidently said, "But then ye were alive and I focused all my energy to help get you back to the ship. Get you back to me. But I'd be lying if I didn't admit part of me wanted to charge down the ramp and revive you myself."

"But if you had to choose, between me or saving the Initiative?" Ryder quietly asked.

"I'd expect you and SAM to have come up with a plan to avoid that scenario," the doctor plainly stated.

"Suvi," Ryder sighed with exasperation.

Giving her partner a smile, Suvi simply said, "We're human, love. I should be working on a cure right now, but I'm here with you, because in this moment you are more important to me."

Taking a tentative step towards the doctor, the Pathfinder smirked as she playfully said, "You should be sleeping."

Suvi sweetly replied, "Aye, but I have this problem."

Closing the distance between them, Ryder asked, "Oh?"

Humming for a moment, the doctor huffed, "I keep having these dreams about this adorable blonde."

"Adorable blonde?" Ryder pretended to think as she added, "Sounds familiar."

Taking a step into the Pathfinder personal space, Suvi leaned in and whispered in her ear, "I can always make her moan when I – "
Ryder had clearly heard enough as she crashed her lips against Suvi's and let her hands wrap around her body. For several glorious minutes, the doctor felt the Pathfinder not hold back her desire and express her yearning for Suvi. Their tongues danced and their lips teased and finally they had to come up for air. They rested their foreheads against each other in a familiar show of intimacy.

Cupping Suvi's face with both her hands, Ryder pulled back to look at her before affectionately whispering, "I don't deserve you."

The doctor let her fingertips trace the Pathfinder's lips as she breathed, "Promise me, something."

"Anything," Ryder's breath hitched as Suvi's other hand slipped underneath her tank.

"Don't shut me out, I know ye think yer protecting me, but I'm not SAM. I can't read yer mind," Suvi insisted as she add, "Just talk to me, I'm tougher than I look."

With the hint of a smile, Ryder nodded and said, "My girl is pretty badass."

Swatting the Pathfinders ass, Suvi chided, "Flattery will get you no where."

"Okay, okay," Ryder chuckled then said, "I promise if I'm freaking out about something, from now on I'll talk with you and not try and handle it on my own."

For the first time in over a day Suvi felt a genuine smile take hold.

"Beautiful," Ryder whispered as she started to lean forward.

"Pathfinder, several angara are about to enter."

Pulling back, Ryder didn't take her eyes off Suvi as she replied, "Thanks for looking out, SAM."

"Of course."

Hand in hand they went back to the women's quarters and curled up together in Ryder's slightly bigger bunk. The dangers of the mission still loomed, but Suvi knew as long as they were together, they could tackle anything.
"Well . . . shit."

Ryder's sentiment seemed to echo the mood of the group as they stood with Commander Do Xeel's team and Captain Blake at the command table in the heart of the Resistance base. A 3D projected model of the Roekaar base slowly spun at the center of the table. A light blinking in a room deep within the compound indicated a human life sign.

"I had 3 different pilots scan the caverns, all three came back with the same result," Captain Blake explained.

"They know we can't bomb the base and risk the weapon entering the environment. This bottleneck entrance prevents any frontal assault. The landing pad only activates based on their security codes, so can't sneak in that way," Ryder huffed with exasperation.

As the military minded people discussed all the options, Suvi continued to stare at the model when something caught her attention. Typing in a few commands at a panel on the table, the blinking light showing Ruth Bekker's position disappeared and soon faint lines of light red pulsed through the base.

"SAM," she quietly began, "These thermal pockets run right through parts of the base, if we could increase their heat output by a two degree variance they might create cracks in the caverns."

The model stopped spinning and zoomed in on a particular thermal pocket as SAM began to speak.

"If we increased the temperature of this pocket by 1.82 degrees it would trigger a soft clasp of the thermal pocket in an area of the base with the least activity."

Nodding, Suvi continued to talk with the AI, not realizing the pair now had a captivated audience listening to them.

"We would need to reinforce the pocket up to this point," she continued to speak softly as she reached up and tapped part of the 3D model.

As she finished a few calculations she then added, "Funneling the heat to here."

"That is correct, an angara team could drill into the pocket here," the AI zoomed the model out and a green blinking dot appeared in a network of caves close to the base.

"How long would it take to reinforce the pocket?" Ryder's questions started Suvi out of her concentrated focus.

"My estimates project eight hours, Pathfinder," SAM answered.

Ryder looked at the model with intense concentration before commanding, "Let's get that estimate down to six hours. Captain, Commander we need all hands on deck for this."

"Understood, ma'am," Captain Blake quickly replied.

Ryder looked over at Jaal, "We need eyes on that base, any ship leaves we need to know."
Jaal nodded before heading off to grab a scout team.

For the next several hours Suvi worked remotely from the Resistance base with the teams sent out to reinforce the thermal tunnel. She and SAM helped to make calculations or adjustments on placement and direction, but soon it appeared that the repetitive work of securing the tunnel was the only thing to be done.

"Captain Blake has sent a shuttle to pick you up and bring you to Taerve Uni, Doctor," SAM's voice interrupted a yawn from Suvi.

Shaking her head, Suvi tried to stifle the next yawn as she said, "I should monitor their progress through the next phase."

"Doctor Anwar," Ryder's voice startled Suvi on her comm.

Suvi quickly snapped into professional mode as she answered, "Yes, Pathfinder."

"Vetra, Drack and I have a few items for the assault to go over with you, please return to Taerve Uni when the shuttle arrives."

Wearily stepping away from the command table at the Resistance base, Suvi gave final instructions to her angara counter part. The female angara shook the doctor's hand and asked if she could keep in contact so they could continue to exchange ideas regarding the vaults, and Voelds warming weather. As the doctor was being escorted down the hallway she finally noticed a team of soldiers surrounding her as they moved.

Turning to the asari on her right, Suvi asked, "Why are ye following me?"

"We're part of the security team here on Voeld, Captain Blake and the Pathfinder assigned us to you," the asari stated.

"Shuttle up ahead," a turian's voice growled ahead of Suvi.

A salarian stepped forward and said, "I'll secure the vehicle."

"Please, wait here ma'am," the asari instructed as she took up position in front of the doctor.

A few minutes later Suvi sat in the corner of the shuttle and enjoyed watching the northern lights dance in the sky. When the shuttle landed at the outpost her security team escorted her to a heavily guarded building deep within the camp. Upon entering the building, the doctor quickly spotted the Pathfinder. No longer wearing the Collective gear, she was decked out in Initiative sweat pants and a sweatshirt, with her hair down instead of tied up in the usual ponytail. Suvi smirked as she thought about what Ryder might have been like in college. The Pathfinder was standing at Captain Blake's command table as they discussed the different assault teams.

"We'll send an infiltration unit in first to secure the tunnel, then I'll lead the main assault team into the base. Once SAM has hacked into the network, shuttle 1 will land and the second assault team will engage. Shuttle 2 will carry the two Tempest teams. Bravo team will be going after Ruth Bekker, Tango team will be headed for the lab," Ryder explained as she pointed to the different parts of the base during the explanation.

Captain Blake nodded and asked, "The angara team will wait until both assault teams engage?"

SAM spoke up and said, "I will monitor the Roekaar's deployment and should enough soldiers be pulled from the main entrance I will signal for Jaal to engage."
"So you draw everyone’s attention away from the labs and Ruth Bekker, then what?" the Captain asked.

"Then we hold position until Dr. Anwar has gathered everything she can from their lab, including the weapon, and both Tempest teams have been extracted," Ryder stated simply, as if the plan was a walk in the park.

The Captain looked concerned as she spoke up, "With all due respect, Pathfinder. Once they realized where you are, they'll send the majority of their forces at you."

"I know, that's why I'm leading the assault team," the Pathfinder's voice became serious as she added, "Dr. Anwar getting into the lab undetected is the primary objective of this mission. My team is just a distraction tactic."

"I should be on that team," Drack complained.

Ryder shook her head as she insisted, "I need your experience to keep the doctor safe."

"Vetra can keep her safe, you need me bashing heads in."

"Drack," the turian cut in, "As flattering as your faith in me is, Ryder's right. You and Suvi can move quickly to the lab, and you can take out any problem before they know what hits them. The doctor is gonna have to be focused completely on gathering all intel on the weapon, you're gonna have to be her shield."

"Kid, you're gonna need to keep the Roekaar's attention for at least fifteen minutes," it was the first time Suvi could remember hearing the krogan sound concerned.

Ryder didn't look up as she sighed, "I know."

"At least take Cora with you. Liam and Peebee can handle getting Bekker back to the ship," Drack insisted.

Just as Ryder looked like she was going to protest, Suvi finally spoke up, "Please, Ryder. Take Cora with ye."

The pair locked eyes, and Suvi could see the doubt creeping into the Pathfinder's gaze. It took all of the doctor's will power not to rush into her arms and shake sense into her.

"Please," Suvi pleaded.

Swallowing back a protest, the Pathfinder gave the smallest of nods as she called out to SAM, "Contact the Tempest. Let Cora know the change of plans, SAM."

"Right, away."

"You and your team should get some rest, Pathfinder. We have several rooms prepared for you upstairs," Captain Blake said while gesturing to follow one of her assistance.

Minutes later the group was escorted into a large suit and shown the different sleeping areas.

"The Tempest will be landing in about an hour, we deploy for the mission in four. We'll gather at the outposts LZ, suited up and ready to move out," Ryder sighed, "I recommend everyone tries to get some rest or relax, or whatever."

Without another word she turned and went to the private room in the back, her head slightly bowed
as she shuffled along. Suvi seemed to struggle with what to do, was this a moment to be a supportive partner or did Ryder need her space before a mission. Suvi turned to ask Vetra and Drack but they had already retreated to their respective areas of the suite, leaving the decision entirely up to the doctor. With a deep breath, she turned towards Ryder's room and went to the door. It opened automatically.

When the doctor entered, her eyes were immediately drawn to Ryder. She had one arm up leaning on the window at the far end of the room, her head resting against it. So lost in thought, she never heard Suvi approach. The doctor hesitated for a moment, and then wrapped her arms around Ryder's waist. When she felt the Pathfinder lean back into the embrace, she knew she'd made the right decision. Kissing Ryder's temple, Suvi tightened her hold on the woman.

"This mission isn't going to be easy," Ryder whispered.

Suvi gently breathed, "I know."

Turning in the doctor's embrace, the Pathfinder let one of her thumb's caress Suvi's cheek as she mumbled, "Promise me, no matter what, you'll get out of there."

"Ryder," the doctor felt a lump form in her throat as her voice cracked.

The Pathfinder methodically moved in to kiss the doctor while she continued to whisper, "Promise me."

Afraid to answer, Suvi leaned forward and captured Ryder's lips. Her fear and anxiety, all fuelling her need for the Pathfinder. The doctor hungrily possessed Ryder's mouth as her hands moved under her sweatshirt. To the doctor's surprise, the Pathfinder wasn't wearing anything underneath it. Grabbing the fabric she yanked it up and over Ryder's head.

The garment was haphazardly thrown across the room as the Pathfinder began to work on undoing Suvi's top, while also nibbling down the doctor's neck. The doctor's hands snuck underneath Ryder's sweatpants and were delight to find that, once again, the Pathfinder had failed to put anything else on. While squeezing Ryder's ass, Suvi pulled her partner's lower body flush against her, allowing the doctor to grind into her, spikes of pleasure shooting through the doctor as she did.

Suvi suddenly felt a rush of cold against her skin, followed immediately by the hot wet teasing of Ryder's tongue licking her nipple. The action elicited a gasp from her as she lost focus while the Pathfinder tugged her top off. One of Suvi's hands moved to the Pathfinder's exposed breast and began fondling it, pinching and twisting Ryder's own nipple in response. The doctor's other hand pushed on the sweatpants to get them over the Pathfinder's hips, allowing her to step out of them.

Without losing contact with the doctor lips, the Pathfinder was able to kick off her shoes before tugging on Suvi's pants as she guided them to the bed. Ryder pushed the doctor down, and seductively let her mouth suck, and teeth bite Suvi's breasts before drifting down to her stomach. With a good pull, the pants moved past the doctor's hips and allowed the Pathfinder to pressed her mouth against the doctor's damp mound, her tongue flicking against the fabric of her underwear. Suvi's back arched and her body pressed into Ryder's mouth, enjoying the pleasure she created.

The Pathfinder had to step back long enough to get the pants and shoes completely off the doctor. Suvi took advantage and quickly discarded her panties before scrambling to her knees afterwards. Something in the doctor refused to let Ryder be the one in control tonight, and the Pathfinder clearly saw the challenging look in Suvi's eye as she climbed onto the bed.

Reaching out and roughly grabbing Ryder's hair from behind, Suvi pulled her into a searing kiss as
their bodies slammed together. Realizing the position they were now in, the doctor inserted one of her knees between Ryder's, which then automatically put one of the Pathfinder's knees between Suvi's. Allowing them both to rock against each other's legs.

Ryder moaned as she began to ride the doctor. One of her hands moved to cup Suvi's ass, helping to give her leverage with the motion. The doctor used one of her own hands to mirror what the Pathfinder was doing, while the other continued to pinch and tug on Ryder's breast. Suvi felt the pleasure building within her, as she rubbed against the Pathfinder's knee.

"Fuck," Ryder panted between kisses, and the doctor knew they were both close.

Suvi whispered in her partner's ear, "Together."

Pulling back just enough to look into Suvi's eyes, Ryder could only nod in response as her body continued to bob up and down. Their movements became frantic but they couldn't take their eyes of each other. It was a level of intimacy Suvi had never experienced. Seeing her own pleasure reflected in Ryder's eyes only heightened the orgasm that crashed into them.

"Suvi," Ryder whimpered.

The doctor reached out and held her partners face in place as they both began to cry out in pure pleasure. Neither closed their eyes as the spasms over took them, both gasping for air. When the ripples of pleasure subsided they rested their foreheads together.

The Pathfinder's breath was cool against Suvi's cheek as she whispered, "I want to be inside of you."

It was said with such raw desire, that the doctor shivered.

"I need to be inside of ye," Suvi panted.

The doctor glanced down at Ryder's flushed lips as she mumbled, "Do ye trust me."

"Yes," the Pathfinder desperately replied.

Letting her thumb trace Ryder's lips, Suvi instructed, "Face the headboard."

The Pathfinder's tongue darted out and licked the doctor's thumb for a moment before she moved towards the top of the bed. Suvi positioned herself right behind Ryder, both still kneeling on the bed. Placing soft kisses on her partner's shoulder, Suvi let her right hand delicately caress its way down Ryder's arm, before wrapping her own hand over the Pathfinder's. Carefully guiding the hand behind Ryder, Suvi allowed it to brush past her inner thigh. The Pathfinder's fingers playfully stroked the soft skin as it moved, but all movement stopped once the doctor placed the hand right where Ryder had wanted to be.

With her left hand, Suvi slowly caressed Ryder's hip and abdomen, before it's trajectory turned south. The Pathfinder took her hand and placed it over the doctor's just as it reached it destination. Suvi softly kissed Ryder's neck and could feel the Pathfinder's pulse quicken with anticipation of what was to come. Both of their bodies glistened, and the doctor could taste the salt on the Pathfinder's skin as she moved up to her jaw.

Ever so slowly, Ryder's fingers began to stroke Suvi's entrance. Following her lead, the doctor repeated the action on the Pathfinder. For the next several minutes they teased and fondled each other's sex, dragging low moans of pleasure from each other. After Ryder's middle finger glided over the doctor's wet entrance multiple times, she delicately slipped the finger inside of Suvi.
The doctor bit down on the Pathfinder's shoulder as she mirrored the action with her own finger. Ryder's head fell back against Suvi as they continued to pleasure each other. It became an erotic dance of pleasure, letting the flames of passion burn deep and slow. Soon Ryder used the palm of her hand to press against Suvi's pelvic bone, before penetrating her with two fingers.

"There – Jesus, Ryder," Suvi gasped as the Pathfinder's fingers had found the spot.

The waves of pleasure building within the doctor was almost to the breaking point, but she wanted to share this moment with Ryder again, and moved her fingers and hand into a different angle.

"Fuuu . . ." Ryder groaned incompletely.

Both of their hands picked up the pace, their breathing was labored and their bodies slick with sweat. Suvi could feel Ryder's excitement building and knew she was only moments away from climaxing. Applying just a touch more pressure with her palm along with a few well timed strokes, she felt her partner clamp down on her fingers as she cried out. What the doctor didn't anticipate was the Pathfinder's ability to keep her own fingers moving within the doctor. Almost out of nowhere, Suvi felt the sharp spike of pleasure take hold, and she quickly followed Ryder into ecstasy.

The room grew still, the sound of their heavy breathing filling the silence. Suvi rested her head against Ryder's shoulder as her body continued to quake with after shocks, the Pathfinder's fingers still gently stroking and elongating the climax. A minute or so later, she started to pull her finger out from the Pathfinder, but Ryder's hand stopped her movement.

Glancing over her shoulder to look at Suvi, Ryder whispered, "I love you."

Tears stung the doctor's eyes as she leaned in and breathed, "My love," just before kissing her.

Eventually they moved under the covers of the bed, wrapped up in each other's bodies, and tried to take a quick nap. SAM delicately woke them when there was an hour left before deployment. Together they moved to the small shower in the room, and enjoyed washing each other, and exploring each other. They threw on clothes before hustling across the outpost to the Tempest.

As they moved up the ramp, Ryder took Suvi's hand and guided them to the Pathfinder's quarters. On the bed was an initiative set of armor.

"I ah, had Cora put together an armor package for you," Ryder shyly explained.

Smiling Suvi said, "Very thoughtful, though, I might need help."

Ryder quickly put her under armor skin on, and helped Suvi with hers. Within a few minutes the Pathfinder was once again sporting the impressive armor of the N7. Suvi followed her up to the load out room next to the bridge.

"Miss us, Kallo?" Ryder asked as she confidently entered the room.

The salarian turned, shock written all over his face as he jumped out of his chair and pushed past Ryder to hug Suvi.

"You're not allowed to leave the bridge, ever again!" Kallo demanded as he hugged her.

Ryder gave a sarcastic quip, "I mean, I might have a problem with that."

Suvi gave the Pathfinder a look over the salarian's shoulder. Throwing up her hands in an innocent
manner, Ryder signaled that she was going to grab their weapons and give them a moment of privacy.

Kallo pulled back and confessed, "I never understood why you would get so nervous listening to the Pathfinder during a mission, but then we heard your comms. when the vehicles were attack on Kadara. I felt so helpless, and I finally understood. I was so far away and I couldn't help you. It was horrible."

"Awww, Kallo," Suvi replied, touched that he cared so much.

"I know, don't tell Gil," the salarian whispered.

Giving him a wink she quietly said, "Your secret's safe."

After giving her friend one last hug, Suvi followed Ryder back through the Tempest. As they walked down the ramp, the Pathfinder attached two pistols to Suvi's armor.

"When do I put my helmet on?" the doctor asked.

Giving her a sad smile, Ryder answered, "After I leave the shuttle, I wanna see that face as long as possible."

Before Suvi could reply, Cora shouted out to Ryder. They pair started to organize the security force helping to infiltrate the base. The four shuttles opened and the different groups shuffled in.

As Suvi approached shuttle 2 she saw, the rest of the Tempest crew. They all hugged her and talked about how it wasn't the same on the ship without her, but all too soon the friendly reunion was over as Ryder and Cora marched over to them. Everyone piled into the shuttle, the Tempest crew forming a sort of wall between Ryder and Suvi, and the outpost volunteers. As the shuttle lifted off, the Pathfinder took hold of the doctor's hand. They stood like that for several minutes in relative silence.

"Five minutes out from first drop," the pilot shouted from the cockpit.

Ryder quickly moved in and kissed Suvi, restraining the passion she had showed earlier in the day. The Pathfinder's lips moved to the doctor's cheek then to her ear.

"My love," she breathed.

Suvi instinctively wrapped her arms around Ryder's neck and held her tightly.

"One minute."

Pulling back so she could see Ryder's eyes, Suvi quickly said, "Don't look back, keep moving forward and I'll see you on the other side."

They kissed one more time, and Suvi repeated her instruction, "Don't look back, love."

The Pathfinder, took a moment to look at the doctor, almost as if she was trying to memorize her face. Then with a heavy sigh she moved away from her and waited to disembark the shuttle. Suvi moved so she could watch Ryder for as long as possible. The Pathfinder's shoulders slumped forward and her head was bowed. Yet, just before the shuttle's doors closed, the doctor saw Ryder's head snap up and her shoulder's roll back as she confidently walked forward towards her team.
"Kids, gonna be alright," Drack almost sounded relieved.

Suvi nodded as she whispered, "I know."
"Stay behind me!" Drack yelled out as the sounds of gunfire echoed all around them.

The second shuttle was descending into the base, the assault team from shuttle one already engaged with Roekaar. Suvi frantically tried to put her helmet on, but she wasn't used to the armored gloves and so her fingers weren't as nimble. When the krogan turned around to see what the fuss was about, he grabbed the helmet and chucked it behind them.

"I'm guessing, you're gonna need to see what you're looking at in the lab?" he asked.

Suvi just nodded, clearly anxious about going back into battle for only the second time.

The krogan must have sensed this as his voice softened when he said, "Deep breaths, Doc."

She took a few deep breaths and felt better.

"Here we go!" Peebee gleefully shouted as the doors to the shuttle opened.

The asari threw up a biotic shield, allowing everyone to jump out of the shuttle safely before finding cover. Drack moved the doctor behind several crates and Suvi watched as the shuttle lifted back up through the entrance in the roof. Grabbing hold of her pistol, Suvi peeked out from behind the crates to see if Drack needed any help, but the firefight had moved further into the base.

"Put the gun down, Doc, before you shot me," Drack grumbled as he appeared.

"Right," Suvi nervously complied.

SAM spoke up, "The lab is on the second level, down to your left."

The pair swiftly moved away from the landing pad and towards the doors to the lower levels. As they moved into the next corridor, Suvi saw a large group of Roekaar at the other end. Drack grabbed her and yanked her into a crawl space in the wall.

He quietly whispered, "C'mon."

The crawl space was tall enough that they could remain standing, but they would have to shuffle sideways to go through. Pipes and vents concealed them from the group of angara as they moved closer.

"What was that?" one of them asked as they pointed their gun towards the wall.

Drack stopped moving, and put his hand out to stop Suvi.

Another one of the Roekaar grumbled, "Why are we guarding this hallway and not helping with the fight?"

"Akksul doesn't want any of the Milky Way near the weapon," explained another angara.

Suvi and Drack gave each other a nod that they were on the right path. Suddenly the feedback of a PA system coming on caused everyone to flinch.
"Hey Akksul, nice base you've got here, be a shame if I blew something up," Ryder's sarcastic voice filled the corridor.

Moments later the ground rumbled indicating that she had actually followed through on her threat.

"Oh opps, didn't mean to blow that up," the Pathfinder seemed to say in earnest.

The ground once again shook violently for a moment before Ryder's voice returned to say, "But I meant to do that. Human Pathfinder, out!"

Suddenly, the Roekaar's comm. channel was screaming for reinforcements and the group in the corridor sprinted towards the direction Drack and Suvi had just come from.

"I alerted the Pathfinder you were in need of assistance, though I believe she took my suggestion literally," SAM's voice popped up in their ear.

"Drack? You guys good?" Ryder's voice was hard to hear over all the gunfire.

The krogan smiled as they exited the crawl space, "Try and save the fireworks until I can help, Kid."

"Copy . . . Cora they're trying to flank us!" Ryder's comm. went silent.

Suvi didn't have time to dwell on the Pathfinder, as she and Drack kept moving further into the base. Luckily, for the next several minutes they would only run into patrols of two or three Roekaar, which Drack easily handled.

"This is starting to get fun," he chuckled as he threw the most recent Roekaar into the wall.

Suvi just shook her head at him while pulling up her omni tool, "Lab should be on the other side of this door."

The two cautiously entered the next chamber, and right away the doctor could see the brightly lit lab with all the equipment and more importantly the weapon.

"Drack," Suvi whispered as she pointed at the room.

The krogan nodded as he looked around, then said, "Stick close to the wall."

Walking around the chamber to get to the lab kept them in the shadows and allowed Drack to position himself between Suvi and any would be attacker. Once they were at the door, SAM spoke up.

"Hacking security protocols."

The krogan kept his shotgun at the ready as they waited. A minute later they heard the ding and hiss of the door opening. Drack took point as they entered the lab.

"Oh my?" came the voice of an angara.

Drack pointed his gun as he said, "Hands where I can see them."

Suvi peeked around the krogan to see what they were dealing with. When she and the angara made eye contact, the alien seemed to light up.

"You're a human female with red hair? I've heard you're quiet rare!" his excitement to meet her was
"Where's the weapon?" Drack growled.

The angara seemed to fumble out of his seat, clearly terrified by the krogan, as he stuttered, "Oh course, it's over here."

Keeping his gun up, Drack threatened, "Don't try anything."

"I wouldn't dream of crossing a krogan, especially one of your experience," the angara said as he began to pull out a containment case.

Drack put the gun on the angara's chest and pushed him away from the case as he said, "You seem to know a lot about the Milky Way species."

Suvi finally spoke up as she assessed the case, "He would have had to, Drack. Testing the Havaral accelerant so that it still made the dieses deadly in all five of the species."

"You're a scientist?!" the angara gasped with joy before adding, "Then you can finish the antidote!"

The angara scrambled to another row of draws. Drack kept his gun trained on him, but a noise out in the chamber caused all three of them to stop their movement.

"That's a patrol," the angara whispered.

Suvi nodded to the door, "Take a look."

"Not leaving you with him," the krogan growled.

"Your red headed human companion might be your last hope in finding a cure for this abhorrent abuse of nature. I want to help you, not harm," the angara said with such conviction that Suvi believed him.

"I'm alright, Drack," Suvi confirmed as she watched the angara from across the table.

The krogan hesitated for just a moment before saying, "She's got a gun, and I've personally trained her on it."

"Duly noted," the angara gulped.

Once Drack left, the angara visibly breathed a sigh of relief then introduced himself.

"I'm Dr. Darvo Orshe On."

Suvi gave a warm smile as she said, "Dr. Suvi Anwar."

Darvo's eyes went wide as he whispered, "You're the human Pathfinder's mate."

The doctor blushed at his wording while she said, "Ah, it's a bit more complex than that."

"I'm fascinated in how same sex human couples can reproduce, do you do genetic mapping of the —"

The distant sound of gunfire from the lab distracted them. Suvi peeked out one of the lab's windows to see Drack cautiously checking out where the action was coming from.
"Dr. Orshe On, you mentioned a cure?"

The angara got excited again as he turned back around while muttering, "Of course, of course."

"Why are you willing to help us?" Suvi asked as she watched him mix together several different vials of liquid.

Without looking up from his work, Darvo whispered, "Because I never wanted to harm your species in the first place."

Glancing up at Suvi, he continued, "Akksul kidnapped me from Havarl weeks ago. Said if I didn't develop the weapon he'd harm my family. Made me do tests on Ruth . . . it was horrible."

His voice trailed off as he lamented what had happened.

"Watching your life’s work be turned into something unnatural and cruel . . ." he started to say, " . . . I refuse to be the cause of your species demise. We can learn from each other, help fight the kett."

Gently touching his arm, Suvi assured him, "That's all we want. To work and live together harmoniously."

Darvo smiled as he said, "And the building blocks of trust will be laid here, you and me."

Before Suvi could respond, the gunfire grew closer. This time Darvo looked out the window and panicked.

"It's Akksul, you have to hide," the angara gasped.

"I can't let him take the weapon," Suvi tried to sound brave though she was terrified on the inside.

Pushing her to the back of the lab, Darvo explained, "You can't take them on alone! Stay behind here."

He guided her to huddle underneath a desk in the back of the lab. Suvi listened as the doctor moved around the lab, appearing to look busy.

"SAM, where's Drack?" Suvi whispered.

But the AI didn't respond as Akksul and his guards stormed into the lab.

"Give me the weapon!" the voice of the Roekaar leader filled the room.

Suvi listened carefully as Darvo shuffled around.

The angara doctor stammered as he said, "Let me prepare it for transport."

"There's no time!" barked Akksul.

"Angara are immune to this disease, but if you want it to survive the trip to where ever you're taking it, then let me secure it."

Akksul snapped, "Be quick about it!"

Suvi tried to focus on keeping her breathing even as one of the angara guards seemed to walk towards the desk. Her mind started to come up with different scenarios if Akksul were to discover her. Trying to keep fear from paralyzing her, the doctor thought about what her partner would do.
If Ryder were stuck hiding because she was out gunned, but Ryder was a biotic, even in the most perilous of situations the Pathfinder seemed to have a trick up her sleeve.

"Please, don't touch that," Darvo couldn't hide his irritation.

The charging of weapons caused Suvi to close her eyes and send up a silent prayer. Nothing was said, but the doctor could hear her angara counter part working on the case for a few more moments. The tension in the lab was palpable, at any moment one wrong word or gesture could send it hurling towards violence.

"There," Darvo huffed with effort.

Suvi released a breath she'd been holding as the room once again came back to life from the eerie silence.

"Get the case to the transport," another Roekaar instructed.

The sounds of the group heading for the exit alerted the doctor that perhaps the cost was almost clear.

Darvo's calm voice so close to the desk startled Suvi as he said, "I have done everything you've asked. Please, let me go home."

"Yes, I think it's time you joined your family," Akksul's voice almost sounded pleasant.

The lone gunshot that rang out caused Suvi to jump. Slapping her hands over her mouth to prevent any sound from escaping, she watched, horrified, as Darvo slid down the wall of the lab covered in blood, and gasping for air.

Akksul snickered, "They will be happy to see you."

With that, the Roekaar leader stormed out of the lab. Suvi waited another beat or two before cautiously crawling out of her hiding spot. She immediately began assessing Darvo's wounds.

"Don't move, I need to stop the bleeding," she instructed as she frantically looked around the lab.

"SAM, alert Ryder, Akksul has the weapon and is headed for the hanger," she said aloud while grabbing a lab coat.

Quickly ripping the coat into pieces she began to apply pressure to Darvo's wound.

Clearly struggling to stay awake, he gestured to the desk behind her as he mumbled, "Hand me those."

Suvi turned and quickly handed him the vile along with the injector before going back to dressing his injury. So caught up in trying to save his life, she never noticed what he was doing until it was too late.

"My dear," he whispered and waited for her to look up at him before continuing, "All my research is on data pads in that desk, have your team look at them."

"We'll look at them together," she insisted.

Darvo gestured for her to come closer, as Suvi leaned in, she never saw him position the injector by her neck. It wasn't until she felt the prick and sudden push of fluids being put into her system.
"You are the cure," Darvo coughed up blood as he spoke.

Suvi suddenly felt light headed as she held onto the angara.

"What did ye do to me?" she asked with a slight slur.

With a sad smile, he spoke his final words, "Saved your life and . . . redeemed mine."

"Darvo? Dr. Orshe On?" Suvi desperately shook him as panic began to set in.

She could feel whatever he had injected her with already affecting her nervous system. Closing his eyes and placing the partial ripped lab coat over his face, Suvi stood. Stumbling to the desk she had to force herself to concentrate on grabbing all the data pads. A satchel was hung up on the wall, which she used to carry everything she could find.

The sounds of fighting out in the chamber forced her to duck down as she crawled to the lab's exit. Peeking out to see who it was, the doctor saw several Roekaar holding Drack down. The krogan was covered in blood, and the doctor couldn't tell if it belonged to him or someone else. One of the angara put their gun to his chest and were clearly about to pull the trigger. Without thinking, Suvi pulled her pistol and shot the man holding the gun to Drack's chest then shot one of the other Roekaar holding him. The distraction was enough for the krogan to break free and start bashing heads. This time, the doctor wasn't plagued with instant regret of shock of what she was doing. Keeping her pistol up, she was able to take out another guard before all was said and done.

"You all right?" Drack shouted as he moved over to her when the fighting was done.

The doctor tried to stand but her legs were wobbly.

"I don't know," she slowly said.

Drack grabbed her face and looked at her eyes as he asked, "Are you drunk?"

Suvi opened her mouth to speak but SAM beat her to it, "The doctor has been injected with a potential antidote to the weapon, at the moment it is affecting her nervous system."

Shaking her head to try and clear the cobwebs, Suvi nearly shouted, "Akksul has the weapon. We have to stop him."

"Shit," Drack muttered as he threw an arm around the doctor to help them move faster.

The pair moved with relative ease back to the hanger bay where the shuttles had dropped them off. Yet, as they grew closer it became clear, the Roekaar were making a stand here so that their leaders could safely get away with the weapon.

"Stay here!" Drack yelled out over the fighting as he tucked Suvi in behind several crates by a wall.

"Akksul!" Ryder's voice bellowed.

Until she'd met the Pathfinder, the doctor had never experienced relief and dread at the same time. Yet, knowing Ryder was still alive but very much in danger was a state the doctor realized would be a constant in her life as long as Ryder was Pathfinder. If Suvi was honest with herself, it was probably something she would have to live with for the rest of their lives.

"Ryder keep his attention we're moving into position," Cora's soft voice came over the comm.

"Fight me you coward," Ryder shouted.
All hell broke lose, Cora and her group attacked while Ryder and her group pushed forward. Suvi tried to stand but the effort was too great as she felt her strength beginning to fade. Crawling to the next set of crates she tried to see if she could help.

"Drack, your six!" Ryder's voice shouted on the comm.

A wave of biotic energy knocked Suvi over as she tried to stand again.

"Ryder, watch your – AH!" Cora's scream of pain was cut off, but the doctor quickly began scanning for her.

Suvi immediately asked the AI, "SAM, where's Cora?"

"Fifteen yards to your left."

"Get me to her," Suvi commanded.

"On my mark, move to the debris to your left," the AI explained.

Suvi moved into position to be ready for SAM's signal.

"Mark."

Her legs failed her as she tripped and fell halfway to the debris, but scrambling back to her feet she was able to make. For the next several minutes SAM carefully guided Suvi over to Cora. Throughout the journey Suvi kept talking with the former commando to keep her awake and distracted. Finally the doctor was in position that she could see Cora.

"Cora, can ye throw up a shield?" Suvi shouted over to her.

The second in command had been hit in the arm. With her good arm she held her pistol and keep shooting at any Roekaar foolish enough to come close. The doctor spotted one and once again pulled out her pistol and shot them. Cora clearly couldn't hide her surprise as she saw the angara collapse to the ground beside her.

"Nice shot!"

The biotic then threw up and shield allowing Suvi to stumble over to her location. The doctor went to work on the wound with supplies she'd stolen from the lab.

"Doctor, you need to move," SAM's voice called out.

An explosive device landed just a few feet from them. Grabbing Cora, Suvi rolled them into a ditch just as the explosive device went off. Feeling the commando's body land on her was the last thing the doctor remembered before everything went dark.
"Come back to me."

The sounds of the med bay were the first tendrils of consciousness to grace Suvi. Her eyelids were heavy as she struggled to push them open. Blobs of bright shapes moved about as her eyes struggled to focus. Blinking back the fog, the doctor saw Cora in the bed beside her.

"Hey, sleepy head," Cora's voice muttered in a gravely tone.

Suvi tried to sit up, but her body just didn't have the strength.

Lexi quickly fused over her, "Don't even think about it."

"I won't, I swear," Suvi's voice croaked as she relented.

The asari was clearly upset as she continued to vent, "First, you let an alien inject you with goddess knows what, than you try and get yourself blown up!"

"To be fair, Doc, Suvi rolled us away from the explosive, not on it," Cora piped in.

Lexi gave her a look that caused even the former commando to gulp and shut up. The asari turned back to Suvi and was about to speak when the doors to the med bay opened. There, clearly out of breath from running to the room, was Ryder. Her eyes fixed solely on Suvi as she entered. The doctor noticed bandages sprinkled all over the Pathfinder, including a black eye and fat lip, which caused the cocky smile to look a little skewed. Ryder moved to sit on the edge of Suvi's bed. The doctor couldn't help herself as her fingers gently touching the Pathfinder's wounded face. Turning into her touch, Ryder kissed Suvi's palm before taking the hand with her own and giving it a squeeze.

"I've looked worse," Ryder tried to joke.

Lexi cleared her throat before saying, "Pathfinder, I still need to examine Dr. Anwar, if you could give me a few minutes."

Not taking her eyes off Suvi, Ryder replied, "Sorry, Lexi. I can't wait."

The Pathfinder's thumb continued to stroke the doctor's hand, as she leaned in and asked, "You okay?"

Suvi's chest tightened at the vulnerability Ryder so willingly showed in her eyes. Unable to find her voice, the doctor gave the smallest of nods. She was rewarded with a relieved sigh from Ryder, whose smile was so bright she winced at the pain it cause.

"Lexi wouldn't tell me anything," Ryder whispered.

The asari blustered, "I'm still not telling you anything."

"Pathfinder," Kallo's voice interrupted over the comm., "Kandros and the other Pathfinder's are waiting for you on vid call."

Ryder finally broke eye contact with Suvi as she looked down at their hands, her shoulders
slumping.

Giving her hand a squeeze, the doctor whispered, "I'm not goin' anywhere."

"Promise?" the Pathfinder asked with a small smirk.

Suvi answered, "Aye, I promise."

Leaning forward, Ryder kissed Suvi's forehead, her lips lingering a beat longer than necessary. She dragged herself from the bed and began heading for the door.

"I plan on jail breaking her later, Lexi," the Pathfinder called out as she left.

"I'd like to see you try!" the asari called out.

Cora chuckled, "Don't tempt her, Doc."

Once the doors were closed, Lexi quickly locked them and moved to Suvi's bed to begin her examination.

"She doesn't know?" Suvi couldn't hide her relief in asking.

Lexi shook her head, "I used doctor patient confidentiality."

"How bad?"

The asari couldn't hide her concern, "I was able to counter the affects to the nervous system you were experiencing, but . . ."

"But?" Suvi insisted.

"You're running a low grade fever, and from all of Dr. Orshe On's research, it's going to get worse," Lexi explained.

"But you can treat my symptoms now?"

Lexi sighed, "Yes, but I think it's better if you stay here. I can monitor you as we go through the research."

"How long until . . ." Suvi couldn't finish the question.

The asari looked down and started fidgeting with her hands, "A day at best."

Hours, that's all they had to try and figure out how to keep her alive long enough to survive the antidote. The enormity felt like a punch to the gut. Did she devote all her time to help Lexi, or spend what conscious time she had left with Ryder.

"Cora," Suvi looked over to the woman, who had clearly been trying to give the two doctors privacy, as she asked, "What's the sitrep?"

Putting the data pad she'd been reading down, Cora took a deep breath before explaining, "Akksul got away. The Tempest evac'd everyone out of the base before reinforcements arrived. Resistance air support tracked Akksul's shuttle to a meteor belt but lost them. Reyes picked up chatter that perhaps the Roekaar might try and pillage the derelict Ark Natanus for a transponder in order to slip past Nexus control tower."
"That's why Ryder's talking with the Pathfinder's?" Suvi asked.

Cora confirmed, "We're checking in with the recovery crew Pathfinder Rix put in place. We're going to stop there first, then head for the Nexus."

Absorbing everything the biotic told her, Suvi began to form a plan about when to speak with Ryder.

"Doc, I know it's not my place but," Cora seemed to struggle with what to say next, "You and Ryder are always stronger when you're on the same page."

Suvi gave the woman a sad smile, "I know, I just need to try and exhaust all options first."

Looking up at Lexi, the Scot had a new determination as she said, "Where do we start?"

For the next several hours, Suvi read through Darvo's research as Lexi and SAM continued to run simulations on her condition. Each round bringing them closer and closer to different cocktails that could help lower her rising body temperature. Soon, the effort to even read was exhausting Suvi and she found herself dozing off for small periods of time. Lexi tried to get her to eat, but food became unappealing by the middle of the day, so the asari made tea from her own personal stash.

"I need to hook you up to fluids, Suvi," Lexi said during her mid afternoon examination.

Wrapped in a blanket, and shaking slightly from the fever, the doctor nodded. They continued to work, SAM hopeful that they were nearing a breakthrough. Suvi fell asleep and didn't wake until she felt a cold compress on her forehead.

"Hey, Doc. How about some home made broth?" the low voice of Drack greeted her.

Pushing herself up on the bed, Suvi weakly smiled, "How'd ye get stuck, playin' nurse?"

It was such an innocent question that his reaction caught the doctor completely off guard.

Looking down at the ground the krogan grumbled, "Seeing as you probably wouldn't be going through this if I didn't leave you with that nut case."

As quickly as her body would let her, Suvi grabbed his arm and softly said, "This isn't yer fault."

"Tell that to the kid when she finds out," he muttered.

"Drack," her voice suddenly found strength as she insisted, "This is not yer fault."

She gave him a look and waited until he met her eyes before adding, "Besides, when I beat this, you'll owe me yer life."

The krogan let out a genuine laugh as he looked at her and said, "How do ya figure?"

"Cause if this weapon goes off, we'll already have the cure."

"Fair enough, but before you start pronouncing yourself, savoir of the Milky Way, how 'bout a few sips of this?" he asked.

For the next hour, Drack helped to feed her and place new compresses on her head. He explained that Ryder was so busy coordinating the efforts between the Pathfinder's and the Nexus to prepare for Akksul's potential attack it had kept her on the third floor nearly the entire day.
"I could tell she was getting cranky and knew she liked this soup, so figured I could make a batch of the broth for you," he said while placing a new compress on her head.

Suvi's body was shaking rather consistently now as she stuttered to say, "Ye'd think, you two were related. The way ye read each other."

"Well, the kid's part krogan so that make sense," Drack teased.

Trying to smile through the shaking, the doctor replied, "Thick headed for sure."

A large yawn over took Suvi, as the effort to stay awake was taking its toll on her.

"Get some rest, Doc."

Curling up as her body continued to shake, she tried to get some sleep. The next time she opened her eyes, Suvi felt delirious, her vision was slightly blurry for a moment as she tried to fight through the symptoms of the fever. She was so cold her teeth chattered. Her eyes finally found Lexi, in deep conversation with someone, but a privacy screen shielded them.

"We need to get her body temperature down," the asari's voice held a hint of panic as she added, "By any means necessary."

The rustle of someone removing his or her clothes caused Lexi to gasp, "What are you doing?"

"Taking her into the showers," Ryder's voice confidently said as she rounded the corner in nothing but her bra and underwear.

Suvi tried to smile through the shaking, but her body just wouldn't respond. Ryder lovingly caressed her face and placed a tender kiss on her cheek.

"We've gotta lower your body temperature," the Pathfinder gently explained again.

The doctor whispered, "J-just, want-t t-to s-ee me, na-kked."

Giving her a wink, Ryder playfully said, "You know me so well."

Lexi helped the Pathfinder remove Suvi's clothing, leaving her in the standard issue Initiative bra and underwear. Scooping the doctor into her arms, Ryder placed sweet kisses on her head as they moved through the hallway. The asari stepped into the crew showers and turned all the temperatures to the coldest possible setting.

"SAM, keep the water tank at the lowest temperature you can," Ryder called out as she moved into the bone chilling spray.

"Son of a – god damn – mother!" Ryder cursed as the near freezing water hit them both.

Suvi could only groan as her body continued to shake from the fever. Carefully sliding down the shower wall, Ryder sat down and positioned the doctor in her lap so that she was cradled against her chest with her head tucked into the Pathfinder's neck. Once they were settled, Lexi repositioned the nozzles so they were all hitting the couple.

"Pathfinder you'll have fifteen minutes of water pressure, then it'll take the water ten minutes to recycle before your next fifteen minutes," Kallo's voice instructed over the loud noise of the showers.

"Copy that."
Ryder turned her attention back to Suvi as she shouted over the water, "You sure know how to show a girl a good time, Doc."

Leaning up so her mouth was close to the Pathfinder's ear, she tried to reply, "Y-yerr w-w-worth i-it."

"I never thought I'd be saying this but," Ryder paused as she blew out water from her mouth, "I wish I was on Elaaden right now."

The Pathfinder continued to try and keep the mood light as they suffered through the first cycle of cold water. Kallo gave them a warning as the water prepared to turn off.

"Ryder, you're only going to be able to sit with her for one more cycle before someone else will need to swap in," Lexi's voice came in over the comm. as the water shut off.

Unflinching in her tone, she replied, "No one else is coming in, Lexi."

"Your body temperature can only go so low, Ryder – " the doctor started to say.

"SAM, please cut off the doctor."

Finally the room was relatively silent as the Pathfinder looked down at Suvi and placed a kiss on her nose. The doctor noticed Ryder's face was already healing with the help of medi-gel. The lip was almost unnoticeable and the coloring under her eye had lessened. She started to think back to all of the injuries Ryder had sustained over the past few weeks. In her fever induced state, Suvi's memory took her back to Reyes and their conversation. Suddenly a question the doctor had buried in her subconscious came to the forefront of her mind.

"W-w-why, Re-yes?"

Ryder looked at her for a moment confused, as she repeated, "Why Reyes? What do you –"

Suvi could see the moment the Pathfinder finally realized what she was talking about. Guilt seeped into her eyes, as Ryder looked away, water droplets cascaded down her neck as she turned. She remained quiet for a few moments clearly struggling with how to answer. When she finally spoke, her voice was low and full of emotion.

"For the first few months, after my Dad . . ." trailing off, the Pathfinder took a moment to regroup then said, "After Habitat 7, I didn't really think I was gonna live very long."

The doctor desperately wanted to reach out and touch her, but Suvi's body was so paralyzed by her shaking that all she could do was try and will Ryder to look at her.

"I didn't know what the hell I was doing," she continued to confess, "I stumbled upon an asari who'd been studying the remnant, then some how convince a krogan to join us. I should have been dead about hundred different times in those first few missions."

Taking one of Suvi's hands, Ryder softly said, "And there you were this smart, incredibly sexy Scot, flirting back at me."

Bringing the hand to her lips, the Pathfinder kissed the knuckles and continued to whisper, "There was such a depth to you, I felt like I could listen to you contemplate science and faith for hours. Even if I didn't understand half the things you were saying."

Another wave of guilt passed through Ryder's eyes as she put down Suvi's hand and looked up at
the ceiling while muttering, "It would have been selfish of me to start something with you, knowing I wasn't going to live very long."

Suvi finally made a sound close to a sob, which pulled the Pathfinder's attention back to her face. Ryder let her thumb slowly stroke the doctor's cheek.

"You deserved . . . you deserve . . . better than that," she breathed, "You deserve a house, full of kids and a dog."

The comment got a small smile out of Suvi.

"A partner who isn't going to worry you about whether they're coming home, or if there's a bounty on your head," Ryder continued, "Someone who thinks your rock licking habit is as cute as I do."

The Pathfinder paused before saying, "Someone who'd never hurt you, or cause you pain. You deserve to be happy, to be loved and cherished."

Sadness took hold of Ryder as she whispered, "You deserve to live a long peaceful life . . . and if that means me walking away," he voice quivered as she added, "I'd do it."

"N-n-o-o-o," Suvi managed to moan softly.

The Pathfinder shook her head as she insisted, "You're meant to do extraordinary things, Suvi. If being with me would even rob you of one of those possibilities, I'd never forgive myself."

The doctor was overwhelmed at the emotion seeping into every word the Pathfinder was saying.

"You asked, 'Why Reyes?' Ryder's voice trembled as she continued, "Because it was easy. I never had to risk anything in being with those other people. I never had to give anything of myself. Just get lost in the feeling of being alive and forget everything that had happened."

Looking up at the ceiling again, the Pathfinder added, "Forget Habitat 7, forget that Scott was in a coma, forget the last few years of mom's disease . . . forget that fifty thousand souls were counting on me to find them homes . . ."

Closing her eyes, Ryder murmured, "Forget how much I wanted you."

Silence followed, all Suvi could do was watch Ryder intently, hoping she would open her eyes.

"I honestly don't know what the hell you see in me," the Pathfinder tentatively admitted.

Finding the will to move one of her hands, the doctor used all her strength to inch it upwards until it rested over Ryder's heart. The action prompted her to open her eyes and look down at the doctor.

"H-h-o-o-m-m-e."

The pair held each other's gaze, neither one hearing the warning from Kallo that the water was about to turn back on. Ryder, of course, had to throw out a few curse words as the cold spray engulfed them again. This time they sat in silence, each trying to weather the freezing conditions. Yet, when the water finished its second cycle, it wasn't the persistent voice of Lexi that startled the pair, but a familiar AI.

"Pathfinder, had I a body of my own, I would physically remove you from the crew showers myself."

Snorting at him, Ryder quipped, "Good to know, SAM."
"When Dr. Anwar survives this fever, she will not be happy to have to deal with you contracting pneumonia."

Suvi's laugh came in short bursts between her body shakes

"Yeah, well, I thought I already taught you this lesson, SAM," Ryder said.

The AI replied, "Human stubbornness?"

"Funny," Ryder flatly grumbled, "But no."

The Pathfinder looked down at the doctor and hesitantly leaned forward before capturing Suvi's lips with her own. It was a long deep kiss, slow and methodic in it's pace and intention. The doctor couldn't hold back a moan of pleasure as she enjoyed the taste of her love. It was clear that Ryder wanted to convey what words could not. A depth of feeling that could only be expressed through the sweet embrace of lips, through the dance of tongues, and through the shared air between. When they finally parted, both breathless and slightly dazed, the Pathfinder's face split into a goofy grin.

"Humans, will do anything for the people they love."
"Brain activity indicates Dr. Anwar is regaining consciousness," the monotone voice of a familiar AI was the first thing Suvi heard as she awoke.

Blinking back the fog of sleep, she looked up to see a relived and exhausted Lexi standing over her.

"Thank the goddess," Lexi breathed as a tired smile tugged on her lips.

Softly, Suvi asked, "Did it work?"

"Congratulations, you're a living cure," the asari chuckled as she examined her.

With weary pride, Suvi took a deep breath and felt herself relax for the first time in days. Her eyes glanced around the room and noticed Ryder was nowhere to be seen.

"She's on the Natanus with Drack and Vetra," Lexi began, "Otherwise she'd be occupying that chair."

The asari pointed at a chair with a blanket draped over it.

"Had to treat her for hyperthermia after her stunt in the shower, but, it worked. By the fifth cycle, your fever finally broke, but you'd already lost consciousness by that point so I doubt you remember."

Lexi finished up her examine then asked, "Hungry?"

"Starving," Suvi eagerly admitted.

"Excellent, Drack made some extra broth before he left," Lexi happily said as she typed on her omni tool before speaking again, "Peebee, could you heat up the broth in the galley for me."

"If you just want me to come down there and give you a thrill, no need for the food pretense," Peebee said in a flirtatious tone.

"The broth isn't for me," Lexi grumbled.

There was a moment of silence before Peebee's voice excitedly said over the comm. "Wait, Suvi's awake?"

The doctor finally spoke up as she said, "Indeed."

"I'll be right down!" the asari nearly squealed before adding, "Hey Kallo, guess who's awake?!"

Her comm. cut off after the question but the doctor had a feeling the med bay was about to get a little more crowded. Sure enough two minutes later, Gil and Kallo nearly ran over each other as they stumbled into the med bay.

"It's true," Gil exclaimed.

Kallo went straight to her bedside and took a seat as he huffed, "You're not allowed to get hurt any more, or leave the ship, or do anything that might cause you to get hurt or leave the ship."
"I think what he's trying to say is, we're glad you're okay," Gil injected with an eye roll.

Suvi laughed as she said, "Don't worry, I think I've had enough excitement to last a lifetime."

"Some how, I doubt that," came the voice of Cora as she, Liam and Jaal walked in.

Jaal nodded in agreement as he added, "Especially considering who your mate is."

"I think she secretly likes danger, why else would someone date Ryder?" Liam joked.

"Oh Liam, honey, there are plenty of reasons," Peebee purred as she made her way through the growing crowd and placed a tray with broth on the doctor's lap.

As Suvi looked at the crew now gathered around her bed, the Scot felt overcome with emotions.

"It means so much to me that . . ." she struggled to speak, but tried again, "I didn't expect to find . . ."

She shook her head still trying to fight back the overwhelming emotions threatening to take over.

"You are family, Suvi Anwar," Jaal's low voice commanded.

Nodding, Cora stated, "It's not the same without ya, Doc."

"And let's be honest, Ryder isn't the same without you," Peebee chirped.

"Hopefully, she'll stop breaking my ship now," Gil grumbled.

Kallo piped up, "And stop sitting in your chair on the bridge."

This got a chuckle out of Suvi.

"I'll have to speak with her about that," the doctor tried to sound serious.

Liam leaned forward and said, "So Drack's been telling stories of your adventures in the base."

"Said you took out nearly fifty Roekaar all by yourself," Jaal added with a mischief smirk.

Suvi lost track of time as she regaled everyone with the stories from the raid on the Roekaar base, and her adventures on Kadara. She listened as they all talked about the raid from their perspectives and even talked a little strategy for the inevitable confrontation with Akksul. Something everyone believed was a foregone conclusion.

"Tempest this is, Ryder. Kallo can you assemble the crew in the conference room?"

The room froze for a moment, as all eyes turned to the salarian. When he didn't answer right away, Cora had to motion for him to say something.

"Uh – copy that, Pathfinder. What's your ETA?"

"About ten minutes out," Ryder replied.

"I'll make sure everyone is assembled in ten, Tempest out."

Gil stepped forward and cheekily said, "So, we're totally sneaking Suvi up to the meeting without telling Ryder, right?"
"Wait a minute," Lexi finally spoke up.

"You'll be at the meeting too, so when it's over just escort her back," Gil tried to argue.

Cora quipped, "Cause Ryder's gonna just let Lexi bring her back down here without complaining."

"I'll handle, Ryder," Suvi calmly said then added, "But yer forgetting the most important person to keep quiet."

The group thought about it for a second then collectively said, "SAM."

"The Pathfinder did not provide me with specific instructions regarding Dr. Anwar as she has in the past. Therefore, I believe I will be able to keep silent in your ruse."

"Brilliant," Gil cheered.

The group shuffled up to the third floor conference room and made sure to stand somewhat close together in order to hide Suvi. Minutes later they heard Ryder speaking to Vetra and Drack as they approached.

"That son of a bitch won't listen!"

Vetra gave the crew a look, one that normally indicated when Ryder was in a mood.

"Ryder, the Pathfinder's are prepared and so is Kesh and Kandros. Reyes and his men can stay close to the Nexus and when the shit hits the fan, which we know it will, Tann won't have any choice but to ask for their help," the turian explained. Shaking her head as she paced, Ryder tried to quell her temper as she said, "I know I wasn't there during the riots, but I've established settlements on Eos, Voeld, and Elaaden, gained the trust of the angara and just opened the door for a settlement on Kadara. I'm the only Pathfinder actively fighting the Archon. All of you have nearly died at one point or another and my girlfriend is in a coma because she wanted to help find a cure for our latest crisis. What the hell else am I supposed to do to get Tann to trust me? Come back from the dead?!"

Cora was quick to say, "Well, you've done that twice already."

This got its desired effect, as Ryder laughed and the tension in the room dissolved.

"Guess the third time might be the charm then," the Pathfinder teased as she took up position at the head of the conference table.

Looking up at the crew she gave them a curious look, "You guys don't all need to stand there."

The group broke up, but Jaal and Gil kept shielding Suvi from Ryder. They had planned to surprise the Pathfinder at the end of the meeting, but with every word she spoke, Suvi felt herself fighting back the urge to wrap the woman in her arms and never let her go. The intensity of the feeling shocked the doctor. Was this level of need or want healthy?

"Several shuttles have been taken from the ark, and SAM was able to detect that all files on the Nexus were copied over from a terminal," the Pathfinder's frustration evident in her voice.

"They'll know all our procedures and codes," Cora gasped.

Vetra nodded as she spoke, "Kesh, Kandros and Sid are working on changing the codes to key systems without informing Spender."
"Don't think they'll get away with that very long," Gil bristled.

Ryder agreed, "No, they won't, which is why I'm defying Tann's order and heading back to the Nexus."

She carefully looked around at everyone as she continued, "If anyone feels the need to object to my decision let me know and I will make a note of it."

The table was quiet for several long moments before Kallo finally spoke up, "My orders come from the Pathfinder of the Tempest. To hell with Tann."

The group cheered and slapped their hands on the table indicating they were with Ryder till the end.

"Okay, now that we're a ship full of rebels, we were able to find one clue into what Akksul is planning," Ryder said as she tapped her omni tool.

In the middle of the table, a projection of some type of system aboard the Nexus appeared.

"SAM was able to trace their search to this system aboard the Nexus," Ryder informed the group.

Peebee turned her head sidewise and asked, "What is it?"

Suvi peeked at the table and recognized the system almost immediately. Suddenly it hit her what the Roekaar were possibly planning. Without thinking she pushed past Gil and Jaal.

"That's the cryo regulator aboard the Nexus. When an ark is docked it provides the power and cooling system to the pods. If they were to release the weapon into that system they would infect everyone still in stasis."

"And instead of just taking out the Nexus leadership, they'd be taking out the entire Initiative," Lexi grimly added.

"But Suvi's awake now, so we have a cure right?" Peebee asked.

Lexi heavily sighed as she explained, "We have the antibodies for a human cure, yes. From Suvi's antibodies we can extract and begin creating the necessary cures for the other species but we still need time in order to do that."

"So we have the Hyperion, Leusinia, and the Paarchero disembark from the Nexus, simple," Liam added.

As the crew began to debate the best course of action, Suvi finally looked across the table at the piercing gaze she'd been avoiding since making her presence known. Ryder's expression was that of pure shock, her eyes continued to look at the doctor as if she were a ghost or something super natural. The doctor discreetly caught Lexi's attention and jerked her head towards the Pathfinder. Lexi, who was closer to Ryder, softly spoke to her, but she still didn't move. Alarmed by her reaction, the doctor decided to try another tactic.

"Ryder!" Suvi nearly yelled.

The table went silent, as the Pathfinder seemed to snap out of her shocked state and look around for a moment. Then that familiar cocky grin appeared and Suvi knew everything was all right.

"My apologies for staring, Dr. Anwar. I wasn't expecting you at this meeting," Ryder teasingly
said.

With a snort, Suvi replied, "Ye and me both."

Peebee leaned forward and preened as she said, "Surprise!"

"Yeah, the Doc jumped the gun on the big revel we had planned," Gil said in an apologetic tone.

Suvi elbowed him in the ribs, which caused him to yelp and the rest of the table to laugh. The team spent the next ten minutes deciding on a course of action that would help prevent any harm coming to the arks, but also not tip off the Roekaar that they were aware of their plan. When the meeting came to an end, the crew once again all took turns hugging Suvi and welcoming her back. Lexi reminded the pair that she expected to see the doctor back in the med bay within the next five minutes or she would send out a search party. Once they were alone, Suvi hesitantly took a step towards the Pathfinder who had stayed back and allowed the crew their time with their colleague.

"They wanted to surprise –"

Ryder clearly had no intention of speaking for the next few minutes as she quickly pulled Suvi into an embrace and kissed her as if her very life depended on it. When they finally broke apart, the Pathfinder buried her head in Suvi's neck as she held her tightly.

"You're okay?" she desperately asked.

Suvi kissed her neck then whispered in her ear, "I'm okay."

Pulling back from their embrace, Ryder strongly insisted, "I don't care what Lexi says, you're coming home with me tonight."

"Promise?"

"Promise," Ryder said before giving her a quick peck on the lips.

The rest of the day went by like any other day aboard the Tempest. Suvi worked with Lexi in the med bay as they relayed information to the science team and continued working on the cure for the other species. She was even allowed to go up to her station on the bridge for an hour. Kallo couldn't stop chatting about all the latest gossip she had missed. Ryder even appeared on the bridge, and winked as she took up position at her station. When dinner rolled around, Lexi insisted on examining Suvi again, before they joined the crew.

"Can I sleep in my own bed at least?"

The asari gave her a sidewise glance, "If that bed happens to be in the Pathfinder's quarters than the ONLY thing you're allowed to do in said bed is sleep."

"I think I can restrain myself for one night," Suvi defensively said.

Lexi cocked an eyebrow and challengingly replied, "I'll know if you don't."

Later when the rest of the crew had turned in for the night, Suvi and Lexi finished up their work and coordinated when she would stop by for her check up the following morning. As the doctor entered the Pathfinder's quarters, she saw the blonde sitting on the coach hunched over data pads. So absorbed in what she was doing, she didn't notice Suvi enter the room. The doctor took a moment to admire the woman. Ryder only had a tank and sweat pants on, her hair still tied back. Walking around the couch, the doctor pulled the data pad out of Ryder's hand as she
simultaneously straddled the Pathfinder's lap. Leaning back into the couch, Ryder gave her a seductive smile as she blatantly ogled her.

"Rumor has it, you've been sittin' in my chair," Suvi teasingly said.

The Pathfinder rested her hands on the doctor's hips as a slight blush colored her cheeks.

Avoiding eye contact, Ryder feigned innocence, "Shouldn't believe everything you hear about me."

"That so?"

Suvi arched an eyebrow as she leaned closer to the Pathfinder. Her hand snaked up Ryder's neck then caressed the back of her head, before tugging on the hair tie to release the ponytail. The doctor enjoyed running her fingers through the Pathfinder's hair.

"I'm sure I could ask SAM to pull up footage from the bridge to clear yer good name," Suvi continued to engage in playful banter.

Ryder smirked but kept her eyes down as she quietly confessed, "I – uh, was having trouble sleeping, so I started pacing the ship."

Taking a moment, she turned her head and looked away completely, almost as if she was ashamed to admit her weakness.

"No one was on the bridge at the time, I didn't even realize what I was doing until I sat down. That's when I smelled your shampoo."

Using her fingertips to gently guide Ryder's face to look at her, Suvi tenderly murmured, "I'm here now, love."

Kissing the doctor's fingers, the Pathfinder breathed, "I know."

The intensity between them was palpable, and once again Suvi reflected on how she'd never felt this strong connection to anyone before. During the quiet contemplation the Pathfinder's admission from the other night came to mind.

"In the shower," the doctor softly began, "when ye were trying to bring my temperature down. Ye said you'd walk away if it meant I would live a long and happy life."

Ryder gulped and slowly nodded as she struggled to say, "I would."

"There's just one problem with yer logic," Suvi countered.

"What's that?"

Caressing her face, the doctor lovingly said, "I could never be happy with anyone but ye."

"But if it meant – "

The doctor cut her off, "Both of us being miserable for the rest of our lives? Pardon my Martian, but that's a shite way to live."

Ryder's face lit up with a smile as she chuckled, "I like it when you talk dirty."

"Cause yer daft," Suvi said with a playful swat.
But the Pathfinder caught her hand, then slowly brought the open palm to her lips and kissed it.

"Can't blame me when I have a sexy Scot sitting in my lap, giving me ideas," Ryder said with a wiggle of her eyebrow.

"Sadly, that's all they'll be tonight," the doctor openly pouted.

The Pathfinder continued to kiss and nibble the hand she'd caught as she mumbled, "Let me guess. Lexi said you could only sleep in the bed?"

Suvi just nodded.

With a quick jerk on the hand she'd been holding, Ryder caused the doctor to fall forward so they were flush against each other. The doctor could feel the Pathfinder's heart beat against her own chest. Their lips nearly brushed against each other as Ryder spoke.

"Good thing we're not in bed."

Biting her lower lip, Suvi fought against the wanton thoughts now dancing through her mind.

"She threatened to give me an examine in the morning if I didn't behave," the doctor sighed.

"She wouldn't," the Pathfinder scoffed.

Suvi quickly replied, "She would."

With a defeated groan, Ryder huffed, "That means we'll only have tomorrow night together before we get to the Nexus."

Just the thought of not being with the Pathfinder for another day caused the doctor to react quite unexpectedly.

"I can't wait."

The words tumbled out of Suvi's mouth before she could think. To her credit, Ryder seemed to understand completely. Instead of teasing her or saying something silly to deflect the doctor's embarrassment, she opened up completely and the mood in the room shifted dramatically from playful teasing, to unabashed lust.

"Do you know how hard it is to stand next to you on the bridge all day?" Ryder asked with a ravenous look in her eye.

"You're like a drug," she longingly continued, "More addicting with every taste."

"I've never felt this . . ." words failed Suvi as she looked into Ryder's eyes.

The Pathfinder, however, knew exactly what to say.

"Need," she panted, "A hunger."

The doctor ever so slightly nodded her head as she breathed, "I ache for ye."

Ryder's hands quickly shifted to wrap around the doctor's legs as she leaned forward into a seated position. Then, just as briskly, stood up with Suvi wrapped around her waist. They placed tiny kisses on each other's faces as the Pathfinder walked over to the bed. Delicately laying Suvi down, Ryder kept her position between her legs. Taking both of the doctor's hands, she pinned them
above her head as she leaned forward.

Whispering in Suvi's ear, she commanded, "Close your eyes."

She did as she was told and felt a rush of excitement. Her body prickled with anticipation of what Ryder might do.

"Before we were together," the Pathfinder's voice was low and husky, "Did you fantasize about me."

Suvi gasped, "Yes."

"Tell me."

So many images flooded the doctor's brain she didn't know what to say, until one of her very first fantasies popped into her mind.

"On the bridge," Suvi's voice quivered as she spoke, "Kallo would leave for a break just as ye arrived."

Ryder hummed before saying, "Do I kneel down in front of your chair."

"Yes," the doctor murmured.

For the next half an hour, the Pathfinder used her words to help bring Suvi the minor relief she'd desperately wanted. The verbal intimacy was maddening and exhilarating all at once. Ryder gave the doctor permission to return the favor the following night, but Suvi had other plans. Now, as they lay tangled in each other's embrace, still fully clothed, they quietly talked of the looming threat.

"I still feel like there is something I'm missing," Ryder pounded aloud as her hand lazily made circles on Suvi's hip.

"He's always been one step ahead of us," she added.

"Perhaps it's not about being a step ahead of the Initiative, but about being one step ahead of ye," the doctor offered.

Ryder looked down at Suvi resting on her chest.

"Like he's studied me?"

Suvi repositioned herself to lean her head in her hand, so that she could look at the Pathfinder directly.

"Human's by nature are creatures of habit. Unless you need to take Jaal on the mission, you tend to take Drack and Vetra. You'll have Cora run point on the second team cause ye trust her."

"I'm predictable," Ryder grumbled.

Suvi put her fingers on the Pathfinder's lips and corrected, "You're efficient. You know everyone's strength and weakness. You just need to find a different way to use them on the Nexus."

A look of pride swelled in Ryder's eyes as she said, "Between your brains and my good looks, the Archon doesn't stand a chance."
The doctor couldn't hold back her laugh as she whispered, "Such a humble Pathfinder, ye are."

"You wouldn't have me any other way," Ryder crowed.

Suvi smiled, as she whispered, "No, I wouldn't."
"Nexus tower, this is The Tempest requesting permission to land," Kallo nervously spoke into the comm.

"Steady, Kallo," Ryder's calm voice washed over from her station beside him.

Suvi took a deep breath as she felt her own nerves starting to flare up. They had a plan, one the majority of the crew didn't like, but they couldn't argue that it gave them the best chance to draw out Akksul. The doctor's thoughts drifted to earlier in the day when Ryder had pitched the idea.

"Are ye mad?" Suvi shouted as she threw the covers off and left the bed.

Ryder quickly scrambled to follow her as she said, "Just hear me out."

The doctor stopped in her tracks but refused to turn and look at the Pathfinder.

"If I let Kandros arrest me for disobeying Tann, word will spread through the Nexus, might draw out who's been helping the Roekaar and perhaps get Akksul to act."

Suvi whipped around and argued, "So, ye just bait!"

"Exactly!" Ryder happily answered.

The doctor scoffed, "Do ye even hear yourself. You're willingly going to allow yourself to be trapped?"

"Yes," the Pathfinder confidently began, "For practice, you could tie me up."

Ryder tried to step forward and pull Suvi closer to her, but the doctor wasn't having any of it as she stepped out of the Pathfinder's reach.

"This isn't funny, Ryder," Suvi snapped.

With a sigh, the Pathfinder became serious, "No, it's not, but what do you want me to say? I'm scared as hell? Suvi, I've been scared since Habitat 7. The only way I've been able to survive is sarcasm, fighting, drinking, or fucking. Now, I don't want to fight you, it's too early to drink, and clearly sarcasm isn't working either. So that leaves me with one choice."

Ryder closed the distance between their naked bodies, hands softly tugging on Suvi's hips so they were flush against each other.

"Worship every inch of your beautiful body," the Pathfinder lustily breathed.

Suvi was beginning to fall under her spell, her body responding against her wishes.

"Because starting tonight, I'm not gonna be able to touch you like this," Ryder whispered as her hands slowly caressed the doctor.

"I won't be able to kiss you," the Pathfinder murmured before her lips took hold of Suvi's.

It was a slow burning kiss, meant to remind the Scot of the fire Ryder could stoke within her. The
Pathfinder pulled back from the kiss just enough to meet the doctor's eyes.

"I won't be able to make you moan," Ryder panted as her hand wandered down Suvi's body.

The doctor felt her body react and she couldn't suppress the soft moan that escaped when the Pathfinder's fingers began working their magic. A cocky smirk engulfed Ryder's face, fueling Suvi's annoyance that she couldn't restrain herself.

"I won't be able to hear you call out my name when you cum."

"Ryder," Suvi breathed in one last feeble attempt to argue. Kissing the doctor's neck, the Pathfinder whispered, "Help me make the memories to survive these next few days without you."

The doctor turned a bright shade of pink in her chair as the memories of their love making that morning replayed in her mind. She stole a glance at Ryder who gave her a wink. The crew was given instructions to land on their usual docking pad everything seemed normal and routine. Once they landed, however, that changed dramatically.

Kallo's mouth fell open as he relayed the instructions given by the ground crew, "They're asking for the ramp to be lowered and for the Pathfinder to exit unarmed with her hands up."

All eyes on the bridge turned as two APEX assault teams escorted Kandros to the landing pad.

"Son of a bitch did it," Ryder happily mumbled out loud.

Suvi glanced at her before asking, "Did what?"

"Those are my APEX teams, Valkyrie and Olympus. I sent them out on missions two weeks ago. Kandros didn't think he'd get them back in time for our little charade," the Pathfinder couldn't hide her excitement as she added, "He'll have a member from one of those teams guarding my cell at all times."

Turning to leave, Ryder called out, "SAM, ask everyone to meet me in the cargo hold."

"Right away."

"Peebee, c'mon you don't want to miss me being put in handcuffs," Ryder banged on the asari's door as she left the bridge.

The young asari strolled out of her little hovel and shouted after her, "Not much fun unless I'm putting the handcuffs on you."

Seeing Kallo and Suvi right behind her, Peebee quickly added, "But only if Suvi lets me."

The doctor could only shake her head at the two of them. Moments later everyone was gathered in the hold.

"They shouldn't arrest you in public," Cora angrily injected, "And two assault teams is a little over kill, no?"

"Two teams shows the level of respect Kandros has for Ryder as a biotic and as a Pathfinder. Greater show of force gives the message that she is just as powerful as the rumors say she is," Lexi answered to everyone's surprise.
Ryder smirked, "What she said."

"Sid has already reached out to Keri. She and her crew should be waiting to film you and harass Kandros about your arrest," Vetra said with concern, "And we'll begin spreading the word on all black market channels."

Jaal spoke next, "Using Resistance transportation we should be able to smuggle Reyes and his team onto the Nexus tonight."

"Kesh has her people working the sections of the Nexus they'll dock with, I'll personally over see that no one enters the area," Drack grunted

"I'll be on the bridge of the Hyperion, coordinating with the other captains for detaching procedures," Liam added.

Peebee smiled as she said, "And I'll be secretly placing POC in the cryo regulator chamber."

"I'll be standing by with the other Pathfinder's, keeping Tann distracted and monitoring for anything suspicious," Cora huffed.

"Lexi and I will continue to work with the science team on the cures for the other species," Suvi announced.

Gil looked at Kallo as he said, "And we'll keep the engine running in case you need air support."

Ryder looked around at the group before taking a small step forward.

"I know this isn't how we normally operate. We like to hit hard and hit fast, but . . ." the Pathfinder's gaze drifted over to Suvi as she continued, " . . . someone reminded me recently that you can't become too predicable."

Pride filled Ryder's eyes as she continued to look around at the group, "I know this will be hard and different, you'll want to fall back to what we do, but we can't. Stay the course, and trust each other."

Silence filled the cargo hold for a moment before she added, "Cause I sure as hell wouldn't let myself get arrested for any other group of idiot in this galaxy."

"Meaning she totally got arrested back in the Milky War," Vetra quipped.

Ryder laughed as they began to head for the ramp, "Few times."

"Let me guess, you got drunk and fell asleep in the Citadel fountains," Drack asked.

"I knew I recognized you from somewhere," Ryder joked.

The merriment died the moment the APEX team came into view. Ryder stopped dead in her tracks. Suvi could see her jaw twitching with anxiety so she discretely came up behind the Pathfinder and whispered.

"I love you."

Ryder's eyes refocused as her chin tilted upwards, the swagger in her step returning, as she started moving again. The crew hung back as Kandros took the Pathfinder into custody. He didn't handcuff her, but had the assault teams surround her as they left. Gil and Kallo wished everyone good luck as they headed back into the ship. The crew, who normally acted as Ryder's shield when they would come back to the Nexus, now surrounded Suvi as they prepared for the public outcry.
The group was only about fifteen feet behind the security detail escorting Ryder, as they walked up the ramp. The doctor wasn't prepared to hear the shouting and jeers of the crowd now gathered by the security check point. People shouted at the APEX team and Kandros, others called Ryder a traitor for helping the Exiles on Kadara.

"Why are you arresting the Pathfinder," Keri's journalistic voice floated over to the crew.

Kandros grumbled, "The Pathfinder is not being arrested."

"Then why is she being taken into custody?"

"No comment," Kandros growled as the security escort pushed through the crowd.

The asari turned to the crew, and Suvi had to steady her nerves for what was about to happen next.

"Have they told you why she's being taken into custody?" she pushed the mic into Suvi's face.

Cora answered, "No idea, they won't tell us anything."

"Have you been in contact with the other Pathfinders?"

No one answered her.

"Doctor Anwar, is it true the Science Team is considering removing you from the Tempest because of your relationship with the Pathfinder?" Keri threw out after them.

This question completely caught Suvi off guard as she looked at the asari. She fumbled to respond which gave Drack enough time to shove the camera out of her face. Pushing past the majority of the gathered crowd, the crew arrived at the tram just as Kandros was loading Ryder on to it. The Pathfinder shuffled in and turned around, seeing the crew by the entrance.

"I'm sure it's just a miss understanding," she called out, "I'll be out in a few hours tops."

"Orders?" Cora asked loudly, continuing the script they had worked on.

Ryder's loop sided grin appeared as she said, "Try not to have too much fun without me."

The last of the assault teams filed in with Kandros, and the Pathfinder's eyes darted to Suvi. The doctor was suppose to be playing the role of distraught partner, and Keri's question about being pulled from the Tempest had the desired effect on her.

"Doctor Anwar," Ryder called out.

Suvi had been avoiding the Pathfinder's gaze, but when she heard her name, the doctor couldn't help but look up at the women. For that moment when their eyes connected, all fear and doubt left Suvi, drawing strength from the Pathfinder's confidence.

Ryder's face lit up with happiness as she shouted out, "I left you a gift."

Before the doctor could gather her wits and ask about it, the doors closed and the last thing she saw, was the Pathfinder's cheeky grin and loving eyes watching her. There was a moment when no one moved from their spot, everyone still watching the tram doors as if they were going to open and Ryder was going to pop out and say it was all a joke.

"Time to get to work," Suvi's voice suddenly broke through the silence.
Vetra put a hand on the doctor's shoulder as she said, "I'll let everyone know when I'm seeing back chatter on Ryder."

The crew all nodded and slowly began to break up.

"She's going to be alright," Lexi tried to sound confident.

The doctor just nodded and proceeded to follow the asari to the science team's lab. Minutes later they were walking through the doors, Suvi's thoughts lingering on the last image of Ryder in her mind. The Pathfinder was a free spirit who could never be contained and the thought of her trapped in a holding cell, seemed so foreign.

"Dr. Anwar! By the goddess, how are you feeling?" Dr. Aridana asked as she and her colleague rushed over to her.

Lexi stepped forward and proudly stated, "She has made a full recovery and her antibodies are quiet unique."

It was an odd feeling to be the subject of her colleague's curiosity. Suvi loved science but she never envisioned herself being the one observed. For the next several hours she endured all their questions about her interaction with Dr. Orshe On, what her symptoms were like during the fever. She let them take sample after sample of her blood, hair, tissue, and even bone marrow. As she sat quietly recovering from the last test, her omni tool sprang to life.

"Doctor Anwar, the Pathfinder instructed me to give you her gift, when you had a moment alone," SAM's voice softly spoke up.

A smile tugged on Suvi's lips as she said, "I could use the distraction."

"Indeed, however, I believe she was in error in asking that I present said gift," the AI almost sounded conflicted.

"How so?" the doctor asked.

Sam replied, "It is a gift she should present in person, which is why I'd like to present an alternative gift."

"An alternative gift? I have to say, ye got me curious, SAM," Suvi said with a hint intrigue.

"If you'll allow me," the AI began, "I'll present my alternative gift, and should you find it not sufficient I will present the Pathfinder's gift."

"You've got yourself an accord," the doctor chuckled.

Suvi's jovial attitude shifted dramatically when she heard the voice of a woman who had been dead for over 600 hundred years.

"Scott, please," Ellen Ryder's sick voice filled the doctor's ears.

"I'll only do it if she sings," the voice of Scott Ryder now greeted Suvi.

The familiar cocky voice of Ryder was next to speak, "Ah no you don't. I play, you sing."

The sound of Scott Ryder sighing dramatically was next.

"Fine, but you harmonize," he said.
Ryder must have been proud of herself as Suvi heard her triumphantly say, "Deal."

Seconds later, the beautiful sounds of a piano floated in the air, and the doctor closed her eyes as she tried to imagine Ryder playing. After a lengthy piano intro, Scott Ryder began to sing. As Suvi listened, she almost felt like a voyeur intruding on something sacred. This was a side of Ryder Suvi had never met, and the doctor wondered if she ever would. She wouldn't blame the Pathfinder if she kept this part of herself locked away from the horrors of Heleus.

"I've grown accustomed to the tune she whistles night and noon. Her smiles, her frowns, her up, her downs. Are second nature to me now," Scott's voice crooned.

Minutes later when the song ended, the doctor didn't expect to be so emotional. Perhaps it was the performance, perhaps Suvi was missing her own family, or perhaps it was the culmination of Ryder's absence and the stress of the mission. Whatever the reason, the doctor found herself blinking back tears as Scott finished singing.

"Okay, enough of the love songs," Ryder's voice boomed a few moments after the song finished.

The older woman seemed to take her daughter's impatience in stride as she said, "One day you'll find someone who you'll want to play love songs for."

Clearly the Ryder twins didn't think so as Suvi could hear them laughing immediately on the recording.

"Sis, fall in love? C'mon, Mom," Scott teased.

"Yeah, not really the settling down type, Mom," Ryder added as she fiddle around with piano cords.

"Oh my darlings, one day you will, and when you do, you'll remember and say, 'Mom was right.'"

The recording ended, and Suvi was left to ponder what Ryder's fate would have been, had things gone differently.

"I believe Ellen Ryder was correct," SAM's voice disrupted the doctor's musing.

"Oh?"

SAM replied, "The Pathfinder has clearly found someone to play love songs for."

Suvi couldn't help but blush at the compliment.

"Didn't know ye were a romantic, SAM," she muttered with sincerity.

"It was quite a surprise to me as well, doctor," the AI said.

After letting the AI know that his gift was amazing, Suvi rejoined her colleagues and continued to work. The doctor was so caught up in what she was doing she didn't notice when Sid entered the lab, a few hours later.

"Vetra said you two probably hadn't moved from the lab all day," the younger turian happily teased.

"Sorry, did ye say somethin'?" Suvi asked without looking up from her viewing scope.

Sid sauntered right up beside the doctor and waited to see if she would look up. When it was clear
Suvi was still oblivious to her presence, the turian spoke again.

"So, Cora's been arrested," Sid began to say.

Suvi absently replied, "Uh huh."

"The Tempest also exploded on the landing pad, we think Kallo did it to get back at Gil."

Still Suvi continued to work.

"Drack tried to jail brake Ryder, but got to drunk at Vortex."

"He likes that bar," the doctor commented.

"The Pathfinder has been kidnapped," Sid tried to sound panicked.

Suvi finally tore her eyes from the viewing scope and looked concerned as she asked, "What did ye say?"

"Ryder's been kidnapped, Cora's been arrested, Drack's past out at Vortex and Kallo blew up the Tempest."

Suvi arched an eyebrow at the woman as she said, "Are ye havin' a go at me?"

"Yes," Sid giggled before saying, "Vetra asked me to check on you and Lexi, and drag you away from the lab to eat."

The doctor's muscles screamed to be stretched now that she wasn't hunched over her scope.

"Oh my, it's late," Suvi's voice conveying her surprise.

Sid agreed, "Yeah, but Vetra had a feeling you wouldn't be sleeping very much so, best she hoped for was you taking a break to eat."

"Let me just set some scans to run while we're gone," the doctor said before turning back to her work.

Suddenly the power went out, only a few of the emergency lights flickered on, giving the lab an eerie feel.

"We haven't had a power outage since the Hyperion docked," Dr. Aridana said as the science team looked around.

"The Nexus has been compromised," SAM stated aloud for the whole room to hear.

Suvi looked at Lexi as she said, "You and the science team need to hide with the cure."

The turian pulled out two pistols and handed one to the doctor.

"Dr. Anwar, what about you?"

With trepidation, Suvi took the other pistol from Sid and charged it.

"We're going to cover ye," her voice faltered as she spoke.

Lexi gasped, "Suvi that wasn't part of the plan. You're supposed to come with us."
"I can't sit by and do nothing, besides, if one of those bombs goes off, I'm the only one inoculated to the weapon," the doctor gave Lexi a pleading look to understand.

The asari stepped forward and put a hand on Suvi's shoulder.

Giving it a gentle squeeze, Lexi whispered, "I just put you back together, please be careful."

With a sad smile, Suvi nodded before saying, "I will, now get goin' before I lose my nerve."

The doctor watched as Lexi ushered the entire science team to a corner in the lab, then popped out a junction panel. SAM's voice could be heard as he explained how he would guide them to safety.

Turning back to Sid, Suvi gestured to the pistol as she asked, "How'd ye know to bring a spare?"

"Vetra had a feeling," Sid smirked as they took up cover positions.

Suvi took deep breaths as the faint sound of gunfire echoed in the distance.

"Any chance she gave ye a plan as well?"

Sid nervously smiled, "My sister always has a plan."
"That's the plan?" Suvi anxiously whispered over to Sid.

The turian nodded as she glanced at the door, shouts could be heard down the hall as the gun battle drew closer.

"Can't be too hard, just need to knock one of them unconscious," Sid nervously replied.

Suvi noticed the shake in the turian's hands and realized she was scared. Putting down her gun, she waved for Sid to join her on the other side of the lab.

"I have a better idea," the doctor quietly said, "But you're gonna have to trust me."

The young turian tiptoed over to where the Scot was crouched down.

"You're going to play dead," Suvi informed her.

"What?" Sid struggled to keep her voice low.

Suvi quickly reached for a small injector as the turian began to complain.

"What if they don't believe I'm dead? What if they shoot me just to be sure?"

The doctor pretended to listen as she prepped the injector to hit Sid's arm.

"You can never be to sure, right? I mean, what if – AAAHH –"

Suvi slapped her hand over the turian's mouth as she finished drawing some of her blood.

Incredulous, Sid huffed, "You coulda warned me."

"Go lay down over there, I'll place the blood on your forehead," Suvi instructed.

The turian began to move than stopped as she looked over her shoulder and asked, "Wait, why can't you play dead?"

"Do ye know where to inject an angara?" Suvi asked.

Sid looked like she was thinking about it for a moment before saying, "Good point."

Within moments the scene was set, and Sid lay prone on the ground, blood dripping from her forehead. Suvi quickly worked to build an injection strong enough to knock out an angara.

"Doctor Anwar, several Roekaar are headed in this direction," SAM's voice startled her.

Suvi continued to quickly mix the cocktail, her fingers fumbling slightly as she realized time was of the essence.

"20 seconds," SAM informed her.

"Hurry," Sid muttered.
Suvi continued to concentrate on mixing as she breathed, "Not helping."

"10 seconds."

The doctor felt the pressure as her hands nearly dropped the whole thing. Taking a steady breath she finished what she was doing and slipped the vile into the injector, dropping down into her hiding spot just as the lab doors slid open. Suvi listened as she heard several angara voices enter. Finding a slight opening between two pieces of equipment, the doctor was able to lean back and watch as the angara huddled around the entrance. One of the Roekaar motioned for someone to stay. A younger angara male nodded as he started to walk further into the room while the rest of the group left.

Suvi carefully repositioned herself while keeping an eye on the angara. He cautiously continued through the lab, and when he spotted Sid, he looked around, gun moving in all directions. The doctor was almost holding her breath, waiting for him to turn and kneel down beside Sid. She inched forward as he finally moved past her hiding spot and closer to the turian. Suvi forced herself to move slowly as she stood, and matched her steps to his. What she didn't anticipate was her red hair reflecting in the glass of a table near by. The angara must have spotted it as he whirled around on her, gun pointed at her chest.

"Who are you?!" he demanded, "Where are the others?"

Now that his focus was solely on her, Suvi quietly said, "What others?"

He raised his gun and dug it into her forehead causing the doctor to wince in pain. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Sid slowly standing up. Discreetly turning the injector in her hand, Suvi nodded her head in Sid's direction.

"Ye mean, her?"

The moment the angara turned, the doctor jabbed the injector into the folds of his neck. Sid quickly moved in and put her hand over his mouth to prevent him from calling out for help. The serum moved quickly as the angara collapsed into Sid's arms just moments later.

"Geez, Doc, whadya give him?" Sid asked as she carefully laid him on the ground.

Suvi used her omni tool to check his vitals, as she said, "A stronger version of the tranquilizing agent used before we put everyone into cryo."

Pointing to his gun, the doctor instructed, "Grab that and keep an eye on the door."

"Right," the turian replied as she took up a position near by.

Turning back to her omni tool, Suvi called out, "SAM, I'm scanning their personal device."

"Analyzing."

The sounds of static filled the lab for a moment before a comms channel became clear. It took SAM another moment before he could translate the speech.

"Concentrate on drawing the Pathfinders to the cryo regulator, while we head for the atmospheric ventilation hub."

"Bombs placed in filtration system."
"Akksul the human Pathfinder is headed your way!"

"Good, I'll be waiting."

Suvi's heart dropped, the cryo regulator was a trap, and now there were bombs in possibly two locations.

"SAM," she desperately called out, "Who's closest to the water filtration system?"

"Cora and Pathfinder Rix," he answered.

Suvi nodded as she said, "Patch me into their comms."

"Connected."

"Cora, it's Suvi," the doctor began, "The cryo regulator is a trap, they've already placed bombs in the water filtration system, and they're headed to the atmospheric ventilation hub now."

Gunfire made it hard to hear what Cora was saying as she replied, "Are you sure?"

"I have hacked into one of the Roekaar's personal devices and am monitoring their comms. channel. They have indeed placed bombs in the water filtration system and are heading for the hub. I have alerted the Pathfinder, she will continue to draw Akksul's forces towards the regulator. You and Pathfinder Rix must defuse the bombs and only take individuals with you who are in full armor," SAM relayed.

"Copy that! Rix we gotta move!" Cora shouted over the chaos.

"SAM, who's closest to the hub?"

The AI's voice sounded hesitant as he answered, "You and Reyes Vidal are the closest to reaching the hub."

The doctor closed her eyes in aggravation as she muttered, "Of course."

"What about me?" Sid asked.

The doctor looked at Vetra's sister, the willingness to help but the fear of battle evident in her mannerisms. Suvi imagined she wore a similar expression that night on Kadara before they loaded into the transports. Ryder had been so attune to her naiveté when it came to the horrors of Heleus, she nearly scarificed her own happiness to keep Suvi safe. It dawned on the doctor that it had been almost two weeks since that night, though it seemed like a lifetime ago. Looking at the young turian, the doctor began to understand Ryder's intentions in trying to shield her.

"You've done enough," Suvi said with a smile before adding, "Stay outta sight, and keep monitoring their comm. channel."

Sid nodded before saying, "But how, I don't have – "

"I have routed the relevant information to your omni tool," SAM answered.

As the doctor began to move, Sid called out, "Good luck."

With a silent nod of appreciation, Suvi moved to the exit. Keeping her head down, she ducked into the hallway. Several Roekaar bodies littered the ground as she cautiously moved through the halls.
"Calculating route to hub," SAM quietly said, as the doctor continued to move.

Suvi carefully hid behind walls and pillars, as she walked along the corridor.

SAM's voice piped up again, "Reyes Vidal is fifty meters ahead. You will need to sneak past a Roekaar patrol."

"Ye'll guide me through it?" she asked in a whisper.

"Of course."

With a unsteady breath, the doctor said, "Where we goin'?"

"There are unfinished offices ten meters to your left."

The doctor glanced to her left and saw the offices SAM referred to.

"I see'em."

"Using the barrier wall to shield your presence, you will crawl along the eastern portion of the office."

Checking to make sure no one was around, Suvi quickly moved to the unfinished offices. Hearing angara voices up ahead, she quickly dropped down to all fours and hugged the eastern wall of the room. As she crawled closer to the group, the doctor tried to focus on her breathing, keeping it steady and quiet.

The observation windows had not been installed, so the Roekaar were leaning against the wall Suvi was now crawling under. Even with their backs turned to her, she slowly slid down to her stomach and painstakingly crawled past them. After a few more meters the wall turned to the right giving her complete cover from the group. Pulling herself up, she sat with her back against the wall, trying to steady her nerves.

"There is an exit to your right. Follow that corridor to the first intersection and you will find a maintenance hatch."

Making sure to still hug the wall, as the Roekaar were only ten meters away, the doctor crawled over to the exit. Quickly sprinting into the corridor, she made her way to the intersection and found the maintenance hatch.

"You will need to manually open the hatch as power still has not been restored," SAM instructed.

"Great," Suvi huffed.

Finding the manual release took a few moments. The lever was stuck and Suvi had to throw her entire body weight behind pushing it down. When it finally released, it made a loud noise. Snapping her head in the direction of where the Roekaar were positioned, she quickly worked to open the hatch.

"The Roekaar are headed in this direction."

Pulling the hatch open, Suvi ducked inside and quickly worked to lock the hatch behind her. Turning, she saw the metal ladder and without hesitation scampered up several rungs, then stopped when she heard the patrol. The sound of gunfire startled her, causing her knuckles to turn white from the force of her grip on the ladder. Several bullets pierced the metal of the hatch where she
had just been standing. Holding her breath, Suvi started to pray they would move on. After another minute or two, SAM gave her the all clear.

Climbing up the ladder, the doctor could hear she was moving right into another firefight. Looking up at the next platform she watched a biotic burst of energy blast a hole into the metal. The shouting of a familiar smuggler indicated to Suvi she was in the right spot.

"Why are we holding this position, Reyes?"

"Waiting to pick someone up," he shouted over the fighting.

Suvi peeked up over the now destroyed platform to see if it was safe to move. An asari turned and saw the doctor struggling with where to go.

"That her?" the asari called out.

The doctor saw Reyes turn and smile at her before saying, "Pleasure as always, Dr. Anwar."

His team helped her out of the maintenance shaft, and quickly moved away from their exposed position in the corridor. Pulling the doctor back behind a barricade further down the hall.

"Ryder, it's Reyes. We have the doctor," the smuggler called out into the comm.

When the Pathfinder didn't respond, Suvi could feel the panic rise within her.

"Ryder," Suvi said into the crew channel.

Scrambled gibberish was all the doctor could hear.

"SAM, what's happened to Ryder?"

The silence was deafening as Suvi struggled to keep her composure.

"Any Tempest crew come in," she tried not to sound concerned.

After a moment, static filled her ears before the familiar voice of a salarian called out.

"Suvi! Is that you?" Kallo asked.

Sighing with relief, Suvi replied, "Yes, I can't get a hold of anyone."

"The Roekaar just released some sort of jamming device near the Hyperion, SAM Node is still online but we can't break through the signal this far out," Gil chimed in.

"What about the rest of the team?" she asked.

"If they're near the ark their comms are jammed. Our scanners on the Tempest show the Pathfinder's team is still engaged with the main force of Roekaar," Kallo began to answer, "Cora and Pathfinder Rix are in the water filtration system facing heavy resistance."

"Can you scan the Atmo Hub?"

Kallo muttered, "Stand by."

As Suvi waited for an answer from Kallo, she turned to Reyes and asked, "Where's Drack?"

"Once we were safely onboard the station, the krogan took off just before the power went down."
"Suvi, I see about twenty Roekaar in the Atmo Hub. They seem to be moving up the main control shaft," Kallo said.

Looking at Reyes, the doctor said, "They're planting the weapon along the shaft, I need to deactivate it."

"I can take a team to draw them away from the shaft, but it would help to have your SAM," the smuggler sounded unsettled.

Suvi tried to think of a possible solution.

"Hey Doc, it's Gil, might have a slightly crazy idea," the engineer said over the comms.

"Crazy might just be what we need," Suvi replied.

Gil almost seemed to chuckle as he said, "Right, hang on a tic."

"Reyes, they seem to be pulling back, should we purse?" a Collective agent shouted over to the smuggler.

Looking at Suvi for a moment, the Charlatan seemed to be considering his options.

"If those weapons go off in the Atmo Hub, what happens?" he asked in earnest.

The doctor's voice couldn't hide the severity of the situation as she said, "The weapon would be dispersed throughout the station. Everyone would be infected within minutes, and they would have hours to live."

"Then we need to throw everything we have at stopping them there," he surmised.

Just then Suvi's omni tool came to life on it's own, causing both the doctor and Reyes to look at her left wrist with confusion.

"Uh hey, it's Gil and I think I've successfully connected you to SAM on the Leusinia."

"Hello, Doctor Anwar," the monotone voice said.

Suvi couldn't help but sigh with relief, "SAM, never thought I'd say this, but it's good to have ye back."

"Though I am the same system installed on the Hyperion, each SAM Node is unique to its Pathfinder and team. The SAM Nodes do share information, however, whatever relationship you have developed with the SAM Node of the Hyperion would not transfer over to me."

"Right, new SAM," Suvi muttered to herself before saying, "Is there a way for ye to connect to my omni tool, and—"

"If you would allow, Doctor," the new SAM began to say, "Using the patch your engineer has devised I can scan your implant and reset it to connect directly with my Node on board the Leusinia."

Suvi seemed surprised, "Oh, okay."

"A word of warning, you might feel a slight sting."

"Wait, what?"
Suvi cried out in pain as she dropped to one knee. Reyes immediately knelt down beside her as he looked at her with concern.

"Are you alright?" he asked while placing a hand on her arm.

Still stunned by the shock and remembering their conversation on Kadara, Suvi yanked her arm from his grip and stood.

"I'm fine."

Stepping back from her, Reyes murmured, "Despite our differences, I want what you want, doctor."

"And what's that?" Suvi challenging asked.

"To survive."

Out here, that was the only currency the doctor could completely rely on. Everyone’s willingness to do whatever it took to survive, even if that meant working with someone who was actively trying to seduce your partner away from you.

"We'll split up into two teams," Reyes offered, "I'll try and draw them away from the shaft while your team enters through the auxiliary hatch below."

Before Suvi could reply, new SAM abruptly spoke up, "That would be ill advised. Opening up the auxiliary hatch while the power is still off could trigger lose of gravity."

Both the smuggler and the doctor shared a look.

"There's an armory just down the hall," Reyes said with a sly smirk. "Should have enough suits to cover everyone."

Nodding, Suvi added, "SAM once we're inside could ye manually control the gravity settings?"

"You would need to scan the main panel, located on the lower desk."

"Gil, I need ye to figure out a way to get comms back with the rest of the team, even if Kallo has to fly the Tempest beside the Hyperion and ye act as a bridge," the doctor instructed.

"Copy, Suvi, but what about you?" the engineer asked.

With an apprehensive breath, Suvi said, "I'm about to relive my EV training."

Then quietly mumbled to herself, "Hopefully, without passing out this time."
Chapter 20

"Outer door is sealed," the new SAM said into Suvi's helmet.

The doctor turned and began manually imputing the command to open the auxiliary hatch.

"Doctor, we are in position," Reyes said over the comms.

The doctor continued to concentrate on the override as she said, "Understood, standby."

The sound of two guns charging distracted Suvi for a moment.

"When was the last time we did a anti-grav mission?" Ri'na asked her sister Ashler.

The asari had been assigned to help provide cover while the doctor worked on deactivating the bombs. The pair had been commandos back in the Milky Way, and both now worked for the Collective.

Ashler cocked her helmet to the side as she said, "Omega? When we were extracting that matriarch from the brothel?"

"No, that was with stealth shielding," Ri'na replied.

"Oh right," Ashler mumbled then said, "Was it on Noveria when one of those NDC labs lost power?"

Ri'na shook her head, "I think we were just cold."

"Illium, taking out a Cerberus freighter," Ashler said with excitement.

"Yes! The Illusive man was so pissed," Ri'na laughed.

A warning siren interrupted the conversation as Suvi finished inputting the manual override.

"Magnetize boots," Suvi instructed.

The echoes of "Yes, ma'am," gave the doctor a brief moment of exhilaration, but she would trade that feeling in a heartbeat to have her SAM and her crew back on comms. She felt alone and detached from what was happening elsewhere on the station. More importantly, she worried about Ryder, and yearned to hear her voice, even if it was just for a moment.

The auxiliary hatch began to open, and immediately the group felt the pull from the pressure change try to suck them into the chamber. Once the atmosphere was released, Suvi and the asari dipped their heads into the chamber to get their bearings. Many angara floated towards the top of the long chamber.

"Let Reyes know gravity has been turn off and several groups are near his position," Suvi said to Ri-na.

The commando quickly relayed the information as Ashler and Suvi looked for the main atmo terminal.
"There," the asari said as she pointed to a terminal below them.

Turning back to her sister, Ashler quickly said, "Throw up a biotic shield, we'll keep the doc sandwiched between us."

Ri'na nodded and took up position behind Suvi.

"When you're ready, Doc."

Suvi climbed onto the edge of the hatch then nodded to the asari. Ashler quickly threw up a biotic shield and pushed into the chamber, using the jump pack to guide her direction towards the terminal. The doctor was right behind her, as Ri'na followed.

"Doctor, please adjust heading," new SAM said while displaying the course trajectory on Suvi's omni tool.

The soft sound of pings behind the doctor alerted her to the fact that the angara were firing on them.

"Take cover behind that bulkhead," Ri'na called out.

The trio regrouped and let their boots magnetize on the bulkhead. The room now flipped to a different position, which caused Suvi's stomach to drop.

"Hey, Ash, the Doc's looking a little green."

Ashler turned and looked as Suvi as she said, "Deep breath, kid. Just focus on following me."

For a moment the doctor felt rather indignant about the young asari calling her kid, but then realized the woman was probably hundreds of year older and was completely justified in her use of the phrase. Taking a deep breath, Suvi did as instructed and focused on following Ashler as they walked over to the terminal.

The sounds of gunfire erupted above, indicating Reyes' group had engaged in fighting the angara. The two sisters continued to throw up biotic shields as they crossed exposed positions within the chamber. Several stray bullets flew in their direction as they moved. A few moments later they finally reached the atmo main terminal.

"SAM, I'm scanning the terminal," Suvi called out.

The gun battle above seemed to intensify and both asari seemed eager to join.

"Scan complete, I now have control of atmo functions," the AI flatly said.

Ri'na excitedly said into the comms, "Reyes time to lock down."

"Rodger, that," the smuggler replied.

Ashler looked at her sister as she said, "Do all human's know a Rodger?"

"It's old Earth military slang," Suvi informed them as she continued to scan the terminal.

"That makes more sense," Ri'na muttered.

Suvi typed in a few more commands to her omni tool before saying, "Gravity restored in 3, 2, 1."
The sickening sound of bodies hitting objects in the room rang out for a few moments. Suvi closed her eyes until it was over, mumbling a pray to drown out the sound.

"I am detecting multiple explosives in the chamber," new SAM said before adding, "The first one is on the floor directly above you."

Suvi and her team found the ladder and began to climb to the next level. The main shaft of the Atmo Hub ran threw the middle of the room. Along it's outer shell were two sets of ladders built into the structure. A platform surrounded the shaft with three catwalks leading from the outsider parts of the room at each level. There were eight levels that Suvi would have to check. On the first level, the doctor easily spotted the explosive device tied into the shaft.

"Cover me," she instructed as she moved to deactivate the bomb.

The two asari followed and took up position on either side of the doctor. Suddenly bullets started raining down on them. Suvi had to lean away from the bomb in order to not to get hit.

"Damn it, I thought they were taken care of," Ri'na huffed to Ashler as they kept their shields up.

Suvi continued to work as the asari sisters tried to take down the new crop of angara.

"I can't get a shot," Ri'Na angrily breathed.

Ashler used a biotic throw to try and dislodge the Roekaar from their cover position.

"Reyes, we have hostiles on level two, do you see them?" Ashler asked.

The group was met with silence.

"Reyes?"

"I believe the group of Roekaar have a mobile jamming device," the AI informed Suvi.

The doctor finished deactivating the first bomb then threw it into the bag she'd brought with her before looking up at the asari.

"SAM says that group might have a small jamming device," the Scot informed the two commandos.

"Well, we've got one advantage," Ashler said then turned to the doctor and added, "We control gravity."

Ri'na got a crazy gleam in her eye as she said, "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

Nodding, Ashler started to move into position as she called out to the doctor, "On our mark cut off the gravity."

"SAM, standby to cut gravity," Suvi instructed.

The two asari started to run and just as they jumped off the platform called out. Suvi gave SAM the cue and as the two sisters reached the apex of their jump, instead of falling they began to float. Using their jump jets they zipped up to the next floor and began engaging the Roekaar.

New SAM gave Suvi an idea as he said, "Doctor, you can quickly make your way up to the third floor to the next device while the gravity is off,"
"Right," she mumbled to herself as she held onto the shaft and positions herself to use the small ladder openings in the platforms as a guide to jet up to the next level.

The doctor activated her jump jet in small bursts until she reached the third level. The last burst nearly caused her to miss the ladder all together. She scrambled to grab hold of something before she was thrown too far off course.

Struggling to pull herself back towards the platform, she called out to New SAM, "Resort gravity!"

The doctor crashed back down to the platform, which caused the wind to be knocked out of her. Suvi failed several times to stand up, but once she was vertical, swiftly made her way over to the next bomb. Gunfire seemed to be echoing from every direction in the chamber now.

"Doctor stop," New SAM instructed.

Keeping her back flush against the shaft, she leaned out just enough to see a group of Roekaar standing on the catwalk facing the bomb.

"Ashler, Ri'na do ye copy?" Suvi whispered into comms.

"Reyes, do ye copy?"

The deafening silence only worsened the doctor's growing fear.

Suvi desperately hit the button again, her voice strained as she said, "Kallo, Gil?"

"Looking for us?" Ri'na's voice called out from another part of the room.

The doctor looked back and saw the angara rapidly leave the platform to pursue the asari. Keeping her head down, Suvi crawled over to the next bomb and went to work. Bullets deflected off the side of the shaft near the doctor's head, causing her to flinch away for a moment. Looking around, she couldn't determine what direction they came from and went back to work.

She was just a few moments away from detaching the second bomb, when she saw the red light of a sniper rifle flicker to the side of her. The doctor immediately dropped to the ground and felt the air from the bullet whistle above her.

Digging her fingers into the grating of the platform, Suvi called out, "Cut the gravity, SAM."

Looking up at the bomb, the doctor noticed the red laser shifted the moment gravity was cut. Pulling her feet up to the shaft, Suvi used her magnetized boots to walk to the bomb. As she pulled the object away from the shaft, a bullet struck the side of the containment unit holding the weapon. The doctor cried out in pain as the impact spark hit close to her hand. The bomb dropped from her grip and began to float away. Without thinking she pushed off from the shaft to grab hold of it. Now, she was floating in the middle of the chamber exposed. The red sniper laser began to float up Suvi's body. Using the jump jet to dive to the left behind the shaft, she shoved the bomb into her bag and positioned herself to fall onto the catwalk.

"Restore gravity!"

This time she was prepared and fell down onto her feet. She tried to make her way over to the ladder, but a steady steam of bullets from that side of the room prevented her from going any further. When she turned and tried to walk around the other side, the sniper laser returned. Suvi was trapped. As her mind tried to work through the problem of what to do, a familiar monotone voice called out.
"Doctor, on my mark jump off the side of the platform."

"What?!" Suvi exclaimed.

"Trust me, Doctor."

There was something in the way the SAM said to trust him that made Suvi wonder if perhaps she was once again speaking to Hyperion SAM. Before she could ask, the AI instructed her to jump. The doctor only hesitated for a moment then ran full speed for the platform railing, using just a touch of her jump jet to help push off the railing, Suvi felt herself fly into the air. The electric charge of biotic energy suddenly encompassed the doctor along with two strong arms. She felt like a rocket was propelling them up to the next level. She and her unknown rescuer landed in a heap onto the catwalk.

"Shields, Pathfinder."

A flash of navy blue moved past Suvi, it took a moment for the doctor to recognize the familiar N7 armor. A shield encompassed her for a moment before the Pathfinder used a biotic charge to take out the attackers. Ryder swiftly came back to the doctor's side.

"Hold on," she instructed.

Suvi wrapped her arms around Ryder's neck and felt the rush of speed again as the Pathfinder used her biotics to get them up to the next platform.

"Deactivate bomb, I'll cover you," Ryder commanded.

Suvi nodded as she turned to take care of the weapon. Now, with the confidence of knowing Ryder was watching over her, the doctor could full concentrate on the matter at hand.

"Doctor, get down," SAM insisted.

Suvi ducked down and watched as a body of an angara slammed against the shaft before Ryder used a biotic pull to throw the body back at another group. As Suvi worked on the weapon she spoke with SAM.

"SAM, how am I talking with you? My implant was reset."

The AI replied, "When the jamming device was disabled, the SAM aboard the Leusinia alerted me to what Gil had been able to do. I am routing my connection through that SAM Node in order to communicate with you."

"Suvi?" Ryder called out over the comm.

The doctor finished what she was doing and carefully placed the third bomb into the bag.

"The final weapon is on the seventh level of the shaft," SAM informed them.

Ryder was off to the side of the room away from the central core trying to take out a rather stubborn group of Roekaar.

"Head for the east ladder," The Pathfinder grunted as she fired on the angara.

Circling the shaft to the other side, the doctor quickly began to climb. When she reached the sixth level, a bullet flew by her head.
"Hands up!" a Roekaar shouted at her.

The doctor instantly froze.

"Put the bag down," the angara demanded.

Suvi hesitated.

"I said put the bag down!"

A lone gunshot rang out, startling the doctor. Taking a deep breath she realized she was still alive.

"You okay?" Ryder's voice softly asked over the comm.

Turning to see the Pathfinder, gun still drawn, scanning the catwalk, the Scot had to restrain herself from running into the woman's arms.

Nodding her head, Suvi stuttered as she said, "Yeah."

"Don't worry, love, I've got ya," Ryder warmly said as her helmet nodded toward the ladder.

The pair quickly climbed up to the seventh floor and were met with immediate resistance. Ryder pinned Suvi to the shaft and used her own armor's shielding to protect the doctor. Watching the Pathfinder's eyes begin to glow through her helmet, the doctor knew what was about to happen.

Suvi watched as Ryder charged and took out a few of the Roekaar, but several others were on the levels above. The Roekaar moved positions to take aim at Suvi.

"Go for the weapon," Ryder called out as she threw up a shield.

The pair rounded the shaft and were met with more gunfire from above. The Pathfinder used two hands to reinforce the shield around them as Suvi began to work on the bomb.

"SAM, this one's different," the doctor couldn't hide the panic in her voice.

The AI calmly said, "We will need to detach the weapon from the arming device, similar to what you did on Kadara."

"Drack, we're pinned down," Ryder yelled over all the gunfire pinging against her shield.

"Calvary is on the way, kid."

"Ryder, hold on," Cora's worried voice shouted over the crew channel.

A group of Roekaar charged down the catwalk towards the Pathfinder and the doctor. Ryder pushed the shield out towards them, which sent the group flying. Within seconds she reestablished the shield.

"Arming device disengaged," SAM alerted the doctor.

The weapons fire seemed to intensify on the pair, as Ryder kept up the shield around them. Suvi forced her hands to remain steady as she worked on removing the vile holding the biological weapon. The doctor could hear Ryder's struggle with holding the shield.

"SAM," the Pathfinder painfully breathed, "Give me everything you've got!"

Suvi continued to work as fast as she could.
"100 meters from the Atmo Hub," Cora's voice came over the comms.

Ryder began to grunt out loud with the effort it was taking to keep the shield up. The angara were now firing everything they had at the pair. They were completely surrounded.

Time seemed to move in slow motion for the doctor as she finished disarming the device. Bullets rained down on the shield Ryder fought to hold, the shouts of Cora and Drack alerting them that they were breaching the hub filled the comms. channel, and SAM giving his final instructions with regards to the bomb added to the chaos. Everything culminated in a moment of Suvi turning around and looking at Ryder.

The Pathfinder had a perpetual glow about her as she desperately tried to hold onto the biotic shield. Weapons fired on them from all directions and for a moment, the doctor seemed to be at peace with the idea that perhaps, if this were the end, she would have died saving the greater good, and standing by the love of her life. Turning back to the bomb she made one final adjustment before yanking the weapon from its position.

The Pathfinder screamed out as she continued to hold the shield. When Cora and Drack finally stormed the hub, Suvi felt her heart stop as she watched Ryder release the shield and fall to the ground in a heap.

"RYDER!" Suvi cried out as she scrambled to her side.

The doctor took two steps before the agonizing pain of a bullet ripped into her shoulder. Suvi was immediately knocked down and tried to catch her breath as she saw the blood seeping out of her shoulder. She caught sight of Ryder's unconscious body and hopelessly tried to get up.

A figured suddenly appeared on the catwalk and moved towards them. The doctor recognized the man as he came into view.

He pointed his gun at Ryder's head and sneered, "Goodbye, Pathfinder."

The gunshot echoed as Suvi screamed.
"Goodbye, Pathfinder."

The gunshot echoed, as Suvi screamed, "NO!"

William Spender stood towering over the unconscious form of the Pathfinder for only a brief moment before the bullet, which punctured a hole through his skull, caused him to drop to the ground. There, standing with his gun still pointed at the traitor, was the man Suvi never expected to owe her life too.

"MEDIC!" Reyes yelled as he dropped his gun and ran towards Ryder.

Suvi watched as the smuggler ran his omni tool up and down the Pathfinder's body.

"SAM," Suvi wept as she tried to crawl over to her love's body.

Reyes finally saw the doctor and cursed, "Shit, where's the medic?!"

"Is she . . . is she?" the doctor couldn't even form a complete sentence as she struggled with the idea of living in this world without Ryder.

The AI couldn't conceal the slight hint of concern in his voice, "Her vitals are sporadic, the extended change in her brain pattern to hold the biotic shield for so long, against such force depleted her bodies electrolytes."

Just then, the Tempest crew along with some of the Collective agents started jogging down the catwalk.

"Ryder's unconscious, the doctor's been hit in the shoulder," Reyes explained to Cora and Drack as they approached.

The former commando quickly hit her omni tool, "Lexi, meet us in the Hyperion med bay, Ryder and Suvi are injured."

"I have the kid," Drack said while picking the Pathfinder up off the ground.

Cora nodded as she made her way over to Suvi, and knelt down. Using an emergency supply of medi-gel, the second in command was able to stop the bleeding and help the doctor to her feet. As the Tempest crew made their way back to the Hyperion, Cora continued to wrap her arm around Suvi to help keep the doctor standing, all the while issuing orders and commands to secure the station and assist the other Pathfinders.

Suvi felt numb and despondent. She should have been paying attention to what else needed to be done on the station, or perhaps at least instructed someone to take the bombs from her satchel. Yet, all she could do was watch Ryder's limp body carefully nestled in the arms of a krogan. Emotions took hold of the doctor as she felt a weight pressing down on her chest. Every breath was agony, without warning, she ripped off her helmet then limped over to Drack and clawed at trying to remove, Ryder's. The tears clouding her eyes prevented her from seeing what she was doing.

"I got it, Suvi," Cora softly whispered, "I got it."
When the helmet was removed, Ryder's pale face only caused the doctor more distresses. Tears silently streaked down her cheeks, as she struggled to catch her breath. The few times Suvi thought about how she might lose Ryder, it was always in some heroic sacrifice saving the Initiative, never did she think, the strong willed warrior would die protecting her.

When the tram finally arrived at the Hyperion, Suvi watched as Drack carefully moved into the corridor. People parted like the sea as they saw the unconscious body of their Pathfinder. The doctor could feel their eyes watching the crew as they followed behind. Moving further into the ark, the crowded size doubled as word spread. All movement stopped when they entered the med bay.

"Over here," Harry instructed Drack.

Dr. Carlyle, along with several others, began to work on taking Ryder's amour off while also talking with SAM. The doctor was so caught up in watching what was happening, she failed to notice Lexi walking towards her.

"By the Goddess, Suvi you've been shot!" the asari exclaimed.

Before the doctor could reply, Harry shouted out, "Hold her down."

The Pathfinder had begun to thrash around almost as if her mind still believed she was fighting. Suvi watched as Drack, Reyes, and several others took hold of her arms and legs and tried to pin them down against the bed. Something broke inside the Scot at seeing Ryder this way. Pulling away from Lexi she moved to the Pathfinder's bed and weaved her way past all the people holding her.

Kneeling down, Suvi caressed Ryder's cheek and lovingly murmured, "It's alright, love."

Almost immediately, the Pathfinder began to settle down. The doctor glanced at Harry, who was prepping an injector to sedate Ryder. He signaled for her to keep talking with the Pathfinder.

"I'll be right here when ye wake up," Suvi said with a sad smile before kissing her forehead.

Harry injected the needle into Ryder's neck and once again she began to push back against those still holding her. So tired and emotionally drained from everything that had happened, the doctor kissed the Pathfinder without thinking about who might be watching. For an instant, it almost felt like Ryder was kissing back, but soon her body completely relaxed and everything became still.

"The Pathfinder has successfully been sedated," SAM informed the group.

Suvi's head hung as she pulled back from Ryder, she didn't notice the group gathered around the bed giving her space as she stood. Nor did she see the young man, with bright blue eyes and golden blonde hair like the Pathfinder's, watch her with great curiosity. She just shuffled along beside Lexi, oblivious to the world.

As Suvi was guided onto the surgical table, SAM spoke, "Doctor Anwar, while you are unconscious, might I reset your implant back to my Node?"

"Of course," she absently mumbled.

"I will monitor The Pathfinder's condition and will give you a full report when you have regained consciousness," he added.

With the smallest hint of a smirk, Suvi whispered, "Thanks, SAM."
Hours later, the doctor was walking back into the med bay from the surgical room, her right arm wrapped against her body to allow her shoulder to heal faster. Lexi had insisted Suvi go back to the Tempest and get some rest, but the doctor wanted to check on the Pathfinder first. She turned the corner and felt utter rage when she saw Reyes sitting beside Ryder's bed, holding her hand.

"Get away from her!!" the doctor yelled as she stormed over to the bed.

Reyes, to his credit, stood up and backed away when he saw Suvi marching over to him.

"Doctor, please I was just –"

"Ye were just, what? What were ye doing?" she asked while using her left hand to push him.

"She wouldn't be in that bed, if ye hadn't abandoned us in the hub!" the doctor shouted.

Vetra and Cora appeared out of nowhere and both wrapped their arms around the doctor, holding her back from the smuggler.

"She could've died, cause of ye!"

"Ryder gave him the order to pursue the Roekaar, Suvi," Vetra struggled to say as she held the doctor back.

Cora nodded as she added, "Once she was headed your way, Ryder wanted Reyes to cut off their escape."

The doctor looked at her crewmates and shook her head before saying, "I heard Ri'na and Ashler. They couldn't get through to ye."

"Once they took out the Roekaar with the jamming device, we had moved to another part of the station and changed frequencies," Reyes explained.

Suvi was beyond exhausted and still shaking off the effects of coming out of surgery, she clearly couldn't cope with the idea that Reyes had not only saved Ryder's life, but also helped save the station.

"Doc, why don't you let me help you back to the Tempest," Vetra offered.

The Scot shook her head as she tried to extract herself from her friends hold.

"I'll take her," an unfamiliar voice said.

The group turned to see a young man, same age and nearly the same face as Ryder, staring back at them.

"I'm Scott," he said while holding out his hand to Suvi, "Scott Ryder."

The doctor was so shocked by the resemblance she failed to reply with anything other than, "I'm, uh, I'm . . ."

"Doctor Suvi Anwar," he said while holding up a data pad before continuing, "Yeah, I've been reading some of your reports from the field."

"Ye . . . ye have?" the doctor asked with extreme confusion.

Taking a step forward, the young man extended his arm and lowered his voice while offering,
"Why don't you let me escort you back to the Tempest?"

Suvi couldn't muster up the energy to argue so she just nodded. As they made their way to the exit, the doctor noticed Reyes went back to the Pathfinder's bedside. Suvi moved to confront him again, but Scott steered her back to the exit.

"He's saying goodbye, Doc, let the man have his moment in peace."

Baffled by what he said, the doctor asked, "What do ye mean?"

"Well, I'm guessing at some point my lovely sister and he were close, or they at least slept together," Scott bluntly stated.

Suvi avoided looking at him and waited until they were on the tram heading for the Tempest before answering.

"They were," she regretfully admitted.

Scott seemed to understand as he said, "But that was before she was with you, wasn't it?"

The doctor couldn't hide the blush in her cheeks and opted to just nod in response.

"See, I know my sister," Scott began, "Better than she knows herself sometimes."

His remark caused Suvi to chuckle.

"She was never one to settle down, always bouncing from one person to the next, enjoying the buffet of life I think she called it once," he said with his own laugh before adding, "That guy is exactly the type I'd expect to see her with."

Scott waited until Suvi looked up at him before saying, "But not you, you're different."

The tram arrived at their stop forcing a pause in the conversation as they exited.

"Let me guess, cause I'm a – "

"Woman?" the Ryder twin injected, then said, "Shit, she's been with men, women, asari, turians, and I swear she hooked up with a krogan once, but I can't prove it."

Somehow that little nugget of information didn't surprise her.

"You're different in that you're smart, probably the smartest person she's ever dated, which must make conversations boring for you," he teased.

The doctor couldn't help but laugh.

"And, if you don't mind me saying, you are a knock out and I'm a little jealous I didn't meet you first."

The doctor couldn't help but once again blush at his words, but quickly spoke up and said, "That's very sweet of ye to say but . . . I don't date men."

Scott's eyebrows jumped up as he said, "Ah, well, then since I didn't have a chance in hell, glad my sis scooped you up."

The young man seemed extremely perceptive like his sister, yet, when Suvi looked into his eyes,
instead of seeing that childlike excitement Ryder would exude, Scott's gaze held one of an old soul.

"I have no doubt ye'll have plenty of women's hearts to break here in Andromeda," Suvi tried to joke.

Scott shook his head and chuckled, "I'm not like Ry. She can just roll with whatever comes her way. Not a care in the world."

"Ry?" Suvi curiously asked.

"Growing up, everyone would either say 'Oh you're the Ryder twins,' or 'Your Alex's kids,'" he explained, "Bunch of dad's friends would call me RJ, for Ryder Junior, and just call her Ryder. I shortened it to Ry."

A tired smile encompassed the doctor's face at learning that little tidbit of knowledge from Scott. Moments later, the pair walked up the ramp of the Tempest.

"There you are!" Kallo scolded from the upper catwalk, "Lexi said she released you almost thirty minutes ago, and that you're suppose to go straight to bed."

With an amused expression on his face, Scott turned to the doctor and said, "Looks like you're in capable hands."

"Thank ye, for walking me back," Suvi said with gratitude.

Then Scott did something so familiar it nearly stole the doctor's breathe away.

The infamous lopsided grin appeared as he said, "Anytime, Doc."

Suvi watched his retreating grin form down the ramp. Ryder's twin seemed so different from her, and yet so familiar it was uncanny. Later, as the doctor sat on the Pathfinder's bed, she began to wonder what Scott had meant when he said she was different. The question haunted her as she settled into bed.

It wasn't until late in the afternoon the next day that Suvi finally emerged from the Tempest. Lexi wanted to examine her shoulder while Peebee and Vetra offered to take her out to eat afterwards, but all Suvi wanted to do was check on Ryder. SAM had filled her in on all the tests and scans Harry had done, but the Scot needed to physically see the Pathfinder. She needed to hold her hands and feel warmth emanating from them, she needed to hear the steady rhythm of Ryder's heartbeat on a monitor, and see the color in her cheeks even if it was just for a minute.

As she made her way to the tram, she spotted a familiar smuggler leaning against the railing, people watching from above. Deciding that she needed to make amends for her behavior the previous night, Suvi walked up the ramp to the second level and quietly joined him on the railing.

"How's the shoulder?" he asked while keeping his eyes on the people below.

"Better, thank ye," Suvi made sure to keep a remorseful tone as she continued, "I owe ye an apology."

Reyes remained quiet, and the doctor couldn't tell if he was ignoring her or just trying to give her the time to work through what she wanted to say.

"I shouldn't have snapped at ye like that, and accused you of – "
The smuggler interrupted, softly and slowly musing, "I remember the first night I was with her. She insisted on staying at my place. Anytime I tried to suggest going back to the ship, she'd refuse."

Now it was Suvi's turn to remain quiet and pray that he had a point to his story instead of just shoving his conquest of Ryder back in her face.

"Looking back, I should have realized she didn't want to parade me through the ship because she didn't want someone to know anything was going on between us," he said while quickly glancing at the doctor.

"We both found comfort in each other arms, running from the things we had seen. Each coping with it differently."

Suvi couldn't help but blurt out, "Do I need to hear this?"

Finally, Reyes turned to face her, a sadness had washed over him as he said, "That first night, when the night terrors woke her, I couldn't calm her down. All I could do was hold her, and ride it out."

Something about this man sharing such an intimate memory with the doctor made her quickly pay attention to what he was saying.

"I thought, her letting me hold her, letting me be the one to see such vulnerability meant she had let me in. That I wasn't just someone she had fun with."

The smuggler shook his head as his eyes lost focus, clearly remembering something.

"Then last night, I watched as you calmed her down with the simplest of touches," his voice barely above a whisper.

His haunting gaze pierced through the doctor as he admitted, "You give her something I can never provide."

"And what's that?" Suvi gently asked.

"Peace," the smuggler stated simply then expounded, "Ryder is the tempest and you are the light in the harbor guiding her safely home."

Suvi never imagined she would ever pity Reyes, but in this moment, she could almost feel sorry for him.

His charming bravado returned as he said, "We'll always have a connection."

The doctor gave an understanding smile.

"If she ever needs a drinking companion, or . . . more . . ." he trailed off while giving Suvi a wink, then added, "I won't deny her."

Taking a deep breath, the doctor couldn't stop from rolling her eyes.

"However," the smuggler quickly spoke, "I won't pursue her . . . not while she's with you."

Suvi was so awestruck by what Reyes had just said, she didn't even pull back when he took her left hand and gave it a kiss.

"Take care of her, doctor," the smuggler said as he pulled away, "Because I'll know if you don't."
Suvi stood there, frozen with confusion at what had just happened.

"You okay, Doc?"

Shaking her head to try and clear away the shock of Reyes backing down, she absently muttered, "I don't know."

Looking up at the concerned passerby, the doctor was once again greeted with the sight of a familiar cocky grin on the face of a different Ryder twin.

"How'd ye know?" she asked Scott as if he was just present during her conversation with the smuggler.

Arching an eyebrow, he replied, "How'd I know, what?"

"Last night, ye said Reyes was saying goodbye."

Understanding dawned on his face, followed by a bashful grin as he said, "When Ry started to flip out, I could see him itching to do something. Then suddenly you pushed through everyone and instantly got her to settle down. As a guy, I've seen plenty of friends look deflated after getting rejected or knowing when they don't have a chance anymore."

This seemed to make sense to Suvi.

"Besides," he began to say, "The real nail in the coffin happened after you left."

"What do ye mean?"

Scott looked as if he was debating whether to say anything then threw his arm around Suvi as if they had been friends for years. He started to guide her down the ramp towards the tram.

"SAM alerted Harry that Ry had been partially conscious and registered what Lexi said, that you had been shot. Her thrashing about was her subconscious trying to get her body to wake up and get to you"

The doctor continued to be in a perpetual state of shock, first Reyes, now this. Perhaps she should just return to the Tempest and call it a day.

Gently nudging her good shoulder, Scott then said, "I over heard Lexi and Harry talk about the strong emotional connection someone would have to have in order to react in the state she was in."

With a confident smile he added, "So, like I said last night, you're different."
"I could shake her, that'd probably wake her up," Drack offered as the crew continued going through supplies to load into the Tempest.

Vetra chuckled at the krogan's offer, "I think Suvi would like Ryder back in one piece."

"That'd be preferable," the doctor teasingly added as she checked off several supplies for the science equipment on board.

"When does Lexi think she'll wake up?" Jaal asked as he moved several boxes onto the loader.

Suvi sighed, "Any day now."

"Hey Suvi, take it easy on the shoulder, aye," Gil shouted down from the ramp.

"Don't worry, Gil. Tell Lexi we're only letting her carry a data pad at the moment," Vetra yelled back.

The engineer laughed.

"Ye worse then me, ma," Suvi grumbled.

Drack snorted, "I think she's getting ready to nest."

"What?!" Vetra nearly choked on the word as Drack winked at the doctor.

Her reaction got a good laugh out of everyone.

"Has Dr. Carlyle spoken with our doctor's on Aya, perhaps they could help?" Jaal offered

"Both Dr. Carlyle and Dr T'Perro have spoken with the Moshae about the Pathfinder's condition. Scans of her brain and nervous system have been sent to Aya for further analysis," SAM answered.

"She's only been out for three days. Give it a minute. Probably, could use the sleep," PeeBee joined the conversation as she arrived at the dock with Cora in tow.

"I watched asari commando's be out for weeks after pulling stunts similar to what Ryder did," Cora began, "She'll be awake and bugging us before you know it."

"Weeks," Liam whined.

Peebee draped a hand on the young man's shoulder as she purred, "What's the matter, killer? Get shot down again at Vortex last night?"

The whole crew hooted and cat called at Liam as he blushed.

"Tempest, this is Nexus security," the call interrupted the merriment.

Cora replied, "Go ahead."

"There is a Scott Ryder asking to come down to the ship, says he's part of the Pathfinder team."
The crew was silent as they all looked around at each other.

"Send him through," Cora instructed.

Peebee looked concerned, "Wait, are we going to have two Ryder's on this ship now?"

"Goddess help us," Vetra muttered.

Cora shook her head as she said, "He's not medically cleared yet."

Moments later the young man appeared walking down the gangway to the loading platform.

"Holy shit, it's a male version of Ryder," Peebee blurted out loud.

Scott must have heard her because he couldn't hold back the light chuckle in his voice as he said, "I'm Scott."

For the next minute or so he introduced himself to everyone on the platform.

"I'm sorry it's taken me this long to come see you all, I've been helping with the repairs to the station from the fight," he explained.

"How's that going?" Suvi asked.

Scott looked astounded as he said, "Surprisingly well. The Collective and Outcasts have been able to help find supplies and chipped in with the manpower. Tann's not happy but the Pathfinder's kinda over ruled him on this."

"Course he's not happy. Kesh and I were right about Spender," Drack grunted.

Vetra gave a sly smile as she crowed, "And we'll never let him forget it."

"Nexus security raided his apartment. Heard they found all sorts of supplies, manifests of stolen goods, and communications with the Roekaar and someone named Sloane Kelly. Apparently they were not fans of my sister," Scott explained.

Drack snickered as he said, "Let's just say Ryder and Sloane disagreed on who was the alpha in Heleus, and at the end of the day, the kid won."

"That and Ryder was able to repair the Initiatives relationship with the krogan, which pissed Spender off to no end," Cora mentioned.

Scott gave Suvi a cheeky grin as he said, "I think my sister is part krogan and mom didn't want to admit it."

"I believe it," Drack grunted.

"I was actually on my way to the med bay to check on her, didn't know if anyone wanted to join me," Scott looked around at the group.

Without missing a beat, Vetra said, "Well Lexi did ask to see Suvi, so you should probably go, Doc."

"What?" the Scot blurted out.

Jaal quickly spoke up, "Didn't you see the message?"
Suvi turned to the angara with equal frustration and said, "What message?"

"Dr. T'Perro sent a message to your omni tool several minutes ago," SAM chimed in.

The doctor had a feeling her crewmates were all in on some scheme to give her an excuse to see Ryder. Yet, when she searched her messages, one from Lexi had been received several minutes ago. Still suspicious, Suvi decided to play along with the ruse.

"Oh," she happily began then looked over to Scott, "If ye don't mind me tagging along."

The Ryder twin was genuine in his tone as he said, "Not at all. The more time I get with Ry's girlfriend the more dirt you might share."

Peebee giggled, "He called you Ryder's girlfriend."

The doctor rolled her eyes as the group started to chant "Ryder's girlfriend," at her. Taking Scott's offered arm, the doctor shook her head at them all and began walking up the gangway. She never heard the soft exchange between the crew as she and Scott left.

"Thanks for going along with that, SAM," Cora said out loud.

"Yeah, nice work on creating the message," Liam added.

Jaal nodded as he said, "I thought she would wear out the deck plating with all the pacing."

"Hopefully, Lexi gives her the all clear to go back to the science labs, that'll keep her distracted," Vetra said.

Drack then said, "We'll still need to keep an eye on her."

Suvi and Scott walked past the security posted by the Tempest docking entrance and headed for the tram to take them to the Hyperion.

"I think they were trying to put one over on me," Suvi guessed.

Scott flashed the lopsided grin as he asked, "What makes you say that?"

"Because I spoke with Lexi this morning," the doctor sheepishly admitted.

Minutes later they were walking through the corridors of the Hyperion, heading for the medical wing.

"We had to haul ass, both half naked, through the Silversun Strip and pray C-Sec didn't catch us for indecent exposure," Scott finished his story with a hint of embarrassment and pride.

Suvi could only shaker her head as she said, "Ye poor ma, ye two were terrors."

"Ry, more so than me," Scott joked.

They entered the medical wing and looked around.

Scott sounded confused as he said, "Speaking of my sister, where the hell is she?"

Another patient now occupied the medical bed Ryder had been sleeping in. Looking around, Suvi noticed the medical wing was unusually busy.
"I'll see if I can find Harry. Maybe they took her for tests," Scott muttered as he walked further into the wing and rounded the corner at the end of the main hallway.

Still holding her data pad, Suvi began to scroll through her list to see what else they might need aboard the Tempest. As a minute rolled into several, the doctor felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up. Looking down the hall to where Scott had disappeared, Suvi felt the uncanny pull of walking in that direction.

"You said she was shot?!" a familiar voice frantically said in the distance.

The sound was like a spark reigniting Suvi's soul. Relief overwhelmed the doctor, as her feet seemed to carry her closer to the owner of the voice. Suvi's heart hammered against her chest as the sight of a familiar blonde came into view. Scott and Lexi looked as if they were desperately trying to calm the Pathfinder down.

"That was several days ago. I've already taken the sling off her," Lexi said with exasperation then spotted the doctor and gestured, "See for yourself."

When the Pathfinder turned, her gaze instantly found Suvi's.

The doctor weakly breathed, "Ryder."

"Suvi," was all the Pathfinder could say as she started to close the distance between them.

Tears of joy pricked the doctor's eyes as she moved to intercept the Pathfinder. The pair nearly ran each other over as they slammed into a crushing embrace. For several long moments they held onto one another, neither wanting to break away.

"You're hurt?" Ryder's voice trembled with guilt and concern.

The only answer Suvi could give was to pull Ryder into a passionate kiss. Blood thundered in the doctor's ears drowning out the sounds of the medical wing. All she could focus on was the sensation of being in the Pathfinder's arms again. The softness of Ryder's lips, the pressure of her grip on Suvi's back, the smell of her hair as it fell around them, all reinforced that the Pathfinder was alive and that the doctor wasn't dreaming. When they finally parted, the cheers and whistles of the medical wing finally reminded the pair they were not alone. Embarrassed by her own actions, Suvi buried her face in Ryder's neck.

"Alright, alright," Ryder called out to everyone, "Shows over."

The Pathfinder then whispered into the doctor's ear, "But I'd love a private show later."

Suvi pulled back just enough to see the impish gleam in Ryder's eyes. It was endearing to know that even on little sleep and looking a mess, the Pathfinder found her desirable.

"If ye behave, I might even let ye play doctor," Suvi softly teased.

A smirk slowly pulled the Pathfinder's lips upwards as she murmured, "Yes, ma'am."

"Ryder we need to finish examining you," Harry spoke up behind them.

Without taking her eyes off the doctor, the Pathfinder asked, "Any chance you can finish examining me while I hold onto the good doctor here?"

"Afraid not."
"Worried I'm gonna convince her she's with the wrong twin?" Scott asked with sarcasm.

Ryder scoffed, "You've had three days, buddy. If you couldn't close the deal with me unconscious you've got no shot."

"As entertaining as this sibling verbal sparring is, we have other patience to help, Ryder," Lexi sighed then looked to Suvi and said, "You two can wait in Alex's room, we'll bring her down shortly."

Still holding Suvi, Ryder asked, "Why my dad's room?"

"We'd like to keep you close tonight for observation," Harry began to explain, "If nothing unusual happens then we can release you in the morning."

Suvi could see the disappointment and possibly apprehension in the Pathfinder's eyes at the thought of having to stay in her father's quarters.

"Hey," she said while nudging Ryder, "Perhaps Lexi will let ye have some visitor's tonight to keep ye company."

"Only if you extract yourself from Dr. Anwar in the next five seconds," Lexi huffed.

Ryder leaned forward so their foreheads touched for a few moments, then breathed, "I'll see ya, soon."

Stealing a quick kiss, the Pathfinder finally let go of the doctor and followed Lexi and Harry to the examination room. For the first time in days, Suvi felt whole again. This wouldn't be the first time she would have to endure a major medical crisis with Ryder nor the last, but for now, the doctor planned on savoring their time together.

Nearly an hour later, Suvi stood quietly enjoying a cup of tea as the entire crew had piled into Alex Ryder's quarters. Peebee and Scott sat on the bed beside Ryder, while Cora and Liam stood around them. Vetra and Drack lounged on the couch and Jaal leaned against the bookcase. Lexi was in and out as she was helping Harry in the medical wing. Both Gil and Kallo had pulled up chairs to sit near everyone else, which left Suvi standing in the corner, observing the frivolity from a slight distance.

"Then when we were on the pirate kett ship, Ryder used some lines from an old sci-fi movie to try and fool them into thinking nothing was wrong," Vetra was happily recounting one of their adventures.

Scott looked at his sister and said, "You pulled a Han Solo?"


Scott laughed then turned to the group and said, "She was obsessed with these movies. Even learned to play the music on the piano."

"Can't beat a classic," Ryder shrugged.

"I was curious," Jaal's deep voice drew everyone's attention to the angara, "That night you played the . . . what were they called again?"

"Rock N' Roll, songs," Liam answered.
"Yes, the rock n' roll music. I looked in the Initiative achieve, those songs are quite old. How did you learn to play them?"

The crew watched as a stunned Scott looked at Ryder and gently asked, "You played?"

The Pathfinder looked hesitant to answer as she suddenly found her hands to be extremely interesting.

"You haven't played since mom . . ." Scott trailed off.

"Uh, yeah," she continued to keep her eyes down as she said, "It was the night I told you Dad was still alive."

"When I was still in the coma," Scott stated.

Ryder just muttered, "Yeah."

There was an awkward tension building in the room. The crew discreetly looked around at each other, almost as if they were hoping one of them would speak up.

"Whadya play?" the young man asked.

With a sad smile, Ryder told him, "Thunder Road, Saturday Nights Alright for Fighting, Make You Feel My Love."

Everyone could see the shock on her twin brother's face at the mention of the last song, but before he could ask her about it Lexi walked in.

"Okay, time for the Pathfinder to get some rest," she announced.

The poor doctor was met with groans and protests but the asari held firm and asked that everyone leave. Suvi purposefully hung back as she watched the rest of the group including Scott say their goodbyes. Lexi failed to notice that she was still in the room when she began to check on Ryder's vitals.

"I've already put in the order for your breakfast tomorrow," the asari started, "Finish most of it, and I'll release you to limited duty."

Ryder whined, "Limited?"

At her wits end, Lexi sat down on the bed beside the Pathfinder and put her serious face on as she said, "Do you not understand the stress you put your body through?"

"I'm fine, seriously I – "

"You are far from fine, Ryder!" Lexi snapped, "You used every ounce of energy your body could produce to hold that shield, and if you don't slow down there will be nothing left for the Archon to fight!"

Shaking her head, the asari's voice dropped with embarrassment for her outburst, but the sternness still held in her voice as she breathed, "You are remarkably resilient for a human, there is no denying that, but even you have limits."

"Thank you," Ryder whispered in earnest, "For taking care of me."

Suvi could only see half of Lexi's face but a genuine smile encompassed it for a moment.
"If I some how manage to keep you in one piece, it'll be my greatest accomplishment," Lexi joked before saying, "Now, I'll give you and Dr. Anwar a few minutes alone, but then I'll have to insist you get some rest."

The asari stood up and headed for the door without another word. Suvi couldn't hide the fierce blush now creeping up her cheeks for being caught trying to hang back. She cautiously made her way over to sit on the edge of the bed beside Ryder, keeping an eye on the door as if Lexi might come back.

"I think I made mom upset," Ryder quietly joked.

Suvi couldn't help but chuckle, "And got me in trouble in the process."

"I'm a bad influence," the Pathfinder teased.

The doctor took hold of Ryder's hand, her eyes enjoying the sight of their fingers interlocked. Her mind suddenly flashed backed to the hub, and Suvi desperately trying to crawl over to the Pathfinder's unconscious body. Ryder must have sensed her change in mood because she delicately cupped the doctor's cheek.

"Hey," the Pathfinder whispered, "Where'd you go?"

Suvi turned into Ryder's touch and closed her eyes a moment, forcing the memory away.

"Just thinking about how much I missed this," she said while squeezing Ryder's hand.

But the Pathfinder wasn't fooled as she softly countered, "Liar."

Moving her hand behind Suvi's head, Ryder guided her down for a slow soulful kiss. Conveying through touch what they couldn't with words and when they finally broke apart they looked deep into each other's eyes.

"I need to know you'll be okay," Ryder murmured.

Breaking eye contact, Suvi pleaded, "Don't."

"Look at me," the Pathfinder begged.

The doctor refused her request and even began to pull back but Ryder's hand kept her from moving.

"Suvi," she sounded desperate, "Please."

Finally relenting, the doctor dragged her eyes up to look at the Pathfinder who looked just as upset about the conversation as Suvi felt.

"I know you don't want to think about it," Ryder began, "Neither do I, because I always plan on coming back to you. But . . ."

Suvi could almost feel the desperation she experienced on that platform screaming out for Ryder to take hold of her once more. Glancing down at the bed covers, she took a deep breath and gathered all her strength to project confidence as she answered.

"I'll be okay."

Watching the relief play out on Ryder's face was worth the white lie she had just told. If anything happened to her, the Scot would be devastated beyond repair. In the last few months this young
woman had some how not only wrapped her way around Suvi's heart, but infused her spirit into the fabric of the doctor's soul.

"What if something happened to me?" the question flew out of Suvi's mouth before she could stop it.

A painful expression took hold of Ryder as her eyes glazed over, lost in a memory perhaps.

"If you . . . died," her voice was suddenly raw and broken, "I'd crawl into a bottle, and numb the pain for as long as I could. I'd tried to fight anyone and everyone and not even Drack himself could stop me."

Bringing Suvi's hand up to rest against her heart, the Pathfinder continued, "I'd drive away anyone who tried to help, and eventually end up in a dark alley somewhere covered in blood, piss and vomit waiting for death to take me."

The brutal honesty of Ryder's answer was nearly breathtaking.

"But one day, through the fog of my pain and suffering," she slowly breathed, "I'll remember I made you a promise that I'd be okay. And I would spend the rest of my life trying to live up to that promise."
"Hey Suvi, wait up," Scott shouted out to her as he jogged up the ramp from hydroponics.

The doctor turned and smiled at the young man as she waited for him to catch up. She noticed he was sweating and out of breath, as if he'd just ran a marathon.

"Ye alright? Ye look wrecked," she stated.

Still trying to catch his breath, Scott told her, "Yeah, just doing physical therapy."

The pair began to stroll at a leisurely pace up to the second floor.

"How's that going?"

"Aside from me getting my ass kicked? Great," Scott snickered, "Have you seen Ry? She was supposed to meet me after?"

Suvi answered with a nod of her head, "The other Pathfinder's asked to meet her in the tech lab, wouldn't say why. Kicked all non essential personnel out."

Arching an eyebrow, Scott lowered his voice as he whispered, "Meridian?"

"Possibly," the doctor replied softly.

The young man appeared lost in thought for a moment then suddenly turned to the doctor with purpose as he asked, "Where are you headed right now?"

"Oh, I'm just wandering while I try and write up this summary. Walking helps me think," she explained.

Not hiding his amusement, he gestured with his head as he asked, "Mind if we pull over for a moment and chat?"

"Not at all," she cheerfully answered as they moved to take up position on the railing overlooking immigration and the docks.

Suvi could see part of the Tempest in the background, while the hustle and bustle of the markets and welcoming center swirled below. She waited for Scott to say something, and when he didn't she glanced up at him. His eyes held concern and worry while his gaze was fixated on the ship in the distance. Giving him another moment, she delicately touched his arm to bring him back from his silent musing.

"Sorry," he stammered with embarrassment.

Flashing an understanding smile, she sweetly said, "S'Alright. Seems like you've got something on ye mind."

"Yeah," his voice distant as he once again looked lost in thought.
"Perhaps if ye wrote it down or –"

"What are your intentions with my sister?" Scott blurted out the question.

Utterly floored and slightly taken aback, Suvi hesitantly replied, "I'm sorry?"

Shaking his head, Scott took a deep breath and chuckled, "That came out wrong, I – see the thing about Ry is – um – I know it's not my place . . ."

With a defeated sigh, he hung his head and rubbed the back of his neck as a blush blossomed on his cheeks.

"I know you guys haven't been together very long, but you've certainly cared about each other for quite some time," he managed to say.

Now, it was the doctor's turn to look rattled. In a single breath, the young man had perfectly described her relationship with Ryder. They had only been together physically for a short time, but the doctor had certainly harbored feelings for the Pathfinder for much longer.

Giving him a curious look, she asked, "What makes ye say that?"

The infamous cocky Ryder grin encompassed his face as he quietly said, "C'mon, Doc. I thought you two were gonna jump each other right there in the medical wing the other day. So clearly you're still in the honeymoon phase of this."

With a challenging arch of her eyebrow she countered, "Perhaps, but that doesn't indicate how long we've cared about each other."

"True," Scott said coyly.

Silence followed as the pair starred at one another. Suvi had a feeling all these awkward attempts at asking about their relationship was coming from the overly protective brother instinct. Not to mention, Scott Ryder had missed several long months of his sister's life that included their father's death, her ascension as a leading figure in Heleus, and now a serious relationship. It was only natural for him as the only family member left to try and vet her as a suitor for his sister.

With a huff, he finally caved and admitted, "The night we first met, and I said you were different. I didn't realize how spot on I was about that until Ry mentioned playing again."

The young man turned and looked out at all the people below as he continued in a low voice, "At first she hated the music lessons cause she wanted to play the drums not piano, but mom insisted if we could play the piano we could play anything."

"Ye both play?" Suvi sounded surprised.

"We both play," he repeated with a bashful smile, "You know we're both biotics?"

"Of course."

"When we were in Alliance training, first year I think, we went out to a bar," he began to say, "Ry was always the more outgoing one. Don't get me wrong, I can hold my own, but you know how it is with her."
Suvi agreed, "She's a force to be sure."

"The place had a small stage and the piano was just sitting there, collecting dust," he scoffed, "I nudge her and bet her a drink she couldn't still play."

The doctor could just imagine Ryder's eyes lighting up at the challenge.

"She counters my bet and offers to play while I sing, trying to help me impress the girl I had been chatting up all night. If I went home with her, I had to cover next time Ry snuck out of the barracks," Scott happily told the story, "Ever since that night, whenever there was a chance to play, she always let me take the lead."

Scott finally glanced at Suvi as he quietly sighed, "It was almost as if she knew."

"Knew what?" the doctor asked.

The young man's demeanor shifted as he said, "Those moments on stage, when everyone looked at me instead of her for a change, was all I needed."

Suvi watched as his eyes grew distant and sorrow over took him.

"It wasn't until Mom became sick that I found out Ry had never stopped playing," his voice soft and reflective, "That it was a refuge from all the noise with Dad and SAM, Mom's sickness, biotics training, whatever person she was sleeping with that week. All of it melted away when she sat down in front of those keys."

Taking a deep breath he added, "It was a part of her no one saw."

Not knowing what to say, the doctor remained silence trying to processes everything Scott had just told her.

"I'm telling you all this so you understand, that my sister doesn't just play in front of people. She does it if we're together, for Mom, and for herself," Scott insisted.

His eyes bore into Suvi's as if trying to will her to understand the point he was trying to drive home.

"The fact she played, let alone that song, tells me that whatever is going on between you two is different than anything else she's been involved in."

His implication slightly offended the doctor.

"I love her," Suvi stated emphatically.

The young man must have sensed the Scot's irritation because he quickly tried to make amends.

"Oh I know – I know, sorry – this all made sense in my head, just bear with me," he pleaded.

Taking a moment to recollect his thoughts, Scott quietly admitted, "I love my sister, but I know her in ways you can't because I've had the benefit of time."

The doctor remained quiet but sighed loudly.

"I've watched her bounce from one person to the next in a matter of hours, days, and weeks," he informed Suvi, "But I've never seen this, I've never seen her this way."

Looking down at his feet, Scott said, "What I've been trying to say is she's never been in any
serious relationship . . . of any kind."

The doctor's irritation instantly faded as the magnitude of what he'd just said hit her.

"She's the only family I have left," Scott's voice wavered with emotion, "And I know in the next
day or so, she's going to board that ship, and I probably won't see her again until all this business
with the Archon is over."

Sadly looking back up at Suvi, he stated, "You need to take care of her, now more than ever."

"I will," the doctor insisted.

"She might shut down, she might try and tell you everything is fine," he continued, "But don't
listen to her, don't let her push you away."

Vigorously nodding, the doctor began to understand what Scott had been trying to tell her.

"You two were clearly meant to met on that ship, to find each other here on the edge of space," he
said with a smile, "There's a destiny about you Dr. Anwar."

Suvi couldn't help but lightly chuckle, "I don't know about all that, but . . . she's special to me as
well."

"Doctor Anwar, the Pathfinder has requested all Tempest crew assemble immediately in the
conference room," SAM interrupted.

"Well, looks like duty calls," Scott joked.

The pair shared an understanding look as Suvi gave his arm a gentle squeeze before she started to
leave.

"Suvi," he called out.

Quickly turning, the doctor saw that insightful look, the one that gave Scott Ryder the appearance
of having an old soul.

"Be patient with her," he advised.

Minutes later the doctor stood in the conference room with the rest of the crew and silently listened
as Ryder explained what Dr. Aridana and the other Pathfinder's proposed with the Ghost Storm
technology.

"We'll leave at 0800 tomorrow, I recommend everyone enjoy themselves tonight, because we
might not be back here for a while," the Pathfinder said at the end of the meeting.

There was a heartbeat of silence that followed before the crew erupted into planning. It seemed
relaxing was far from anyone’s mind as, for the first time, the finish line appeared in sight.
Meridian, the heart of the vault network. Ryder was swept away by Cora and Vetra before Suvi
could speak with her.

Several hours later, the doctor, with her head buried in a data pad, strolled into the Pathfinder's
quarters. She didn't even realize were she was until she heard the voices of the other Pathfinder's.

"We'll need to test the Ghost Storm technology a few times while your engineer integrates it into
the Tempest, Ryder," Hayjer's voice echoed in the room.
Suvi looked up and saw Ryder standing at her personal terminal going through plans.

"Rix – Theris, can your teams handle that?" Ryder asked as she pinched the bridge of her nose.

The two other Pathfinder's confirmed and the group quickly ended the call. Suvi watched as Ryder braced herself against the railing by her station and hung her head. Putting her data pad down, the doctor silently walked up and started to rub the Pathfinder's back.

"Ye still recovering, take a moment and sit down," she gently offered.

Ryder slowly turned and took Suvi's hands in her own.

With a playful smirk she said, "Or I could lock the door and you could give me a very thorough physical."

As the Pathfinder spoke she subtly walked Suvi backwards towards the bed.

"It'll have to be a quick one, I'm afraid," the doctor pouted.

Confused, Ryder asked, "Why?"

Stopping their momentum towards the bed, Suvi explained, "Peebee is organizing everyone to meet up at Vortex soon. I think she even invited Scott."

"Good, so while everyone is out we can be as loud as we want," the Pathfinder countered.

"Sadly, I think our absences will look suspicious," the doctor stated.

With a defeated growl, Ryder let her head fall on Suvi's shoulder as she whined, "Why can't people let me have a night of wild sex in peace?"

Enjoying the feel of the woman in her arms, the doctor rubbed the Pathfinder's back as she whispered, "I'm sure this won't be our only chance."

The doctor could feel Ryder's muscles tense. Without warning she pulled out of Suvi's embrace and began to walk away.

"What is it?"

The Pathfinder stopped in her tracks, but kept her back to Suvi.

"We're getting close to ending this," Ryder's voice was instantly serious and held hints of dread, "I can feel it."

Partially turning around, she continued, "And the moment this ship takes off tomorrow, this mission, the crew, the other Pathfinder's – my time won't be my own. All my energy and focus will be on finding Meridian and stopping the Archon."

"I know that," the doctor softly said, her earlier conversation with Scott echoing in her mind.

With a heavy sigh, Ryder finally looked at her with frustration as she complained, "I just wanted to have one night where you didn't feel all that. That it was just you and me because –"

She cut herself off and turned away from Suvi again, her hands resting on her hips. Taking a cautious step towards her, the doctor waited a beat before speaking.
"We'll figure it out . . . together."

Ryder's voice was almost inaudible as she whispered, "People are struggling to survive Heleus and I'm sitting here bitching about not having a night with my girlfriend."

With a disgusted laugh, she turned and looked at Suvi, "You are too good a person to be dating an asshole like me. Ya know that right?"

"I remember the first time you flirted with me," the doctor lovingly said as she closed the distance between them, "You mentioned being good with guns and danger."

Ryder closed her eyes with embarrassment, as she said, "So not smooth."

"Much smoother than admitting you thought I was cute and liked seeing me on the bridge," Suvi had been waiting to teaser her about that one for months.

"So, you're dating me out of pity, is that it?" the Pathfinder jokingly asked as the doctor stepped into her personal space.

Both of Suvi's hands began to weave around Ryder's neck, as she whispered, "I'm a sucker for hard luck cases."

Hours and multiple drinks later, the doctor sat with a pleasant buzz. She was tucked into the Pathfinder's side as the pair sat packed into a booth with the rest of the crew. Suvi noticed that ever since they arrived at Vortex, Ryder's demeanor had perked up. Of course she had to step away a few times, claiming Pathfinder business, but each time she came back with a brighter smile and winking at the doctor, almost as if she were up to something.

"By the Goddess!! I love this song, c'mon," Peebee called out and dragged Cora, and Vetra with her.

Scott slammed down the rest of his drink and began to follow as he and Cora had been eying each other all night.

"Jaal, Liam, lets go get a drink," Drack instructed as he stood up from the table.

The trio headed for the bar, where Lexi and Sid stood waiting for their order.

Ryder leaned over to Suvi and shouted over the music, "C'mon."

Tugging on the doctor's hand, the Pathfinder helped her out of the booth and began to guide them to the exit.

The alcohol slightly clouding her brain, Suvi asked, "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise," Ryder happily explained while they passed Gil flirting with a settler from Eos.

As they exited the club, Suvi felt the cool air of the station surround them as Ryder's warm hand took hold of hers and guided them through the residential wing. Soon, the doctor started to spot scaffolding and construction tools indicating they were moving into an unfinished portion of the Nexus. Just as she was about to say something, they rounded a corner, and the luminous soft glow of several plants from Havarl came into view.

"Oh my," she breathed as they walked under a canopy of glowing pedals.

They finally arrived at an unfinished room, angara oil lamps were scattered around the floor, and a
mattress with pillows and blankets sat in the center. Ryder walked Suvi to the barricade that had been put up for safety then pointed up.

"I thought we could sleep under the stars tonight," she tried to hide the nervousness in her voice, but the doctor could hear it, "What do you think?"

Completely blown away, Suvi couldn't answer as her eyes drank in the majestic vista above her. Ryder took up position behind the doctor and wrapped her arms around Suvi's waist. With a gentle tug, she let the doctor rest her weight against the Pathfinder's chest. They stood like that for several quiet minutes both just stargazing.

When Suvi finally found her voice, she turned in Ryder's arms and with a shaky breath asked, "How'd ye do all this?"

"Didn't you hear?" she projected over confidence as she said, "I'm the human Pathfinder, liberator of the Moshae, founder of Eos, the all knowing, all seeing – "

"Shut up," the doctor laughed just before pulling her in for a kiss.

When they broke apart, Ryder looked down at her feet before murmuring, "I ah – I've never been good at this sorta thing."

"Ye coulda fooled me. Ye should plan the next movie night," the doctor teased as she glanced around at all the oil lamps and luminous plants.

Giving her a look, the Pathfinder flatly said, "That's not what I meant."

"Oh?" the doctor feigned innocence.

Taking her hand, Ryder gave it a squeeze as she admitted, "This."

"Holding hands?" Suvi continued her teasing, "You're being too hard on yourself."

The Pathfinder's eyes went large as she pretended to look mad, "Suvi Anwar, I'm trying to be serious."

Unable to suppress the giggles that escaped, the doctor tenderly cupped Ryder's face as she happily said, "I know, love."

Her use of the Pathfinder's favorite endearment, earned Suvi a smile. The merriment from their banter lingered in Ryder's eyes for a few seconds then it slowly morphed into want, and lust, but even those emotions just flickered in her eyes momentarily. The deep blue orbs projected the one emotion the doctor would never associate with the Pathfinder. Vulnerability.

Strip away the bravado and sarcasm. Remove the N7 armor. Let the scars and wounds heal. You'd be left with the young woman now tenderly watching the doctor as if her life depended on it.

"I slept for 600 years and never could have dreamed of you," Ryder whispered, "And now . . . I can't stop dreaming of you."

And just like that, the Pathfinder stole Suvi's breath away.

"I'm gonna mess up, I'm gonna forget things that maybe are important or you're suppose to remember in a relationship," Ryder continued her heartfelt confession, "I've never done this, gone all in on one person, but . . . the thought of not waking up next to you in the morning scares the hell
Tears had begun to sting Suvi's eyes during the little speech. A few wayward drops escaped down her cheeks prompting the Pathfinder to brush them aside with her thumbs.

"I don't deserve you," the doctor mumbled through her tears.

Ryder shook her head as she breathed, "No, you deserve better."

The comment hung in the air for a moment before the Pathfinder leaned in and added, "That's what Scott keeps telling me."

"Good thing it's not up to him then," Suvi laughed despite the tears.

Their lips brushed in a quick kiss followed by the pair both sighing with contentment and resting their foreheads together. The doctor noticed that the Pathfinder began to sway them from side to side as if they were dancing to a song. Before she could ask, Ryder began to hum the tune.

"Sing it," the doctor gently requested, "Please."

They continued to sway for a moment, which caused the doctor to think Ryder was ignoring her but after a few more beats the Pathfinder softly began to sing.

"Wise men say, only fools rush in . . ."

Ryder pulled back and shifted her hands so one wrapped around Suvi's waist and the other took the doctor's hand and held it against the Pathfinder's chest.

". . . but I can't help falling in love with you."

As they continued to dance, Ryder's soft lips captured the doctor's in a sweet and savory kiss, one full of promise and hope.

It was the same kiss Suvi experienced nearly a month later as they stood outside the vault on Meridian. The crew was still applauding and cheering, but as Ryder pulled the doctor into an embrace, the only thing Suvi could hear was the Pathfinder's relieved whisper.

"We made it."

Fin.

Chapter End Notes

As a "Thank You" to all you lovely people who took the time to click on the story, read it, gave it kudos, left a comment, or even lurked in the shadows, I shall write an epilogue. BUT, I want to hear from you on what you'd like it to have: fluff, smutt, angst, Drack giving fatherly advice, all of the above, none of the above. The epilogue is for you and all the amazing support you gave this story. I'll wait a week before I
start working on it to give folks time to speak up.

Again, thank you so much!
"Why the hell am I wearing this?" Drack asked as he pulled at the fancy clothing on his arm.

Lexi swatted his hand away as she scolded, "Because it's a formal occasion."

Drack softly snarled.

"Besides, it's nice to see there's an actual krogan under all those layers of armor and dirt," the asari shyly flirted.

The crew stood huddled together in the corner of the grand ballroom on Aya. The Initiative and the angara were formalizing their partnership in creating a governing body for all of Heleus. All the Pathfinder's and top brass from the Nexus were there along with the mayors of the settlements.

With all the leadership of both groups in one place, it also meant heightened security. Cora had been tasked with coordinating the protection details and now tried to casually wander around the room and keep an eye on things. She approached the group as she finished up one of her rounds.

"Still waiting on Ryder and the others?" she inquired.

Vetra nodded as she sipped her drink, "Luckily the angara make strong drinks and no one has noticed."

"Why couldn't I be on security detail tonight?" Drack grumbled.

Cora cocked an eyebrow at him before sighing with exasperation, "Because you're representing clan Nakmor, not the Tempest."

"At least you get to sit at the big table," Liam complained, "We took down the Archon, saved the Hyperion, made planets habitable again, and we get put in a corner."

Sid piped up, "Actually, Ryder had them put you guys closest to the bar on purpose."

"Why?" Liam asked.

Jaal smirked as he said, "Because there is also a balcony that leads to the gardens below."

"Giving us the perfect escape to go have real fun," Peebee squealed with excitement.

Drack demandingly stated, "No one leaves until the Doc and I can sneak out with you."

The whole crew looked over to Suvi, who had only been partially listening to everything. Her eyes
had been trained on the main door the entire night, waiting for Ryder to finally appear. It was bad enough she hadn't been able to see her all day due to negotiations, but then SAM had informed the doctor that the Pathfinder would have to meet her at the gala. Forcing Suvi to rely on Vetra, Peebee and Cora's help in getting ready.

The doctor's one shoulder silhouette dress brushed the floor, while the thigh high slit on the left side showed off her leg. It was a deep midnight blue made from angara silk that the girls had spotted at a vendor cart a few weeks back. Vetra pulled a few strings and somehow managed to find a few seamstresses out of Kadara who made the crews formal attire for the event. Suvi had let Peebee talk her into blowing out her hair just a touch to give it more body and doing heavier make up around her eyes to pop the color. Now, it felt like every few minutes someone new was offering her a drink.

"Excuse me, are you Doctor Anwar?" another random person asked.

Always the polite one, Suvi smiled as she said, "Yes, I am."

"I have to say, I'm a huge fan. I've been reading your reports from the Tempest . . ."

The energy in the room suddenly shifted and Suvi's eyes were pulled back to the main doors. Someone had arrived but the crowd blocked her view.

". . . though I'd have to argue with your analysis on the jardaan's intent with the angara –"

"I'm sorry, could ye give me a moment," Suvi said as she tried to move closer to the gathering crowd.

Lights began to flash from several news drones before the doctor heard a journalist shout, "Pathfinder Ryder, over here!"

It took the doctor another minute to delicately weave her way through the throngs of people pushing forward to get a glimpse of the Pathfinder. When her eyes finally spotted the woman, Suvi had to remember to breath. The red rose halter top dress accentuated Ryder's many features. It billowed out from her hips and swayed around her knees as she glided around the room. The Pathfinder's hair was down and wavy, and she actually wore make up which made her look older than she was.

"You're a lucky woman," the velvet voice of a familiar smuggler whispered.

Suvi glimpsed over her shoulder to see Reyes tracking Ryder with his eyes.

"Thought ye'd be in those negotiations?" she asked trying to take his focus off her girlfriend.

Glancing over at the doctor, he gave a sly smirk, "I was . . . in my own way."

The smuggler nodded his head in the direction of Keema Dohrgun, his angaran figurehead who was currently being interviewed.

"Ye want the power, but not the fame?" Suvi asked.

"Fame makes you a target." Reyes kept his voice low as he continued, "As you're well aware."

The doctor and the smuggler shared a look. They both cared about the one human in Heleus who had the biggest target on her. It was a strange twist of fate that Reyes could empathize with Suvi over the anxiety that would cause.
"The Pathfinder and I do have some business to attend to, but I will leave it until tomorrow," he casually said.

He took her hand and kissed her knuckles before saying, "Enjoy your evening."

Suvi turned back and was once again blocked from seeing where Ryder had gone. The Scot pivoted in all directions trying to find any sign of her partner. She was about to give up and head back to the crew when an opening in the crowd provided a flash of red. The doctor started to head in that direction when the sea of people abruptly parted revealing the blonde. Just as Suvi was about to call out, the Pathfinder looked up and the rest of the room seemed to fade away as they locked eyes.

An electric jolt shot through the doctor as Ryder's gaze traveled the length of Suvi's body unabashedly. The pair continued to undress each other with their heated looks as people attempted to speak with Ryder. She just ignored them and continued to stalk towards the doctor with wanton strides. The Pathfinder showed incredible restraint as she stopped just shy of entering the doctor's personal space.

"Dr. Anwar, you look stunning," Ryder said loudly as lights flashed near by.

The Pathfinder leaned forward and whispered in the doctor's ear while keeping her hands to herself, "Think they'll notice if we disappear for awhile?"

Suvi couldn't help but smile at Ryder's implied question, as she pulled back and said, "Yer a celebrity now, they'll notice what ye eat at dinner."

With a mischievous look in her eye, the Pathfinder quietly said, "As long as they aren't around for dessert."

Bowing her head to try and hide the blush creeping up her neck, Suvi gave a shy smile as Ryder made a show of offering her arm. With pride, the doctor accepted the chivalrous offer and smiled as several people took pictures. The Pathfinder politely wave and nodded to people as she guided the doctor away from the crowd. Yet, many of them still followed as the pair approached the crew of the Tempest.

"Cora, little help?" Ryder asked.

"Okay, I need the press back to their assigned area," the biotic quickly began to shout out.

As security pushed the reporters and gala attendees back from the crew, Drack, Vetra and a few others took up position to block prying eyes from staring at their leader.

The turian shoved a drink in Ryder's hand as she whispered, "Looks like you could use one."

Downing the drink like a shot, the Pathfinder sighed afterwards, "You have no idea."

Concerned for her partner, Suvi extracted her hand from Ryder's forearm and wrapped it around her waist, pulling the Pathfinder closer.

"Ye look tired," the doctor worriedly whispered.

Faking a smile, Ryder quickly kissed Suvi's temple before she quietly replied, "Think I prefer fighting the Archon, to politics."

"Cheers to that," Vetra mumbled beside them.
Affectionately rubbing, the Pathfinder's back, Suvi gave her an understanding smile. Soon the crew began to fill Ryder in on all the gossip of the day, while the Pathfinder gave the team little nuggets of info into what was happening in the negotiations.

"Dr. Anwar, Pathfinder Ryder," Dr. Aridana's cheerful voice interrupted the group.

Everyone turned as the asari and several members of her lead team approached the crew.

"Dr. Aridana, didn't think they let you off the Nexus," Ryder joked as she greeted the scientist.

Chuckling, the asari retorted, "I didn't leave the Milky Way just to sit on a station in Andromeda, despite Tann's insistence that it's not safe."

The asari turned her focus to Suvi, which made the Scot slightly nervous. Though she was assigned to the Tempest, and Ryder was her commanding officers, Suvi was still a member of the science team. All her reports were filed to Dr. Aridana and her lead team.

"Part of the reason I wanted to attend tonight's gala was so I could deliver the good news to Dr. Anwar in person," the asari happily explained as she looked around at the crew then back to Suvi before continuing, "I recommended you to lead the Meridian science teams and Tann has approved! Should you want the position of course, I know the Tempest can be a thrilling assignment, but your experience with the vault networks and the remnant city make you a valuable resource to help the Hyperion begin settlement."

So stunned by the announcement, the only thing the Scot could utter was, "Oh my, that's – that's . . ."

"Take the night to think about it, and we'll chat tomorrow," Dr. Aridana said with excitement.

The science team bid their goodbyes and left the Tempest crew reeling with the news that they might be losing one of their own. So many emotions ran through Suvi as she tried to process what the doctor had just offered. Leading the team on Meridian was a huge opportunity to be on the cutting edge of scientific discoveries in the region, the very thing that brought her to Andromeda. Yet, as she looked around at the faces of her adoptive family, her excitement dimmed.

"Does this mean you're leaving the Tempest?" Peebee's voice was soft, almost childlike, as she asked the question the rest of the crew couldn't.

Still numb from the surprise of the offer, Suvi shook her head and mumbled, "I dunno."

The comment hung in the air as silence followed. The doctor finally turned to look at Ryder, but the Pathfinder wouldn't meet her gaze. Instead she continued to look at the floor, as if the answer to an unasked question lay beneath her feet.

"Ryder – "

Chimes suddenly rang, and guests around the room began to take their seats.

Still refusing to look at Suvi, Ryder took the doctor's hand and gave it a quick kiss as she hurriedly said, "I'll be back after the dinner."

The Pathfinder quickly left for the head table at the front of the room with Cora in hot pursuit acting as a buffer between her and any guests who might want her attention.

Suvi was about to follow when Drack cut her off, and grunted, "Don't worry, I'll knock some sense
into her.

With that the krogan followed Ryder to the lead table, Vetra and Peebee quickly helped Suvi to a seat and within minutes the table was chatting about nonsense. Cora finally joined them and sat across from the doctor, the Scot could feel the biotic watching her closely.

"Suvi," Cora's voice got the attention of the table.

"No matter what you decide, just know we'll support you, and we're happy for you."

Gil raised his glass as he added, "Damn well proud and honored, more like."

"Here, here," echoed around the table as a lump formed in Suvi's throat.

The doctor took a sip of her water before saying, "I don't even know if I'm gonna take it."

"In my observation of humanity," Jaal's gravely voice began, "I have noticed that in a situation such as this, humans shy away from sharing their feelings. How do you feel about the offer?"

Caught off guard by his questions, the doctor took a moment before she replied with, "It's an amazing opportunity. It's the reason I came to Andromeda, to explore the unexplored."

"Those are reasons, very admirable ones, but in this moment, how do you feel?" the angara pushed.

Looking down at her glass, Suvi swirled it around before saying, "I don't know what I'm feeling. Humbled Dr. Aridana thinks I'm ready to lead an entire team. Excited about the possibilities."

"But?"

The doctor looked up, her emotions causing her voice to quiver as she spoke, "But yer my family. This, what we have, is special. I don't want to lose that either."

Nor did she want to lose Ryder, but that vulnerable thought Suvi kept unspoken, though she was sure everyone at the table knew it.

"You will never lose us, Suvi Anwar, of that I am certain," Jaal confidently said.

There was something in his optimistic manner that made the doctor and the table relax. As the first course was served the crew fell back into their normal banter, the weight of Suvi's decision no longer pressing down on them. Throughout the dinner the doctor would glance up and try and catch Ryder's eyes. She noticed Drack had sat down right beside her, even though it wasn't his assigned seat. The pair was constantly engaged in conversations with all the leaders.

As dessert was served, an angaran musical group took the stage and began to play. Many of the angaran guests made their way to the dance floor and began to move in a traditional waltz like pattern. It was captivating to watch, so much so that Suvi failed to notice that Ryder and Drack had left the gala. Finishing her dessert, she quickly excused herself from the table and snuck out onto the balcony, hoping to find her missing date.

"The Pathfinder and Drack are down in the gardens below," SAM informed her.

Suvi wrung her hands as she debated about whether to try and find Ryder or to give her space.

"Dr. Anwar, perhaps you can answer my query," SAM stated.

Still pacing around, she quickly answered, "Sure."
"I have noticed that since Dr. Aridana offered you the position on Meridian, nearly the entire crew's blood pressure and heart rate have increased. Though many have expressed their happiness for you, their levels of cortisol would indicate their body is still in a state of stress, which would imply a state of contradiction."

"It's possible to feel happy for someone, and sad at the same time," Suvi quietly replied.

The AI was silent for a moment.

"Emotions have a way of doing that to a person," the doctor began, "Especially when they're about someone ye care about."

"That analysis could be applied to the complex emotions centered around the Pathfinder's memories of her father; happiness and sorrow, love and anger," SAM injected.

Suvi absently nodded.

"Might I make an observation?" the AI asked.

"Of course."

The AI's voice softened as he said, "In speaking with the crew you mentioned the position on Meridian would be an amazing opportunity, to, as you said, 'explore the unexplored.' However, the position on the Tempest already provides you with this qualification, does it not? As it stands to reason, the Pathfinder will most likely be the first to explore and chart new planets and regions within Heleus."

Suvi couldn't suppress the small smirk that tugged at her lips while hearing SAM throw his two cents into her career decision.

"A fair point, but this is an opportunity to not only make new discoveries but to lead my own team. I don't know when I'd have that chance again," the doctor countered.

"If Dr. Aridana believes you are ready to lead a team now, should you chose to stay aboard the Tempest and acquire further knowledge of Heleus, it would only make you a stronger candidate in the future, would it not?" the AI innocently asked.

The doctor hated to admit it, but SAM had a point. As she tried to come up with a counter argument, another thought popped into her mind.

"What would be your projection on how long Ryder could be in the field?"

"Calculating family history, conditioning, age, rate of injury, and mental stability it is likely the Pathfinder will be able to sustain field work for another twenty five years," he quickly replied.

The answer was like a punch to the gut. Of course Suvi knew Ryder would be a Pathfinder for the foreseeable future, but worrying about whether she would come home at night for the next twenty or so years seemed daunting, even for the doctor. Then again, if Suvi left the Tempest, there was no guarantee she'd still be with Ryder twenty years from now, and that thought more than anything cut the deepest.

"However," SAM began to say, "In comparison to other notable N7 and Specter agents, it is more likely that the Pathfinder will be promoted to a leading position within the next ten years."

"Thanks, SAM," Suvi mumbled as she once again stared down into the gardens below.
Hesitating once more before finally heading for the steps, the doctor took several deep breaths to calm her nerves. It only took her a few minutes of walking the garden path before a familiar voice rumbled near by. Cautiously approaching the entrance of the secluded seating area Ryder and Drack commandeered, the doctor made sure to keep her distance and wait for the opportunity to announce herself.

"So," the krogan huffed.

Ryder turned and sarcastically responded, "So?"

"You gonna talk about the Doc leaving or are we all gonna pretend that didn't happen?"

The Pathfinder smirked as she said, "Since you're giving me a choice, how about the latter."

"Didn't take you for a coward," Drack huffed.

"What did you say?" Ryder's voice was low and threatening.

The krogan casually shrugged and said, "You heard me."

"I'm not the one leaving," the Pathfinder quickly snapped.

"You don't know that she is," Drack countered.

Ryder was silent but Suvi could see the tension in her shoulders.

"She should," the Pathfinder's voice was surprisingly quiet as she continued, "Science has always been her first love. I can't compete with it."

It took all of Suvi's strength not to run into the garden and yell at Ryder that she loved her and wanted to be with her, science be damned.

"Besides," the younger woman sighed before sitting down. "I know what this opportunity means to her. This is why she came to Andromeda. What kinda girlfriend would I be if I didn't let her go to pursue her dream?"

"You'd be a selfish jerk, which thankfully, you're not," Drack joked.

Silence fell between them as the krogan carefully watched Ryder. Meanwhile, Suvi tried to desperately get her heart to stop hammering in her chest. Closing her eyes, the doctor concentrated on breathing and reminded herself that she was eavesdropping and should probably announce her presence, but her feet wouldn't move.

"So, kid, what's really got you wound up?"

Ryder continued to look at the ground as she admitted, "You know I don't sleep well when I'm away from her."

Drack only nodded.

"I'm sure I could work through that," she quietly continued, "But when we're out there in the thick of it, the only time we have to just be us, are those few moments before bed and in the morning."

With a frustrating huff, Ryder pushed herself off the bench and started pacing.

"I've seen my friends try the long distance thing, it doesn't work."
Drack grunt, "If you want it to work, it'll work."

"You got a girlfriend on Elaaden I don't know about?" The Pathfinder's sarcasm returned.

The krogan chuckled, "Wouldn't you like to know."

"I'm sure a certain asari physician would," the human quickly countered.

Once again the pair locked eyes to see who would back down first.

"This ain't about me," Drack's voice was low and confident.

His words seemed to crack the Pathfinder's stubborn façade.

"What do you want me to say?" Ryder couldn't hide the hint of anger in her voice.

"The truth, kid. Simple as that."

Her mouth opened to respond but then closed. Suvi held her breath as she waited to hear what was truly causing Ryder so much angst.

"What if she forgets about me?"

The question was so softly asked the doctor almost missed it, but she saw Drack give an understanding nod.

"I'll be gone for weeks at a time," Ryder continued, "She'll got lost in her work, probably forget to eat."

Suvi could see a smile playfully tug at Ryder's lips as her eyes glazed over, lost in a memory perhaps.

"I can just see it now. She'll probably run over some poor soul fresh out of a cryo pod when she's pacing with her head buried in a data pad," the young woman mused.

Drack chortled, "Or when she's in the middle of a conversation and stops because she's had an idea."

"Like that time at lunch when we were going over some of the early vault scans and she just got up and walked away without saying anything," Ryder happily said.

"But then she came back thirty minutes later and asked where everyone went," Drack added.

The doctor smiled in the shadows as she remembered her earlier days on the Tempest, her excitement to be off the Nexus overshadowing her insecurity about being assigned to the Pathfinder's team. Little did she know how much the assignment would change her.

The lighthearted tone of Ryder's voice shifted to sadness again as she said, "We'll try and talk every day then something will come. She'll have a meeting; I'll be trapped in a vault. Now we're just trying to talk at least a few times a week. The Tempest will get pulled onto another assignment and now I won't see her for another month. She'll get upset, I'll get upset, and within a half a year we've drifted apart."

Suvi felt a panic seep into her bones as the Pathfinder laid out the very real possibility of what their interactions would become should the doctor leave the Tempest. Suddenly the question Ryder had whispered earlier floated back into Suvi's mind.
"What if she forgets about me?" the doctor muttered to herself.

Drack's voice pulled Suvi back from her dark thoughts as he said, "I can't tell ya what to do, but I can tell ya what I've seen in all the years I've been around."

The doctor felt herself lean forward with anticipation.

"I've seen beings who had no business being together, live that happily ever after crap from your horrible Earth movies."

Ryder made a sound somewhere between choking and a laugh.

"I've also seen couples who were so perfect for each other it made me want to puke, but in the end they drifted apart or inflicted the most pain on one another," he continued. "You and the Doc remind me of those beings who have no business being together."

"What? Why?" the Pathfinder quickly asked.

"Because you look at the Doc and think she deserve some nice sweet scientist who can understand all the big fancy words she likes to use," the krogan simply stated.

Ryder laughed, "Yeah, I have no clue what she's saying half the time."

"So why do you keep trying to understand her?" he asked.

The question caught the Pathfinder off guard as she paused to think about it.

"I dunno," Ryder said with a shrug of her shoulders before adding, "I love the way her face lights up when she talks about her recent discovery. How she slips into her accent just a little more because she's talking so fast. Most of the time I just sit there and nod . . . I dunno, I guess, I'm just happy when she is."

"Even when we're out on a mission and you only get to chat with her on comms.?"

Ryder's eyes held a hint of sadness but also affection as she answered, "Sucks not being able to see her, but I'm happy knowing she's safe and doing what she loves."

The comment hung in the air a moment before the Pathfinder's face went flat as she said, "I see what you did there."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he grumbled innocently.

"Mmm hmm," Ryder hummed then asked, "So you look at Suvi and think she deserves a sweet scientist, what about me?"

Drack cocked an eyebrow as he asked, "What about you?"

"Who do you think I should be with?"

"No one, 'cause you're nuts."

Soon the conversation turned into an insult contest and the doctor's feet finally started to move again, but they carried her away from the garden's entrance. Listening to Ryder's anxieties, knowing many reflected within the doctor's own heart was comforting and troubling. How could the Pathfinder think she would forget her so easily? Or believe anyone else could capture her heart and soul with the same intensity as Ryder had done? Suvi needed to find solace to sort out all the
conflicting emotions warring within her.

The sound of rushing water caught her attention. She followed it to the source and was greeted with the majestic view of a waterfall. The moonlight reflected off the wall of water as it cascaded down into the pool in front of her. The mist off the water was soothing and reminded Suvi of home. Closing her eyes, her mind drifted to her family.

"So yer actually going," her father's voice echoed as the memory of the night she told her family she was leaving for Andromeda came to mind.

"Think of all the undiscovered science," Suvi excitedly said.

Her father smiled and replied, "Aye, but think of the adventure."

The young woman bristled, "I won't have time for that."

"My little Suvi," her mother lovingly started, "All the discoveries in the world will mean nothing, if ye don't have someone to share it with. Yer embarking on the most amazing adventure. Don't limit yourself to labs and reports. See the galaxy with yer own eyes."

"And lick every rock in sight."

As the memory faded away, a tear escaped down Suvi's cheek. Her parents had given her that advice over six hundred years ago, though to her it felt as if it had just happened.

"Suvi?"

Suddenly the one person she had been trying to see all day was now the one person she was trying to avoid, at least in this vulnerable moment. Keeping her back to Ryder, the doctor took a moment to compose herself. Her hesitation in replying must have caused the Pathfinder some concern because the doctor suddenly felt herself pulled into a crushing embrace.

"I'm sorry," Ryder whispered as she held onto Suvi.

She could feel the Pathfinder kiss her head as she continued to whisper, "I'm an idiot for reacting that way."

As Suvi pulled back to look at her partner, she felt the Pathfinder's thumb gently brush away the tear that had streaked down her cheek. The doctor took a moment to regard Ryder; fear, worry, and hints of sadness all visible in those beautiful blue orbs.

"Talk to me," the Scot breathed as she cradled her love's face, forcing the Pathfinder to keep eye contact.

"I . . . " Ryder tried to speak but stopped.

Suvi could see the vulnerability in her eyes, but for some reason the Pathfinder refused to articulate it.

Looking down, Ryder stepped back and mumbled, "I'm sorry."

"Ryder!" Suvi snapped with surprising authority.

The Pathfinder almost looked scared at the aggression coming off of the doctor as she mumbled, "What?"
With frustration, Suvi turned away and angrily said, "Ye can talk to Drack but not me."

The doctor waited for some sarcastic reply but when none came, it caused her to turn and look back at Ryder. Her eyes focused on the waterfall, the Pathfinder appeared to struggle with how to respond.

She finally whispered, "I was scared."

Suvi felt a weight lift off her shoulders as she quickly closed the distance between them. This moment was too important for her not to lay it all on the line. Taking hold of the Pathfinder's waist, she pulled her close and used her finger tips from her other hand to gently turn Ryder's head to face her.

"That's alright, love," she whispered adoringly.

Shaking her head, Ryder huffed, "No, it's not!"

She tried to break away from Suvi's hold, but the doctor wouldn't release her.

"Let me go."

"Tell me why it's not okay," the doctor insisted.

"Because," Ryder desperately exclaimed.

Suvi shook her head, as she pushed, "That's not a reason."

"Suvi."

"Tell me why it's not okay," she continued to push realizing she might be jeopardizing her relationship.

Ryder ripped herself out of Suvi's grasp and yelled, "Because you didn't fall in love with some vulnerable asshole who doesn't have her shit together!"

The heartbreaking truth lay bare before the doctor. The Pathfinder refused to meet her eyes as silence engulfed them.

The Scot's voice was soft and unflinching in its conviction, "I fell in love with all of ye, Ryder."

The younger woman still looked distraught and kept her distance.

"I love how strong ye are for everyone else," Suvi continued, "I love the compassion and empathy you feel for those you're responsible for."

She took a hesitant step forward, "I could never think ye were week, because I watch ye sacrifice yer self everyday for everyone else."

Ryder finally glanced up and Suvi could see her words were starting to work.

"But I want to be the one you confide in," the doctor breathed as she once again entered the Pathfinder's personal space. "I want to be the one who holds you and comforts you."

Their lips nearly brushed each other as the doctor said, "I want to be yer everything."

Suvi was about to lean forward and capture the Pathfinder's mouth when Ryder gently pulled back
and murmured, "You are."

For a moment, the world came to a stand still as all noise faded away except the quickened intake of the doctor's own breathe. This would be the moment she would reference the rest of her life. When she knew she'd never love another as much as she loved Ryder. Standing beside a moonlit waterfall on an alien world, it seemed she had taken her parents advice after all. She'd found the one to share the adventure with.

Their lips crashed together in a kiss fueled by anxieties and fears, but with the intensity of their love. It stole Suvi's breath away, leaving her panting and wanting more. Something in her snapped, something primal and instinctual. Tonight, the doctor would be the hunter and Ryder her pray. She would show with every caress and every whimper the depth of her feelings. When the sun rose there would be no doubt in the young woman's mind of Suvi's unyielding love and devotion.

One hand wove around Ryder's waist before squeezing her ass, while the other hand searched for the zipper of the Pathfinder's dress. Suvi's lips moved to Ryder's neck as she let her teeth drag across the delicate skin.

"I want you," Ryder murmured, "Let's go back to the – "

The doctor cut her off with another searing kiss, as her fingers finally found the zipper.

"Suvi, what are you – "

Once again, she used her lips to cut the Pathfinder off before whispering, "I can't wait."

She stopped briefly to look at Ryder, letting her see the unadulterated lust in her eyes. A playful smile took hold of the Pathfinder and she gave a small nod of understanding before she let her dress fall to the ground.

"Beautiful," Suvi breathed as she let her hands roam free over the newly exposed skin of her love.

"Yes," Ryder stated confidently before adding, "You are."

Letting her fingertips glide over the Pathfinder's swollen lips, Suvi hummed at the compliment.

"Think I'm a little over dressed," she teased while turning her back to the Pathfinder.

Ryder's steady hands quickly found the zipper to the dress and slowly began to pull down on the item, in a clear attempt to torture Suvi. Yet, once the dress slid off of the doctor, she could hear the Pathfinder's sharp gasp.

"Doctor Anwar, you seem to be missing some undergarments," Ryder pretended to sound concerned.

Suvi seductively turned so that the Pathfinder could see her naked body. She took great pride in watching Ryder's eyes rake over her and felt a spike of pleasure shoot through her when the Pathfinder licked her lips. The doctor placed a hand on Ryder's stomach as she began to carefully navigate them to the water.

The pair continued to kiss and caress each other as they moved closer to the water, with Suvi swiftly discarding Ryder's thong along the way. Soon they were waist deep in the cool liquid when the doctor felt a sudden urge to dunk the Pathfinder. She waited for Ryder to move her hands back up to her breasts then swiftly used the leverage to sweep the Pathfinder off her feet and into the water. Her giggles echoed off the water as she moved away from Ryder and closer to the waterfall.
When Ryder reemerged from the water she quickly went on the attack and started to splash the doctor. Suvi didn't realize it, but the Pathfinder was working her back towards the waterfall. It wasn't until the cold mist started to sprinkle her back, she even registered it was so close, and that moment's hesitation gave Ryder her opening. Closing the distance between them in a few strides, the Pathfinder planted a hungry kiss on the doctor before she tackled her into the water. Suvi couldn't help but smile as they continued the kiss underwater.

When they returned to the surface, to their surprise, they discovered they were now in an alcove behind the waterfall. Giving the pair privacy from prying eyes. For a moment they enjoyed the beautiful view from behind the waterfall. However, the doctor's gaze was soon pulled to the Pathfinder's glistening body. Ever so slowly, Suvi began to kiss and lick the water off Ryder's neck. A soft hum of pleasure rumbled in her ear, alerting her that she had the Pathfinder's attention.

She felt Ryder's hand cup her breast and fondle her nipple, the sensation almost distracting her from her mission. To help her focus, she gave the Pathfinder a few smile bites to the collarbone. However, the action seemed to only fuel her partner's need even further as Ryder's grip on Suvi's ass tightened before she pinned the doctor to the smooth rock wall behind them.

"Fuck, I want to feel you," Ryder huffed as she grinded her hips into Suvi's.

Not wanting to lose the upper hand, the doctor threw her knee up between the Pathfinder's legs then used the distraction to roll her along the wall until Ryder was pressed against it.

Suvi breathed, "Yer mind tonight."

She dipped her head down and took one of Ryder's nipples in her mouth. Gently sucking and tugging it while her hand guided one of the Pathfinder's legs to wrap around her waist. Suvi could feel Ryder's nails dig into her back before weaving into the doctor's hair.

The Scot's mouth trailed back upwards, while her hand slipped between her and Ryder. Her fingers stroking the inside of the Pathfinder's thigh, then the hip joint connecting the leg to her groin. Suvi finally felt Ryder's hips twitch when her fingers found their mark.

Fervently kissing the Pathfinder, the doctor used the brief moments they broke for air to whisper, "Tell me the truth."

She maneuvered her hand in a way that caused a moan to escape Ryder's lips.

"Do ye want me to stay?" she breathlessly murmured in the Pathfinder's ear.

The doctor's hips began to move to the rhythm of Ryder's, both sharing in the pleasure, but Suvi was determined to get an answer out of her love. With a slight curl of her fingers she felt the Pathfinder bucks against her.

"Suvi," Ryder groaned.

Stealing the breath from the Pathfinder with a rough kiss, Suvi used light pressure from her palm to illicit another moan of pleasure.

"Please," the young woman panted.

Kissing Ryder's ear, the doctor's voice dropped as she groaned, "Do ye want me to stay?"

"I – I – want you to be happy," came the ragged reply.
Not satisfied, the doctor began to slow her movement down, knowing it would frustrate her partner.

Ryder growled, "Suvi!"

The kiss the Pathfinder planted on her nearly caused the Scot to forget what she was doing in the first place. Her own body screaming at her to find a release, but somehow she found the strength to keep herself and Ryder right on the edge.

"Do ye want me to stay?"

Suvi rolled her hips just enough to cause another shiver of pleasure to roll through them.

"God," Ryder breathed, "J-just– h-happy."

The doctor's voice was almost desperate now as her body started to move on it's own, overriding her.

"Please," she begged between breathes, "Tell me."

She could feel Ryder's body tighten around her fingers, knowing her release would only be moments away. In that heartbeat of clarity, before one falls of the ledge and into the abyss of pleasure, Suvi found Ryder's eyes.

"Stay," the words were chocked out before the Pathfinder's head flew back in a cry of ecstasy.

Suvi found her own small release moments later, and when they had both come down from the high of their lovemaking, she found her forehead pressed against Ryder's.

"Stay," Ryder softly repeated before capturing the doctor's lips.

The simple word became the Pathfinder's mantra the rest of the evening as they somehow made it back to their assigned quarters without anyone seeing them soaked and only half dressed. Their clothes quickly discarded on the floor the moment their bedroom door locked. Ryder pinned Suvi to the bed and started to worship every inch of her body.

In between every kiss and caress, the Pathfinder whispered, almost in reverent prayer, "Stay."

Even as her face took up position between Suvi's thighs the doctor could faintly hear the word one more time before the Pathfinder's mouth became occupied sending wave after wave of pleasure through the doctor's body. Long into the night they continued to explored and ravish one another and when exhaustion finally over took them, Suvi couldn't help but feel sated to her soul.

An hour or so later when the rays of a new day began to peek through the closed drapes of their room, the doctor carefully extracted herself from Ryder to use the bathroom. Upon returning, her breath caught in her throat at the image waiting for her. Streaks of glowing light illuminated parts of the Pathfinder's body, the marks of their lovemaking beginning to fade from her skin. Something so simplistic and domestic and yet it reinforced what Suvi had concluded.

"SAM," she quietly whispered.

"Yes, Doctor?" he replied with the same volume.

With a smile, she softly said, "Please send a message to Dr. Aridana thanking her for the opportunity," she paused a moment, "But I will be staying in my current post, aboard the Tempest."

"Of course," the AI quickly said.
Carefully getting back into the bed, Suvi scooted closer to Ryder. Brushing several strands of hair from her face, the doctor happily sighed as she admired the women who had captured her heart. A memory came to mind from a month ago, the Pathfinder had finally been cleared to return to duty and the Tempest was leaving Meridian.

"Where to next?" Suvi had asked as the Pathfinder stood on the bridge.

A smirk formed on Ryder's lips as she flirtatiously said, "I'll take you anywhere you want to go."

"I go where the science is, as you know," the doctor replied with the same playful tone.

Looking out over the viewport, the Pathfinder gestured before saying, "Well, lucky you, Dr. Anwar, science is everywhere."

Suvi waited until Ryder's gaze had returned to her before saying, "Lucky me, indeed."

"Do I have to be here for this?" Kallo grumbled on the other side of the bridge causing the doctor to laugh.

Without missing a beat, the Pathfinder had turned and quipped, "Yeah, it's a tough life, buddy."

Kallo had grumbled something to the effect of, "Just go . . . pathfind."

Suvi couldn't help the smile that tugged on her lips at the memory. No being able to restrain herself, the doctor let her fingers tenderly caress the Pathfinder's face. Here with this amazing woman is where she belonged, and together they could face any challenge, discover the unknown and perhaps one day build a family. Ryder had been right, science was everywhere and as long as they were aboard this ship with this crew, the doctor knew her life would never be dull.

Deciding that Ryder had had enough of a nap, she began to let her hands wander, enjoying the feel of her lovers muscular body. The action soon earned her a lazy sigh.

"Mmm, feels nice."

Rolling the Pathfinder onto her back, the doctor whispered, "Ready for round two, love?"

One eye peeked out from behind closed lids before Ryder murmured, "On one condition."

Propping herself up on one elbow, Suvi arched an eyebrow as she asked, "What?"

Reaching out to cup her face, Ryder pulled her back down so that their faces were only a breath apart.

"Stay."

And so they began their day in the same manner they had ended the previous night. Tangled in each other's embrace, whispering words of love and devotion. Light years away from earth, humanity, and all she had known, Suvi had found home in the arms of a Pathfinder.

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