### Among Other Things

**Rating:** Explicit  
**Archive Warning:** Graphic Depictions Of Violence  
**Category:** F/M, M/M  
**Fandom:** Mass Effect: Andromeda  
**Relationship:** Female Ryder | Sara/Reyes Vidal  
**Character:** Female Ryder | Sara, Reyes Vidal, Vetra Nyx, Nakmor Drack, Lexi T’Perro, Kian Dagher, Keema Dohrgun, SAM (Mass Effect), Jaal Ama Darav, Gil Brodie, Sloane Kelly  
**Additional Tags:** Sass and Sarcasm, shameless flirting, Ryder needs a vacation, Kadara smells, There will be booty calls, spoilers--obviously, Coffee Addiction, Slow Burn, Reyes swears off dangerous women, lol because that would ever work, Kissing, Friends With Benefits, Vigorous coffee, Smut, oh look there's smut now, like I promised, also now a reference to Liam's gross couch!, Seriously that couch freaks me out  
**Series:** Part 1 of Low Ryder  
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**Summary**

Violet Ryder isn't fond of most things about Kadara, but flirting with Reyes becomes a fun pastime. Thankfully, she doesn't need to trust him in order to appreciate his humor...among other things.

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**Notes**

So I'm attempting a longer fic with regular chapters. New territory for me. Shall we see how it goes? Updates as I get them, but most likely weeklyish?

Story follows canon to start with, with embellishments, and will diverge to wherever my brain eventually takes this.

edit: My VERY good and talented friend did some art of Violet for me a while back, and gave me permission to share. So if any of you are curious as to what Vi-Vi looks like in the face (I sometimes forget character description...) you can check it out.


A lovely reader, Erica, also made me art! I'm sobbing. You spoil me!
https://ericaangelaart.tumblr.com/image/170301744855
Drinks are on Pathfinder

Oh shit, she’s young.

Reyes wished he wasn't already on approach, but he didn't anticipate the need to compose himself. This was supposed to be a quick business meeting, a nudge to get the Pathfinder off on the right direction through his Resistance contacts, and to size her up to see if she was worth working for other angles, another possible tool for his toolkit. He just never expected her to be so...supple.

She lounged against the bar in a beaten leather jacket and jeans stuffed into a pair of boots that had seen better days. Long, lean legs. The clothes hid most of her framework, but he imagined combat training honed every unseen inch. A mess of dark hair was worn swept back from her face, accentuating the cut of her cheekbones and jawline.

If he was a normal man approaching a normal woman in a bar, he’d have bought her a drink and tried to hit on her. Damn, but he expected the Pathfinder to be a crusty old war vet. By all accounts, she got shit done with brutal efficiency. He’d imagined a hardass, not unlike Sloane.

He didn't have time to stand and gawk. He already reached the bar. If he didn't say anything, he lost an opportunity for a smooth opener.

“You look like you’re waiting for someone.” Habit blessedly carried him forward. He gestured to Umi, who already had his drink poured when he set foot in the bar. She looked pissed, but he was beginning to believe that was just her face. Taking the second drink, he offered it to the Pathfinder, trying not to choke on his own tongue. His future rode on this meeting.

She took it without hesitating, one perfectly arched eyebrow raising a fraction. “I’ve got time for a drink.”

Damn, but how old was she? Twenty? Twenty-five? Probably a decade between them, give or take.

Not his priority.

He threw back the shot, letting the burn settle his nerves. No hitting on Pathfinders. Bad Reyes.

If he didn’t get to business, he would end up trying to convince her to head back to his place. The Collective was worth more than five minutes wrapped around the Pathfinder. He'd spent the last year of his life carving out these opportunities. His careful network was slowly building into a movement and if he could use her to undercut Sloane even a fraction, he could finally pull the last pin and make his bid for Kadara.

“Shena, but you can call me Reyes,” he drawled. “I hate codenames.” He reached out to take her hand. A lot could be learned from a handshake.

He expected her youth to work against her. That young with that much power? He prepared to feel his bones grind under an overzealous grip. The handshake, interestingly, was firm, but brief. The kind that stemmed from a quiet confidence, like she had nothing to prove. It actually put him more on edge. She would be easier to manipulate with a chip on her shoulder.

“Violet.” She swept him with a critical gaze, apparently finding him lacking. “I was expecting someone more...angaran.”

He chuckled. “Sorry to disappoint. The Resistance pays me to supply information. Among other
“things.”

“So you’re a smuggler.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Smuggler among a den of outcasts and miscreants? Such a cliche,” she shot back with a wicked curve to her lips.

It was difficult not to slip into a rhythm of banter, which suited to settle him more. She needed to view him like everyone did. A quick, greasy talker with more words than brains, the guy who squeezed by on luck and bluster. “Calculating” was not a trait he showed the world. Everyone underestimated Reyes, just the way he wanted them to.

He leaned his weight the bar with lazy posture, grinning idly. “We can’t all be as original as a Pathfinder. Some of us have to travel more familiar roads to make it in the world.”

“What fun is surviving if you never bother to live a little along the way?”

The corners of his mouth perked. He wasn't sure what to make of her yet, but damn, he appreciated her delivery. “We don’t all have that luxury, Pathfinder.”

She shrugged. “I guess not, but that’s why I’m fixing all this shit, isn’t it?”

“Is it?”

“Worlds easier to survive on will make for better living for all. Even this shithole.”

“Hey now, this is home!” he laughed, surprisingly pleased every time a vulgar word passed from her lips.

“Did I hurt your feelings?” she crooned, rolling a sarcastic smile his direction.

His heart gave a little, excited lurch. He would sell his soul to have her smile sarcastically at him for the rest of his life. Unfortunately, he also felt other things twitching with interest and didn’t need to call that kind of attention to himself. Not to mention, he needed to stop making the habit of learning this lesson the hard way. Dangerous women would be his downfall. Zia had gotten under his skin in a bad way. If she hadn't tipped her hand as to the true purpose of her seduction--he still hadn't found his ship, or it's contents--he had every intention of revealing his identity as the Charlatan. He was sworn off of cunning women since that debacle. Dumb broads only.

Eager to get to the real purpose for this meeting, he motioned her away from the bar and headed to the rail that overlooked Kadara Port, just out of earshot of Umi or any other prying ears.

“Your man--Vehn Terev--was arrested by Sloane Kelly, leader of the Outcasts. Word spread about what he did to Moshae Sjefa. The people are calling for his execution, and Sloane...she’s a woman of the people.”

“She should have that stitched into her flag. She can wave it next to the piked heads,” Violet snorted.

That might have been funnier if he didn't think Sloane capable of it. Violet herself didn't seem so amused by the quip, which was probably for the best. Caution would keep her alive in a place like this.

“She won’t give Vehn up easily to you.”
She shrugged. “Don't worry about me. I’ve got my sparkling personality to get me by.”

“As easily as that worked on me, Sloane was part of the uprising on the Nexus. You working for the Initiative won’t inspire any friendship from her.”

“I don’t need her friendship. I need her cooperation.”

The little smile that strayed to her lips was nothing short of unnerving, but nobody forced the Queen of Kadara to do anything. On the other hand, it might be fun to see someone with the Pathfinder’s clout put her in her place. Fun in theory, doubtful on execution, although Violet’s reputation did precede her quite impressively.

“I’ll leave how you drum up that cooperation to you,” he declared, doing little to hide his amusement.

Bracing her forearms against the rail, Violet squinted out across the hazy Kadaran landscape. “I can deal with assholes. I work for Tann, remember? I’m thinking about making it part of my official job description. Pathfinder, Professional Asshole Handler.”

It took a serious effort not to burst out laughing. Damn, but he liked this one. “Doesn’t seem like the sort of message Tann would want to imply from the Initiative.”

“I don’t know. I think if Tann had his asshole handled a little more often, half this mess could have been avoided.”

Reyes then did laugh out loud. Shit, but this woman was going to be a danger. He had to bring the conversation back to business.

“We’ll see what we can do about Vehn. You work Sloane. I’ll talk to the Resistance.” He pried himself away before he did something stupid, like implying that he wouldn’t mind if she handled his asshole a little. Not the usual opener he used on attractive women.

He almost made it halfway across the bar before she called after him.

“How do I contact you in case things go south?”

Violet, in possession of his direct line? Not likely. He winked and moved on. His people would handle coordinating their meetings, if further interaction was required, or she could use those pathfinding skills of hers to track him to the club.

Just as he reached Kralla’s exit and the doors whisked open to him, he heard the faint trill of Umi bitching at the Pathfinder to pay for the drinks.

Shit.

He’d stiffed her with the bill. A dick move that fit his character and image, but, at least in this instance, one that had been entirely unintentional. He was too far out the door to make a graceful return, so he let it stand, hustling before Violet could decide to make him pay her back. Way to endear himself to her.

He caught a ride to the slums and made a beeline for the Tartarus where Keema waited for him to report in. Kian already had a drinks waiting for them in the upstairs room.

“How’d it go?” the angaran asked, halfway through a scungy looking beer her people preferred.
He dropped down into the booth next to her, extending his legs out with a long sigh and grabbing the
more human-appealing beer that waited on the table, condensation beaded along the glass.

“We'll see if that reputation holds after she meets with Sloane. She's got her work cut out for her.
Sloane is going to hate her.”

“Sloane hates everybody.”

“She's young, she's pretty, and she's sarcastic. Trust me, Sloane is going to have a special hate for
this one. Let's hope our new friend is as good at delivering as everyone says she is.”

He would have liked to see how her meeting with the Outcast queen went, but the woman was
creeping from cautious to paranoid and had all recording devices banned from her throne room to
ensure privacy. He regretted losing his surveillance there. He still had eyes and ears present part of
the time, but not for any of the important meetings.

“Our new friend?” Keema quoted blandly.

He tipped the beer up to his lips. “It's good to have friends.”

She eyed him suspiciously. “What are you planning?”

Planning wasn't the right word. With the Pathfinder here, things would start changing in real time.
He had to be ready to adapt to the situation, to jump on opportunities as they presented.
Unfortunately, his moves during this juncture would be primarily reactive to whatever appeared.

“There's plenty of trouble around Kadara Port for a model citizen such as her to stumble into. The
Outcasts are a messy organization. Maybe with a few nudges…”

“So you want to use her.”

For a moment, images of how he’d really prefer to use her flashed across his mind. Tangled in
sheets, hands locking her wrists against the mattress, sweat slick between their bodies…

No. Business first. He could jerk off to the idea of getting friendly with the Pathfinder later.

“You know me, Keema. I’m a connoisseur of opportunities. Nobody’s going to like the Initiative’s
lapdog poking around Kadara Port and cleaning up the badlands. She’s going to be short on friends.
Offers for mutual assistance are going to be slim.”

“Let’s hope her standards are low.”

He toasted her to that.

“You know what would really piss Sloane off?” Keema mused. “Get her on those Roekaar murders.
Sloane is a woman of the people, and people are dying. You want to prove she's incompetent, have
the Pathfinder solve this before she can.”

It was a thought. Any way to cut out her respectability was good in his book. The only thing he
didn’t have was hard evidence that the Roekaar were behind it, and no real way of gathering it.

“And you're certain it's the Roekaar.”

“You're not the only one with contacts, Reyes.”

It wasn't a half-bad plan if it panned out. Violet would get to play hero, he would get to play helpful
bystander, and Sloane would get to play inadequate leader.

“I’ll have her check out Zear. Nobody has gotten around to checking out the scene, so as long as
scavs haven’t gotten to it, her AI should have plenty of evidence to assemble. And send me the
packet you’ve put together on the other victims. I want to look it over before I start pointing a loaded
Pathfinder and pull the trigger.”

Keema nodded, tipping her glass back and finishing her beer in a few, quick swallows. “I have to get
back to Sloane,” she said, making as if to stand.

“Do enjoy yourself.”

She snorted and strode out of the lounge.

Reyes sent out a note to his team to find people to tail the Pathfinder and report her movements using
the usual encrypted dropbox. His agents all had datapads that they could leave messages on, which
would then transmit to his device. The signal couldn’t be tracked, although he wondered if the
Pathfinder’s AI might be strong enough. He would be careful to misdirect her enough that they
wouldn’t have to put it to test. It might be worth noting that lying directly to her may have
consequences, if that SAM unit of hers was powerful enough for some casual, biometric scanning.

After he got the chance to look over Keema’s compiled evidence, a coordination of supplies being
smuggled into the slums by his people that evening kept him busy, so he could only keep half an eye
on the messages about the Pathfinder as they began to ping on the datapad. The people of Kadara
were always in need, and the Collective was happy to lend a friendly hand. Sloane was new at
leading. She hadn’t yet learned about the untapped potential of the seemingly powerless. The more
he undermined her influence on those who chafed the most under her stranglehold, the more her
pillars of salt and sand eroded away from under her.

As the operation wrapped up, goods and filtered water delivered to those in need, he learned that
Violet spent some of the day wandering the market by herself. A bold move, although he might have
liked to see security vids of any idiot dumb enough to tangle with her. Even unarmed, he couldn’t
help but think back to his first assessment of her. Lithe, but powerful.

As if by divine providence, she stopped at the scene of a fresh angara murder near Kralla’s song,
pausing to ask a few questions. The body was already in the midst of being moved and the scene
scrubbed clean. Sloane was in a fury, trying to keep the murders hushed up before panic spread in
the streets. Exiles and angara alike were cropping up dead. People saw it as Sloane’s responsibility to
put an end to it, and Sloane wasn’t making much headway in her own investigation.

Eventually, Violet was joined by a scarred up krogan and a turian. Not a dumb choice for
bodyguards, especially in this place.

Kian sent up more drinks to keep him satisfied while he worked, half monitoring the response from
his supplies delivery, half keeping tabs on the Pathfinder. Eventually, it became clear she was
heading for the slums, and then probably the badlands. Messages flooded in as she meandered about
the undercity, always flanked by her two friends, poking into back alleys and eventually making her
way to Tartarus.

He wrapped up his other business, in no mood for her AI to pick up traces of his activities. He
couldn’t say how powerful the SAM unit was, but accounts told of her hacking remtech. It spoke to
reason to err on the side of caution. He needed this woman, if not to trust him, at least not to suspect
him of being anything more than he appeared.
Friends in Low Places

Chapter Summary

Vi takes a tour of Kadara's underbelly and finds exactly what one can expect--a seedy lowlife operating a smuggling ring out of a shithole nightclub.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I swear, the longer we stay on this planet, the smellier it gets. It's like perpetually low tide,” Violet complained as she, Vetra, and Drack mounted the steps to the club they had been pointed to.

She didn’t know what Tartarus had to offer, but she wanted to explore Kadara Port’s seedy corners before heading into no-man’s-land to get her hands dirty. She didn’t like doing business in spaces unfamiliar to her. Maybe it was paranoia, but this seemed like the place where somebody hungry and stupid might try to get their luck smacking around a Pathfinder, and she didn’t want to accidentally end up corralled because she didn’t know the turf. It wasn’t that she feared for her life, but pummeling pitiful lowlifes wasn't how she got her jollies and was generally frowned upon, as if she wasn’t disliked enough in this miserable pisshole.

“Motivation number one for fixing the vault on this place,” Drack rumbled.

They all peered inside the club as the doors whisked open for them.

“I’m going to go walk around,” he said. “Get a feel for the place. Don’t forget, everybody’s armed here.”

“Maybe that’s why the dancers are in cages.” She glanced at a human girl grinding just inside the bars. “Not that bars are going to stop gunfire.”

The dancing cages created an interesting aesthetic. They looked like they might have been storage rooms or closets, repurposed with bars and locked entrances to keep drunks out--or dancers in? Her stomach twisted as she thought about having to dismantle a human trafficking ring on top of everything else. Everyone told her that the exiles weren’t her problem, but they were still people. She couldn’t sit back while innocents were preyed upon.

This place was going to fuck her sideways before it was through, she thought with a sinking stomach.

Vetra smacked her across the chest. “Let’s go grab a drink.”

“Think they make the beer with the water on this planet?”

“On second thought…” If turians could curl their lips, she could have sworn hers curled.

Violet let the idea of drinking go and instead gave herself a tour, prowling out the corners. The club didn’t have much to offer, but the sour scent of sweat and metal was better than the foul air outside. Anything was a reprieve from Kadara’s pungence. She wondered if half the patronage came in with similar opinions.
Drack circled back around to her, unimpressed by the club. “Nothing to note. Some drugs with questionable legality, plenty of booze, some awkward writhing you humans pretend is dancing.”

“Let’s not stay long. I’m over this city already.”

She only wanted a quick peek at the second level before heading out. They skirted a plume of dubious smoke billowing from one of the booths and meandered toward the exit nearest to them. At the last minute, she made a detour through a closed door that likely either led to bathrooms or a drug den, maybe a room for private dances. She was actually a little disappointed when it opened into an empty lounge containing a couple of long sofas and several tables on one side, vid screens suspended from the walls, a message terminal, and plenty of empty space. A single occupant sat on the long, stained couch, eyes on his omnitool display. He glanced up when she barged in, a quick smile flickering across his features. She came to about the same conclusion she did the first time she saw him. Dark hair, swarthy skin, caramel eyes, kind of shifty, kind of hot. Her not-so-angaran contact, Reyes.

“Ah, the Professional Asshole Handler. Looking for me?” he practically purred.

“Not particularly.”

His smile widened and closed the omnitool screen. “Come join me for a minute. I want to hear what you think of Kadara Port so far.”

“You run all your business out of the slums?”

“The farther from Sloane’s seat of power, the smaller the cut she tries to swipe. Besides, it’s not far from my home. I like the convenience,” he drawled with feigned disinterest. “Come sit. Who are your friends?”

“You know this dipshit?” Vetra grunted.

She took a few cautious steps into the room, but didn’t go so far as to sit and join him. “Reyes Vidal, this is my team, Vetra and Drack. Guys, this is my Resistance contact.”

“A pleasure.”

They muttered less enthusiastically.

Undeterred, he pressed on. “Are you finding all the adventure you hoped for? Kadara Port always delivers.”

“Plenty of bloodshed in the streets. Stepped over a brawl walking in, stepped over a corpse heading out,” she grunted.

His face fell slightly. “Oh. So you’ve heard about the murders, then.”

“Your resident Charlatan sounds like a charming fellow.”

His eyebrows twitched a fraction and he glanced between all of their faces. “The Charlatan? I doubt it. The Collective keeps it subtle, doesn’t leave bodies. Not in the middle of the street where anyone will stumble into them, anyway. Whoever is doing this is crying to be heard.”

It was hard to put motivations on any faceless organization, but Reyes was the local here, not Violet. Maybe it would pay to listen. She took a few more steps in, providing the smuggler with a fraction more attention.
“You think someone’s dropping the bodies for attention? Making a statement?” She cocked her head.

“A statement to who?” He asked as if he already knew the answer.

“Don’t bullshit me. If you have an idea of who’s responsible, maybe I can do something about it.”

Vetra rolled her eyes toward her. “Anything else you want to volunteer for?”

She elbowed her to shut her up. People were getting killed. It didn’t matter that it was exiles and angarans.

Reyes reclined back in his booth, grabbing his drink up with a lazy flourish. “Why don’t you and your friends have a seat, Pathfinder? Order some drinks.”

“Why don’t you tell me who you think is behind the murders, Vidal? Unless you have no idea and you’re just wasting my time.” She folded her arms and stood her ground.

He smiled. “You’re ruining my dramatic reveal, but I see you are not the type of woman who needs to be handled gently. I think it’s the Roekaar. I did some digging. Some of the victims are Outcast, and all angaran victims are vocal Milky Way sympathizers.”

“That is vaguely suspicious at best and I’m not taking out a basket of crazies in the badlands based on the gut feeling of a smuggler. There’s a fifty-fifty chance you just drank the water. What would Roekaar be doing in Kadara Port, anyway?”

He flourished a hand around. “Who do you think built this place, and ran it before the exiles showed up? All angara. I think the Roekaar thought they could recruit here, and now it’s come to this.”

“Do you have any evidence?”

“No, but that’s where you come in.”

“Lucky me,” she drawled flatly.

“Look, I tried to take this to the Resistance, but they won’t risk antagonizing the Roekaar. Fair enough, but the murders still need to be dealt with. Nobody else here has the tech for this level of analysis, but you do. You could use that fancy AI to scan for evidence to implicate the guilty party, and then those even fancier guns to make the problem go away.”

Violet considered the proposal, drumming her fingers on her thigh. It was yet another thing to add to the list, but people’s lives were at stake. As long as she was wading into the badlands beyond the mountain to begin with, what could it hurt to analyze a few crime scenes?

“This may be a good chance for you to win friends in Kadara Port,” Reyes pressed.

“I can make friends on my own.”

His eyes swept her lazily. “I don’t doubt that, but you should take what advantages you can. We don’t have the means to handle it ourselves.”

“Because you lack a motivated investigation force with adequate equipment.”

“Exactly.”

Something still didn’t add up. Either Reyes was super helpful with a paladin morality, or he had an
angle in this game. She couldn’t pin down what he got out of deploying the pathfinder to solve murders. Sure, Kadara was his home turf, but he didn’t seem like the type of guy to give that big of a shit.

“So what do you get from this?” she asked, hoping a direct assault might throw him enough to let it slip.

“I get safe streets and happy customers.” He folded his arms and leaned back in his chair.

“Happy customers?”

“People aren’t terribly willing to part with their credits when they’re dead. I have a broad customer base. Many of them worry that they have targets on their backs. If I can solve this problem for them, they will very grateful.”

It was probably as much as she was going to get from him. “All right, fine.”

He opened his omnitool. “I’ll send you the navpoint of one of the crime scenes. The neighbors don’t usually draw close, so there’s a chance they haven’t picked it clean yet. I wouldn’t advise dawdling, though. They figure out the place is undefended and they’ll strip it to the bones.”

“I guess we’ll take a look then, since I guess I’m a sucker enough to actually believe that you can’t do it without me.”

“Really, I couldn’t do it without your AI. You are a bonus.” His smile broadened, a dimple appearing at the corner of his cheek.

Little alarm bells started going off when he cranked up the charm, like she should know better than to trust it.

She gave him her most scathing side-eye. “After you stuck me with the bill on our first date? You’re lucky to have either of us.”

“I never promised to be a gentleman.”

“And I never promised to share the findings of my investigation.”

His eyelids dropped a fraction and his lips curved wickedly. “I’ll make it up to you, hermosa.”

Violet would put hard money down that his look and tone of voice had divested weaker men and women of their underwear and pride. She kept her poker-face sealed, interested in giving him no satisfaction that cheap tricks worked on her. She hoped the dilation in her pupils didn’t give her up, although she was certain that SAM logged an increase in pulse and respiration rate.

“You should be so lucky,” she shot back. She rocked backwards a step, beginning a calculated retreat before he could rope her into any more favors. “But I’ll check out your crime scene. And since you wouldn’t give me your contact specs, SAM, hack his omnitool and pull his info for me.”

“He has quite a sophisticated firewall, Pathfinder. Give me a moment.”

“I’ve got time.”

“All right, all right! Sending you my information,” he laughed, throwing up his hands in surrender. “You don’t need to force me. Just ask.”

“I’ll contact you when I have something.”
Glowing with amusement, he reached for his drink as she strode out, shoulders shaking with a few more silent laughs. The doors whisked shut behind her, cutting off the rest of his reaction. She probably shouldn't have indulged him so much. Her usual MO when being hit on by lowlife scumbags was to ridicule them into giving up. Next time. She didn't need him getting ideas about his odds.

She only addressed Vetra’s sarcastic looks when they exited the club, heading toward the gate separating the slums from the badlands. She threw up her hands in defense. “What? He was cute! Stop looking at me like that. It’s not like he has a real chance.”

“I didn’t like him. He’s got too much invested for the amount of dumb he sounds. He's got an angle.”

It was probably a fair assessment. She trusted Vetra’s read on the exiles more than anybody. It was half the reason she had her along on this venture.

“Then I promise not to flirt too hard.”

“Yeah, because your self-control has been extra-stellar lately.” If her tone got any more pointed, it would have stabbed her.

Violet had to admit, her track record the last few weeks wasn’t the cleanest. Fooling around with Liam hadn't been her shining moment. Unspoken rules dictated that crew members were strictly off-limits to sleep with, but shit, she was a walking stress bomb. Between Tann and Addison hounding her about settlements and kett and angaran relations, between battles and vaults and carving her way into hostile landscapes, all topped off with her brother’s coma, she needed to blow off some steam. Liam was attractive and kind of funny and available. It seemed like a simple thing.

Liam was also, apparently, uneducated to the definition of a one-night-stand. She’d spent the last two weeks avoiding his crushed puppy-eyes. Not so easy on a ship the size of the Tempest. She ended up more wound-up and frustrated than before she decided to sleep with him.

“Well, you better hope there’s a metric fuckton of pirates out there who need their asses handed to them, because mama needs to take the edge off.” She rolled her stiff neck as she checked her weapons at the gate, making sure they were loaded and ready.

“I wouldn’t worry, Kid. There’s been a neverending line of fuckups who want to try to make you dead since you arrived in Andromeda. Why do you think I hang around?” Drack rumbled.

“And that, ladies and gentlemen, was your daily dose of sunshine from our resident krogan.” She loaded a round into the chamber of her sniper rifle. “Let’s get to it.”

They headed out into the smelly wonderland that was Kadara. It was good to be out of the city. She had been watched literally everywhere she went. It didn't bother her so much, as she assumed it was Sloane’s people, but the constant feel of eyes on her left her uncomfortable and oily feeling. It would be good to shake it off and slide back into a familiar rhythm of exploring, hunting, and shooting. If only the planet didn't smell so bad.

Chapter End Notes

For the record, I adore Liam's character, but there was such a good opportunity there to make Violet cranky! Forgive me Liam! We're still friends, right?
The Scent of Kadara

Chapter Summary

Violet and her team head out to get the bottom of the supposed Roekaar murders with a little guidance from their well-intentioned smuggler.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Violet wanted a cup of coffee. She wanted to lounge in her room on the Tempest, fresh from a hot shower, with the scent of lavender and vanilla gently lulling her into relaxation, and a hot cup of java warm between her hands to sip as she zoned out in front of a vid and forgot all about being the Pathfinder.

Instead, she stared at the mangled, three-day-old corpse of a krogan. She had her helmet on, filters cranked to the max, and even then she was positive she could taste the metallic stench of rot on her tongue. As if Kadara didn't already smell bad enough.

“You never take me anywhere nice, Reyes,” she sighed as she stood over the body.

His laughter echoed through her comm. “You came to the wrong planet if you were looking for long walks on the beach.”

“Hey, a girl can dream.”

“Did your scanner pick up anything, yet?”

Sighing, she swept it around, done with her physical examination of the crime scene. She got everything from angaran footprints and blood, as well as a ceremonial angaran knife. Only an organized strike team could have taken out the krogan on his own turf. Outnumbered, outgunned.

“My money's on Roekaar. I'd like to hear what they have to say,” she agreed as she left the house.

She wished she could say that she stepped into fresh air, but it was Kadara. “Fresh” was relative. She rechecked her filters. Recycled air was better than the brimstone and sulfur of the planet. Maybe this place was hell.

“Good enough for me. Let's pay them a visit,” Reyes suggested.

“You already know where they are?”

“I wasn't sitting on my ass while you do all the work. I'm looking at the place. Terrible landscaping, but they get good light from the east.”

She had the feeling he had been sitting there the entire time, waiting for her to come to the same conclusion and get on board. She wondered what intel he'd withheld from her. There was no way he would gun so hard after the Roekaar based off a hunch--unless he was dumber than he looked. Either way, she was pretty sure the Roekaar were responsible, so it didn't matter.

“I'm on my way. Don't do anything until I get there.”
“And risk missing your beautiful face?”

“Yeah, if you can get her to pry that helmet off,” Vetra snorted as they loaded into the Nomad.

“Kadara smells like an asshole inside another asshole after fiery jalapeno burrito night. My helmet has filters.”

“You stop noticing it after a while,” Reyes promised, voice thick with amusement.

She set the coordinates he provided into her map. “Does the same hold true to your bullshit?”

“Ouch, Pathfinder.”

“We’re twenty-five minutes out. See you soon, Vidal.”

“It’s a date.”

“It’s only a date if we’re alone and there’s booze.”

“That can be arranged.”

Violet scoffed and cut off the transmission. From across the Nomad, the look Vetra fixed her with could have salted an ocean. This time, she ignored it. It felt good to flirt with someone other than her shipmates. Considering how flirting with them panned out, it was probably a hell of a lot safer. No proximity to make her think bad ideas were actually good, and she was allowed to shoot him if got handsy with her.

She elected to bypass a gunfight on her way over. Outlaw factions. She didn’t know and didn’t care. They were free to kill each other to their heart’s content for a little while longer. She could only handle one murderous gang at a time, and right now, the Roekaar held that winning lottery ticket. Cleaning up the mean streets was so far a bitch of an endeavor.

“So what happens when we get to this place and it turns out your friend screwed us over and it was a trap this whole time?” Drack mused out loud.

“Come on, is that even a question? We jam our shotguns up their asses and fuck them up. But keep my pretty smuggler alive. For interrogation reasons or something.”

“No promises if he points a weapon at me.”

“He’s a squishy little human. How much of a threat could that possibly be?”

He grunted approvingly. “You make an argument. What’s on your mind for that interrogation?”

Oh, the possibilities...

“Well, I’d probably still shove a shotgun up his ass and fuck him up, but I’d do it with flair and broadcast it live across Kadara so they know what happens to shitweasel traitors.”

“Now that’s something I’d watch,” Vetra giggled.

“We’d need popcorn.”

“And ryncol.”

Before arriving on Kadara, she and Vetra talked about assuming everyone was out to screw them
over and everything was a trap. Plenty of exiles would be gunning to take a shot at the Pathfinder. That wouldn't stop them from walking into said traps, but it did imbue her with a sense of caution. They didn't go anywhere on this planet without expecting the worst.

The coordinates brought them to a little prefab outpost built directly into the rock face of a hill. She assumed the complex wound into a cave within it, otherwise it wasn't much bigger than three hundred square feet. They approached cautiously, on the lookout for posted guards. It wasn't a place she particularly wanted to assault straight on. Strategically speaking, it was a smart hideout, easy to defend in a firefight.

“SAM, are you detecting any life up front?”

“No, Pathfinder.”

“What kind of military group doesn't post scouts?” She had a bad feeling about this.

“It is possible that Mr. Vidal already took care of the lookout while he was waiting for us.”

“Yeah, but then where is he?” She opened their comm channel. “Reyes, we just rolled up. What's the plan?”

Silence.

“My money’s on trap,” Vetra grumbled.

She didn't know what possessed her, but she decided to take that bet. “Twenty credits says you're wrong.”

The turian stared like she had lost her marbles. “This is definitely a trap, Vi.”

“I don't know. I think something else might be up.”

“Fine, but don't whine when you have to pay up and shove your shotgun barrel up your cute smuggler's ass on a livestream across Kadara.”

They shook quickly on it.

“As long as we get to kill something, that's payment enough for me,” Drack drawled, pumping a round into his shotgun.

They entered the front door without knocking. It delivered them into an empty front room with a single door leading back.

“No one here,” the turian trilled knowingly.

“I still detect no sign of Mr. Vidal. Shall we proceed without him?”

“You want in on the bet, SAM?” Vetra asked.

“I do not have enough information on him for predictive behavior analysis. Scans during our last encounter revealed he was either nervous, aroused, or both, but my scope of understanding is still too narrow and any guess would be, as you might call it, wild.”

Violet shook her head in amusement. “Come on, SAM. Live wildly, then.”

“Very well. Twenty credits says it's a trap. However, it's worth noting that I have no personal funds
of my own.”

“I think that means Violet will owe your portion.”

“Only if I lose. Now, can we go in?”

They didn’t get the chance to barge in, guns ablazing. The inner doors whisked open before they made it another step and four angarans, guns raised, hustled through. She, Vetra, and Drack were forced to throw their hands up in surrender, given no chance to retaliate. She wondered if they tripped a silent alarm or if their voices attracted the attention of the Roekaar inside. Or if they had been betrayed.

“Oh, hello there. Do you have time today to talk about our Lord and Savior today?”

The Roekaar weren’t amused. “Shut up. Farah will deal with you.”

“Can I leave you with a pamphlet?”

Vetra looked at her like she wanted to punch her.

They were disarmed and escorted through the door where the room opened into a yawning cavern where a small band of Roekaar had taken up residence with gear and weapons stashed long enough to keep them comfortable for a few months. She did a quick headcount. Eleven Roekaar in residence. Between the three of them, armed, that wasn’t a big deal. Disarmed, the odds swayed toward the angarans. Thank god for body armor.

They were prodded down a set of stairs into the cave where their leader strutted forward. The blue angaran looked like she could cheerfully eviscerate their entire crew with her fingernails. It was going to be one of those exchanges.

“I don’t need to tell you what happens next.”

Yep. Definitely going to be one of those exchanges.

Violet folded her arms, putting on a look of perfect boredom. Both Drack and Vetra arranged themselves on either side of her, but in arm’s reach of their guards. When the shooting started, they would disarm those nearest to them. Their body armor could take a couple of hits, but any more and the impacts would overwhelm them. They had to get themselves armed within the first few seconds of the fight, or they were well and truly fucked.

“Yeah, yeah, I get the picture. You kill me. You kill my friends. You paint your bodies with our blood and dance under a full moon. I have a few questions before we begin.”

“No.” She extracted a ceremonial knife, much like the one they found near the krogan corpse. “You’ll bleed, just like the others.”

Both Vetra and Drack tensed, waiting for her signal.

“So you confess? You’re behind the murders. Innocent people.”

Farah’s lip curled in a supremely human-like gesture. “Invaders and sympathizers are not innocent. I will protect my home.”

That was all she needed. A verbal confession tied the evidence together with a neat, little bow. It was a shame she couldn’t whip out some cuffs like in a cheesy cop vid and throw down a one-liner while
arresting the angara. Violet wasn’t eager to get to the fighting and killing. Without a doubt, she would be the first one they shot at.

But hey, maybe talking her way out was worth a go? “We are working it out with your people. You don’t need to fight a war on two fronts. We’ll work together.”

“Like here on Kadara?” she sneered. “Sloane crushes my people under her boot in her bid for power. She uses them and discards them like they’re disposable.”

Violet cringed. “Yeah, Sloane’s a super shitty example.”

Apparently that was as much as Farah was willing to give her, because she raised her gun to silence her once and for all. The second she moved, so did Vetra and Drack, exploding into motion and tackling the Roekaar nearest to them to rip the guns out of their stunned hands. The bullet Violet expected never came as the gun flew out of Farah’s hands and Reyes bounded down the steps to her defense, assault rifle spitting out a line of cover fire.

“You’re late!” she sang.

“You’ll see in--”

If he finished his thought, she never heard him, as Farah whipped back around with a fresh gun in her hands, jammed it against Violet’s chest, and pulled the trigger. A shotgun, she mused absently as her body flew backwards and the concussion popped her eardrums, even through the filters of her helmet. As her back hit the ground, a louder explosion rang out, ripping apart an ammo stash belonging to the Roekaar and adding fire to the mayhem. She let Vetra, Drack, and Reyes clean up from there, her lungs spasming in retaliation of the abuse. She’d once been hit by a pirate shuttle doing security on a Prothean dig. That hurt less than this.

As bullets whizzed overhead and her ears rang loudly enough to drown it all out, she barely managed to roll onto her side and crawl to the nearest corpse to pry a handgun loose from his belt, survival instinct overriding pain. Unfortunately, the man she chose to swipe from was still alive and took objection to the attempt to disarm him. He snatched the pistol back, engaging in a surprisingly childish tug-of-war with her. Releasing one hand from it, spitting vitriol with every breath, she punched him a few times, aiming for the fleshy neck flaps that seemed to be particularly sensitive on the angarans. The punches did the trick. She managed to wrest the pistol away from him, hooked her finger under the trigger guard, and began firing wildly. The first three shots missed over his shoulder as he steered the muzzle away from him, but the fourth grazed his scalp and the fifth blew out his eye socket. Brain and skull exploded over the ground away from him and that was when Violet learned that angarans were just as susceptible to bullets to the head as humans were.

Shoving the body away from her, she managed to get to her knees and help Vetra out picking off the remaining straggler. The last echoes of gunshots faded out to the back of the cave, leaving them a panting, gore-spattered mess, but universally alive.

Violet doubled over, clutching at her body armor with a long, emphatic, “Fu-u-uck.”

“You okay, Vi?” Vetra asked, heading over and prying her hands away to see the damage.

“My chest piece took the worst of it, but I’m going to be bruised to fuckall and back tomorrow. SAM?”

“Multiple, widespread contusions across your sternum and ribs. You will be sore, Pathfinder.”

“Yeah, no shit.” She swept an accusatory look toward Reyes. “And where the fuck were you? Why
didn’t you reply on the comms?”

He grimaced apologetically. “I was in a position where talking would have gotten me discovered prematurely.”

Gritting her teeth, hanging onto Vetra’s arm, she struggled to her feet. Adrenaline kept her moving for now, but she had been in this game long enough to know that she was in deep shit the second it wore off. She kept an arm crossed over her chest, putting pressure against her diaphragm to regulate her breathing.

“No the bright side,” she hissed, “it wasn’t a trap. You owe me twenty creds, V. Fuck that. You owe me forty. You can pay up for SAM’s portion.”

“Your AI bet against me?” Reyes huffed, rearing back. “And you...didn’t.”

“I’m a little disappointed it wasn’t a trap,” Drack admitted, picking over the bodies for anything useful and retrieving their confiscated guns. “I was looking forward to what she had in store for you if it was.”

Violet was in no mood to trade sass with any of them. “SAM, have Kallo ready for extraction. I want the fuck off this planet and the strongest cup of coffee in the system. I never thought I’d say this, but I miss Voeld.”

“Right away, Pathfinder.”

Voeld might be a frigid and miserable wasteland crawling with kett, but she was willing to risk a little frostbite to breathe freely again. Besides, kett were easier to kill. They were monsters, even if they had once been innocent angara. Here, the enemy tended to hit a little closer to home. Outcasts. Outlaws. Exiles. The lines were gray and blurry. They had all come to Andromeda together searching for something. How had they become so fractured so quickly?

Turning, she trudged toward the stairs that would deliver them out of the hideout. Each breath was a little more labored than the last. Lexi was going to pitch a fit when she saw her. A well-earned fit, but a fit nevertheless. Violet collected bruises as a hobby these days, but she imagined every inch of her chest was going to be black and blue before morning.

By the time she reached the top of the stairs, Reyes caught up for a word. “I do want to thank you for doing this for me. The streets are safe. Or, at least as safe as they ever are.”

She was pretty sure he was being charming again, and she was also pretty sure she didn’t care.

His tone sobered. “I’ll make sure all of the important people know who to thank.”

“Does his first name start with Reyes and his last name Vidal?”

“I’m not so greedy I can’t share credit when it’s due.”

“Your parents must be very proud.”

She hauled herself up the staircase, one laborious step at a time. Everything was starting to hurt. Couldn’t SAM have extended her with little jolt of epinephrine? She paused just within the inner door, rubbing her chest ruefully and catching her breath. Usually bullet impacts on her armor end up dispersed enough not to cause much damage, but a blast point blank had really done a number on her. What gun had Farah been using?
“You know, all things considered, this was kind of fun, Pathfinder,” Reyes purred, circling in just behind her.

“You weren’t the one who got shot.” She rubbed her chest again, looking forward to putting a cold pack on it.

“Let me know when you get back to Kadara. I’m interested in seeing what else you accomplish here.”

“And let me guess, you also want a cut if I find any success.”

“Maybe I just want good seats for the show.”

“Maybe I’ll believe that Sloane is hiding a soft, squishy center of love and bubbles.”

She caught a flash of his dimple and a wink before he nodded to her and headed out, back, she supposed, to whatever underhanded dealings usually kept him occupied. He had a land vehicle parked next to the Nomad he climbed into.

“Tempest inbound, Pathfinder,” SAM warned.

“Let Lexi know I’m her willing guinea pig if she can keep me from coughing up blood tomorrow.”

“She’s prepping the med bay.”

“Good.”

Violet limped her way back to the Nomad for pickup, crawling into the passenger side so someone else could drive. The Tempest arrived minutes later, dropping low enough to lower the ramp so they could drive straight into it. Lexi met her in the cargo bay.

“Be gentle, Lex,” she groaned.

The doctor pried off her chest piece to take a look. “Compared to a shotgun slug to your chest, anything I do will be gentle.”

That was less reassuring than she would have liked.

“How did it go?” she asked, taking scans right there in the nomad.

“Made a new friend.”

“Oh?”

“Uh-huh. My Resistance contact. Very amicable.”

“How quaint.”

She snorted. “Vetra thinks he’s super shady, but I don't know, he's also kind of sexy.”

“You think you can trust him?”

She discovered laughing hurt. A lot. “Hell no.” She tried to quit squirming for Lexi, rubbing her aching chest to ease the spasming. “I wouldn't trust him to tell me asari are blue.”

The doctor pried her hands away. “SAM, send me a time lapse of her lung function since impact.”
“Right away, Doctor.”

To Violet, she said, “Maybe he can be useful.”

“He's the only person who'll deal with me right now, so I guess we're stuck with him.”

“Let's move this to the medbay. I can't do all of my work in the Nomad.”

Nodding, she braced herself for the move. At least she got quite a bit accomplished. She wasn't BFFs with Sloane yet, but she found one monolith to correct, putting Kadara on the right track to clean water and air. She didn't know what it said about the planet that it would be easier for her to stabilize its environment than forge alliances with it's people.

Well, at least she had Reyes. He may be a weasling, second rate smuggler, but at least he gave her compliments and had a nice ass.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter we'll learn a little bit more about Reyes's business dealings and a bit more about his history with Zia.
Windows of Opportunity

Chapter Summary

The Tempest returns to Kadara and Reyes keeps a very close eye on things, waiting for just the right opportunity to present itself, all while juggling business as usual, of course.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Tempest was back in Kadara Port.

Reyes got the ping at three a.m. Disoriented, confused, he peered at the too-bright screen of his omnitool as his brain wound a languid, sleepy journey to comprehension. Usually, he turned off all but priority alerts while he slept. He kept tabs on too many situations that his inbox would keep him awake twenty-four/seven if he let it. Normally, nobody bothered him. Emergencies didn’t always have the good graces to occur during business hours, but the odds had been in his favor so far.

An arm slipped over his middle from the other side of the bed, startling him out of his fog. “Shit!” He flipped the blanket back, revealing an unexpected bedfellow snuggled up next to him. The sight was less than endearing. He’d expected him to take off after their night concluded, not hunker down and nap. What was the guy’s name? Brandon? Brett? Bruce? He’d been a little drunk when picking him up at Tartarus’s bar and the details of the encounter were fuzzy on a whole. He poked his bare shoulder to get him up.

“Hey. Wake up.”

Muttering, he curled in tighter.

Not cute.

Shit, but what was his name? He took a wild stab at it. “Brian.”

Muttering sleepily, he cracked an eye. “It’s Brayden.”

“Whatever. You can’t sleep here. I need you to go.” He kept his tone firm, maybe a little unapologetic. He was pretty sure he made that a stipulation of inviting him back to his place to begin with. Reyes didn’t like his one-night-stands staying for morning snuggles and breakfast. Not since Zia. No way he was falling into that trap again.

Brayden rose up on his elbow, scuffing a hand through his bad dye-job. “Are you serious?”

“Yep.” He didn’t bother apologizing.

Rolling his eyes, the man rolled away and began the hunt for clothes and shoes. Reyes propped pillows behind his back and sat up as more alerts pinged to his inbox, his people reporting in on movement from the Tempest. The Pathfinder disembarked with several of her companions. They appeared to have some trouble with the docking computer.

Brayden, dressed, lounged in his bedroom doorway. “This was fun, Reyes. We should do it again
He didn’t lift his eyes from his omnitool. “Uh-huh. Sure.”

Rolling his eyes, he finally left, giving up on recapturing Reyes’s attention.

Another ping let Reyes know that Violet, an asari, and an angaran male headed into the slums. They were literally three blocks from his apartment. Of course, they bypassed everything. Tartarus was still open, but the quality of the clientele at this time of night was even beneath Reyes’s standards. Instead, they headed directly for the gates. His people watched them until they loaded into their all-terrain vehicle just on the other side and drove out.

Yawning, he got up and made a pot of coffee before jumping into the shower. Light alerts next to the shower head indicated how much of his water ration he burned through. Favors traded, hands greased, and eyes bought insured he had a larger water bracket than most of the slummers in his district, but that didn’t mean he could linger. The water was barely lukewarm, but at least it was filtered. He timed himself for two minutes.

By the time he dressed and sat down with his coffee on a bar stool next to counter in his crackerbox kitchen, he had alerts from field agents. He sat with his eyes glued to to his inbox as more checked in.

*Pathfinder’s rig spotted 3:41 a.m. Headed northeast.*

*Nomad Passing outpost 2.B. 3:50 a.m.*

*Pathfinder alert. 3:58 a.m. Headed toward Spirits’ Ledge.*

*Exchanged shots with Pathfinder and team. They interrupted firefight with us and unaffiliated outlaw gang. Called tactical retreat. Injuries sustained. No deaths. Bitch nearly took my head off with that sniper rifle. 4:03 a.m.*

*Oh fuck. Pathfinder inbound. Think she spotted us. Gotta move. 4ish*

It didn’t appear like she was hunting the Collective specifically, but she definitely wasn’t backing down from any available fights. With his field agents hunkered down and pulling in retreats, lest they get suckered into a gunfight with her—he’d put out an advisory to avoid confrontation, if at all possible—the reports became spottier the further into the badlands she roamed.

When he burned through the pot of coffee and dawn approached, he was forced to put tracking the Pathfinder on hold for real work. The first thing he did was push a run he was supposed to make in the crapshoot of a shuttle he pretended like was spaceworthy to Eos. It could wait a day. The cargo wasn’t going anywhere and he wanted to be on planet at the same time as Violet. He had plenty of other business to monitor in the meantime. There was a team in place to intercept and swipe a weapons drop happening out in Haarfel. The weapons were coming from Elaaden and supposed to be picked up by a group of scavs who were making waves among Sloane’s Outcasts. Sloppy work. No real purpose. He didn’t mind sniping the weapons out from under them, as funny as it would be to see Sloane forced to mobilize to squash annoying little reptiles seeking independence from her regime.

As he settled in to watch for the reports, he got another ping from one of his closest agents. Tabitha Holloway was one of the first people he personally brought into the Collective early on. She was one of the disillusioned exiles from the Nexus who didn’t have the good luck to fall immediately into Sloane’s good favor. Debts accrued as she tried to provide for herself and a brother just after Kadara
Port was taken from the kett. Reyes hired her for odd jobs to keep her on her feet when he could. She was one of his first “charlatans” to recruit for him, helping him begin the business of undermining the big wigs who screwed over everyone else in the noble pursuit for power. These days, she managed his larger import/export business. She was stone stoic, but he hadn’t found anyone more loyal.

He took the call directly. “To what do I owe the pleasure, Tabby?”

“I’ve got a bead on the Gambler,” she reported.

His heart gave an unhealthy stutter. “Where?”

“She’s sitting outside a cave in Sulfur Springs. I don’t have eyes on Zia, but there’s one person still on board the ship. Looks like they’re picking something up. They have the cargo hatch open.”

“Can you get it?” he uttered, barely audible.

Tabitha gave a pregnant pause while he quietly died on the inside, wishing he could get out of the slums fast enough to personally make the retrieval. The Pathfinder was on the other side of the mountain, or he might have even called her for help. He could do nothing but wait for Tabby to make an assessment.

“If I take out the guy in the ship, I might be able to fly her out before the others catch on.”

He exhaled slowly. “I would owe you for life.”

His hearthammered against his ribs as he waited for updates. A little over three months ago, Zia had gotten him blackout drunk and snatched his ship right out from under them. The one goddamn thing he actually cared about—aside from her, at the time. It was his lifeline to the stars. His apartment in the slums was the place he slept, but the Gambler was home. It was the shuttle he stole to get off of the Nexus, and a damn fine one, at that. Better than the shithole he was flying now.

“Shit,” she swore. “They just came out of the cave. There’s eight of them. I’m not going to be able to get close.”

“Can you call for backup?”

“I’ve only got two in reach. I’m sorry, Reyes.”

Muting the comm, he spent a full minute swearing and promising all manner of vile ends on his ex. He took an exaggerated, steadying breath before he was finally ready to address Tabitha again. “Fucking Zia. Is she down there?”

“I don’t see her.”

“I swear to god if she sold my ship…”

“We know it’s making local drops and pickups. It’s something.”

He slammed his palm against the counter hard hard enough to make it go numb for the next minute. Wincing, flexing it ruefully, he said, “Pull back, Tabby. Keep your head down. I’ll have some people look into obtaining trackers for our agents to carry. The next time someone sees it, I want it tagged.”

“I can put out feelers with some people, but having everyone carry trackers is going to be expensive.
Also, they’re trackers. If they’re hacked, your entire organization is compromised.”

He scowled, shaking his tingling hand. “Yeah. Fuck. That woman makes me insane. I just want my ship back.”

“Let me know what you decide. I’ll check out our options in the meantime.”

“Thanks, Tab. Oh, and do me a favor and relay this to Crux. Have her post someone nearby in case the Gambler makes a reappearance. Keep it vague. Just tell her the Charlatan thinks it has good resale value.”

“Will do.”

Forcefully unclenching his jaw, reminding himself that nobody in their right mind would trust a dentist on Kadara if he broke a molar, he retrieved the status reports from the Elaaden drop. It had been completed while he took Tabitha’s call, success all around. He even had an inventory download processing. He delegated review the itemized lists to his senior staff to have them decide how and where to distribute the cache.

His inbox pinged with another priority report.

Pathfinder headed north. 5:48 a.m.

He watched as the reports clustered closer together. Finally, it became clear that she was headed back to Kadara Port. He debated heading into the slums and arranging a run-in. What if she loaded up on her ship and took off again for another five weeks? Drumming his fingers on the counter, he counseled himself on patience. It had taken a year just to get this far.

Feeling like an idiot, he sat and watched the reports detailing her return to the slums, and then back toward the docks. The breath froze in his lungs. There was so much he wanted to accomplish, so much that Violet Ryder could do for him and his movement. If she boarded the Tempest and left before he had the chance to speak with her, how long would it be before another opportunity presented itself?

Pathfinder exiting docks. Headed toward market. Alone now. Companions have dispersed, going different directions. 6:26 a.m.

Reyes scrambled to grab his jacket to head out. The window was open.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so this one was pretty short, but the next chapter is looooong and jam-packed with Violet and Reyes sassing off at each other.

And yes, I’ve embellished on Reyes's history with Zia. In the best way possible. Because of COURSE she got him drunk and stole his ship at some point.
Violet could feel the knots of tension in her neck and back. She hadn’t taken a day for herself in weeks, jumping from planet to planet, swinging by the Nexus when she could afford to, hunting down missing arks, missing people, missing tech. She tracked, she fought, and she negotiated every single day. She couldn’t actually remember what sleep felt like, as she spent any time spent in bed staring at the ceiling and fretting.

The worst part, though, the part that had her ready to go to Tann and put in her resignation--Heleus was running out of coffee.

She was on day three of her coffee detox, and she was in literal hell, but she used the symptoms. They fueled her. If ever she had a reason to fix vaults and hunt Meridian, it was for the planting and harvesting of coffee beans so that she would survive in the new galaxy. Every second she spent suffering, she was motivated to force each habitable world into submission.

It had been Liam to finally point out that Kadara’s sprawling market might have a bag or two of grounds for sale. She had business there, anyway. They were in the middle of their day when they landed, but the Tempest’s standard time and Kadara didn’t match up well. Her 3 p.m. happened to be Kadara’s 2 a.m., so she headed out beyond the gate to take care of a couple of chores and blow off some steam shooting at outlaws before heading back in time for the market to open.

Eyes tracked her wherever she went and she picked up at least two dedicated stalkers as she strolled down the line of open booths and storefronts. The downside of being a minor celebrity. The vendors either bristled with hostility or avoided eye contact with her, some of them even pulling up a bulletin on their devices to double check that the Pathfinder was, in fact, perusing their wares.

She stopped in front of a booth displaying tech upgrades. A quick scan alerted her to the illegality of literally all of them. The asari running the show folded her arms and curled her lip, daring Violet to raise an objection.

Kadara played by its own rules. Violet had no jurisdiction. She didn’t feel like pissing off Sloane by throwing around her weight among the locals that day, so she moved on quietly, wondering if she earned cred for not acting like a rulebook wielding girl scout, or lost cred for backing down from a confrontation. Her headache informed her that she didn’t care, either way.
She finally found a table selling scopes and mag extenders and other modifications one could apply to their weapons. She gravitated to the sniper paraphernalia, picking up a scope to inspect.

“Not for sale,” the merchant, a reedy Salarian with shifty eyes, grunted.

“It's got a price tag on it,” she pointed out blandly.

“It's not for sale, not to you.”

“What, are you afraid my credits are infected with Pathfinder cooties?”

His eyes narrowed to slits. “I know the Nexarx wants nothing more than to send it's brainless minions down here to stomp us out, and I won't facilitate the killing of my brothers. It's not. For. Sale.”

She set the scope back with a heavy eyeroll. “You know I'm trying to make this planet more livable. For you. To live on. The Nexus has bigger problems than a pisshole of salty defectors.”

The hairs on the back of her neck raised as a crowd formed in her periphery. The market wasn’t thick with bodies this early in the morning, but there were just enough to make her position dangerous if they turned on her. Normally, she would throw up her hands and back off. This wasn’t her turf. Her headache intensified. She had her biotics, even if she was unarmed. They might have numbers, but she was pretty sure she could take more than a few down with her until backup could arrive.

A body detached from the throng of onlookers, sauntering up to her side. He was backlit by the rising Kadara sun, so she had to squint to make out any distinct features. First glance told her human, male, barely taller than her. Posture and gait indicated that he likely he was no soldier, but that he had some light training and probably knew how to throw a punch in a way to make someone hurt.

“Fancy meeting you here, Pathfinder,” he crooned, hitting a shadow so that his features cleared up. Dusky skin a few shades off of her own, dark hair, shit eating grin.

“Reyes Vidal.”

He winked and turned to the Salarian. “Pathfinder giving you trouble, Malen?”

“Thinks she’s going to turn our own weapons against us when the Nexus comes raining down.”

Reyes tsked disapprovingly. “Ah, yes. Wouldn’t want to outfit the enemy. I see your point. I’ll get her out of your hair this time, Malen, but you owe me.” He swung an arm around her shoulders to steer her away. “Pathfinder, I’m afraid you aren’t wanted here. I’ll see you out.”

She shoved him off as they headed down the line of stalls. “Thanks for the backup, asshole.”

“It was either walk away or fight, and they had you outnumbered fifteen to one.”

“Fine, fine, but if they had a few more, it would have been fair.”

He chuckled. She was always surprised by the richness of his laugh, and how easily he parted with it, like everything amused him. Her headache reminded her not to fall under its spell.

“You are not liked much around here,” he noted with ill-contained amusement.

“Really? I hadn’t noticed. I suppose this is the part where you offer to lead me to what I need for a finder’s fee?”
Lips turned up, he perked his eyebrows. “Now that’s not a half-bad idea. What are you looking for?”

“Nothing I can’t get somewhere else. I just thought I’d save myself an extra trip.”

“You just need to know which vendors to go to. Luckily, I have time this morning to show you around. But first, breakfast. I haven’t eaten yet. Have you eaten? I’m starving.” He strode into the market, showing no shame at escorting her around.

Her little shadows scuttled along to keep up now that she had a purposeful destination. She wondered if they were aware of each other, or worked independently. She split her attention keeping an eye on the stalkers and an eye on Reyes. She didn’t appreciate or trust his generous intervention. At some point, he would try to get something out of her, and she wasn’t in the mood to indulge him.

“What brings you back to Kadara?” Reyes asked, making an annoying bid for smalltalk as they wound deeper into the sprawling market. “I take it you missed me.”

“Remember how last time I did work at your suggestion, I got shot in the chest?”

He turned suddenly, stopping her in her tracks, golden-brown eyes meeting hers intently. “How are you? Any serious damage?”

Violet had to unstick her tongue from the roof of her mouth. “I...no. I was fine. Bruised as hell, but I was back on my feet in a day.”

He resumed course, nodding approvingly. “Good. But you didn’t answer my question.”

“I have some chores to do. You know how it is. Not to mention, I still haven’t reset Kadara’s vault. I have two more monoliths to hunt down and hack before I can even do that.”

“After your introduction to Kadara, I’m relieved you even came back. I hear you’ve been busy on other planets. Didn’t you establish a colony on Voeld?”

“Word travels fast.”

“It’s not easy getting news out here, but I have my ways.”

They passed a few food trucks, reminding Violet that she was, in fact, hungry. Usually she started her day with coffee and something light, but since she used the last of her grounds up, she’d been too disgusted with life to even bother with that. It would only be a matter of time before Lexi started harping on her about her caloric intake.

“So you have plans on how to talk someone in this city to feed me?” she began grudgingly, hoping to find out what, exactly, he had in mind.

“I can talk anyone into anything. The Resistance doesn’t call me ‘Shena’ for nothing.”

“Yeah? What exactly does it mean?”

He let out a small, reluctant groan, as if he regretted bringing it up. “It’s the Angaran word for ‘mouth.’ I’m good with words.”

She perked an eyebrow. “Among other things?”

His tone dropped huskily. “I’ve had no complaints. Don’t tempt me to prove it to you.”

“Keep it in your pants, Reyes. Considering how long you’ve been on Kadara, who knows where
your mouth has been.”

He let out another of his rich, deep laughs, slapping a hand to his heart. “My wounded pride!”

Violet fought against a smile.

They didn’t get much farther before she thought she caught a whiff of a familiar aroma. On Kadara, just about anything smelled better than the air, and since she had been fantasizing about coffee for the last sixty-two hours, she assumed it was another hallucination. However, as they drew closer to the source, the seductive scent curled thickly in her nostrils, sending a thrill of undiluted pleasure through her entire body.

She reached out and grabbed a fistful of Reyes’s sleeve. “I smell coffee,” she said, throwing a shocking amount of intensity behind her voice.

It was coffee. This was not a drill.

“Yes,” he said, eyebrows raised a fraction. “Just ahead. It’s scarce these days, but the owner of the shop has an undisclosed source that keeps him up and running.”

“I haven’t had coffee in half a week. My skull feels like it is literally splitting open. You get me a cup, and I’ll listen to whatever shitty deal you have in store for me.”

“What makes you think I have any deal in store for you?” he pouted.

“Coffee,” she snarled, tightening her grip on his sleeve.

Smiling with a quick flash of his dimple, he gently pried himself away from her hand. “Lucky for you, I happen to know the owner. Follow me.”

Violet kept her cool through gunfights and hostage negotiations, through races through the Scourge, through arguments with Tann, and through mediating disagreements among her own crew. However, confronted with coffee in the middle of savage withdrawal, she would have given her very soul to get her hands on a cup, and, unfortunately, she couldn’t hide it. She saw Reyes’s eyes dancing with amusement as he led the way toward a little hole-in-the-wall. It was literally just a bar with a couple of stools and a guy behind the counter opening up for the day.

“Hey, Pete.” Reyes approached, oozing with his usual, oily charm. “How’s business? How’s your wife?”

The man behind the counter had a severe widow’s peak and ruddy cheeks, small, watery blue eyes widening slightly. “Fine, we’re fine. It’s not pickup day, is it?”

“No, I’m here for pleasure, not business. I want you to meet someone. Pete, this is Violet Ryder, human Pathfinder. Violet, this is Pete Ostrowski. Violet tells me she’s in caffeine withdrawal from an unsupported coffee habit, and what kind of friend would I be if I didn’t go out of my way to brighten her day?”

He looked between them, letting the moment draw out, then finally shrugged. “How do you take your coffee? Because we don’t have cream or sugar or any other bullshit additive.”

“Black,” she assured him, her eye twitching a little in anticipation. “And what would it cost me to get a bag of grounds to go?”

He shook his head. “Coffee’s tight. Everything extra I have in stock is spoken for.”
“I’ll double whatever they’re paying.”

“It don’t work like that, sweetheart. First come, first serve.” He ambled behind him to the coffee pot and poured two mugs, setting them down on the counter, one in front of each of them.

Violet took hers greedily, almost sloshing it in her fervency. She didn’t care that it burned the roof of her mouth. She took a grateful sip, eyes rolling back as the first wave of bitterness hit her tongue. The coffee was stiff enough to stand a pencil in it, just how she preferred. She brought it immediately back to her lips, savoring each moment. Her headache cleared as if by magic. The clouds seemed to part, birds chirped, and for a moment, Kadara didn’t seem that bad.

“If I had known it was that easy to get her to make those noises, I’d have mentioned I’m one of your buyers right off and took her back to my place,” Reyes laughed.

She cracked an eye. “Can I buy your coffee?”

He settled his elbow against the bar and hooked one ankle over the other, lips curled as if he just clinched the deal of the century. “I might be persuaded to work something out.”

“I did say I’d listen to whatever deal you have in store for me.” She breathed in the scent of the coffee in her cup, the tension leaking out of her body.

“Well, now that you mention it, there is something I might have an interest in…”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, figures. Go on, then.”

“Your outpost on Voeld. It’s been shipping ice between the Nexus and other settled worlds, hasn’t it?”

She paused, her mug hovering near her lips. “Yeah. Ice running is booming.”

“If you didn’t notice, the water here is a little toxic,” he hinted.

Sighing, she set the mug aside. “Shipments of ice blocks are worth a little more than a half a bag of coffee beans for personal consumption.”

Undeterred, he said, “I was thinking more in terms of credits. I have some assets set aside. Your ships fly right past Kadara on their way to Eledaan. I can fly a shuttle out to meet them as they use the gravitational field off of Govorkam for momentum. It’s barely a detour, just a mild deceleration while we grab the cargo, and then send them on their merry way.”

“Who’s ‘we?’” she asked.

“I’ll be bringing in a friend with a ship capable of hauling ice.”

“You know I don’t have any control over those pilots or their cargo. I set up the outposts, I don’t run them.”

“Yes, I get that, but a word from the illustrious Pathfinder would go a long way. If you set up a meeting with a willing pilot, I would make it worth your while and theirs. I’ll pay them an extra fifteen percent for the trip, and you get ten percent of any profits I make selling the ice here on Kadara.”

“Won’t Sloane take objection to me interfering in her water business? She controls it all, doesn’t she?”
His smile positively glittered. “What Sloane doesn’t know can’t hurt her.”

And if she ever caught onto this scheme, she’d ream Violet out so hard she’d rupture her colon. It wasn’t worth the trouble. The plan remained the same. Eventually, she would butter up Sloane enough to let her establish an outpost here. The outpost would receive imports from Voeld, including ice, and they could sell to Kadara Port if they wanted, although, hopefully by then, the vault would have been corrected and the water improved for all.

Sensing he was losing her, Reyes upped his offer. “A fifteen percent cut.”

Suddenly, Pete Ostrowski slammed something down in front of her. It was a package of coffee beans, she realized after staring at it in confusion for a moment. Rich, succulent, fresh coffee beans.

“You take his deal, Miss Pathfinder. Reyes, you give me a cut of fresh ice, enough to keep my business going without the shit water Sloane affords me, at a discount, of course. I make sure Violet here never runs dry on coffee again.”

Her breath caught. Shit. She couldn’t jeopardize her tenuous relationship with Sloane over a caffeine addiction.

Could she?

She licked her lips. It was almost comical, except for her headaches.

“I will talk to the ice runners.” She held up her hand to shut Reyes up before he could celebrate. “I can’t promise anything. I’ll be asking them to bend rules. That ice already has a destination. Not to mention, it could royally piss off Sloane if she found out, which could make trouble for the entire Nexus, and rob me of my dream of ever having an outpost here. But I’ll ask.”

Pete began to pull his coffee beans off the table, but her hand came down firmly on the back of his wrist.

“I’ll ask a little harder if you leave those.”

It did occur to her that it was a little weird that Reyes would talk business openly in front of anyone else, but maybe this was his plan the whole time. Maybe he knew Pete was more likely to want in on the deal, rather than going to tattle to Sloane’s goons. The concept of Reyes orchestrating that level of manipulation on the fly made less sense than believing dumb luck followed him wherever he went.

Pete backed off, leaving the beans in her custody.

She took her time finishing her coffee, and then Reyes pushed his cup toward her with an amused little twitch to his lips. She inhaled it a little quicker than her cup. Caffeine fizzled through her veins, perking up her mood.

“What else were you looking for?” Reyes asked, purring his R’s a little harder now that he was in a good mood. He still had his elbow leaned on the bar, smiling as if he could stand and watch her drink coffee all day.

She pretended not to notice. Or like it. “Sniper scope, actually. I’ve done one too many field patches on mine trying to correct the site, but it keeps going off kilter. Missed a perfectly lined headshot this morning for the last time.”

“I’m sure the person on the business end of your rifle was grateful. Has it occurred to you that you’re
not as good of a shot as you think you are?”

“Hey, now, those are fighting words,” she warned, although she was too damn perky after the coffee to put any menace behind it. “I happen to be a superb shot, but shitty equipment is cramping my style.”

“I might be able to find you a vendor who will deal.” He pushed away from the counter, sending credits to the vendor. “Thanks, Pete. I’ll let you know when Rider scores us some ice.”

She snorted as they strolled away. “Your confidence in me is truly inspiring.”

“I would never underestimate what a cunning, beautiful woman such as yourself is capable of.”

Flattery didn't usually work with Violet, but damn if she didn't like it when Reyes tried. Fighting to keep from smiling too much, lest he get any ideas, she motioned him on. “So. Sniper scope?”

The market contained more foot traffic as other early birds awoke and started their days. It became easier to get lost in the crowd, faces blurring together, her features no longer quite so recognizable. Her two tails never lost sight of her, but they were easier to ignore with more people to blend into.

Reyes didn't hurry, meandering at a leisurely gait and exchanging welcomes and good-natured jeers with just about everybody. It shouldn’t surprise her that he knew everyone in Kadara Port, especially among the merchants. He probably supplied a good many of them with merchandise at any given time.

“You are totally enjoying showing off, aren’t you?” she accused after he pried himself away from an exile hawking what looked like broken kitchen appliances.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“What, you don’t get a kick out of proving that you’re Mr. Popular?”

He flashed her a sidelong grin. “Better they all recognize me, than you.”

“No joke, there.”

She paused to run her fingers over a fabric swatch hanging off the end of a stall. There weren’t many vendors selling novelty or luxury items, so an asari selling scarves stood out in the crowd.

“You miss it?” Reyes asked.

“Miss what?”

“Being an unknown. Someone nobody looks at in reverence, blame, admiration, or disgust for simply being there.” He plucked a vibrant blue scarf out of the pile, running the fabric between his fingers.

Violet hitched a shoulder. “Sometimes. Usually when I have an email from Tann waiting in my inbox. But...I don’t know. I’m good at this. When I first started, I caught so much crap for not being the great Alec Ryder. They all thought we were doomed without him, because he would know what to do and how to do it. Honestly, I’m not sure they were so right.”

“Not a big admirer of your father’s work?” He seemed genuinely surprised by the revelation.

“Dad was competent and resourceful, but he was also really set in his ways and linear in the way he treated the world. I think I’ve done well and I’m done letting people compare me to him.”
Reyes flipped the scarf over her head, settling it around the back of her neck and looping it around several times to drape her shoulders. “This is your color,” he murmured, studying her almost too intimately. His fingers brushed her hair, sliding under her dark locks and pulling them free of the scarf to lay overtop it.

Her heart giving out a frantic little stutter as the fondling of her hair shot spikes of tingles down her spine. She made herself pull away. “I’m not here to buy scarves.”

“On me.”

Before she could protest, he put in the credit transfer to the asari merchant. Violet touched the material, wondering what it had been made out of. It was lightweight, surprisingly breathable. Maybe made from something native to one of the Heleus planets? She hoped it was machine washable.

Reyes picked the conversation up as if it hadn’t been interrupted by a scarf purchase. “Why did you follow your father out here if you didn’t like him?”

She pretended to be more focused on the line of stalls they passed. “I didn’t follow him to have daddy/daughter bonding time. I did it for me. I never found something worth doing back in the Milky Way, so like thousands of other fools, I came here chasing an idea. Lucky me, I got saddled with SAM straight off and a soul-crushing load of responsibility. But, really, as frustrating and stressful as it is, I’m good at it. So I guess Andromeda was worth the chase. As long as I can keep caffeinated.” She touched the bag of coffee beans she had stuffed in her jacket pocket.

“Was it just you and him?”

“No, my brother Avery came with us.”

“Oh? And where is he?”

“The Nexus. He had some complications coming out of cryo when we hit the Scourge. He’s supposed to wake up. Eventually.” Her stomach did its usual nervous twisting when she discussed her twin. “What about you? Any family or friends make the journey with you?”

“I’ve always been a bit of a loner,” he admitted, rolling his shoulders. “So your brother’s still in cryo?”

“My brother’s in a coma, and I don’t really want to talk about it.”

If Reyes meant to pry, he didn’t get the chance. A human wearing patchy armor and a patchier beard shouldered into her, muttering an apology. Before Andromeda, Violet might have ignored it and moved on. These days, her nerves made her a little jumpier than usual.

She turned on reflex, grabbing the man’s arm even as his hand dipped in and out of her jacket pocket, seizing hold of the bag of coffee she had stashed there. Something in her processed that she was getting pickpocketed faster than conscious acknowledgement. Grabbing his hand around the thumb, she wrenched his hand back, fingers digging into the cluster of nerves there and ripping a frantic screech from his lips.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” she shrilled as the coffee bag tumbled from his numb fingers, bearing down with her weight and forcing him to his knees. Violet was not a small woman at 175 centimeters of solid muscle and military training. The stress she put on his wrist was enough to make him whimper in agony. “Really? You’re going to rob the Pathfinder over coffee beans.”

“I...I...”
Others turned at the commotion, stepping back as the scene played out.

“Is this a game to you? You think I’m joking around? You put your little paws on my coffee again and I will reach up your asshole, grab your tongue, and pull it all the way back through so you can lick your own spine.”

Reyes fidgeted nearby. “Um...Violet…”

“Capiche?” she roared in the would-be thief’s face.

“Violet!”

“What?” She turned her snarl toward Reyes.

Which was when the idiot in her grip decided to pull a gun on her. It was a little thing, angaran by the looks of it, and there was no telling where he stashed it to slip past the guards and their “no gun” policy. She barely caught a glint of it when she turned her attention to the smuggler and, once again, she reacted by reflex before she even knew what she was doing. She stripped the gun out of his hands and turned it on him, dragging him even closer with her grip on his hand and shoving the barrel against his chest.

“Oh, that’s just fucking great! Did you honestly think you were going to be able to kill me? Do you know how many times I’ve been shot this week alone? Little boys should not play with guns!” she admonished, and finally released him in disgust.

She stripped the gun down to parts after she let him go. It was a little unfamiliar, being alien tech, but she had gathered and sold enough gun scrap since landing on Andromeda that she had a basic familiarity to pull it to pieces. The man watched, mouth agape, as his weapon practically disintegrated under her hands. When she was done, she snatched her coffee beans off the ground, smacked the side of the thief’s head, and turned.

And encountered the barrel of a rifle.

Sloane’s city guard, fast on the scene, probably had guns on her the entire time. She blinked, slowly raising her hands with a little curse.

“Bitch tried to snatch my coffee,” she insisted grimly.

The Outcasts lowered their weapons.

Only then did it occur to her that she almost caused a huge political gaff over a caffeine addiction. Engaging in a shootout in Kadara’s market was not the way to endear Sloane to her cause. Cheeks flaming, she stuffed the bag back in her pocket and gingerly made room for one of them to pick up the scattered debris of the gun.

“Remind me never to piss you off. Or mess with your coffee,” Reyes chuckled warily as he reappeared at her side.

She dragged her hair back with her hands, exhaling as the adrenaline bled from her system. “I nearly fucked up, didn’t I?”

“Hey, it was at least fun to watch. I wonder if the brown streaks in his underwear will ever come out…”

She grimaced with a small shake of her head. She needed to see Lexi before she snapped and did
something insane.

“You okay? You seem a little...tense,” Reyes hedged.

She rolled him a sarcastic grin. “What gave me away?”

He stepped a pace forward, setting a hand on her waist and invading her personal bubble. “Maybe you just need someone to help you take the edge off.”

Did she ever. In a moment of madness as their faces hovered close, she considered it. She hadn't found any other real means to relax since waking up from cryo. A quick, sweaty fix with no strings sounded exactly like what she wanted.

Violet almost let her body incline into his, but in a last bid for sanity, she dragged herself back.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Reyes Vidal was not the person she wanted to tangle with, and she was losing her mind if she actually thought there was some appeal there. Setting a hand over where his warmed against her waist, pretending like the contact didn’t make her stomach drop out, she pried him off and stepped a safe distance away. Why did he have to be the one thing on Kadara to smell nice?

“I tend to shoot my tension away these days,” she warned, taking a stab at sarcasm to cover her galloping pulse.

Damn it, her voice did not just crack.

His eyes lit in amusement, but he raised his hands in surrender. “Point taken. Although, should I be so afraid, since you said so yourself that your scope doesn’t work?”

“You keep your hands to yourself or I’ll show you exactly what a broken scope looks like.”

If anything, he looked even more pleased. Violet decided she needed an extraction before she caused any more damage. She had her coffee. She could order a rifle parts from almost anywhere.

“Look, I really should go. I’ve got a couple of hours to burn with this caffeine buzz, so I might as well direct it somewhere useful and get back out into the badlands.”

“With that shitty scope?” he teased.

“I'll cope.”

“You a poet now? Rhyming?”

“Nah, poetry is Addison’s thing.”

“Now that I would like to see,” he scoffed. “She always struck me as frigid. Uptight. Like, they didn’t quite fully unthaw her. And what’s up with that eyeshadow?”

“Purple is not her color,” she agreed wryly.

“Probably trying to cover those creepy, buggy eyes.”

Damn it, she liked him. She really had to get out of there. “I’m going now. Stay out of trouble, Vidal.” She oriented herself, tracked the fastest way to the Tempest, and began heading back.
“Hey, can I give you some advice?” Reyes called after her.

She turned, but kept walking backwards, hell-bent on putting space between them before she did something stupid. “Oh, this should be good.” She spread her hands. “Shoot, Reyes. What advice do you want to get me?”

“Get laid. You’re as twitchy as Sloane, and that, hermosa, is not a good look for you.”

“If you say you’re volunteering, I’m going to reiterate my point about breaking your scope,” she warned.

“You say that, but you’re smiling,” he accused, dimple appearing at the corner of his cheek.

She responded with a rude gesture, flipping around to stride off into the crowd. Or, really, strut off. Just a little bit of swagger to her pace.

She was such an idiot.

Chapter End Notes

Somebody teach me how to write smut (for reasons that may happen down the road). It’s my achilles heel. HALP. T-T

Also, I’ve decided to use metric casually in this fic (with a special thanks to my Norwegian friend Aphy for making sure everything looks right) because I refuse to believe that an advanced space society would still be using the bass-awkwards measurement system America seems to be stuck on. I have strong feelings about the metric system and America’s refusal to embrace it. Fight me.
Chapter Summary

Reyes conducts his growing empire with a few, little distractions from the Pathfinder to keep him entertained.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Violet came through in a big way on their ice deal. She managed to talk one pilot into offloading a portion to Reyes, and that pilot, in turn, talked several of her buddies into doing the same. Three days a week, he had fresh ice delivered. His people in the Collective took most of it with a little clever dealing. With the help of his inner circle, they spun it to seem like they piggybacked his deal and that they were screwing him over. It made him laugh at the absurdity he went through to maintain anonymity, even from his own people in the Collective, but worth it in the long run.

He sifted through reports and money flows while he waited for Keema in his usual corner of Tartarus, but casually checked his inbox every two and a half minutes. The Tempest came and went from Port every few weeks, never staying for long, and he hadn’t seen the Pathfinder in person since the day in the market, but she was supposedly out in the badlands. Reports were spotty, but he couldn’t help but wait on the edge of his seat to hear word.

It was probably better that she skipped visiting him. He’d nearly had to scoop up his jaw off the ground after watching her take down that pickpocket. Damn, but that had been sexy, and he was supposed to be sworn off dangerous women. At least she still managed to keep him entertained from a distance. They had begun a casual email correspondence shortly after the market. That woman amused the hell out of him.

Reyes. Addison changed her eyeshadow. She's sporting blue. It's worse than the purple. I thought you ought to know. - Violet

He had almost choked on his beer when it first cleared his inbox. He had been in the middle of a meeting with a client who needed some product moved. He’d almost lost credibility, as the man wasn’t thrilled he was checking his email during a business meeting, but it all worked out. As it turned out, the client knew another guy who knew a guy who was more than willing to help Reyes pull off a petty prank.

I forwarded a shipment of purple eyeshadow to Sloane. I said it was from Addison. - Reyes

He had to wait three whole days before she replied. He about went mad, not that he admitted it out loud, but the rush he got when the message finally hit his inbox damn near made him dizzy.

Define “shipment.”

He didn't force her to endure as much of a wait before he responded. He sent a picture without context. He got a reply within a minute.

Holy shit! How did you even FIND that much eye shadow?
He had laughed and made some vague response about connections.

They had other little exchanges, messages fired off when they were bored or avoiding bigger duties. His attempts to be flirtatious were usually rebuffed, but he couldn’t hold it against her. He couldn’t decide if she was mean, funny, or both with her flippant disregard for his advances.

*Hey, Vi. What are you wearing right now?*

_The intestines of the kett that just exploded on me. Note to self: new landmines effective kett deterrent; not to be used in close-quarters combat._

*Thanks. You just killed my boner.*

*I’ve killed a lot of things today. Just one more trophy for my wall._

*First of all, that’s just wrong. Second, go take a shower. You probably smell gross._

*Says the guy who lives on Kadara._

*Touché._

Other days, he got tidbits of gossip, hints and snatches of what was going on at the brass level of Nexus. He found it encouraging that the Pathfinder wasn’t keen on Tann’s dictatorial take on leadership. He’d left because of the way things were handled, but he would have liked to see how things might have ended differently with Violet in the middle of things during the uprising.

*Tann’s face when I explained his new partnership with Morda and New Tuchanka? Priceless. - Violet*

He’d started putting serious thought into her idea of an Kadaran outpost. She made it no secret that she wanted one, and that the only thing that stood in her way was Sloane’s cooperation. Reyes had always intended on undercutting her power and toppling her off that throne of hers. The Collective would reestablish some credibility to the Port. This was everything he and Keema had ever talked about. It was a stipulation for her cooperation and they were both in agreement. If Kadara became his, he would give Violet her settlement, and Keema would maintain relations.

When that time came, he wanted more emails from her, preferably describing Tann’s reaction when she informed him of their new alliance with exiles. The weasling prick would probably grease his pants.

His musings were interrupted when the doors to the lounge whisked open, delivering Keema. She had already swung by the bar, beer clutched in her hand as she stormed in and dumped down on the couch next to him with a long, pained exhale.

“That bad?” he lamented.

“How do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Pretend to like people?” she sneered. “Or, at least tolerate them in silence. Every moment I think I’m going to finally snap and tell Sloane how I really think about her shitty little kingdom.”

The only reason any of this worked was because Keema was better at deception than most of her brethren. That included keeping her opinion of Kadara’s queen largely to herself. That didn’t make it
easy. He actually admired the angaran for her restraint. Put in her situation, he would have mouthed off and encouraged Sloane to rip his spine out months ago.

“You’re doing admirably.”

“Save your crap for someone who believes it,” she snapped, taking a long drink from her glass.

He wisely backed away. Instead of pressing her for details coming from Sloane’s throne room, he checked his messages again. He had one waiting at the top of the list from Crux, marked as urgent.

*Pathfinder just strolled into the hideout.*

His heart stopped dead. She was in Draullir? When the hell had she gotten all the way up there? Instead of typing out a response, he opened their secure comm link for a verbal conversation, not worried about Keema overhearing. These were all reports he sent onto her anyway. The connection was shaky, full of static, but Sloane’s most recent crackdown on communications inside and out of Kadara Port were in constant interference with his operations.

“I’m here,” Crux replied beneath the crackling.

“Is she opening fire?” he demanded, voice annoyingly strangled.

“Lynx met her at the gate and had the good sense not to shoot at her. She’s walking around chatting up the team, getting a feel for the local color.”

He exhaled, scraping his hair back on his scalp. “Fuck. Do not engage, no matter what. Better yet, be nice to her.”

“I know.”

“She’s exchanged bullets with the Collective before. Be extra nice,” he growled.

“Anything else? Should I offer her cookies? A shoulder rub?”

He disregarded the sarcasm. “See how amicable she’s feeling, like if she’s willing to lend us a hand. Offer her whatever seems to hook her. Supplies. Information. Contacts. Also, that ship I have you looking for? See if she’ll agree to find it.”

“Didn’t catch that last part. Connection’s fucked up again.”

He repeated himself and cut off the call before it could get worse, fidgeting with a data pad that he’d been struggling to connect to communions terminals all morning. He didn’t actually think Violet would find Crux’s base of operations. If she wanted, she could deliver a serious blow by driving them out or shutting them down. Or worse, she could sell them out to Sloane in exchange for her goodwill. The thought made his stomach turn. He was going to have to shuffle things, get product and people temporarily moved out of there until he was secure with the knowledge that she wasn’t going to screw them over. The logistics alone was going to be a nightmare.

From down the couch, Keema fixed him with her large, blue eyes. “Well, that could be interesting. Maybe the Collective can turn Ryder into a friend.”

“I’d settle for us not pissing her off. She decides to gut that cave, and we lose too much.”

“You’re going to have her look for your ship, though?”

He shrugged. “She’s good at what she does. It’s not like we have the assets to burn on the chase.”
“And if she ever notices you flying around in it?”

“I'll tell her I won it in a poker match off the Charlatan.”

She shrugged, skeptical.

If he was forced to wait on word how the visit went, he would go mad, so he got to the reason for Keema’s visit. “What has Sloane been up to lately?”

“In a fit over water. She's noticed demand is down. Has people wracking their brains trying to figure it out. They know someone is piping in cheap water, but nobody can get eyes on where it's coming into the city or who's behind it. Without a source to trace, the Collection has come up on a list of suspects, but nobody has evidence to make it stick. She's raising protection fees to make up for the loss.”

His lip curled. “Bitch.”

“I know. Not that it matters, because the Pathfinder has found and corrected two of the three monoliths. If she'd work as hard here as she did on Elaaden, we'd have a reversing environment by the end of the week. Sloane is conflicted on wanting this. She'd like a viable planet, but she's going to take a hit with the water revenue gone, and it makes her beholden to the Pathfinder.”

“What about Violet's settlement outpost?”

“She thinks she can coerce her into doing her bidding while dangling it as a carrot. So far, she's indicated no real intention of ever giving her one.”

That didn't surprise him. Sloane wanted the Initiative sharing her planet as badly as she wanted chlamydia.

The elevating protection fees were going to be a problem, but also an opportunity. The Collective protected its own, which meant he would be paying anyone's fees who couldn't scrape it together. However, even with a monetary loss, the hike would put a strain on the rest of Kadara’s citizens caught in the middle.

“We’ll prime up a recruitment campaign the second the inflation goes into effect. People will be hurting from this. We'll be ready to pick up any who fall through the cracks.”

“If you get a solid influx of recruits, we're going to have the numbers we need,” Keema murmured.

The numbers they needed to take Kadara Port. A fight was inevitable, but with enough agents laying low in the city, when it happened, they had a chance to come out victorious. However, Sloane remained his biggest obstacle before he could give it any serious consideration. He didn't want his people to engage in open combat while she was capable of personally retaliating. He saw what she was capable of on the Nexus. Getting the numbers was only half the battle—literally.

“We’ll make this work to our advantage. Can you keep it together with her Highness?”

The angaran scowled into her cup before draining it. “I guess I have to, don't I?”

“Anything else I should know?”

Her hand fiddled momentarily with her omnitool. “A manifesto of blackmail. Everything I've discovered on Sloane’s cronies. I've tagged the ones I think you have a real chance turning.”
“I'll put it to good use when the time is right,” he promised.

“How is the Pathfinder’s visit to Draullir?”

He checked his messages. Nothing new, so either it was going well or Crux and everybody else was all dead.

Just as his anxiety started creeping up on him, a message cleared into his inbox. The time stamp indicated a delay to connection interference.

*She dug out a rat for us. The one impersonating your orders. Nifty little gadget of hers. I've been on that shit for weeks and she runs a few scans and asks a few questions and figures it out in less than an hour. I see why you want her on our side. She's promised to keep eyes out for that ship you wanted, too. I wouldn't call us friends, but I've assured her she won't have any more entanglements with the Collective. Now if Queen Bitch would quit fucking with communications, I could actually keep that promise. - Crux*

“Lucky,” Keema grunted.

Reyes didn't fully trust luck. He made opportunities. Luck let him down too often.

“Are you going to tell her?” she asked. “I bet if you offered her that outpost, she would kill Sloane for us.”

He shook his head. “I honestly don't think she would be willing to assassinate that large of a political player on the gamble that the Collective is less corrupt of an organization.” He dragged a hand down his face. “Sloane's blood will be on my hands before the end, not hers.”

“I didn't take you as the noble type.”

“It's not noble, it's practical,” he huffed.

She smiled. “Yeah, sure Reyes.”

“It's a card I'm keeping up my sleeve. If I bring her in, it'll only be when I'm certain it won't backfire on us.”

The angaran stood, stretching out her long limbs and peering into her empty beer glass. “I should go. Hopefully your Pathfinder will fix our water tables soon. Sloane's reaction should be good. Maybe she'll get it before the party so we can all watch her publically pout.”

He held up a hand, forcing her to pause, the wheels in his head cranking again. “That party. You haven't found a way into that storeroom yet, have you?”

She eyed him. “I'm not jeopardizing my position for your booze.”

“You won't have to. I might have a way past security. Can you get me two invites?”

“Two?”

“One for me, one for Ryder.”

“You think she'll help you?”

He grinned. “She won't need to. I roll in with her, Sloane is going to have her people watch her like a hawk. All eyes on Violet, none on me? Opportunities, Keema.”
“Fine. It'll be good to watch Sloane squirm with her there.” Rolling her eyes a little, she strolled out.

Reyes didn't have much self-control, but he didn't want to call the Pathfinder in the window directly after she visited the Collective. It was doubtful she would even think to make the connection, but he was paranoid. He waited until after organizing another meeting with a potential client before he finally opened a channel to ping Violet.

“Reyes Vidal. To what do I owe the pleasure?” Her service proved much better than his. She probably ran her comms through the Tempest and private satellite buoys.

“I was just thinking about your legs,” he purred. “And how you never visit me anymore.”

“Yeah, I caught none of that. Your connection sucks.”

A thought struck him. “It’s an ongoing problem. Can you hear me now?”

“Barely. SAM is optimizing your signal. He can temporarily reroute it through our channels. One sec.” After a brief wait, she said, “All right, let me hear your dulcet tones.”

“Is this any better?”

“Much! I swear, nobody on Kadara has a clear signal these days.”

Apparently she was out of the gossip loop and had no idea it was due to Sloane’s interference, trying to keep her enemies from organizing. Email delays, message terminal malfunctions, and broadcast issues plagued the everyday citizens under her thumb. And nobody mentioned it to the Pathfinder.

“You know, maybe it's worth checking into,” he mused, his heartbeat clicking up a pace. He couldn't push it too hard. Couldn't seem too invested.

“What would I check?”

“Maybe use your fancy scanner at some of the service towers, see if you can discover the source of the interference?”

“And I suppose you just so happen to know where I can find the towers?”

He backed off. Of course he knew where the towers were, but he wanted her to feel like this was her idea. “I'm afraid not. Tech isn't my specialty unless I'm moving it from one location to another for someone. It was just a thought.”

“Maybe some of my new friends know.”

“New friends?”

“Helpful locals. You jealous?”

He couldn't keep the smile from his tone. “Infinitely. Some days I think you may be avoiding me.”

“I hate to break your heart, but I have bigger priorities these days than putting up with you,” she drawled.

He grinned. He was such a masochist, but he loved when she took a stab at his ego. “You wound me, hermosa.”

“Sure I do, Reyes. I'll go check out those towers if I can find them. If your signal clears, know I did
“Wait, wait!” he cried, laughing. “You think I called you so you would be annoyed into fixing my shitty comm signal?”

Although it really did work in his favor. Sloane was going to be pissed if the Pathfinder innocently corrected her attempts to undercut the Collective.

“Well.” She made a reasoning noise. “I guess not. What's up?”

“Two weeks from tomorrow. You free?”

“I mean, I have something super dangerous penned in for the end of the week, but if I survive that, my schedule’s wide open.”

Reyes paused, dissecting her tone. “I can't tell if you're kidding or not.”

“Not,” she sighed.

“Well, if you survive, I need a plus-one to a party Sloane is throwing. I can think of no more beautiful of a woman I'd want on my arm than you.”

“You're asking me out? On a date?”

“I promise to be a perfect gentleman.”

“Well, I wouldn't go that far.”

He grinned. “Can I count on you?”

He heard her exhale. “Free drinks? Okay, I'm in.”

His heart gave a little, excited stutter. He frowned down at it. It didn't have permission to be quite so excited. “Okay, hermosa, I'll send you the details. Good luck with those comm towers. It's driving everybody crazy.”

“I'll call you to test it out if I make any progress. Prepare your best phone-sex voice.”

“For you, anything,” he purred.

“Yes. Exactly like that. Talk to you later.”

He reclined back on his sofa, lamenting his poor self-control. So much for avoiding dangerous women, but at least she was pretty clear on her boundaries. It was likely he would never taste her skin under his lips or feel those long legs wrapped around his waist.

But she had said yes to the date.

So maybe that was something.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is going to feature the Tempest crew a bit more. Well, some of them. A
few of them. Okay, so it's literally just Jaal and Gil, but they're fabu~

And I'm still endeavoring to figure out how to write you all a smutty chapter. I wrote out one scene, and I can't decide whether I hate it or not. Bear with me. It's so hard! (just how Violet likes it)

I'm so much better at innuendo. Don't judge me. >.<
Sleepless in Andromeda

Chapter Summary

After literally dying trying to save the Salarian ark, stressball Violet struggles against anxiety, tension, and nosy crewmates.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Violet’s fists hammered patterns into the swinging punching bag, a sensor near the top spitting readouts of her speed and accuracy, which she ignored. This wasn’t a training exercise. It was raw aggression and too much emotion inside her body.

She had died.

Again.

She was pretty goddamn sure she had been kidding when she told Reyes that they could go on their date providing she survived the mission. That might mean she was technically off the hook for his party, not that she would refuse to go, anyway. Anything to get off of the Tempest for a little while and do something not directly Pathfinder related.

Her fists hit harder into the punching bag. Faster. Sweat slicked her body, matting her hair around the sides of her face and sealing her loose tank to her body. She’d been at it for a while, enough that her arms should have started shaking with fatigue. She couldn’t let it go. Either she got the twisting, snaking fear out of her body, or she would explode. Dying once when she arrived in Andromeda had almost been comical. Survive a 600 year journey through darkspace to get taken out by a rock to the helmet on the first day.

This, this was something different.

“I honestly think it’s dead by now,” a deep voice rumbled from behind her.

She fell away from the bag, chest heaving, and pitched a dark look over her shoulder where Jaal perched on a crate stuffed in the corner of the cargo bay.

“Well, you know, I might need to hit it a few more times, just to be sure.”

“Are you okay, Ryder?”

His starry, blue eyes held hers levelly. Jaal, her most earnest teammate. A surprising rock in the storm. Violet had never been good at family. Her mother always been busy, her father virtually absent, and after they became adults, even she and her twin drifted apart. Jaal insisted she was family, and she didn’t have it in her to correct him. To be honest, she could use another brother, especially while her real one was comatose.

She mulled over his question, finally dropping her arms heavily to her sides. “I don’t know,” she admitted.
Hopping off his crate, the big angaran strode up to her, closing his hands around her shoulders. “You know you can talk to me. Whatever you’re feeling. I am here for you, oloan.”

Jaal didn’t have much sense of personal boundaries. It was an angaran thing, and one the entire crew had to get used to. He didn’t mind having a conversation inches from her face, or to sit practically sealed up against the others at meal times. They had all shifted to accommodate, except for maybe Cora, who politely but firmly maintained boundaries. Violet didn’t mind, though. It was about the only physical contact she got day-to-day.

“I’m tired. I need a day off,” she sighed at last, sagging as fatigue set in hard and fast.

The angaran enveloped her in his arms and she found her face pressed into the soft fabric of his rofjinn. Thunking her forehead against his shoulder, she accepted the hug. The bony nodules on the front of his chest scraped against her clavicle, but the rest of him was soft and giving and she felt herself melt bonelessly against him. Fucking angaran hugs. They were almost better than sex.

“Well, isn’t that cozy?” From somewhere above, Gil’s voice drawled down teasingly.

Violet freed one arm, thrust up her middle finger, and waved it about in his general direction.

“Isn’t she a bit gross? She’s been down there hammering at that punching bag for, like, an hour. She’s got to be all sweaty and foul.”

“She’s having a bad day. I can wash my rofjinn. The hug will not wait for convenience’s sake.”

“Whatever you say.”

Jaal finally pulled back, freeing himself. “Would you like me to make you a cup of coffee?”

She nodded, as meek as she ever got. “I really would.”

Giving her a final encouraging squeeze, he loped out of the cargo bay toward the galley. Left to her own devices, she trudged over to the lift to ride it up to the second level and pester Gil where tinkered with something in the engine room.

“How many hours you on?” she asked, planting her ass on one of the consoles.

She loved Gil dearly, but his habit of pulling thirty plus hour days and send her bad poetry when he was delirious from sleep deprivation made her wonder at his sanity. Not that, in her current state, she was in any place to judge, but Gil only needed a regulated sleep schedule and some melatonin. Violet needed a shrink.

“If you leave a buttprint, you’re cleaning that.” He checked his omnitool. “Only twenty-nine, so far. You?”

“Twenty-six.”

“I want to hear no sass coming from you about insomnia from now on, then. Besides, I’ve hit my second wind. I’m getting loads done,” he bragged, leaning up next to her, although he pulled up ship schematics on a datapad to tinker with while they chatted. Ever the multi-tasker. “So that hug was looking a little extra-friendly.”

She didn’t have the energy to glare. She made a mental note to squint at him later. “Not from me. No fooling around with crew. Pathfinder rule.”
“Uh-huh. And was that before or after you decided to defile Liam’s couch with him?”

Violet groaned, head tilting back. She thought that event was good and dead. She and Liam treated each other a little coolly, but she didn’t think they were acting too weird. They weren’t BFFs by any means, but they still managed to effectively work together. She was hoping everyone could just drop it and forget it ever happened, including—no, especially—Liam.

“That couch has seen far worse things than my bare ass. Besides, it’s was how I came up with the rule in the first place. Crew are strictly off limits.” She rubbed the back of her sweaty neck where the muscles had gone and knotted up again. She needed more than a day off. That stupid smuggler was right. She needed to get laid. Anything to release the tension in her body.

“That’s too bad. I was hoping you could tell me what an angaran dick looks like.”

“I bet you he’d show you if you asked nicely. He’s probably the least modest one among us. Definitely the friendliest.”

He paused to stare off thoughtfully at that.

After a moment, Gil said, “So that Archon ship shit...that was rough.”

Not the most graceful segue, but her engineer wasn’t exactly known for finesse.

“Yeah. Not really my favorite thing to have ever happened.”

“Is it weird? With SAM?”

“Nah. SAM and I are good. Aren’t we, SAM?”

“We are a team, Pathfinder,” he reassured her. She could have sworn she heard a note of pride.

“We had a heart-to-heart after we got back,” she continued. “Intellectually, I know that we weren’t getting off that ship without a bit of sacrifice. Or, really, a lot of sacrifice.” She wasn’t the only one who died there, but she was the only one who still walked herself home.

“No, I get it. It was the right call. Doesn’t make it less fucking terrifying.”


“Hey, but at least you have us.”

“Are you kidding? I couldn’t do it any other way.”

Gil shoved his hands in his pockets, leaning back on the console behind him. “Maybe...maybe you ought to get some sleep.”

“Oh, that’s rich, coming from you.”

“Hey, I’m used to it. I work best when I’m sleep-deprived and twitchy.”

By then, Jaal returned with her favorite mug filled with hot, steaming coffee. She took it from him with a fractured smile of gratitude. After her workout, she ought to have switched to water, but coffee made her happiest. The angaran gave her another side hug. Damn, but how was someone so
angular and bony so unconditionally soft?

“Thanks, hon,” she demurred.

“Uh-oh. She’s using pet names. You really ought to sleep,” Gil pressed.

She would have punched him, but she risked sloshing her coffee. “I don’t know. Dying felt eerily like falling asleep. I’m just not ready to go there again. Not yet.”

“Maybe you just need SAM to tell you a bedtime story.”

“Have you heard his jokes? I’m afraid what asking for a story might bring up.”

Jaal set a calming hand on her back. “I think Gil’s right. You haven’t closed your eyes since we got back. You need to sleep. Let me walk you back to your quarters.”

She felt like they were ganging up on her. She hugged her coffee to her chest, lest they try to wrest it away from her next.

“And maybe hand over the caffeine,” her engineer snorted, reading her mind.

She clutched it tighter. “Are you kidding? Coffee doesn’t keep me awake. It just keeps me from going savage.”

Circling his arm around her, Jaal prompted her to remove herself from the console and follow him out of the engine room. “Come on. I’ll tell you a bedtime story myself if that’s what it takes. You should at least try.”

Raising a hand to Gil, she let herself be towed off. She shuffled along, nervous about the thought of sleep. Later, she would hunt down Lexi and get professional help. Maybe sleeping pills. A psyche eval.

“Hey, I'm good, you know. I'll bounce back,” she promised Jaal when they reached her quarters.

“I do know. You're a strong person. It's what I admire about you,” Jaal replied with his usual earnestness.

She gave his arm a little squeeze, getting tingled by his bioelectricity for her gesture. “Thanks. Goodnight.”

“I'm here if you need me.” He stepped back with a small, affirming nod.

Violet did as she was told and retreated to her cabin, throwing off her clothes until she was down to her underwear. She sat cross-legged on her bed to sip her coffee while gazing out the front projection of her room. They were on their way to the Nexus for resupply, so the view wasn't accurate. She had it looping an orbit of Aya. She could never leave the windows diaphanous when they were in FTL. It made her motion sick.

“Pathfinder. I could alert Dr. T'Perro if you would like her to bring you something to help you sleep,” SAM offered.

She sipped her coffee. “Not yet. Let me just wind down.”

“As you wish.” If anything, he sounded a little dejected.

“I'm going to be fine, you know. A few days a freaking out, a few days of therapy, and then I'll
bounce back.”

“I am more worried about your hydration levels. You should switch to water.”

She grinned. “Let me finish the coffee, then water, then maybe sleep.”

It was hard to pin a motivation on SAM, but she liked it when he fussled. It made him seem a little more real to her, and right now, she needed him to be real and moral and part of her team more than ever.

After a minute, he said, “Pathfinder. I’m forwarding an email to your omnitool.”

“What? I thought I was taking a mandatory break from business for a few more hours, at least.”

“This one is not about business. It's from Mr. Vidal.”

She blinked, brow knitting together. “Is it important?”

“No, not that I can discern.”

“Then why…?”

“The release of dopamine, oxytocin, and several other endorphins into your brain when you receive correspondence from him is reason enough. In short, hearing from him makes you happy.”

“Way to be subtle about it,” she grumbled.

Nevertheless, he was right. Reyes gave her much-needed breaks from her duties and usually a pretty good laugh. Violet played hard to get, but she couldn't deny the thrill she got from the attention. She also couldn't deny that she was a textbook example of daddy issues. Her father would have hated Reyes, which only endeared the annoyingly charming smuggler to her more.

She opened the message from him, not even pretending feign disinterest.

_Violet, I had a thought. If the dangerous mission ends poorly for you, could you will me your ship? I promise to put it to good use. - Reyes._

She grinned, trying to imagine Kallo’s reaction if that ever became a reality. He would mutiny. Probably go homicidal. Lucky for all of them, the _Tempest_ belonged to the Initiative, not the Pathfinder who utilized it. Only SAM could be inhereted.

She pulled up a fresh email and began constructing her reply. She didn’t want to talk about the mission, but she knew he was easily distracted.

_What kind of uses are we talking?_

She sipped her coffee while she waited for a response, ending at the bottom of her mug. She set it on her bedside table and reclined back on her pillows to try to relax.

“SAM, dim the lights, please.”

As the lights reduced to a glow, SAM also forwarded another email to her. She found a little, unbidden smile on her lips.

_Maybe having custody of such a noble ship would make me rethink my wicked ways. Pathfinder Vidal has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?_
“Pathfinder,” SAM said while she contemplated her reply. “Please get some water. You are dehydrated.”

Groaning, she extracted herself from the bed and walked to the galley, depositing her coffee cup in the sink and swapping it for a tall water glass. She retreated back to her darkened room, gnawing her thumb until she was ready to fire off her reply.

*Fair warning, being Pathfinder comes with Tann.*

She got a response almost instantly.

*Maybe I'm not that noble.*

*And you have to be prepared for long hours, dangerous conditions, annoying bosses, everybody wanting you to do something for them...*

She eased down in her bed, arranging and rearranging the pillows around her, unable to get comfortable. The darkness irritated her, but she refused to turn the lights up. Violet Ryder was not afraid of the dark.

Her inbox pinged.

*Run away with me? I'll take your mind off of it.*

She wished she could take him up on that, and as soon as that thought crossed her mind, she knew she was finally delirious from sleep deprivation.

“Fuck that,” she muttered, and wrote a reply.

*I thought I already was running away by coming to Andromeda. But it turns out it sucks, so I have to fix it. What could you even offer me that rivals the excitement I've already got?*

She didn’t have to wait long for the reply.

*Orgasms. Lots and lots of orgasms.*

Violet scowled. “Good answer.”

She elected to send a only a one word response, chewing her thumbnail as she debated the fine line between leading him on and playfully flirting. She halfway hoped it ended the conversation so she wasn’t stuck trying to untangle their conversation without a solid dose of sleep first.

*Touché.*

Reclining back, she let her eyes drift shut as sleep finally tugged at her. Before she got there, even before she could begin panicking over the sensation of slipping quietly away into the night, she got a reply back from Reyes. It was short and simple, but gave her her plenty to mull over in the space between wake and sleep.

*See you soon, Pathfinder.*

Chapter End Notes
So I know this one was kind of short and is more like setup for what's ahead. Which is going to be Sloane's party. Yay!
Reyes muted his calls for the evening. Today, he was just a smuggler after a bottle of whiskey. Lording over his empire of crime was going to have to wait. He had important messages rerouting to his top allies, and only they had his personal number if anything critical needed his attention. Kadara could take care of itself for at least a few hours, couldn’t it?

At least the three major players of the planet would all be in the same room. Sloane, the Pathfinder, and the Charlatan all walk into a party…

The punchline to that one was inevitably bloody.

He played the part of invisible bystander among the outer stalls of the market, but within visual range of the Outcast headquarters. He went largely overlooked, dressed in nondescript clothing of no real value. A jacket that might or might not be genuine leather over a tan long-sleeved shirt, generic issue cargo pants, knockoff boots. Things not worthy of a second glance.

When Violet finally arrived, she drew the eye. Her gait bespoke confidence and training. In a crowd full of scavengers, her posture stood out as easily as if she wore a sign over her head declaring her danger. Her clothes were the kind lesser mortals got mugged over—not that she was in any danger of that kind of harassment. Not with her walk. Not with her posture. She didn’t even have to be armed. Eyes tracked her, calculating the worth of her custom-made boots versus the risk of trying to take them, and he was willing to put money down that 99% of them would walk away.

The skin-tight pants she wore did every inch of her legs justice, making him wonder if they, too, were custom trailed. He mostly got to see her in armor, so this was a real treat. She had traded her own leather jacket for a loose, gray shirt that draped her frame casually, topped with the vibrant cerulean scarf he bought her during their walk through the market. She wore dark her hair down where it draped to her middle back. He would have liked to get his hands in it, gather it between his fingers and grip it tight to expose the long, clean line of her throat for his lips to explore.

Apparently, he’d given up pretending like he could reign in any attraction to her. Reyes was so fucking.

The goons manning the front entrance stopped Violet’s progress, sneering up at her because her boots gave her enough lift to put her just above eye-level to them. Her posture remained relaxed, but he figured he ought to go save her before she got annoyed.

He sauntered up from behind her just as the guard standing watch insisted he didn’t have her name on the list. He set a hand on the small of her back, risking startling her for a moment of contact. Heat transferred to his palm, the shirt made of supple cashmere. He stood close enough to catch a hint of her subtle, floral scent that momentarily dropped the bottom out of his stomach. He could bury
himself in that scent.

“She’s with me. Reyes Vidal.”

The goon checked the datapad in his hand with slitted eyes and decided it wasn’t worth his time throwing around any more attitude. He waved them through, although his fingers danced across his omnitool to radio ahead to the rest of the room that the human Pathfinder had just showed up. It was a shame. Reyes would have liked to see all of their faces if given the chance to stroll in unannounced.

Violet glanced him up-and-down as they made their way further inside, her expression not quite readable. “Well, you’re relatively intact as far as I can see. Business must be going well.”

“I don’t get shot at nearly as much as you do,” he promised with a laugh, wondering offhandedly exactly how many bullets made contact with her armor on a regular basis. He pretended like the thought didn't disconcert him.

“Can we not talk about how much I get shot at? It’s been a long week. I’m ready for a drink and literally any other topic.”

That probably meant more bullets than usual had been hitting their mark. A little flare of anger burned a hole in him, but he shoved it aside. Getting shot at was her job, and if he played his cards right, he would put her in the path of more bullets.

“Anything for you,” he agreed grandly as the set of inner doors swept aside to deliver them into Sloane’s sanctum. “You look stunning today, hermosa.”

Violet cast him a tiny, knowing smile. “I know.”

Some might find her confidence jarring, but he lived for it. “Since we aren’t talking about your job, that means I get to ask personal questions,” he warned.

“That, or you get to talk about yourself for once.”

That more disconcerting than she realized.

The room was packed with mostly angarans, with a small smattering of humans, a lone salarian, and some turians among the Outcast staff, and Umi working the makeshift bar. Just as he predicted, most eyes were drawn immediately to the Pathfinder, sliding right over him in the process. If she noticed the attention, she played it cool.

“Hey, Kaetus,” she chimed as they passed the surly turian. “Looking spiffy. Did you polish your mandibles just for this?”

“The fuck are you even doing here? I don’t remember seeing your name on the invite list.”

“I shed the title of Pathfinder for ‘Plus One’ tonight and am taking a much needed vacation day. Is that a new coat?”

He seemed to grind his teeth a moment before answering. “Yes. It actually is.”

“It looks good on you.”

“Don’t start anything,” he warned, ignoring her attempt at chit-chat.

“I told you, it’s my day off. I’ll be on my best behavior. Scout’s honor.” She held up a three fingered
He seemed unconvinced, but had no choice but to let them pass further.

“You invited me just to watch the jaws drop, didn’t you?” she murmured as they made their way toward the bar.

He gestured to Umi to get them both a drink. “Maybe.”

The asari poured two whiskeys with her usual, scowling charm. He took one and handed the other to Violet, amused by her little wince when she sipped it.

“Made with genuine Kadara water and harvested young? This is practically moonshine.”

“Next one comes with comes with spit in it if you let Umi hear you,” he warned.

“Fuck it. Anything’s an improvement.”

He smiled around his own glass. He’d been drinking the pisswater that passed for alcohol on this planet for long enough to have built up a reasonable tolerance. Of course, this whole excursion was to fix that, but he needed a good enough distraction to slip away first, of which he had no doubt Violet would inevitably facilitate. He just had to wait for the right moment.

“So you know good whiskey?” he asked, since it was relevant to his interests.

“I wouldn’t say my standards are high.” She shrugged. “Which says a lot about this stuff.”

Unfortunately, obtaining anything better on this planet was a near impossibility. Even a person had possession of quality booze, it wasn’t something one would serve at an open bar to preening angarans. Good whiskey was probably as valuable as good coffee.

From up on the throne, he felt the heat of Sloane’s eyes. The corners of his mouth twitched rather impulsively. She leaned forward on her throne, fingers white-knuckling the armrests, like she had to physically hold herself back from punching whoever was nearest. Her patience was running a little thin these days, if reports were to be believed, her grip on her kingdom slipping inch by painstaking inch. Executions were up, innocents caught in the crossfire. Reyes wasn't ready to make his move, but they were headed toward a day of reckoning. With each citizen she pushed away, the Collective gained sympathy.

“Parties are clearly not her thing,” Violet muttered at his side, the corners of her own mouth straining. “She might need a drink more than I do.”

“I think that’s just her face.”

“I don’t know if I want to risk it, but I was kind of hoping to take the opportunity to charm her pants off.”

“Not worth it. Probably has teeth down there.”

She snorted into her whiskey glass, bringing it back for another wincing sip. “Think that’s how she executes her prisoners? The looks on those poor kett’s faces when she drops trou and unleashes the beast within.”

Reyes had the misfortune of taking a drink when she unveiled that visualization on him. Whiskey burn his windpipe going down. He pounded his chest while she laughed openly at his misery,
drawing, if possible, even more attention to them. By the time he recovered from the coughing fit, a female, violet skinned angaran moved in front of them.

“Reyes, I thought for a minute you weren’t going to show.” Her expression was relaxed, comfortable even, reminding him exactly how good she was at her job. She hid her emotions and greased a crowd with a level of cunning unheard of to other angarans, shifting attention where and on whom she wanted.

“Ah, Keema. You know I could never say no to an open bar and a glimpse of Sloane’s shining face.”

Keema’s smile turned a bit vicious, but only for a fraction of a second. “She looked like she could almost enjoy herself until you walked in, which can only mean one thing.” She turned to Violet. “You must be the Pathfinder. Reyes speaks of you. Often.”

“Does he?” She greeted her with an angaran gesture, elbows touching, fist to shoulder. “Only good things, I hope.”

“Oh yes. He likes you.”

There went all of his subtlety. Too late to intervene, he made a belated introduction. “Violet, this is Keema Dohrgun, the angaran representative to Sloane. And a friend.”

“Color me surprised. I didn’t think Reyes had those. Only contacts.”

“Oh, I certainly fall into that category. But then, so do you.”

Violet grinned outright. “Well, you have to give him credit for foresight. Being on friendly terms with the Pathfinder has its perks. How are your comms, by the way, since I cleared up the signal?”

“That was you who figured it out? I didn’t realize. What did you find out was wrong?” Keema asked, the picture of gracious innocence.

“Somebody had sabotaged towers across Kadara. I just had to remove the malware from a couple of computers and it cut through the static.”

He and Keema met eyes briefly. Sloane had sulked for days after the signals cleared up across the city and badlands.

“That AI of yours must be incredibly special,” the angaran demurred. “Plenty of others tried to hunt down the source of the interference. What would we do without you?”

“You can sing my praises once I fix that damn vault. Tann keeps tying me up with other shit to put off Kadara, insisting it’s not a priority. He’s just butthurt that I treat exiles like they have some worth left to the Initiative.”

“Not that you’ll get any thanks here,” Reyes drawled.

She conceded with a shrug. “You can have my efforts anyway. If I have to keep coming here for literally any reason, I’d love to clean up the stench of hell it carries, even just a little bit.”

“Your motivations are admirably selfish.”

She handed him her half-empty whiskey glass, apparently opting not to finish the swill, and brushed her hair back off her shoulder. “Speaking of, if you don’t mind, I do want to talk to Sloane for a
minute, at least see if I can butter her up. Basically the only reason I could convince anyone this party was worth the trip was for the opportunity to kiss-ass, and I don’t want them to make a liar out of me.”

“Of course. But if she reaches for her belt, run.”

Violet winked and strolled toward the throne, giving his heart a little, unexpected jolt. Damn, but the view was even better while she walked away.

“I thought you said you were done with dangerous women after Zia.”

“I am. I’m manipulating her.” He wished he sounded convincing, even to himself.

“You think you're subtle.”

“I better be, or we're all screwed.”

The angaran grinned knowingly. “You better get going before your window closes.”

She had a point. All eyes were glued to the Pathfinder while she approached Sloane to chat. Every single Outcast in the room leaned in, ready to respond in case their leader needed anything. Even Kaetus, who had a keen eye that always seemed everywhere was transfixed with the exchange. A better opportunity wouldn’t exist.

Shoving his hands in his jacket pockets, he ducked his head and sauntered out, entirely ignored. He checked his omnitool for the layout of the building to find the right storage room. It wasn’t far, in between the throne room and entrance, just within visible range of Kaetus where he stood. Thankfully, the turian’s glare continued to burn toward their esteemed leader.

Keema had already supplied him with the code to unlock the door. He punched it in and entered without a hitch, letting the doors glide shut behind him. Nice and private.

He double checked the serial numbers he was looking for and started scanning the crates lined up on the far wall, running into a minor hitch when some of the cargo required shifting to find the numbers printed on their labels. Whoever organized and stowed them deserved a solid slap. What he wouldn’t give for Violet’s AI to just scan the contents until he found what he was looking for.

He had hoped to be in and out in less than five minutes, but he spent more time hunting down serial numbers than he could have anticipated. How long until someone noticed his absence and came looking? Cursing under his breath, he shoved another crate around until he found the number printed on its side.

Bingo.

A voice murmured, just in his ear, “What are we stealing?”

If she had been anybody but the Pathfinder, he would have smacked her in his flailing to turn around, but she nimbly jumped out of reach.

“Violet! Christ!” he swore, clutching his heart. “I need to get you a bell. How did you get in here so quietly?”

She hopped up on one of the crates, hooking her ankles together, her face alight with merriment. “With the amount you were muttering and swearing? I could have marched a krogan army in here.” She folded her arms. “So?”
“This is…” His mind scrambled for a lie. Came up short. Damn it, why did her arms have to push up her breasts like that? “This is exactly what it looks like,” he finally finished lamely.

“Figured as much. So, you cutting me in, or what?”

“Are you kidding? You’re going to get us both caught. You were the one they’ve been watching, not me.”

Almost on cue, the storage room door whisked open. This time, he heard it. They were around the corner, just out of visual range, but there was no where to duck in time before whoever it was found them.

“Shit. We’re not supposed to be in here--”

Unfazed, Violet hopped down from her perch, grabbed the front of his jacket, and lifted her mouth to his. For a moment, the world ground to a standstill. He forgot how to breathe. For a suspended moment, all that existed was her soft lips on his, but even as his brain shorted, his body responded. He raised one hand to the side of her neck, the other to the curve of her hip, hanging on for dear life as his pulse stuttered to catch up. When her lips parted just slightly and she traced his bottom lip with her tongue, he came fucking undone, crushing her close and seeking more.

Somewhere in the haze of reality just outside his periphery, their interrupter apologized and scuttled away.

Her nails scraped his scalp where she fastened her fingers in his hair at the back of his head. If she wanted, she could have thrown him off the second they were left alone, but she continued with enthusiasm, deepening the kiss, clutching at his clothes and hair. At some point, he crowded her back up against the crate she had been sitting on. She hopped back up, knees parted so he could stand between them, fire pooling in his belly.

What was the con supposed to be? What was the manipulation? For a frantic moment, he couldn’t recall any of it.

He pulled his mouth away a fraction. “Violet.”

She chased it back with her own.

Fuck, but he didn’t want this to end.

He drew in a ragged breath between kisses. Had he forgotten to breathe this entire time? Finally, he managed to hang onto a vague recollection his purpose. He broke away for good, staggering backwards a step out of the cage of her arms and legs. He did his best at a cocky smile, but he was pretty sure she saw through his thin attempt at bravado.

“I think we’re clear, and I’m not finished in here.”

If he didn’t put distance between them, he would end up asking her for a quickie against the storage crate, and there was no way he was letting Sloane’s people get an eyeful of his bare ass on their merch. Violet took a moment to compose herself, dragging her hair back on her scalp while she caught her breath.

Good. She was just as winded as he was.

Returning to the crate he’d identified before Violet walked in, he opened it up with a small sigh of relief as he found the bottle suspended carefully within packaging. He retrieved it with reverence,
swiping dust off of the label with his thumb.

“Whiskey? We’re snatching whiskey?” Violet demanded, one eyebrow arched skeptically.

“Hey, you were the one complaining about the shit we were drinking back there, and this, this is treasure. It’s the only bottle of Mount Milgrom in Andromeda. Triple distilled and six hundred and forty-five years old.” He cocked a grin at her. “And now, it’s ours.”

The eyebrow twitched a fraction higher. “Ours?”

“Come on. Let’s get out of here.” He jerked his chin toward the door.

He had to appreciate that Violet squared herself and walked out with him like they weren’t robbing the place. She strode confidently, like she had every right to be in that locked storage room. Combined with the quick thinking back there, maybe she had a future as a grifter. She even tossed a casual wave to the Outcast guarding the front entrance, the one who almost denied her entry to begin with.

As they headed back toward the docks, Violet suddenly stopped. “What?”

He half-turned, but she held her finger up for him to pause.

“No. Tell Drack to back him up. If Gil’s going to screw a bunch of mercs out of their credits, make sure he doesn’t get gutted doing it.”

“The kids acting up?” he drawled.

“Always,” she huffed, then turned her attention back inward. “SAM, turn off all messages except those flagged as urgent. And don’t let them get on your case about filtering for me. Remind them of the week I’ve had.”

A little crease had developed between her eyebrows, a tension around her dark eyes and mouth he hadn’t seen before. She looked young and tired and in desperate need of a break.

He held out a hand. “Let’s not worry about business for a while.”

Almost shyly, she reached out and caught his fingers. “You don’t know how hard I’m trying to do that.”

Giving her hand a squeeze, he struck out again, ultimately bringing her to an unused hangar where they had a good vantage point at the ledge to overlook the other ships and the sprawling terrain beyond. Kadara didn’t have many boasting points, but its views weren’t half bad, especially coupled with a sunset. They settled in at the corner of the landing platform, legs dangling over a long drop, and uncapped the whiskey to drink straight out of the bottle. It seemed like a minor crime for the only bottle of Mount Milgrom in the galaxy, but the method of consumption suddenly wasn’t as important as the company.

Reyes wanted to reach out and touch her again, but kept his hands to himself while they passed the bottle back and forth. She had let him hang onto her hand for a while before reaching the hangar, and he swore his hand still tingled from the contact.

“You were right,” Violet finally sighed. “This whiskey is so much better than the shit Umi sells.”

He lifted the bottle to his lips. “The drinks at Tartarus are better. Umi’s struggling by with home brews. Kian imports everything.”
“Imports from where?”

“Ah, now telling you would be a betrayal of client confidentiality.” Especially since he got everything from the Nexus, as they were about the only people with an up and functioning distillery.

She shook her head, claiming the bottle back from him. “Forget I asked.”

“Besides, I thought we weren’t talking business.” He nudged her shoulder with his.

“What does that leave us?”

He thought for a moment, passing the bottle back to her to drink. “What do you think of Andromeda? Is it anything like what you hoped?”

“I’m not sure what I hoped for. I was just looking for a change. A really big change, but a change.” She took a sip of whiskey. “The job was a surprise. I always figured I’d split the second we made planetfall on one of those golden worlds they described. Find a nice, sandy beach. Build something. Settle down.”

“You weren’t going to adventure with the pathfinding team? Isn’t that why you came?”

“You kidding? I was going to put as many klicks between me and my father as I could the second we set up shop. He brought me on to be part of his team, but he’s never understood what being a team meant with anybody, especially his children. He knows how to lead, how to order, and how to control. I came here to do something, but not because he commanded it.”

Reyes didn’t think it was possible for anyone to have a worse relationship with their father than he had growing up, but it sounded like the famed Alec Ryder didn’t live up to his hype. That said, living in his shadow probably skewed her perspective.

“What would you have built if the golden worlds panned out?” he asked.

She took another drink before passing the bottle back. “I don’t know. Maybe a smuggling empire. Just to keep it interesting.”

He nudged her again. “Hey, no stealing my dream.”

“That can’t have honestly be what brought you here. Why did you come?”

A loaded question, if he ever heard one. He bought himself time to answer, lifting the bottle and taking more than a sip. Enough alcohol flooded his system to relax the tension out of his shoulders and make the clamor of his plans fade away to the background. It made him want to tell her the truth of why he signed on the dotted line to embark with the Initiative, but she would die laughing. He’d sooner tell her he was the Charlatan.

“What do you know about me?” he asked. “I assume you dug up my files.” It was actually surprising none of her crewmates knew and ratted him out.

“Most of them were corrupted during the uprising. I know only what little could be salvaged. You were a pilot. Callsign Anubis.”

He snorted. “Stupid callsign if I’ve ever heard one. That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

He took another drink.
“So?” she prompted. “Why Andromeda?”

“I came here…” He gave a small shrug. “...to be someone.”

Reyes hadn’t really meant to say that, but it popped out without his permission. Funny about the road led him to this point. Everyone knew the Charlatan, but Reyes Vidal was invisible. The hand that pulled the puppet. And if he valued his life, he would keep it that way. The fewer people who knew, the longer his lifespan would be.

Violet reached out and set her hand back in his. “For what it’s worth, I like who you are. And that’s got to earn you some cred. Pathfinder approval, and all.”

He leaned toward her impulsively, a slave to his whims, which for now, dictated he try to score another kiss. He was an idiot. This wasn’t the plan. “Might backfire in a place like this,” he murmured.

She met him halfway, breath whispering against his lips. “Worth the risk?”

“Definitely.”

She tasted like the whiskey they shared. The first kiss was soft, exploritorave in a way the previous one had no time for. First a brush of lips, a seeking of taste and texture. Desire burned it's way downward, giving him a clear idea of how he hoped the would end. He shifted his hips, trying to ease the scrape off fabric over his growing desire like he was a goddamn teenager again and a gentle breeze could have gotten him off, but one of her hands came down on his thigh, centimeters from his twitchy, needy erection and he recognized a quicky losing battle. Did she do that on purpose?

The kiss that started out sweet and speculative turned to fire and lust.

“Pathfinder.”

They both jumped back at the interrupting voice of her AI, as if they had been caught making out on his mother's couch.

Those teenage flashbacks needed to stop.

“SAM? What?” she demanded, thrusting her hair out of her face with a scrape of fingers.

Reyes decided she could multi-task while she talked and set his lips against the pulsepoint on her neck, inhaling that cloying scent that was all Violet. She made a soft noise and arched into him.

“You asked me to interrupt if you were about to do something stupid. This falls under the parameters you laid out for me.”

He chuckled against her skin, sampling a taste of her neck that made her squirm.

“Oh. Right. Uh. Forget it.”

He retreated away from her. “Whatever you say.”

Her glare could have cut through a kett battlecruiser. “Not you. Get back here. SAM, forget I said anything.”

“As you wish, Pathfinder. But, if I may, perhaps you should recall our discussion with Dr. T’Perro and the seeking out of risky behavior at this time.”
“Noted. Thanks, SAM.”

Reyes flashed her a knowing grin. “He doesn't like me.”

“On the contrary, I don't mind you at all. You are a distinct benefit to Ryder's brain chemistry.”

“Can we not talk about my brain chemistry today?” she huffed.

“Is it weird?” he asked, sliding his fingers through the strands of her hair near her shoulder. “Having him constantly there? Lurking. Monitoring.”

“Comforting, actually.” She sighed, tipping her head back and exposing the soft underside of her neck. “Which is probably insane.”

“Didn’t take you as an exhibitionist.” He sampled the spot under her ear.

“It's not…” She exhaled unsteadily. “It's just been a weird week. I sort of died.”

He had known her long enough that when she said sentences like that, it usually wasn't because of a twisted sense of humor. He withdrew to study her. She winced, as if she hadn't meant to say that out loud.

His gaze lingered over her body. “Seems like it didn't take very well.”

She lowered her chin back down and sucked the inside of her cheek. “Yeah. SAM both killed me and brought me back. We were caught in an immobilization net, which only works on living organisms.”

“Has anyone ever mentioned you have a dangerous job?”

Her smile was just shy of bleak. “I told you that you didn't want it.”

“So tell me more. He killed you to free you from this net, I take it?” He captured one of her hands, drawing circles over her knuckles with his thumb.

“That was the idea.”

“Smart,” he conceded. “I daresay, maybe even a little crafty. I'm glad I'm on his good side.”

“His killing me didn't bother me so much. I'm glad he was there. He protected me. Our options weren't great, and I didn't feel like getting exalted this week. But the dying…”

“Would fuck anyone up.”

His stomach flipped nervously. When they first met, he'd watched her take a point-blank blast from a shotgun. He'd been certain she was killed then, but when he turned back around after the last Roekaar fell, she had been on her knees, irate, but unharmed. Since then, he never really considered Heleus much of a threat to this indomitable woman.

He caught her rich brown eyes, holding them as he meant to say something encouraging or meaningful in the lapse where she fell quiet. Instead, what came out of his mouth was, “You want to go back to my place, mi amor? I'll remind you what living feels like. Dying will be the farthest thing from your mind.”

Violet nodded, her breath catching. “Hell yeah.”
Reyes hadn't actually expected her to accept his invitation and took a prolonged beat to let it sink in. Meanwhile, she hunted down the whiskey bottle and capped it, scooting back from the edge of the landing pad and hopping gracefully to her feet. After the amount of whiskey they consumed, he was genuinely impressed.

Scrambling after her, he caught her waist before she could change her mind, claiming her lips fiercely while gathering her shapely ass in his hands. He needed to cop this one feel before she regained sanity and threw him off.

“What happened to your place?” she murmured, threading her arms around his neck.

“What?”

She nibbled his jawline. “It's better without the pants.”

“Fuck, hermosa, you wouldn't tease me, would you?”

“You want to find out how I can tease you?”

“Definitely,” he breathed.

Arm wrapped around her waist, he calculated the quickest route to the slums. His plans could go to hell, his determination not to get involved with her with it.

Chapter End Notes

You don't think I'd leave you hanging with a fade to black, do you? Next chapter will be shameless, shameless smut. Rating will be upgraded to explicit, tags to reflect what's coming, all that good stuff.

HOWEVER. I know smut isn't everybody's cup of tea. If anyone would like to read the chapter, sans smut, I'll be doing an adjacent chapter uploaded separately, but linked, where Violet and Reyes have a cup of coffee together instead. A vigorous cup of coffee. With essentially the same conversation pieces so you don't miss out on anything.
Chapter Summary

Violet and Reyes head back to his place after sipping whiskey on the docks to cap off the night with a quick fuck and a cup of coffee.

Chapter Notes

Welllllllllllll this is the first time I've ever posted smut before, SO NEW ADVENTURES FOR ME. I'm totally not freaking out.

But because I know I have at least one reader who finds these scenes uncomfortable, I did a thing and wrote the chapter replacing all explicit bits with vigorous coffee drinking. It was hilarious. It was fun. I like it better than the real chapter. Anyway, if smut's not your thing, try coffee instead!

http://archiveofourown.org/works/11158206

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reyes couldn't keep his hands off of her. Not that Violet minded, but it made their journey to his apartment an endeavor. He roamed her body, exploring with tactical precision. He traced the line of her back and the curve of her waist as they walked, and then the over shape of her breasts in the lift down to the slums. His lips roved what they could. Her mouth. Her neck. Her ear. Her collar. He made her dizzy, sucking the air right out of her lungs whenever it found an untouched corner to taste.

"We're never going to make it at this rate," she complained as the lift settled to a stop.

He had her pinned against its grimy wall--she chose not to acknowledge the crust of sulfur built up on it, mostly because he had his mouth on her throat, clever fingers beneath her bra, and a thigh between her legs grinding up against her aching core. Kadara's underbelly usually made her semi-nauseous, but she had Reyes to bury her nose against.

He extracted his hand from under her shirt, pressing his lips back to hers for a final taste. Then he took a look around, brow knit as if he completely lost track of where they were.

"I'm not fucking you in this elevator," she warned, regaining enough of her senses to put in a formal protest. "My standards aren't high, but there's a line."

Grinning, he took her hand and towed her out of the lift and into the muddy, dimly lit streets beyond. "Then keep me distracted until we get there. What's the craziest place you've gotten laid?"

"Oh, easy. Back of an evac shuttle, getting shot at by pirates."

He perked an eyebrow. "You're shitting me."
“Nope. The guy I was with was absolutely bugfuck insane and I was nineteen and stupid. To be fair, he had a heart of gold. He saved a lot of lives pulling his crazy shit.”

“Pathfinder. You’ve picked up an additional tail,” SAM abruptly warned, interrupting her story.

She exhaled sharply. “How many does that make? Anyone we recognize?”

“This would be the third, and he’s armed. His face is not in my database.”

Reyes glanced over at her. “Third? You have people following you?”

“Every time I’m in Kadara. Give the other two a minute to catch up. They’ll find alternate routes down instead of the lift, but it won’t take them long.”

He had the good sense not to go necking around for a glimpse of her shadows, but his body tensed. “They ever cause you trouble? Who are they?”

“Nah. I figure one reports to the Outcasts, and the other, probably the Collective. Not that because they haven’t tried something stupid means they won’t.” She felt her shoulders bunch at the reminder. Not one fucking moment of peace in this city. She hoped her extracurriculars this trip made for interesting reading material for whoever they reported to.

“And the third?” he pressed, a frown giving way on his face.

“Hey, don’t worry about it. Probably got an eyeful of my boots and is hoping to catch me off guard.”

He threaded his fingers through her hair. “But you’re never off guard.”

“Not in this lifetime.”

Casting a pointed look behind them, he said, “I see I have my work cut out for me. When was the last time someone took care of your needs, hermosa? Let you relax?”

“Relax? What’s that?” she joked.

He made a noise of frustration, combing her hair aside and setting his lips against her ear so that his hot breath whispered against it. “I’m going to make you come so hard you’ll forget your own name.”

A spear of fire raked down her spine, turning her knees to a gelatinous mess.

Violet had really meant to be in charge for this one, to take what she needed, fuck him hard, and then escape before full regret could set in. Maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea to see what he had in mind for her…

They arrived past the shipping containers to a stack of prefab housing units that were a fire marshall’s nightmare. They had been built about four high and ten long with walkways running along the upper levels and narrow steps leading up to each one. They made up a good portion of the slum’s outer wall, facing the badlands, so maybe they at least had a window off the back to give them natural light and a view.

“Cheap rent really worth this?”

“Every cent saved.”

“Does it have indoor plumbing?”
“We could always go back to the Tempest if it offends your sensibilities.”

And parade her one-night-stand around in front of the crew? Definitely not. She held up her hands in surrender. “Let’s see your palace, then.”

His unit was at the top of the stack, not far from the narrow, sulfur crusted staircase leading up. He punched in a code into the door and stepped aside to let her in. Lights popped on, set off by motion sensors, illuminating a combined kitchen and living room with a single window that presumably looked out over the darkened Kadaran landscape. It was camped living, reminding her of the various dorms and apartments she had been stuffed in and out of throughout her life, the surfaces made of molded plastic, adorned with basic appliances. He owned a single couch and coffee table that faced a vid screen. The kitchen had limited counter space and a single barstool.

The one thing that could be said about his apartment was that it smelled great. She inhaled deeply after crossing the threshold, delivered from Kadara’s sulfuric burn and into the arms of spice and warmth.

“Ha! So you do get fed up with Kadara’s stench!” she accused.

He closed the door and keyed the outer locks, turning to catch her waist and walk her further inside. “Best air scrubbers credits can by. The accommodations might be modest, but I’ve made a few improvements.”

He went for her scarf first, the blue one he’d bought for her in the market, unwinding it from where it loosely draped her shoulders and tossing it carelessly aside. He then went for her shirt, peeling it up over her head, aided when she raised her arms to let him. She hoped he didn’t mind she wore the bra she jokingly referred to as the “False Advertisement.” It brought her up a solid cupsize and a half, something she desperately needed since her body fat percentage was stupidly low these days and had nothing extra for curves.

The way his pupils blew wide and he brushed his fingertips down the center of her body, she got the feeling he’d have worshiped anything de-clotting revealed.

“I want to see every corner of your body—ah,” he hissed when she cupped the prominent bulge in his pants and ground her palm against it.

“I’m at a bit of a disadvantage.” With her free hand, she shoved his jacket off his shoulder. “You can see me—have me—but only if I get something in return.”

“You strike a hard bargain, mi amor.” The jacket dropped in a heap, followed shortly by his shirt.

By then she had his belt undone, button popped, and her hand gliding silkily along his length, watching the changes in his face as his control over the situation fractured. He reached out to grip the edge of the counter separating the kitchen from the living space, lips parted just slightly, hips jutting against her hand.

He had beautiful skin. A strange thought to pop into her head as she studied him, but there it was. His dark bronze skin was warm and smooth except for a dark sprinkling of hair that ran down the center of his chest and his belly, disappearing under the band of his underwear where her hand explored. One shoulder and his upper arm were dominated by tattoos, symbols and images feeding into each other. She set her mouth against it near the juncture of his neck, tasting his sweat, breathing him in. He had the build more of a brawler than an adonis, she decided. Heavy with muscle, delightful with each contour, but not as finely chiseled as, say, Liam.
Reaching around her, he unclipped her bra, shoving the straps off her shoulders and letting gravity claim it. She had to pull her hand out of his pants to get it off completely. Her nipples had been tight with arousal since the hangar pad.

“You,” he murmured huskily, pushing her back towards what she assumed was the bedroom door, “are a fucking vision.”

She turned before she tripped and ruined the moment, leading the way to the door she assumed was the bedroom. Lights flickered on as she entered, giving her a full view of the cramped space. A bed dominated most of the space, the walls almost within touching distance of each other if she stretched her arms out.

“My bathroom is bigger than this,” she snorted, peering around suspiciously.

“Seems like a bad time to say, ‘size doesn’t matter.’” He slid his arms around her middle from behind, mouth hot against her neck. “Besides, how are you not stacked on top of everyone in the Tempest?”

She broke free of his grasp, turning to perch on the edge of his bed, hands braced behind her as she scooted back on the surprisingly soft mattress. Definitely not standard issue. One of the few improvements along with the air scrubbers? “The Pathfinder’s quarters are twice the size of this entire apartment. The others are packed in like sardines, but I could host a whole krogan orgie if I wanted.”

“Now that’s not the image I wanted in my head,” he muttered, ridding himself of his pants and underwear before climbing onto the bed after her.

He settled between her knees, caging her with his arms and dipping his head to kiss her breasts. He swirled his tongue around each hard, little bud, one at a time, lavishing them with consummate attention—a delightful little prelude to what she had ahead of her. Her body tingled under his touches, shortening her breath to ragged gasps. His erection lay stiff and trapped between them, so she teased it with feather-light touches while he kissed over her body, giving her something other than his clever mouth to focus on.

Eventually he sat back, looking down at her with unfettered lust. He claimed a kiss on her lips, chest rumbling with an appreciative groan. “Fuck, you’re beautiful. I don’t know what I want to do with you first, you’re so goddamn beautiful.”

She gave his cock a little squeeze. “I have a few ideas you might be interested in.”

Grinning, dimple appearing on his cheek, he pressed another hard kiss to her lips. “Oh, you will be the death of me, hermosa. You can be sure of that.”

Reyes drew back with some reluctance, finally getting around to freeing her from her own pants. He slid down to the end of the bed to shed her boots, first, unlacing each one impatiently to toss over his shoulder. One he chucked all the way to the hallway, the other hit against the wall and dropped out of sight near the corner of the bed. After a small interlude of feathering kisses over her belly, he hooked his hands in the band of her pants and dragged them down her hips.

“What, did you glue these on?” he griped when they clung to her curves.

She lifted her hips to help him. “They’re a pain in the ass to get on and off, but they make my butt look great.”

He made a noise in his throat. “True. I didn’t think I would end up hating them before the night was
over.” He yanked them down her thighs, grabbing her by one ankle and using it to try to pry the pants off, but they clung to her calves even tighter. “Fuck these things!”

Violet laughed, grabbing a pillow to stuff under her head while she watched him struggle.

“Oh, you’re enjoying this, are you?” he growled.

“Immensely.”

“Joke’s on you if I can’t get you out of them. I’m happy just to stare at you all night.” He paused, panting, and kissed the top of her bare knee that he finally freed. He then rested his elbow on top of it and took a break. “I didn’t realize I was going to have to spend all of my energy just undressing you.”

She giggled insanely, propping up on her elbows and grinning down at him. “You need a hand?”

“Is there a trick to these I’m not getting?”

“Nah, just persistence. Maybe some dedicated shimmying.”

“You did this on purpose.”

“Maybe,” she conceded. “Now come on. I believe in you.”

“The Pathfinder has spoken,” he grumbled, grabbed her foot again, and started working the fabric off of her with admirable obstinance.

When the pants relinquished their hold on her, he tossed them aside with a small snarl and then regrouped, running his hands up and down her legs reverently, fingertips tracing the underside of her knees and the shape of her calves. She still wore her panties, perfectly aware of the damp spot that had been growing on them since he started kissing her at the docks. He placed a kiss on the inside of her knee, taking his time now.

“Pathfinder.”

Both of them groaned audibly as SAM’s voice interrupted his worship of her legs.

“Yes?” she sighed.

“I apologize for the interruption, but I thought it prudent to remind you that, while on the blockers, your risk of sexually transmitted infections is still present. I advise physical contraceptives for any penetrative intercourse.”

“Your AI is a cockblocking menace, you know that?”

She glared at the ceiling fan whirling gently above his bed. “Make a note, SAM. These conversations should all happen before we get into foreplay. Maybe before the date entirely.”

“I understand, but I didn’t deem it necessary earlier, as you stated to me that you would not, under no uncertain terms, have sex with Mr. Vidal.” He at least had the decency to sound apologetic.

Reyes rested his cheek against her knee. “Ouch.”

“Shut up.”

“Me or SAM?”
“Both. SAM, your concerns are noted. Would you mind going silent except for emergencies?”

“Of course, Ryder. Enjoy your evening.”

“Can’t you turn him off?”

She flattened her lips, dropping her head back to the pillow behind her. While she couldn’t strictly turn him off, she could have him pause his logs. However, she had already come to the conclusion that she wouldn’t do that to him during significant experiences, good or bad. He was supposed to be learning about humanity through her, and while boning a sexy exile didn’t rank too high on her list of life-altering events, it had its own purpose.

“No. He’ll be quiet, though.”

He traced circles against her leg just above her ankle, expression contemplative. “Because you asked it of him. You didn’t tell him.”

“We’re stuck with each other. I’d rather our relationship be based in respect. He deserves choice.”

Thinking that over a moment, he finally nodded. “Condoms are in the bedside table, but we’ll use them in a minute. I’m not done marveling at your perfection.”

Violet tossed her arms above her head, stretching her lean body out for him to ogle. “Fine, but don’t take too long, or I’ll start without you.”

He grinned, smoothing a hand up her belly, between her breasts, and then back down to her navel. “Deal.”

He caught his fingers in the elastic of her panties, tracing the skin just underneath. He dropped his head again and sucked the skin in the dip of her hip. She squirmed in anticipation, watching with bated breath as he teased his way around.

“Fuck, Reyes, would you just pull them off already?”

He nipped the ridge of her pelvis. “Patience.”

She exhaled raggedly. The last time she got laid, by this point, Liam had already blown his load and was finishing her off with his fingers and she was plotting her escape from the storage room and his filthy couch. Reyes proved he was in no rush as he tickled the skin of her lower belly with his breath, sprinkled with kisses, nips, and gentle presses of his tongue. If he didn’t do something soon, she was going to explode.

Finally, with aching tenderness, he stripped her underwear down and away to reveal her glistening sex. They disappeared off the edge of the bed with the rest of her clothes, leaving her bare and frenzied to be touched.

He muttered something, too soft for her to catch fully, but it seemed to be another praise to her beauty. She hadn’t been wholly convinced that she liked how fixated he was on her physicality up to that point, but that utterance burned through her. His voice had gone deep, rough. It dragged against her like a cat’s tongue, raising the hairs on the back of her neck.

Just as she was about to lodge a formal complaint that he needed to do something, he used his fingers to spread her slickness, then lowered his head to suck lightly against her throbbing clit. The breath exploded from her chest. She watched, fascinated, as he placed open, sloppy kisses against her sex, licking between the seam all the way to her clit. It was wholly lewd, left her knees weak and
breath shallow, and dragged the most embarrassing mewling noise from her lips as he devoured her with enthusiasm.

She slapped hand over her mouth.

That did not just happen.

She wasn’t given much time to regret it. Reyes worked a finger into her tight heat, curling it, exploring her clenching walls. He added a second finger, dragging his tongue back over her clit and eliciting a desperate plea from her mouth.

“Oh, fuck it,” she huffed, dropping her head back and accepting the stupid noises coming from her lips. “Do that...that thing with your tongue again. Fuck. Yes. That,” she panted when he repeated the motion that made her vision darken. “Again. A little slower.”

He took instruction well. She tucked that away for future contemplation.

A third finger joined the others inside of her, fucking her with slick noises that she drowned out with a chant of foul language, moans, and shuddering gasps.

He was too good at this. Better than anything she’d gotten recently, including the whole year leading up to the launch of the Andromeda Initiative. She squirmed under his devoted ministrations, heels digging in the mattress as she struggled to keep her body from shattering apart entirely.

His free hand came down on her hip, pinning her so that she didn’t buck too hard under his clever tongue and fingers. One of her hands clasped behind his head, not quite holding him in place, but digging firmly into his scalp, needing something, anything to hang onto while she came undone.

Heat and pressure built steadily, pressing on all corners of her body, scrabbling for release. She tried to hold it off, because what Reyes did to her was fucking amazing and she had no interest in seeing it end. Her toes curled and her body strained against the hand holding her steady, a deep shudder afflicting her the longer she fought against the impending peak.

When was the last time a lover bothered to make sure she came first? It was about damn time she got her standards back on track.

“I’m close,” she huffed breathily. “So fucking close.” She squeezed her own breast, back arching up off the mattress. “Fuck, Reyes, I can’t...can’t...” Words failed her.

His fingers stroked her expertly, finding a point of contact that made her vision blacken and her breath rip away from her. His tongue wound precise circles around her throbbing clit, then dug in with a final flourish. Violet hurtled over the edge, crying out a half-coherent statement so he knew she came.

As if he couldn’t tell. It wasn’t like she’d come completely unglued under him.

What had he said about making her come so hard she couldn’t remember her own name? He was certainly on the right track.

He removed his fingers from her, even as she clenched down so as not to lose the pressure. The sudden emptiness left her bereft, the ghosts of sensation still rippling through her. He slapped an open-mouthed kiss to her belly with a low chuckle that vibrated through her skin. Violet just lay there, buzzing, unable to catch her breath.

“That was...holy shit.”
“You make delicious noises, you know that?” he purred.

She ran her hands along the smooth skin of his shoulders and down the muscles of his arms, touching whatever she could, just wanting to be close to him for a few minutes more, still buzzing with aftershocks of pleasure.

“Come here,” she uttered.

He obligingly crawled up her body, pressing tender kisses along the way. When he hovered just above her, she licked her own taste off his lips, then kissed him deeply, trailing her fingertips up the centerline of his back and fastening her legs around his thighs. His erection dug against her belly, prominent and deserving of attention.

Breaking his mouth away, grinning, he peppered kisses along the curve of his face and reached off the edge of the bed until he got the drawer open on the bed stand there. She took a moment to try to compose herself, shaking her long hair back, careful not to let it get trapped under her. She took a few deep, cleansing breaths, and happened to glance over to where Reyes fumbled in his drawer for a little foil packet. He had to dig past a couple of bottles of what appeared to be different kinds of lube and a handful of sex toys.

“Interesting collection,” she mused, propping herself up on a shaky elbow to see in better.

“Not much to do on long Kadara nights between jobs.” He seized a box of condoms near the back and withdrew one, but left the drawer open for her inspection. “Anything catch your eye?”

“Is it weird I’m giving serious thought of pilfering from your sex drawer? I left my vibrators in the Milky Way.”

He grinned, rolling the condom on with a practice motion. “You’ll just have to come back whenever you need that itch scratched.”

Violet encouraged him to roll onto his back, swinging a leg over his thighs to seat herself just below his cock, stroking it over the condom as she considered that with a little tilt of her head, hair falling over one, bare shoulder. “Well, that puts a damper on my ideas for a meaningless one-night-stand. Would you consider a fuckbuddy arrangement?”

“For you, hermosa , I would sell my very soul.”

“You can keep your soul. It’s really just your dick I want. Well, and maybe your mouth, Shena.”

“Told you I never get complaints.”

Grinning, she raised her hips up and lined herself up carefully, lowering with a long exhale, head tilting back so that the ends of her hair tickled just above her ass. He filled her, stretching her with a pleasing ache. His fingers dug into her hips, holding her in place while they ground together, her body acclimatizing to the intrusion.

When she was ready, she gave a little roll. Reyes watched her with nothing short of reverence, eyes blackened with lust. He swept his hooded gaze from her face to her breasts to her belly, and finally to the juncture between their bodies. He raised both hands to trace her ribs and breasts, thumbs brushing across her dark nipples.

Violet rocked slowly, taking her time to draw out each sensation with deep, deliberate thrusts. It was a little different than her standard go-to of frantic fucking, but she no longer wanted to rush. She didn't want it over in two minutes, out the door in five, and back to the Tempest to get back to work.
This one had to last. She wanted to forget her duties, to wanted to remember what it felt like to be relaxed and happy.

“You have the body of a goddess,” he breathed as he studied her.

Usually, she discouraged mid-coital chitchat, but she loved the way each word purred from his lips, and that he had more to his vocabulary than, “Oh, yeah, baby, give me more.” He hadn’t even said the word “pussy,” which seemed like a god ordained miracle.

She seriously needed to fuck more guys like Reyes. Or, maybe just keep fucking Reyes. Often.

Violet let out a squeak when he shifted beneath her, shoving her back and sitting up so he could fasten a hand in her hair and drag her mouth to his.

“You are thinking far too much,” he growled, pressing a thumb to the spot between her eyes. “You get a crease just there when your mind won't shut up.”

“You barely know me,” she shot back, struggling to adjust so she didn't get a cramp trying to obtain the right angle of friction again.

“Then tell me I'm wrong. That your mind wasn't elsewhere, daydreaming.”

Curling both hands around her ass, he held her steady and thrust up hard and fast into her body. She dropped her forehead to his shoulder, surrendering control while he took responsibility for pace and force, shuddering out several gasps before she could reply.

“Does it count if I was daydreaming about how I plan to blow your mind every time I'm in Kadara?”

“Then why the little scowl?”

“Because I was also thinking about how disappointing all the times I've gotten laid have been in the last year.”

“If you are thinking about other lovers, I'm not doing my job.”

She arched into him with a little groan as he slowed up. “It was a flattering comparison, I promise.”

He flipped her onto her back, hooking an arm under her leg to lever up and give him full, deep access to her cunt. “You should be a shuddering, lovely mess.” He pushed back into her. “You shouldn't be able to make words, much less thoughts.” His hand dove between them to circle her clit. “Your body should be fire.”

He kissed her, cutting off any response, drawing a blazing trail from her lips down her throat. Between his mouth sucking a mark above her clavicle, his fingers rubbing her juncture, and his cock sliding into her slick core just fucking right, she lost herself in the buzz of ecstasy as each nerve burned alive under his touch. Little moans squeezed from her chest as she shuddered under him, her hand covering his over her clit and urging him to press harder.

He threw her leg all the way over his shoulder, grabbing her hips to control the force of each thrust, his own face shattering with pleasure. Their moans raised, joining together between ragged gasps and creating a backdrop to the rhythm of slapping flesh. It was lewd, it was beautiful, and Violet felt the hooks of a second orgasm dig into her body, preparing for a blissful finish.

Reyes withdrew suddenly, panting, pressing open-mouthed kisses over her breasts and ribs as her foot slipped off of his smooth shoulder back to the bed. He sat back, pulling her up into his arms and
filling her once again. She held on, fingernails carving paths between his shoulder blades as they found a new rhythm.

“You could turn me over,” she suggested breathily, straining against the building pressure.

“Another time, hermosa. I want to watch your face.”

The position suited them, as she wrested some control back and dictated each thrust according to her pleasure. He stole kisses and occasionally gazed down between their bodies, apparently just to enjoy the view. Violet found herself wanting to pose for him, to give him a little extra aesthetic to get off on.

She eventually shoved him back onto his back, straddling him boldly and throwing her arms behind her head, hair gathered, chest thrust out. He chanted something incoherent, diving his hand back to where their bodies joined to twirl her clit back to madness.

Her peak tore her from reality all too suddenly. She hadn't really seen it coming, mind hazy and distracted, so that when it ripped through her, she forgot how to move or breathe or think. She froze there, suspended, aching blissfully from every corner of her body.

Reyes rolled her onto her back, pumping gently through her pulsing orgasm, his motions shaky and disjointed. Finally, gasping, he stilled. Strands of hair caught in the sweat of her forehead glued them to her face until he tenderly scraped them away between grazing kisses.

“You came?” she finally gasped out.

“Right after you did. Maybe a little warning next time?” he laughed.

“If I had seen it coming, I might have.”

A little shift and she felt him slide free. She ached pleasantly, her body still buzzing with the afterglow. For a few quiet minutes, she studied his ceiling fan and mentally prepared to put on clothes and depart back to her business as usual.

He sat up first with a long exhale, fingers scraping his hair back.

Violet scooted up in the bed so that she also sat, uncomfortably aware of the damp spot spreading beneath her. She glanced over the side of the mattress, figuring she ought to track down all of her clothes.

“Any idea where my underwear landed?”

“I thought I tossed them near your left shoe.” He rolled off the edge of the mattress, standing and stretching languidly. It was a good view from the back, with red tracks from her fingernails marking between his shoulder blades. “You want some coffee?”

“Always.” She sighed as she considered her pants. They were going to be a bitch to get back on.

“Bathroom first?”

“Door next to the kitchen.”

She gathered articles of clothing scattered between the roons as she went, finally disappearing into the closet he considered a bathroom to clean up and dress.

The first glimpse of her reflection Violet caught didn't even look like her. Her hair wild, makeup
smudged, shoulders relaxed, lips soft. So unlike the uptight, stressed out, put together person she had been for months. She smiled. Damn, she needed this.

After using the facility and freshening herself up, she struggled back into her pants, damp panties stuffed into her pocket, caged her tits back in her bra, and covered her frame with her sweater, concealing at least one hickey the asshole had kindly left as a reminder of their time like they were two goddamn teenagers. At least he left them down below her neckline.

She combed her hair with her fingers as she emerged. A coffee pot gurgled merrily and Reyes was checking messages on his omnitool, wearing a loose pair of sweats that hung low on his hips.

He closed the app and glanced her over, a smile cracking his lips. “Am I terrible that I want to pull that all off you and go again?”

“Save something for next time. I need to get back to the Tempest before they all wonder if I was kidnapped and murdered.”

“You aren't going to tell them?”

She snorted, settling on the bar stool next to the counter. “I won't need to. They'll know the second I walk in. Or, Jaal will know because he reads me absurdly well and he'll blab to one of them and there's no stopping it from there.”

His dimple flashed as he fought a smile. “Sounds nice and cozy.”

“Try sharing a bathroom with them.”

“What, no private bathroom in your gigantic Pathfinder suite?”

She shook her head. “Major design flaw, if you ask me, and we probably have a tighter water ration than you do.”

He poured two mugs of coffee, passing one to her. “Tragic.”

“But at least I can do something about yours, if I ever get an extra day to find clear out that third goddamn monolith so I can activate it.”

His eyebrows perked. “Clear it out?”

“Oh, this stupid outlaw gang thought it would be funny to set up camp there and shoot at us every time we try to get close. I just haven't had the chance to deal with them with other priorities, and now I'm on a mandatory rest from Lexi after, you know, dying a little bit.” She felt her shoulders begin to tense back up. She sipped her coffee.

“I thought your higher-ups weren't interested in restoring Kadara's vault anyway.”

Her lip curled. “They can suck it. Maybe, just maybe, it'll earn me some favors with some of you. Tann made a shitty call, and Sloane is a conniving fuckbucket, but if I had my way, we'd start mending some of those rifts. Call me naive, but I want the exiles and the Initiative to start working together again. I still want an outpost here, no matter what, but if I can get leadership from both ends to cooperate…” She glanced at his face and sighed. “You think it's stupid? You think it's stupid. Hell, I think it's stupid.”

He smiled. “I don't think it's stupid.” He propped his arms on the counter between them, studying her. “Have you thought about striking an alliance with the Collective?”
She snorted, toying with the rim of her coffee cup. “To what end? Sloane has control of the port, and
dealing with the Collective would just piss her off. No, with any luck, fixing the water will endear
me enough to her black, shriveled heart to get her to let me have an outpost, and maybe, just maybe
start dealing with the Initiative again.”

Reyes shrugged. “Sloane may not be in power forever.”

“And until that day, what choice do I have?”

“I suppose you have a point. But first thing, you need to correct that monolith, and there, I think I can
help you.”

She eyed him skeptically over the rim of her coffee mug. “Dare I ask what you want in return.”

“You can owe me a favor.”

Violet hated owing undefined favors, but she figured she had quite a bit of negotiating power with
him now. “So, what's your solution?”

“A friend with some firepower owes me. Consider your monolith clear for your leisure.”

It seemed all too simple, but when was the last time anyone handed her anything? If Reyes said he
could clear the monolith, she would give him a chance. “Okay, I'll take it. About damn time this
galaxy was easy.”

“Other than me?”

She grinned. “Yeah, Reyes, other than you.” Before she could decide to undress him again, she
reached down to finish lacing her boots. “I’ve probably got to get going. If I’m gone for any longer,
you’ll have an angry pathfinding team beating down your door for absconding with their leader.”

He rounded the end of the counter and hunted around until he came up with her scarf, approaching
to personally wrap it back around her shoulders, much like the first time he put it on her, fingers
straying against the ends of her hair as he untucked it from the scarf. “Before you go, I was
wondering if the designation ‘fuckbuddy’ was up for negotiation.”

She tensed. “Don’t ruin a good thing, Vidal.”

“Relax. I was thinking more along the lines of a ‘friends with benefits’ situation. ‘Fuckbuddy’ seems
impersonal, like all we’re doing is screwing around. I like you, Violet. I hope we are on good
enough terms for that, at least.”

It was hard to think when he stood so close and smelled so good, skimming her with those caramel
eyes of his. It wasn’t like she didn’t like him, too. On the contrary, it felt nice to have someone
outside the Tempest she got along with so well.

“Friends with benefits,” she agreed, a little smile curving her lips.

He leaned forward, snagging a quick taste of her. She wiggled out of his grasp before he could pull
her back in and convince her to stay. Pecking him one last time on the mouth, already looking
forward to their next encounter, she headed for the door.

“Hey, my mug.”

It was still half-full of coffee and clutched possessively in her hand. “I’ll owe you one,” she called
over her shoulder on her way out.

It wasn’t the worst walk of shame she had ever done. It was only an hour or two after sunset, she wasn’t wearing a trashy dress, she had both of her shoes intact, and no mysterious stains anywhere she could see. Her usual two shadows fell into place, but the third didn’t show back up. Must have decided her boots weren’t worth it after all.

By the time she strolled back up to the Tempest, she had drained most of her coffee and felt relaxed enough for a nap.

“You’re home late.” Vetra fell into step with her as she trudged past the cargo hold. “What’s with the cup?”

“Stole it. It had coffee in it, so I took it with me.”

“How’d the party go?”

“It was boring. Sloane was butthurt I crashed, so I didn’t stay for long.”

“Oh?” the turian prompted.

“I helped Reyes get into a room with cargo to snatch a fancy bottle of whiskey, got tipsy with him on the docks, managed to not fall off said docks, then we went back to his place, he fucked my brains out, I stole his cup on my way out the door, and here we are.”

Vetra kept up, entirely unfazed by her confession. “What happened to not sleeping with him?”

“He put up a convincing counter-argument?”

“Oh?”

“I kissed him as a point of clever subterfuge. It sort of snowballed from there.” She shrugged. “Anyway, I’m going to shower and then maybe sleep. Anybody need me for anything in the meantime?”

She shook her head. “Nothing exciting happened here. Glad you had fun, though. You were looking tense.”

“Yeah, no shit.”

She avoided the rest of the crew, isolating herself in the shower, first, and then her room for a much needed nap. SAM interrogated her on the meaning of her relationship with Reyes once she was secluded, requesting context to their encounter. The conversation ran a little longer than she would have liked, but she was teaching the baby AI about humanity, and that meant the occasional philosophical discussions about her romantic life and the dissonance between love and sex.

Settling in once all AI queries had been settled, she lay on her back to stare at her ceiling.

“Pathfinder. I don’t want to interrupt, since your body is exhibiting signs of natural sleep progression, but you have an email that just cleared you need to see.”

“Reyes?” she guessed, smirking.

“It’s Dr. Carlyle, actually.”

She flipped onto her stomach, heart clanging loudly against her chest, fingers fumbling against her
omnitool to pull it up. The message was short.

*Violet. Avery is awake. You should be here.* - Harry

Chapter End Notes

Still not totally freaking out. I promise.

Also, MY VERY LOVELY VERY TALENTED FRIEND DID MORE ART FOR VIOLET. Because she's a perfect human being and a fabulous soul to boot. She's such a dear for taking pity on lesser mortals like me with no artistic talent. <3

A Minor Kidnapping

Chapter Summary

Avery Ryder is awake. Violet helps bust him out if the medbay for a glimpse at the real Andromeda.

The Nexus bustled with life and activity when she got there. The return of the salarian ark had jumped them into overdrive to make room, but with established outposts, a functional trade economy, and enough resources to go around, the shift to make room happened smoothly. Tann was positively gleeful, and considering how quickly he vetoed the Meridian mission, she wanted to punch his smug face all the harder. At least she had the other pathfinders backing her.

After grinding her way through all-day meetings, she got around to the real reason for her Nexus visit. Her twin was actually sitting up when she arrived in the medbay, propped by pillows.

She hung back for a moment before he noticed her, pulling herself together. She and Avery hadn’t been close, not for years, but nearly losing him had been an unexpected gutpunch. He was all she had in this insane galaxy.

His dark hair had grown out into wiry curls, unlike hers, which tended toward waves, and his skin hinged on a lighter shade of brown from the lack of sun exposure while comatose. She did find some familiarity, though, to the brother she knew. He bore the same rich, brown eyes and high cheekbones that they shared, and he had the same large, hawkish nose, a trait she, thankfully, had not also received.

“Hey, big brother,” she finally cooed fondly, catching his attention.

“Hey, little sister,” he replied, smile blooming slowly.

A joke they hadn’t used since they were teenagers. Violet was older, but Avery was always bigger. Now, he looked shrunken, a shell of his former self. People usually described him as burly or built. She had never seen him so thin.

“You look terrible, Ave.” She leaned over the side of the bed to hug his fragile frame.

“Yeah, and you look fucking awesome. It’s not even fair.”

She perched down on the edge of his bed, catching one of his big hands to marvel at their change. Avery always had huge, meaty paws, hammy with muscle and callous. They were now spindly.

“They feeding you at all?”

He snorted. “You kidding? This place doesn’t even have hamburgers. I asked Harry for a steak when I first woke up. The nurses won’t stop giggling about it. First words, ‘Gimme a steak.’ But no cows yet in Andromeda, which is a fucking tragedy. I thought you were supposed to be fixing all of that.”

She laughed. “Yeah. It’s a work in progress.”

He leaned his head back, seeming tired all at once. “Dad would have been so disappointed.”
She didn't want to talk about their father. Avery had jumped on board the Alec train after their mother died, forgetting about the hell of their their childhoods. He threw himself into their father's micromanaging clutches like he cherished it.

“The worlds are coming along. I've got three vaults secured and a bead on the dot that connects them all. It's not paradise, but come on. Isn't paradise a little boring?”

“I'd take a beach to go tan on.” He smiled whimsically. “Maybe a nude beach. Filled with asari.”

She gave him a shove. “Oh come on. You have to have better dreams than that.”

“Are you telling me one of your planets has something better than nude asari beaches?”

“They make for a thousand creative ways to die.”

“Yeah, speaking of, I have a bone to pick with you. What the fuck, Vi? Twice?”

She smiled blandly. “You know me. I'm an overachiever.”

“Cut it out. Seriously.”

“No promises. No matter what happens in my life, I still have at least one more ahead of me.”

He fixed her sternly. “Vi.”

She avoided his eyes, instead finding an interesting spot on the wall to stare at. “My job is risky. I've got the archon gunning after me, hostile worlds, outlaws, and Suvi's questionable cooking.”

“And I heard coffee's running a bit thin.”

“I secured a source on Kadara. Black market coffee. Who'd have ever thought?”

He rolled his eyes.

She squeezed his fragile hand. “Come on, I didn’t come all this way just to watch you sit on your ass while we bicker. I bet Harry’s had you on lockdown since you opened your eyes.”

“Yeah, but for good reason. I can barely hold my head up like a newborn fucking baby,” he grumbled, lip puckered.

Turning her attention off of him for a moment, she tracked Dr. Carlyle across the medbay where he focused on a datapad in his hand. “SAM, can you keep all necessary personnel distracted for a few minutes?”

“Certainly, Pathfinder.”

“What, seriously? He’s breaking rules for you?”

“He’s my partner in crime. Of course he helps me break rules.” Considering they planned on disobeying Tann in the very near future, she needed that to hold true more than ever.

While SAM accessed multiple terminals and omnitools throughout the medbay and engaged doctors and nurses in conversation, Violet appropriated a wheelchair to park next to her brother's bed. If he was healthy, she would have seriously struggled. He towered a whopping 199 centimeters and had the meat and muscle to back it up. These days, he had the height, but he was despairingly light when she hooked her arms around him and transferred him to the chair.
“How much do you weigh?” she gasped when she plopped him down without any effort.

“Don’t ask,” he growled. “Where are we going?”

“I don’t know yet. I haven’t gotten that far.”

“Some pathfinder you are.”

She folded his gangly legs and physically lifted each foot into the rests so they didn’t drag. “Do you want out of this sterile little room or not?”

“You better hurry, Pathfinder. I won’t be able to hold Dr. Carlyle’s attention for much longer,” SAM warned.

Kicking off the brake, Violet wheeled her brother out of the medbay and casually strolled out. She took him to the tram, figuring their escape hinged on getting proximity between her and the good doctor. She would figure out a destination once they got there. She’d made it down the first ramp when she heard raised voices behind her.

“Pathfinder--”

“On it!” she cried, and shoved Avery forward.

He slapped the arm of his chair. “Go, Vi!”

She knew he had to be itching for a jailbreak.

Harry tried calling them back, but she made it to the shuttle and punched in a destination before he could catch up. She aimed them toward for a nearby observation deck, usually packed with people who wanted an eyeful of what lay beyond the walls of the Nexus. That was what she really wanted to show him, anyway. Avery came all this way for adventure and exploration. This had been his dream far more than it was ever hers.

“That was literally the easiest breakout we’ve ever done. I’d high-five you, but I can barely lift my arm.”

She laughed, parking him in the aisle between seats and sitting down in the seat adjacent. “Yeah, Harry’s got nothing on Dad. We didn’t need complicated codes or even to hack anything. I guess we had an accomplice this time. SAM might have been pretty useful for us back in the day.”

“He would have been on Dad’s side,” Avery pointed out blandly. “We’d have probably never gotten out.”

“What do you want to bet that if he was still alive, he’d be using SAM to monitor and constrict all of our activities like when we were kids?”

Avery backpedaled quickly. “Doesn’t matter, Vi. He’s gone. Whatever we think about how he raised us, it’s done. Let’s just...get over it.”

She wasn’t ready to let that particular argument go, but neither would lay into it with her brother when he was thoroughly benched. Thankfully, the shuttle glided to a halt and dumped them onto the observation deck. Taking hold of his wheelchair, she shoved him out where they could more easily disappear.

“Dr. Carlyle is hailing you, Pathfinder.”
“Tell Harry that I’m unavailable.”

“Right away.”

The view out of the Nexus wasn’t the best in Andromeda, but it had its own charm. Violet picked a corner out of the way where they had a grand view of the smear of stardust beyond the wall-to-wall windows. A few constellations jumped out at her, growing increasingly familiar the more time she spent in this corner of the galaxy. Avery gazed out in abject awe, taking it in with an open mouth and widened eyes. She gave him a moment.

“No so shabby, huh?” she demurred when he finally repossessed enough self-awareness to close his mouth.

“I can’t believe I’m missing it.”

“Once you’re back on your feet, you’ve got a first class invite to see this whole place up close. Space on the Tempest is tight, but I’ll give you a spot on my couch if I have to. Maybe bunk beds, like when we were kids.”

He tore his gaze away from the window. “So what’s it like out there? The planets? The people?”

She laughed with a small shake of her head, leaning forward to brace her forearms on her thighs. “I know this isn’t the answer you want, but it kind of sucks, to be honest. Hostile worlds, hostile aliens, hostile Scourge, and the people all blow just as hard as everyone did back home. I guess that’s what we get thinking we could transplant hundreds of thousands of people and assume they were all idealists like us.”

He frowned, flicking a longing look back out at the stars. “Got to be something you like.”

Reyes.

She shoved that thought back to wherever the hell it came from, a little startled by it. She cleared her throat and shook her head of any other unwelcome ideas. “I like the Tempest. It’s crew. It’s a good team.”

“Dad picked that team.”

She snorted. “Dad picked some of that team. I lost about half right out of the gate. Liam and Cora are the only fireteam members Dad brought on board, and the flight crew is even cobbled together out of what was available. Wasn’t it supposed to be an all human ship to start out with?”

He nodded.

“So there you have it. My team was pulled together from whatever was left. Peebee and Drack were strays I picked up on Eos. Vetra pretty much muscled her way on board to start out with—and thank god, really—and Harry bailed and forced Lexi to take his spot, I picked up Jaal from the angarans, and Kallo’s the best pilot in Andromeda, so of course he’s piloting the Tempest, since all of the other pathfinder ships got crunched. I wouldn’t trade those assholes for anyone Dad thinks can do a better job, because I can guaran-fucking-tee they can’t.”

Sighing, the corners of his mouth twitched. “You’re just disappointed he isn’t here to see you doing his job just as well as he could.”

“Fuck you. I’m doing better than he could.”
“It’s not a competition, you know.”

“With every single person in this place comparing me to him every step of the way? Yeah, it actually is. If I had a credit every time somebody began a sentence with, ‘If Alec were here…’ I’d tell Tann to go fuck himself and retire.”

Avery sighed. “Can we talk about anything else? I’m too tired for this today. Just woke up out of a coma, remember?”

They lapsed into terse silence, gazing out at the brilliant starscape in front of them. Violet wished she knew how to talk to him anymore. They were twins. Grew in the same, cramped womb. Shared a bedroom all growing up. Thwarted their father together. Trained in biotics together. Had each other’s backs, no matter what. When had it come to this?

After a few minutes, when she either had to call Harry to come pick him up or apologize for being an asshole, a bright pinprick jumped out against the dark backdrop in front of them. A smile called to her lips as she pointed it out, not that he would be able to tell exactly which star she referred to based off of the trajectory of her index finger.

“That’s one’s Nol.”

“Nol? Anything good in Nol?”

She shrugged. “Not really. It’s got Voeld, which pretty much sucks, as far as rocks covered in ice go. I’ve spent stupid amounts of time trudging across its glaciers and digging kett camps out of the frozen ground. It’s harsh and it’s freezing and I hate going there. Jaal keeps trying to convince me it’s pretty, but I think he’s off his rocker. You want to know what it’s major export is at the moment? Because it’s ice--surprise, surprise. And of course it’s really fucking valuable, because the Nexus can’t recycle forever, Eledaan is dryer than Addison’s snatch, and Kadara’s water is utterly toxic and all filtration systems are owned by its cutthroat pirate queen. So as far as businesses go, ice export is actually in hot demand.”

“You got a favorite planet?”

“Not really. Nothing that feels like home. Havarl, maybe. If I could find something closer to a beach and not in the middle of a sentient jungle.”

“Not to sound like too much of an idiot, Vi, but...kidding about the jungle’s sentience, right?” he asked cautiously.

“Kidding,” she laughed. “That might change depending on who you ask, but now that I’ve got its vault back in line, it’s calmed down.”

He glanced sidelong at her. “Also...pirate queen?”

“Sloane Kelly. She was head of Nexus security before it all fell to shit. Led a band of exiles off planet to settle Kadara. Absolute bitch-and-a-half.” She shook her head, folding her arms in front of her. “Likes to keep heads on spikes at her front door so visitors know she’s not fucking around. I thought maybe I could reason with her, but now I’m pretty sure it’s a pipe dream. I swear she gets more agitated and paranoid every time I visit. I’m trying to act nice with her...but she’s not worth it. People are dying under her so-called ‘rule’ and I’m stuck pretending like I can still play politics with her.”

“Not to be that guy, but is killing her an option?”
“I doubt I could. She’d eviscerate me in a straight-up fight, if I could even get that far. She keeps me disarmed and herself well-guarded when I’m in port.” She shook her head, blowing out a slow breath. “Getting to her would take time, planning, and people, of which, I have exactly none of. I’m not equipped for that game.”

“Jesus, but you’ve thought about it,” he accused.

Of course Violet thought about it. The heads on the spikes outside of Kadara Port grew in number every time she landed. She heard whispers of higher protection fees, people being taken off the streets and tortured for information about traitors, and a higher volume of people getting kicked out, some without discernable reason. She’d give anything to bring the bitch down, but she couldn’t say that the next despot to crawl into her place would be any better.

Her lips twisted wryly. “I think anyone who has ever met Sloane has considered what it would take to topple her crown.”

Avery suddenly grinned with no small note of evil hiding inside of it. “You know,” he said pointedly, “I bet Dad could do it.”

She swatted him. “You think you’re kidding, but I’ve thought about that, too, and I think you’re wrong. Dad would have done the smart thing here, not the right thing. The smart thing would be to make an alliance. Sloane has power and needs help holding onto it. He’d have cut a deal, rather than taking the gamble on a different leader being marginally better than she is.”

“Are you telling me you’re going to suck it up and do what Dad would do?”

“Maybe,” she sniffed. “If the opportunity hands itself to me. This isn’t about my beef with Dad. I need viable planets and fewer wars to fight. Making friends with Sloane would be smart. A serious compromise in my morals, but smart.”

“Bitter pill to swallow.”

Violet shrugged. She didn’t have to make a decision yet. Sloane wasn’t ready to deal and the planet wasn’t viable and she had plenty of other shit to keep her busy on every single other planet and then some in the meantime.

“Seems like a shitty planet overall. Read your prelim reports. Sulfur pools make it smell like rotten eggs, high humidity levels, no decent bars. Maybe the Outcasts deserve it.”

“Eh, Tartarus isn’t bad. Skeezy, but Kian makes a decent gin and tonic. Not like the shit Uma sells at Kralla’s. Literally only whiskey. Shitty whiskey.”

A smile crept up on his face. “I don’t think I read anything about Tartarus. Another bar?”

“Club. It’s got dancers in cages all over it. Super classy.” She rolled her eyes. “But it’s got some upsides.” Like Reyes working out of the upstairs room.

She glanced over at Avery, wondering if it was worth bringing the smuggler up. She didn’t usually sit him down about all of her lays. Lord knew, she didn’t want to hear about any of his. Reyes was a little different, though. A friend. An informant. There was more to him than a couple of sweaty minutes in his shoebox of an apartment.

“Um,” she said at last, trying to figure out how to broach the topic.

“Um?”
“I made a friend there. On Kadara. He takes up shop in Tartarus. About the only reason I ever go there. He’s a smuggler, and occasionally has useful bits of information. He’s even done me a few favors. Not sure I trust him all that much, but I like him.”

“Like?”

She cast him an annoyed look. “Yes. Like. He’s about the only thing on Kadara I do. I just...thought you should know. It’s not all bad. The exiles aren’t all bad.”


“Hardly,” she sniffed. “Friends with bennies, at the most. It’s casual.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’ll remind you of this conversation when I’m scraping your heart off the pavement wherever he decides to run it over, like with the last five ‘casual’ guys who let you down and left you in pieces.”

Violet glared. “I can take care of myself.”

“You have shit taste in men and you always have. You always get more invested than you pretend like you will, and then you act surprised when they turn out to be grade-A assholes,” he accused, and not for the first time in their lives. She had to admit, she had a bit of a pattern.

“I promise, I won’t fall. I’m too busy. I just need someone to blow off steam with when it gets to be too much.”

“I get that. Just don’t get hurt.”

“Or what? You’ll beat him up?”

“Hey, it’s not his fault you have terrible taste.” He squared his thin shoulders. “But yeah, I'll beat him up.”

She leaned in and set her head on his bony arm. “I missed you, Ave.”

“Don’t go mushy on me now.”

“Shut up. Let me have my moment.”

He sighed. “At least tell me the guy's name so I know who I'm beating up when this all falls apart.”

“Reyes Vidal.”

“Vidal, huh? Why does that name sound familiar...?”

“Violet Ryder!” A voice boomed across the observatory.

They both jumped at Harry Carlyle marched aggressively over to them. They had no time or room to run for it. She gave her brother a consoling little pat. At least he’d gotten a small vacation.

“Are you adding kidnapping to your list of accomplishments, Pathfinder?” Harry sighed.

“Why not? It's about the only thing I have left to achieve. Not that this counts. It was a minor kidnapping, at the most.”
“He is on bed rest. You could have talked to him in the medbay!”

“Old habits.” She flashed him a winning grin. “We've been sneaking each other out from lockdown since we were toddlers.”

“Never again,” he admonished, seizing control of the wheelchair to deliver Avery back to the medbay.

“Keep me updated!” she called after them. “As soon as he’s cleared for duty, I want him on the *Tempest*!”

Harry didn't bother with a reply, steering her brother back toward the shuttle and leaving her with her thoughts.

Violet leaned back over her knees and gazed out of the observatory windows at the galaxy that was hers to explore. Eventually, she stood and stretched, preparing to get back to work. She had a meeting with the other pathfinders about circumventing Tann and getting to Meridian before the Archon. A typical day in Andromeda, to be sure.
Hamburgers with a Side of Salsa

Chapter Summary

Violet is back in Kadara in need of food, a shower, and a bed. In that order.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Have you decided to tell her yet?”

Reyes glanced toward Keema, brow furrowing. They stood over datapads packed with blackmail for Sloane's inner circle, creating a schedule for what they planned on revealing and when to cut out the rest of her support and leave her vulnerable. Some, he could probably get to flee Kadara. Others, he could flip. It all came down to timing and paranoia.

“Well?” Keema asked.

The change of subject jarred him out of the spiderweb of manipulation he attempted to build, turning his attention instead to hot flashes of skin and sweat and panting gasps at the forefront of his memory.

He set the datapad in his hands aside. “I can’t.”

“You said you would yesterday.”

“I changed my mind.”

Keema cocked her head. “You don't trust her?”

“Hell no. She wants an outpost. Without control of Kadara, I can't give her one. With my identity, she could get it from Sloane.”

“You think she would sacrifice your love for a settlement?”

He barked a laugh. “She doesn't love me, Keema.”

She pursed her lips, as if she disagreed.

“I'll tell her,” he sighed. “When the time is right. We're so close to dismantling Sloane. Let's just focus on that. Once we have control of Kadara, with you sitting at its head, I'll tell her the truth. We'll use my relationship with her to forge an alliance with the Initiative, but until then, she's got enough on her plate.”

He checked his omnitool, gut twisting. She was still in the vault. She'd been down there for nearly three hours. He could distract himself from worrying with work, but only if Keema stopped pestering him about it.

“Can we get back this?” he asked shortly.

“Do you love her?”
He groaned, head tilting back. “No.”

“Are you certain? You seem on edge. She’s been in that vault for quite some time now.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw as he resisted checking his messages in anything shorter than five second intervals. “I like her, but I learned my lesson about thinking with my dick with Zia. There’s too much at stake.”

“Thinking with your…? Ah. I like that turn of phrase.” She smiled. “But you act as if you can control your heart.”

“I’m not angaran,” he reminded her. “My feelings are human. Humans sometimes have sex without being in love. She’s great, but she could get all of us killed.”

“Do you want to tell her?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he growled.

He couldn’t imagine Violet’s reaction, but he doubted she would appreciate the deception. If he could control enough of the variables, he might mitigate some of the betrayal she would feel. He might keep her from changing the nature of their relationship. From leaving.

“What do you feel when you sleep next to her?” Keema asked innocently, shuffling datapads around.

Now, he grinned, a little viciously. “I haven’t yet. She comes. We fuck. She leaves. No sleeping.”

It was half due to her schedule, but he didn’t need to explain that. The first time she had been back, she had several hours to activate the third monolith before heading out on a “top secret, probably deadly” mission. She’d ambushed him in the upstairs room in Tartarus, announced she had about fifteen minutes tops, stripped his pants down, and proceeded to give him what could only be described as an earth shattering blowjob. He tried insisting on reciprocating, but she assured him she didn’t have the time and that he could owe her one before dashing off on her heroics.

She’d returned later that week to “work through some frustrations” while on a stopover the others wanted to acquire various bits of contraband in the market. They’d spent several hours together. He meant to learn her tics, figure out which buttons to push and when, but by the time she dressed and left, he felt like she’d figured out more about him than he did about her. The woman was aggressive with what she wanted and he couldn’t say he disliked it.

She hadn’t visited before going out to the vault this time around, but sent him a message that he could help her celebrate when she was finished. If he didn’t hurry up with Keema, he wouldn’t get everything done before she got back.

“Quit distracting me. This timeline is good, but it’s a gamble. It has to be perfect.”

“You want to tell her.”

He flashed her a warning look. “No,” he snapped, “I don’t. I’m in this to win Kadara. Violet will always come second to that.”

“That’s hardly romantic.”

“That’s exactly the point.”
He liked Keema. She was wiley, she was smart, and she was cutthroat, but she was too invested in his love life and her angaran interpretation of it. Reyes couldn’t afford to get too close to Violet Ryder. He liked their arrangement, he liked their time spent together, but most importantly, he liked manipulating her actions to undercut Sloane in ways he would never be able to accomplish on his own.

He imagined the look on Violet’s face when she found out he used her.

An ugly thought. He shoved it aside with a knotted gut.

“Let’s get this timeline locked down,” he growled again, a headache drumming a steady beat against his temples.

Keema let the topic drop, but he doubted it was the last he would hear of it. Damn angaran sense of romance. He smoothed his hands over his hair and shifted his focus back to the problems in front of him. The biggest factor he had to deal with was the sheer unpredictability of people, which meant contingency plans for about thirty moving pieces. Too many depended on each other making the right move. The house of cards toppled too easily if things went sideways.

“I hate relying on other people to do what they’re supposed to,” he muttered as he considered their network. “And I hate relying on luck.”

They both paused when the table between them rattled and the datapads skittered around. The rippled passed beneath their feet and then settled. They locked eyes for a moment, pausing and waiting for another tremor.

Reyes had to wonder--natural earthquake, mortar shell, or vault shift?

“I should go. We can pick this back up tomorrow. Your Pathfinder will be on her way back, and you need time to think about whether you should tell her or not.” Keema began organizing datapads, shuffling them into a pile.

“I’m not…” he began, then sighed and began helping her. “Why do you think I should?”

“Because the longer you keep it from her, the angrier she’ll be when she finds out. It’s not healthy to keep secrets from the one you love.”

“I don’t--”

“Besides, we’re close enough to striking Sloane that she might take our side. You can guarantee the takeover and giving her the outpost. It’s an appealing offer, and you, Shena, can talk anyone into anything,” she reminded him pointedly.

He ground his molars together and waited for her to clear out. After she left, he had Kian send up a shot to help him relax. If he wasn’t ready to reveal his identity to Violet, he at least needed to maintain the appearance of utter nonchalance. Sprawling back on his couch, he rubbed his aching temples. In another two weeks, maybe less, this would all be over. The pieces were in place. With the vault now corrected, Sloane was primed to take a hard blow among her people, and Reyes would be the one to deliver Kadara Port into its new, stable future.

His inbox pinged.

Looking forward to clean water? I hope I didn’t mess up your ice trade too badly. Need a shower and food, maybe a nap, but we don’t have to leave Kadara immediately. I’ll swing by in a few hours. - V
For all he wanted to put off seeing her until this was all over, disappointment hit hard that she planned on taking a break before making time for him. He contemplated his empty shot glass, twirling it between his hands, finally gritting his teeth and composing the message he wanted, rather than the one he ought to have.

*I have contraband water, knowledge of the best places to eat, and access to soft surfaces. Which do you want first?*

He seemed to have to wait an eternity for her reply, but it cleared before he could start truly considering that she might blow him off.

*Food. Shower. Your bed. In that order.*

*Done. Meet me at Frazier’s in the market. It’s just past that stall you nearly started a riot at.*

*You’re buying.*

He laughed. *Sure, Ryder. On me.*

Grabbing his jacket, locking up anything he didn’t want snooped in or stolen, he took off into the market to reserve a spot. Benedict Frazier was a Collective agent he wanted to check up on anyway. He had a notoriously big mouth and was on the verge of getting snatched up by the Outcasts to end up on one of Sloane’s pikes. He needed to decide if Frazier ought to be relocated until the upheaval. The only reason he so far slid by unscathed was his distinct lack of clout—Collective sympathy and Collective collaboration were dealt with differently, and so far, Frazier kept his ties ambiguous—and the popularity of his food.

Tables were always in demand, so the fact that he arrived an hour before Violet did only ensured that he got seated about ten minutes before she showed up. He had already ordered them both food and drinks from Frazier himself when she walked in, still decked in armor, although visibly disarmed of weapons. Her dark hair had been braided flat against her scalp to fit under her helmet and she looked as tired and grimy as promised.

She took in the view of the dining room with thick skepticism. Sallow lighting illuminated rickety tables and chairs with mediocre wall decorations and tattered patrons. People didn’t eat at Frazier’s for its charming atmosphere.

“Is this place up to health code?” she asked, dumping down in the seat across from him and offering a tired smile.

“It’s Kadara,” he reminded her blandly. “But regardless, Frazier runs a tight ship. I’ve been in his kitchen. It’s spotless. How’d the vault go?”

“Fingers crossed for clean water and better smelling air.” She sat back and stretched out her long legs beneath the table, a little smirk gracing her lips. “What did you accomplish today?”

“Nothing even remotely as extraordinary.” He wanted to touch her, to pick up where they left off and explore her body in the ways he promised himself, but they were in public and she would probably appreciate the food and a shower first. “I took the liberty of ordering for both of us. Frazier’s menu isn’t large and I know what’s good. You’re going to like this, hermosa.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Where’s your sense of adventure?”
One of her eyebrows perked slightly. “I lost it somewhere on Habitat 7, actually…”

“It’s a shame you can’t retire yet. You haven’t found the perfect planet.”

Violet didn’t have much of a poker face at times. The change in her expression tipped him off, her smile a bit too catlike for his liking. He quickly leaned forward, settling a hand over hers on top of the table between them to stroke his thumb along the underside of her wrist.

“You know something. Tell me.”

“I can’t.”

“Is it a new planet? A better planet?”

“Not exactly. But remember that super classified mission I went on not too long ago?”

“The one that ended in you dying or the one that didn’t?”

She rolled her eyes. “The one that didn’t.” She leaned toward him. “It wasn’t exactly what I was looking for, but I’m getting closer. I have a real shot at fixing this. All of this. Even the viable planets, to make them better. We might even discover others capable of supporting life.”

Reyes wanted in. He wanted in so badly it hurt. To be in the forefront of this kind of discovery, to maximize the potential to come from them. If he could get a Collective presence on the places she discovered before anyone else had the chance…

“Don’t get too excited. I still have one major hurdle. The Scourge isn’t exactly cooperative.” She twisted her wrist to catch the fingers playing against her arm, lacing them and gripping them a little too tight. “And I’m not telling you any more. I can see that little hamster wheel in your head firing off. I don’t need a smuggler botching my business.”

She was only too right, but he was busy pulling the threads together. Keema hinted that a big discovery about the angarans had been made recently. Evfra, too, had been acting weird on their last correspondence. What did that have to do with the worlds? What did that have to do with what the Pathfinder was up to?

He smiled across from her. “Just let me know if there’s any way I can help. I’m pretty good at navigating the Scourge.”

“Better than Kallo?” she scoffed.

He would have liked to have that question settled more than she knew. “Maybe. I’m a good pilot.”

“Yeah, but it’s Kallo.”

He wondered if he should tell her…

“You brought the Pathfinder to see me, Reyes? Why, I’m flattered!” a voice boomed, cutting off his train of thought.

Frazier ambled his girth between the tables, hand delivering two plates stacked with the closest equivalent of hamburgers and french fries Andromeda had to offer. The tuber wasn’t exactly a potato, but doused in enough grease and salt and nobody noticed. He never asked what was in the meat, but he personally stole and smuggled the seeds to start Frazier’s garden for tomatoes, onions, lettuce, and cucumbers to pickle.
“It’s only the best place Kadara Port has to offer, and she looked in desperate need of a real plate of food.” He squinted up at the burly, aggressively mustached man. “How are you doing, amigo? Outcast cronies leaving you in peace?”

“Pah! Like they have the guts to take out their only hamburger fix. Besides, Martha Washington and I will give them a bitch of a fight if they ever do come.” He patted his handcanon affixed to his belt next to his grease-stained apron.

“You named your gun Martha Washington?” Violet inquired, eyebrows raised.

“Yeah. What did you name yours?”

“Shitkicker.”

He guffawed approvingly. “I hear you’re good with it. Give bandits and kett a whole mess of grief for poking their heads out from behind cover.”

“Mess being the operative word,” she agreed with a little wrinkle to her nose.

“Collective leaving you alone, though, eh? Word came down quite a while back that you were off limits.”

“Frazier,” Reyes interrupted with a note of warning. Indicating sympathy was one thing, but he was dangerously close to flaunting his status.

“Don’t you worry about me, Vidal.” The big man winked. “Besides, you let me know when you’re ready to work for my friends full time.”

“I pick the side offering the most coin,” he reminded him. “And you need to be careful. Word has it Sloane’s patience is pretty thin lately. I don’t want you to get into trouble. I went through a lot of trouble putting you in business.”

It sounded like relocating him until they were ready to move on Kadara would be sensible. Frazier had become too bold. He’d fight the order, but Reyes would see him compensated and reestablished as soon as he overthrew Sloane.

“Worry more about yourself, Vidal. Saw some of your competition here the other day grumbling about you snatching up all the good jobs.”

He laughed. “Maybe if they knew the difference between a shuttle and their own asses, they wouldn’t get skipped over so often.”

One of the waitresses scurried over with a couple of imported beers—another of Reyes’s acquisitions for the restaurant. Nodding to them both, Frazier left them to eat.

“Outspoken,” Violet murmured delicately.

“Always. I worry. If this place shuts down, where the hell am I supposed to get a solid hamburger?”

She took a fry and popped it into her mouth, eyelids fluttering closed and a needy groan emitting from her chest. Until that moment, he’d only heard her do that during sex.

“What does he use? These aren’t potatoes. What are they fried in? And the hamburger. I’m pretty sure they aren’t growing cows yet anywhere in Andromeda.”

“Don’t ask too many questions and eat your food, Ryder,” he admonished, picking up his own to dig
“That’s going to be the title of my biography someday.” She did as instructed and also picked up her hamburger. “Avery is going to be so jealous when he hears about this.”

He chewed thoughtfully for a moment, then asked, “Your brother?”

“Oh. Yeah. He woke up a little while back. Thin as a stick, poor guy, but the second the doc’s got his back turned, he’ll start pumping weights. Ave isn’t the ‘sit tight and rest’ type of guy.”

“You must be relieved.”

She nodded. “Yeah, but don’t tell him that. It’ll go to his head.”

Her walls were up, so he didn’t press further, turning the conversation to the other planets and their statuses. She had been busy, but she had been cleaning up the messes made before she ever arrived with alarming efficiency. Multiple planets, multiple enemies, multiple problems. She personally cleaned out bases, hunted down tech, outmaneuvered adversaries, established firmer footholds, and corrected environments. She chatted casually about her team and what they had done, notes of pride creeping into her voice.

He found himself drawn closer by her magnetism, eager to be near her, to erase the distance between himself and the Pathfinder. She was so fucking far out of his league it was comical, but he wanted her too badly to care. What the everloving hell was she doing slumming it with him?

“You’re looking at me weird,” she suddenly accused.

Their plates lay empty between them. She’d been showing him the race to outrun the Kadara vault’s purification field recorded by her AI, a harrowing event, to be sure. He didn’t realize exactly how dangerous the vault had been, and he was glad he knew now that she was completely done exploring them.

“Am I?” he mused, draining the rest of his beer to cover up whatever expression he had on. “It’s probably because you’re extraordinary.”

“I didn’t do anything. My AI reset the vault and I ran faster than the purification field. It’s really not that impressive.” Her complexion was dark enough that a blush was difficult to detect, but he swore he saw a hint of red to her cheeks. “Okay, I’m done talking about me. Your turn to fill the silence.”

“My life is boring in comparison.”

“The life of a smuggler? I’m sure you have good stories.”

He shrugged.

“Fine, then tell me something about your past. Or better yet, a secret about yourself. What’s something about the dashing Reyes Vidal that nobody else in Andromeda knows?”

*That I’m the Charlatan.*

Well, that didn’t count. Technically, a few people knew. He gulped, considering just telling her. Leaning in and whispering it in her ear. How would she react? Would she believe him? Would it take convincing? Once convinced, would she remain loyal, or would she the opportunity for what it was? And how much was he willing to risk that. His heart pounded. He hoped SAM wasn’t running a biometric scan.
Reyes leaned in. “All right. A bonafide Reyes Vidal secret.”

She also inclined toward him.

“I just so happen to be…” he began, pausing for effect. “…a terrific dancer.”

Violet eased back in her chair, scrutinizing him with a scathing eye. “You? You dance?”

He also relaxed back, hands spreading. “Guilty,” he confessed.

“What kind of dancing?”

“Several kinds, but I’m most accomplished in salsa.”

“Most accomplished? Please tell me you have a secret stash of trophies somewhere,” she begged.

He chuckled. “Can you even imagine me in a dance competition?”

She scooted her chair back from the table. “Okay, then. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

“What, here?”

“There’s enough room between tables.”

Exhaling, he considered refusing. He hadn’t danced in well over six hundred years. It always seemed like a part of him he left behind in the Milky Way, a part of a life long ago lived. People didn’t have much reason to dance on Kadara. Tartarus was more a bump-and-grind type of place that was more of prelude to sex than anything.

“Okay, okay,” he finally agreed, standing up and rolling his shoulders. “Do you know anything about dancing?”

“Nope.” Despite her inexperience, she seemed positively gleeful.

He assumed she had pretty good agility, considering her line of work, and that would work fine for him. There wasn’t much space between tables, but with an utter novice in his arms, he didn’t plan on throwing her around with anything too complicated. Violet waited for him with the same attitude she she usually brought to bed with her, lips curled up, watching to see what he did with her first.

He settled his left hand on her waist and his right hand against hers, and she fell into position without much confusion. She felt good under his hands again, despite the layers of body armor that separated them. As always, she was firm, confident. Her loveliness stemmed from her strength—among other things.

He licked his lips. “Okay, I’m just going to take you through a basic step, maybe a turn, nothing fancy.”

“Nothing fancy?” she pouted.

“Not until you earn it, Ryder. Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“Became the Pathfinder without knowing how, didn’t I?”

“Fair enough, but you can’t punch your way through a salsa. Just follow my lead.”

They earned stares from all of the other patrons, but if Violet didn’t care, Reyes didn’t care. He
showed her a simple count and smoothed into it. Her feet stuttered at first, but she caught on quickly. He had been right about her athleticism lending itself to the dance, so he took her through a turn and improvised a bit just to see if she could keep up. She giggled a few times in her effort to match his movements, but was otherwise game.

“We’re going to need more room if you want me to show you anything else,” he hummed, pulling her close so that their cheeks skimmed together. “Maybe we can find a more intimate setting.”

She dropped her hands away, stepping back and disrupting the rhythm of the dance. “Good plan. I think shower was next on my list. Do you have enough ration to spare? I can always swing by the Tempest.”

“It’s a celebration. You corrected the vault. Soon, we may not need the rations ever again. You’re welcome to whatever I have in my tank.” It wasn’t like he couldn’t get it refilled with an extra skim of Voeld ice.

She leaned in and brushed her lips against his cheek. “Such a gentleman.”

Taking her hand, he led the way back out into the street, having already transferred the credits to Frazier for the meal. They didn’t get three steps before his private line went off, an incessant series of beeps. Only a handful of people had that line, which meant the call wasn’t one he could brush off until later.

“I have to take this. Five minutes,” he pleaded.

She gestured. “Important smuggling business or another booty call?”

He made a show of pouting. “You have my undivided attention when you’re here.”


He slipped away, heading between stalls where he might find some privacy. The call came from Tabitha Holloway, which usually meant it was an emergency.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Reyes. Glad I caught you. We have a problem.”

As per-fucking-usual. “I’m out with the Pathfinder. Should I send her home?”

“Up to you. You know that job I was running for you? For Mr. Schooner.”

It was a fake name, but plenty of his clients used fakes. Normally, he ran these kinds of jobs himself. High profile. A lot of cash involved. This week, he was too busy, so he delegated to Tabitha to get it done while he completed his plans for Sloane.

“Go on,” he growled.

“My guy just hoofed it twenty clicks home on foot. Says he got drunk with some broad named Cordier and she snatched his ship while he was too wasted to stand.”

He swore vividly, scraping a hand over his hair. “We can’t lose this job, Tab. This is my reputation and I’ll be damned if Zia-Fucking-Cordier is the one who smears it.”

“Agreed. What do you want to do about it?”
He glanced over his shoulder where Violet loitered, pretending not to look too interested. “I’ll handle it. I’ve got the best tracker on the planet who owes me a favor. Let me know if you find out anything else.”

“Be careful, Reyes. I have a bad feeling about this one.”

He shut off the comm, exhaled slowly, determined not to lose his temper. As likely as it was that Zia deliberated wanted to fuck with him, she may not even know it was his job, since he’d handed off all the work. She could have just taken advantage of a shining opportunity.

“You look unhappy,” Violet noted upon his return.

“Remember that favor you owe me for clearing the monolith?”


He caught one of her hands. “Something came up. Think you can squeeze in a quick investigation, possibly some ass kicking in there?”

Groaning, she pulled away from him. “Fine. What’s the issue?”

“A business rival, Zia Cordier, just swiped a high profile cargo from one of my middle-men. We need to track it down and retrieve it before the client finds out and loses faith in my ability to handle his work. And you,” he purred, “are the best tracker I know.”

Her face altered subtly. Difficult to notice, but it was there, as well as in her posture. Something hardened behind her dark eyes. Before him, she switched gears between being Violet and the Pathfinder. If he wasn’t nearly frantic about the missing shuttle, he might have been a little turned on.

“So, what was in the cargo?” she asked.

“No idea. The client paid for extra discretion. If it was worth the price, it was worth stealing, and that’s as much information as I have on it.”

She perked an eyebrow, but made no further comment. “And how did this Cordier character get her hands on it?”

It took everything in him not to wince. “With her usual tactics. Got my guy drunk and stole the ship out from under him.”

“Usual tactics? How many times has she pulled this?”

He ground his molars, drawn back to the morning he woke up in a field with a throbbing hangover and the Gambler conspicuously missing. “Is that important?”

Violet folded her arms, lips twitching upward. “She’s done it to you, hasn’t she?”

“Please. I know how to curb my liquor when I’m on a job.” Disregarding the fact that he and Zia had been on a date, not a job, when she took off with his ship. A date during which he’d very seriously considered telling her he was the Charlatan. This was a good reminder not to get close to making that mistake twice.

Still smiling knowingly, she said, “Yeah, sure. Anything else I should know about? How do we start tracking this cargo thief?”

“We’ll start at Kralla’s Song. If she’s in Kadara, she inevitably ends up at Kralla’s.”
"I’ll put my team on standby. SAM, who’s up in the rotation?"

"Cora and Liam, Pathfinder."

“Oh, won’t that be fun?” she muttered. “Get hold of them. Have them gear up at the Tempest and be ready. Cora won’t bitch, but Liam will. If he gets snotty with you, whatever he says, just reply with, ‘So was your mom last night.’ Got it?”

The AI, if possible, sounded hesitant. “Is this supposed to be an evolution of my humor matrix?”

“I’ll explain it to you later.”

They headed toward the docks where Kralla’s Song sat on the fringe, ready to serve anyone who landed in Kadara Port. It wasn’t Reyes’s favorite, but it served a purpose, and he’d spent plenty of time there drooling after Zia. Enough to learn to stomach the alcohol, at least. These days, he used it to meet contacts on occasion, but generally avoided it—and his ex.

A huge, scarred up old krogan stepped into their path a few seconds before they reached the bar, arms folded, expression terse. Reyes vaguely wondered if he owed money before recognition set in. He’d seen this battleaxe before, hammering a shotgun down Roekaar’s throats, as well as in plenty of surveillance feeds. Nakmor Drack, one of Violet’s.

“Cora says you’re running a job, kid.” He sneered a little toward Reyes, but otherwise ignored him.

“Reyes called in his favor for clearing the third monolith.” She kept her tone even, almost cheerful, even. “It’s nothing big. Just a case of misplaced cargo. He just needs someone with a comically large magnifying glass to help look for clues, and mine’s the biggest.”

“Swap me out for Liam. Something about this has my bones aching.”

She held her ground. “You’re still scrubbing sand from your joints from that last job on Eledaan. Kick back, old man. I’ll have this wrapped up in a day. Cora and Liam are more than capable of running backup, not to mention, they’re rested.”

“You aren’t,” he argued.

It was almost cute, the way the ancient old krogan fussed over her. Violet didn’t strike him as the type to appreciate coddling, but she put up with it with something almost like affection oozing from her tone as she talked him down.

“I’m fine. Tired is basically how I run these days.” She offered him a lackluster smile.

Huffing, he finally turned toward Reyes. “She comes back alive, or I’ll pull out your spine.”

“She doesn’t need me to keep her alive. I’d probably just get in her way,” he admitted, and that was no shit.

Drack eyed him warily. “I don’t like you.”

“You aren’t the first. There’s a fanclub, I hear.”

Nostrils flaring, he eased out of their way to clear a path to the bar. Reyes’s pulse slowed a notch. While he maintained a solid poker-face, his instincts for survival put in a heavy suggestion to run and hide.

“Friendly fellow,” he commented when they were out of earshot.
“He cares. Better father than mine ever was,” she snorted.

“You said he wouldn't have liked me, either.”

“The difference being, Drack respects me enough to let me make my stupid, ill-advised decisions. Alec would have outright killed you.”

He barked a laugh. “Did you just call me stupid and ill-advised?” He didn't know why it was so much of a gut punch to hear that from her, but he buried it back. It was a tease, nothing more. If she really thought so low of him, she wouldn't keep demanding his time.

She pecked his cheek. “You have to admit, you're a bit of a shady bastard, if a handsome one.”

“Well, as long as I'm handsome…”

Umi made her way over to their end of the bar, emitting a noise of low disgust. “You two want a drink or a room?”

Reyes cranked up his charm toward the surly asari. “I was hoping for information, actually.”

She eyed them skeptically. “Fine, but it'll cost you.”

“Put it on the Pathfinder’s tab.”

“Seriously?” Violet griped.

“I picked up lunch,” he reminded her. “Plus, I gave a reputation to maintain about being a shady bastard. An ill-advised one.”

She scowled slightly. “I'm not going to hear the end of that one, am I?”

“Should I come back? I have somewhere less nauseating I could be,” Umi drawled.

Grinning, he steered them back on target. “Zia Cordier been in lately?”

“She didn't happen to catch the name of this shifty salarian, did you?”

Another shrug. “Can't keep track of your own girlfriend?” she scoffed.

He ignored Violet's raised eyebrows, inwardly cursing Umi’s sense of tact. “Zia and I haven't been together in a long time.” He very, very pointedly didn't look at the woman next to him. He had history. Everybody had history. “Has she been in here?”

“Sure. Met with some shifty salarian a little earlier. Seemed early for day drinking, but you know Zia.” She rolled her shoulders.

“Another shrug. “Maybe it was the Charlatan.”

He deflected his discomfort with a lazy grin. “Or maybe Zia is the Charlatan. Who knows these days? Did you overhear any if their conversation?”

She leaned back with folded arms and a cocked eyebrow. He broke and glanced toward Violet, who sighed and transferred credits enough for a solid bribe. Umi didn't bother pretended to be offended by the amount, making him wonder exactly how good she made it.

“They talked about meeting someone at Spirit’s Ledge.”
“That's it?”

“That's it. You didn't hear it from me.”

“Sure. Thanks.” Elbow propped on the bar, he looked back toward Violet, her expression entirely inscrutable. He shouldn't have been nervous. They weren't exclusive, and Zia was behind him. “Well, we have a lead. Shall we check it out?”

“What could be more fun than chasing down your ex-girlfriend?”

He struggled not to cringe. “Girlfriend is a strong word.”

She flapped a dismissive hand. “Semantics. Do you think she did this to you on purpose? Would she realize it was your cargo she lifted?”

“I...don't know,” he admitted. “It's possible. She's also an opportunist. It could also be both.”

“You two have an ugly breakup?”

He didn't want to get into this with Violet, but he couldn't tell whether she was asking because she was earnestly gathering all relevant information or because she wanted to know for selfish reasons. Either way, he had no reason to keep it from her other than he didn’t like airing his dirty laundry in front of, well, anyone, much less the ones he slept with.

“You could say that.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Enough that she'd want to get back at you?”

“It wasn't like that. It's more whether she felt like twisting the knife in my back.”

“Poor baby,” she crooned, eyes glittering with a little too much amusement.

“What can I say? I find dangerous women alluring. It was my own fault for getting involved.”

“You find me dangerous, Reyes?”

“You find me ill-advised,” he pointed out.

She laughed, settling her hands on his waist and sidling in close. In full battle gear, she stood almost exactly eye-level with him. “What a pair we make.” She claimed a quick kiss, a consolation prize for having to put off showering and sleeping in lieu of tracking down his old flame. She pulled back entirely too quickly in his opinion. “So, Spirit's Ledge?”

“Mind if I bum a ride out there?”

Her eyes hardened again, just for a moment. “Oh yeah,” she muttered. “This is going to be fun.”
This chapter was shaping up to be long enough, so I split it in half! What the hell is even conciseness, anyway?
Dangerous and Ill-Advised

Chapter Summary

Reyes enlists the Pathfinder and her team to track down his ex-girlfriend and some missing cargo. Things go about as well as you'd expect.

Chapter Notes

So a couple of chapters ago I apparently tried to give a link to a piece of art a friend made me, pasted the wrong link in, and then didn't notice it until yesterday. Moral of the story: don't multi-task while posting. Here's the proper link. (And seriously go look. My friend is SOOOOOO talented. She deserves all the praise.)


Her team met her at the bottom of the lift in the slums with the rest of her gear and a thermos of hot coffee. Bless Cora and her foresight. Violet checked each weapon, loaded them, and then began sucking down coffee like her life depended on it. The other two watched Reyes while she geared up with varying degrees of skepticism. Cora, the consummate professional, shoved her disdain under an expression of utter neutrality. Violet had known her long enough to figure out that she only ever looked so perfectly aloof when she hid a sea of disapproval. Liam, on the other hand, simmered with thinly concealed hostility.

“You both know Reyes. Reyes, Liam and Cora,” she said curtly in the way of introductions.

“A pleasure.” He purred his Rs a little harder than normal. Could he be nervous?

“What’s the op?” Cora asked in her no-nonsense way.

“Reyes’s ex-girlfriend/business rival snatched some high profile cargo from one of his middle-men earlier this afternoon. We have a possible location for her whereabouts at Spirit’s Ledge. We’re going to check it out, see if we can find either Zia, someone who knows where she is, or by some divine miracle, the cargo itself. One way or another, our mission is to liberate said cargo and return it to Reyes so he can make the delivery and hopefully keep the client happy.”

“What’s the cargo?” Liam grunted.

“Client paid top dollar for discretion. We don’t know.”

“We don’t even know what the cargo is? Why the hell would you haul for someone who needs that kind of secrecy?”

Unperturbed, Reyes brushed the corner of his sleeve. “Honor has a price. The client paid for mine.”

“It’s not about the cargo,” Violet interrupted before an argument could start. “It’s about getting it
back and getting it to where it belongs.”

“And what if it’s nukes?”

They all looked at Liam blandly.

“I’m not saying I think it’s nukes. I’m just saying, what if it’s something bad? What if we’re facilitating something detrimental to the Initiative?”

“That’s not for us to decide. I owed Reyes a favor for the monolith, this is how he wants it paid back. End of story. We do this, we’re square. Now let’s not take all day with it.” She brought the thermos back up to her lips for a greedy pull. There wasn’t enough coffee in the world, sometimes.

Liam muttered something under his breath too low to fully catch, but she swore part of it had to do with “blowjobs.” She decided not to pursue it, eager to get through this as quickly and cleanly as possible. She should have swapped out the mouthy little shit for one of the others, but their relationship was strained enough as it was and she didn’t want to look like she was playing favorites.

He was good on a fireteam as long as he didn’t go off half-cocked. She depended on him.

As the others progressed into the slums, she decided to nip it in the bud as best she could. Reyes took the lead. This was his turf, where he was most comfortable. Cora stayed close, falling into rank and formation, even if nobody else did. Violet grabbed Liam’s collar and jerked him back a few paces where she could have a low word.

“Hey. You don’t have to like it. You don’t have to like him. But at least pretend you can be professional. This isn’t how I wanted to spend the rest of my day either.”

He at least had the decency to look abashed. “I know. I’m sorry. I just don’t trust him. Rubs me the wrong way. Like…” He exhaled, dropping his voice lower. “Like back when I was a cop. He reminds me of these mafia greaseballs I used to come across.”

“He’s a smuggler. A criminal. He’s going to hit your cop buttons,” she reminded him.

“No, you don’t get it. It’s not just criminal. Everybody here has that look. He’s different. I can’t explain it in a way that makes sense. And this isn’t about…” For a moment, he looked furious with himself. It was half-said anyway, so he pressed forward. “I put what happened between us behind me. I don’t care who you spend your extra time with. But this guy is just off.”

She had a hard time believing it was totally unbiased, but that wasn’t an argument she had an interest in reopening. “All right.”

“’All right?’” he quoted back at her. “What does that mean?”

“It means I’m tired, so watch my six. Help me get through today. I just want a goddamn nap when it’s over.”

“Definitely, Pathfinder. Do I have to be nice to him?”

“Try for civility, at the very least.”

He scrunched his nose.

They detoured briefly to Reyes’s apartment so he could grab heavier body armor to put over his flight suit and weapons, and then they headed out into the badlands. The Nomad waited, still caked with mud from their earlier jaunt to and from the vault. Violet took the driver’s seat, Cora riding
shotgun, and the other two in the back.

“You're going to want to buckle,” Liam warned, clipping himself in.

Reyes didn't reach for his immediately. “What, click-it or ticket?”

Violet threw the Nomad into gear and hit the accelerator. Dirt flew behind their back wheels, but she switched gears, adjusted for the terrain, and skidded away from Kadara Port with nothing short of reckless abandon. She didn't feel like drawing out this road trip for any longer than necessary.

Reyes scrambled for the seat belt.

“You always drive like this, Ryder?” He chuckled nervously.

She hit a corner hard, skidding through it and losing little momentum. “Yep.”

“She drove terrain vehicles for scientists when she was working security on digs in the Milky Way,” Cora commented over her shoulder. “Had to outrun everything from pirates to rival science teams.”

Another hard corner, this one taking the Nomad up onto three wheels. Reyes white-knuckled his arm rests, but the other two could get by with minimal bracing these days.

“You wouldn't think a bunch of nerds digging up relics could be that cutthroat, but if you didn't get your team and their equipment to an area, intact, before everyone else, there was shit to pay,” Violet supplied as she hit a hill and switched gears smoothly, once more minimizing the impact to momentum. “We used to race during off hours. Lots of betting. Lots of men with dick insecurities. I kind of miss it.”

The Nomad crested the hill and Violet hit the boosters on the downhill slope. Liam and Cora knew the drill and braced themselves, but Reyes was thrown against his seat.

“You do keep things exciting, hermosa.”

“Perhaps, dare I say, dangerous?”

“At the very least, ill-advised.”

She caught Liam rolling his eyes in the rearview mirror.

“Sniper glare up ahead,” Cora suddenly warned.

She squinted at the hills as they rolled through. “Must be Collective. They would have shot at us by now.”

“Thought Collective owned the other side of the hill, that this was all bandit territory,” Liam muttered.

“Maybe they're expanding? Weird for them to be this close to the Port.” She shrugged. “Not that I'm complaining. If they want to take over the badlands and make it passable without us taking potshots every time we drive through, that's perfectly fine with me. I should send the Charlatan a fruit basket.”

“So why does the Charlatan have such a crush on you?” Reyes asked from the back seat.

She snorted. “Probably because I am stellar at accidentally pissing Sloane off. Like, remember all the comm interruptions I checked out and fixed a while back? She chewed me out for that at that party while you off stealing whisky. Apparently that was her attempt at interrupting the Collective’s
organization—among a few others—and I went and botched it.”

He laughed bodily. “Sloane was behind that? You must be her favorite person by now.”

“One step forward, two steps back,” she grumbled. “My vision of a settlement here is a pipe dream.”

They passed the scopes on the hill unaccosted, which did indicate a Collective presence. They'd spread out over the badlands, driving out bandits and keeping opposing forces in check. She didn't know what she did to endear herself to the Charlatan, but he (She? They?) had the power to make her life hell, so she didn't feel obliged to look this gift horse in the mouth.

She managed to get on the main road that would dump them on Spirits Ledge the fastest before boredom and anticipation set in among her crew. She wouldn't mind if he endeared himself her team, but with Liam and Cora, it was unlikely.

“So what do you do on road trips usually?” Reyes asked after fidgeting a few minutes. “You don't have a radio in this thing?”

He couldn't have asked a worse question.

“Well if Cora wouldn't act—”

“—not my fault that you—!”

“—shit taste and no brains—”

“—will pull this car over!”

“—won’t even try—”

“—ears bleeding—”

“—krogan trash metal—”

“—both shut up—”

Violet finally fell silent and let the argument burn itself out. Reyes couldn't have known he would upset the beehive, but his shellshocked expression should have been captured for posterity. When the yelling died down, he froze, not daring to speak, lest he stir things up again.

“They're banned from the radio,” she summed up tartly.

They rode along in icy silence for a few more minutes as the landscape slipped by. She made liberal use of the thrusters, despite the uneven terrain, hoping to shorten the drive as much as humanly possible. Spirit’s Ledge normally took a little over an hour by Nomad, barring impromptu gunfights with outlaws with delusions of grandeur.

Liam suddenly turned to the smuggler and said, “If this was such an important job, why did you outsource it?”

“Jobs overlap sometimes. I'm a busy man. I can't do everything.”

“Not busy enough that you couldn't set everything aside to take care of the fuck up personally, obviously.”

“This took priority, but that doesn't mean the interruption won't cause problems elsewhere.”
“How big is your operation, anyway? How many people do you have working under you?”

Reyes smiled tolerantly. “That’s none of your business.”

Violet reached desperately for her thermos, tipping it up to claim the last, little drops with a small whimper. Empty. And they still had a long drive ahead of them.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the Pathfinder is out of coffee,” Cora announced grimly.

“Already?” Suvi’s voice trilled through the comm speaker on the Nomad’s panel. “I told you to pack a double.”

Reyes looked around in surprise. “Your whole team is listening in, aren’t they?”

The odds were high they also had an elaborate betting pool going, too. Violet had hoped she could ignore their lurking presence until they were finished.

Peebee filled him in enthusiastically. “Are you kidding? We wouldn't miss Ryder trapped in a car with her boytoy and her ex going to hunt down her boytoy’s ex!”

There were shouts and exclamations, multiple voices ringing out, “Peebee!” in quick succession.

An icy, uncomfortable silence descended as comms abruptly cut out. Probably Vetra, overriding control before more damage could be done. She grabbed the coffee thermos and tipped it up, praying it had magically refilled in the last fifteen seconds. She got about a drop out. Cora should have also packed gin.

From the backseat, which she deliberately avoided looking at, Reyes finally said hesitantly, “Which one…?”

“Me,” Liam grunted. “And we weren't together, so we really aren't exes.”

“Ah.”

She peeked at Reyes’s expression in the rearview mirror. He caught her eye and winked. At least they shared in the awkwardness, and credit where it was due, Liam did do his best to diffuse the conversation in as few words possible. She’d have to thank him later. The topic did neither of them any favors.

“So, let's play the quiet game,” she suggested tersely.

Liam settled in with folded arms. “Agreed.”

Cora stared pointedly out her window and Reyes began focusing on his omnitool. Violet gripped the wheel a little too tightly and focused on the road ahead. This was supposed to be a good day. Correct vault. Take a nap. Get pounded into the mattress by Reyes.

She grabbed for her thermos, tipped it up, and set it back in disappointment when it hadn't miraculously refilled itself.

Cora flicked her gaze to her, fingernails clicking against her armrest and lips parting slightly, face suddenly conflicted.

“I swear to god if you report back how many times I try to drink from it after it’s empty…” she growled.
“Of course not, Pathfinder.”

Liam coughed, covering up a curt, “Yeah right.”

The drive couldn’t have been longer, even with her gunning it at every opportunity. Driving usually settled her, got her to zen out. Slowly, her grip eased on the wheel, but every time she glanced in the rearview mirror at Reyes and Liam steadfastly ignoring each other, she tensed. The teasing back on board the *Tempest* would drive her to an early grave.

When they crested the final hill into Spirit’s Ledge, she expected to have to split up into teams to look for clues, and tried to wrangle which division would be the most effective and least cringe-inducing. The area wasn’t too large to have to cover and sported several angaran buildings, but out near one of the sulfur pools, someone had a shuttle parked, a fat little cargo hauler with a shabby paint job.

“That's the missing ship,” Reyes growled, leaning forward to see out the front windshield.

Violet scanned the surrounding hills. She'd cleared this area of bandits a few weeks ago, and the lack of gunfire was a distinct improvement on the scenery. However, she didn't trust it. New gangs always moved into the empty holes she left behind.

“I don't like it.”

“What's not to like? We wanted to find the ship, we found the ship,” Liam countered. “Let's hope the cargo is still intact.”

“When is it ever that easy?” Cora checked her guns with a little frown.

“I'm with Cora on this one. It's never that easy.”

He shrugged. “Care to make it interesting?”

“Fifty says it goes sideways,” she agreed.

“You're on.”

“*Hang on. We're logging our bets,*” Lexi called over the comms.

Reyes smirked in the back seat. “Pathfinding gambling ring. I didn't realize what an untapped market you all are.”

She flicked him a grin. “We have to keep it interesting between all the shooting and running. Okay, Liam and Cora, I want you two watching our exit and ready to hurry in to save the day if things go hairy. Reyes and I will go into the shuttle to see if anyone’s inside and if it's still loaded. If not, SAM and I will investigate and figure out where they took it.”

They took their time running recon of the surrounding area before moving in. The entire area seemed as quiet as she left it on her last visit, no signs of life anywhere. Liam and Cora took their positions overlooking the shuttle and Violet and Reyes cautiously moved in.

“I have the codes from my middleman to get us through the front door,” he said as they approached.

“If they've been changed, I can have SAM hack it. Either way, I'll go in first.”

“Of course. You are the lady, after all. And significantly harder to kill. And probably a better shot,” he reasoned.
“Flatterer.”

“Trust me, amor, I'm holding back for the sake of your eavesdropping team.”

She imagined several of them mimed gagging to each other, cracking a smile to her face. She watched their backs while Reyes used his codes on the outer panel. After a minute, the door whisked open for them. They met each other's eyes in abject shock.

“I don't like this,” he said, echoing her earlier sentiment. “Zia isn't dumb enough to leave old codes intact. It's not like her.”

Violet thumbed the safety off her rifle. “Let's see what we've got.”

She headed in first, rifle raised. The door delivered her directly into the cargo hold, a wide, yawning space with locked cargo pens and extra space in the middle. The walls of the pens were opaque, making it difficult to discern whether it was still hauling anything.

“We'll check out the rest of the ship, then see about the pens.”

Her tour took no time at all. Attached to the cargo bay was a small living area containing a fold down bed, lockers, kitchenette, and a cramped head, which then opened into the cockpit. All empty, if a little rust-coated and in desperate need of an air freshener.

They headed back into the hold where Reyes interfaced with the ship's computer, using the codes provided by his middleman. She kept watch, something about the whole situation rubbing her the wrong way.

Cora's voice interrupted. “Ryder, you've got incoming. A small ship just landed. Single occupant. Heading for the shuttle now. ETA less than thirty seconds.”

“Copy,” she said. “The anomaly, SAM?”

“There are indeed crates loaded into this pen, but the crates are empty. They contain no cargo whatsoever, however, one does seem to be affixed with a tracker.”

“Empty? Why the hell would someone pay me to haul a bunch of empty crates?” Reyes growled.

“What about this doesn't smell like a setup to you?”

Violet had her gun on the door as he puzzled it out. A woman stepped through. Pretty, dark haired with streaks of red dyed in. She took an immediate dislike to her, but that might have had something to do with her smug expression. The woman struck a pose, hands on her hips, looking far too pleased about herself for someone with a gun pointed at her chest.

“Finally,” she said in a lyrical accent. “I thought you'd never show, lover.”

Reyes's amber eyes went hard and flat. “What's this all about, Zia? All the cloak and dagger doesn't seem your style.”

“Ryder, three more shuttles inbound and landing.”

She flicked him a glance. “It appears we’re being ambushed.”

The woman laughed. “You never could resist a big payout, Reyes.”

“What can I say? I'm a greedy man.”
“Eight people out of the shuttles, heading your direction. Liam and I are moving in after them. We can pen them between us once they hit the doorway.”

Zia's lip curled a little. “That's why you don't have any friends. You're selfish.”

“He’s not entirely without friends,” Violet protested, feeling unexpectedly defensive. “He's proved himself more than dependable to me.” She wouldn't go so far as to call him a good man, but for a roguish smuggler, he was decent.

“Oh honey,” Zia sneered. “You have no idea who he is.”

The “honey” got under her skin. A mockery of her youth, her naivety. Not the first person to lord down their nose at her from the height of age and wisdom, and likely not the last.

Sarcasm bit out, abandoning all intention of keeping things professional. “Yeah, but have you seen the things he can do with his mouth?”

“If you believe the rumors, it's just a shame neither of us has a cock.”

Reyes coughed. “I think that's a good enough pissing match. What are you doing here, Zia? What do you want?”

“Did you honestly think you could take over Kadara and nobody would notice? That none of us might object?”

Violet didn't think it possible for him to be rendered speechless, but his jaw snapped shut with an audible click and he glared her down with a renewed intensity and...fear? Confusion? She couldn't read him, but his body tensed, humming with hostility.

Emboldened, Zia continued. “You take every good job! Leave the rest of us scraps. I don't know how you have your fingers in every smuggling job on the planet, I don't know big your operation actually is, but seducing you wouldn't get it out of you and stealing your ship didn't slow you up. So we've had enough.”

“Eight hostiles positioned outside the door. Waiting on your order to engage, Ryder.”

Beside her, Reyes shed his discomfort, body loosening and a curt laugh snapping between them. “So that's what this is? The smuggling union got together to kick my ass?”

She drew on them, pulling a sidearm into her hands. “Didn't take you squealing to the Pathfinder into account, but I'm sure someone will pay us for killing her.”

Violet grinned. “I'm harder to kill than I look, and you only brought eight to back you up. You have ten seconds to call them off.”

“You’re stupid if you think the two of you against nine of us will ever end in your favor. I don't care how good you are” She apparently wasn't bright enough to factor in how Violet got her intel about the others.

She smiled wolfishly. “And you're stupid if you think I didn't bring backup.”

A moment of hesitation flickered across the other woman's face. Then, her eyes hardened. She brought her gun up with lethal intention, aiming not at Violet, but the man beside her. She reacted out of instinct, shoving in front of him instead of returning fire and taking the bullet in her chest. It smacked against her armor, but the impact distributed enough that she would barely bruise.
“Timely rescue, if you please, Cora!” she called.

Shoving Reyes back, she took aim, but he grabbed her elbow and threw off her aim so that her burst of gunfire hit high above her target’s head, even as other armed smugglers filtered through and started shooting.

“Reyes, what—”

“I need her alive!”

They retreated back toward the cockpit, finding cover behind computer terminal and corner of the farthest pen where they fired a volley of cover fire to deter anyone from charging in after them. Reyes swore vividly as they alternated covering each other during reloads.

“Alive might be a tall order,” she snarled.

“She has something of mine. Or had. I need to question her!”

Before she could demand details, Cora's voice snapped crisply in her ear. “Three down, taken by surprise, and one injured.”

“Keep them penned between us. They can't go in or out without someone shoving lead up their ass.”

She focused on picking off the other smugglers, peppering concentrated bursts at whatever soft spots they showed to her. Their armor wasn’t high quality and her armor piercing rounds did plenty of damage. Flaring up her biotics, she sent out a pulse of energy that picked a combatant up and crunched him bodily against the bulkhead, breaking everything important and then some.

Just as the battle turned their direction, something small arced through the air and dropped directly behind them. They both turned, but not with much time to react. Reyes dove away from their cover, risking bullets to get out of the blast radius. Violet dove toward it, hoping to minimize the impact of shrapnel with her body armor. It would fuck her up, but they were in an enclosed space. Reyes’s armor couldn’t take that kind of hit, but hers could.

The blast threw her backwards before she ever reached the grenade. She clipped the corner they had sheltered behind and spun out into the room, landing hard on her side and rolling a few times before settling on her back. Her ears rang, her vision blurred, and she couldn’t quite get her limbs under full control. Blood spattered against the inside of her helmet when she coughed, indicating the amount of abuse her lungs took. SAM chirped a diagnostics eval into her ear, but she couldn't process any of it yet.

As her blurry vision sank into focus and the ringing faded, a figure took a firm stance above her, gun raised.

“What does it take to kill you?” Zia snarled down the barrel of her gun.

Before she could fire, the woman’s body jerked with the impact of a bullet, knocking her back a step. Violet rolled her eyes to see Reyes step forward, emptying his entire clip into Zia with a primal noise of rage. He dropped the gun when it clicked empty and Zia's body crumpled. He knelt down to Violet, hovering his hands over her, swearing in Spanish and English.

“Don’t fuss,” she groaned, hooking her fingers under her helmet and tugging it off. She hissed as the movement antagonized a million different hurts in her body, forcing her to curl up into herself with a cry.
“Oh God, you’re alive. He pressed a hard kiss to her forehead, doubled over her, inhaling unsteadily. Then he sat back, dark eyes hardening. “Who throws themselves toward the grenade! Fucksakes, Violet! Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“You shot her?” She coughed up a little more blood.

“Of course I shot her! She was standing over you with a fucking gun after literally blowing you up. I thought you were already dead!”

“You blew up, Ryder? Wicked,” Liam said, stumping in. “Cora’s out taking care of a couple of runners. She’ll be done in a minute.”

“SAM?” she asked.

“I’m consolidating injury response systems to several, high-priority areas, but a hole was torn through your suit on the left anterior side of your bicep that is bleeding profusely and requiring attention. I think medigel will suffice to take care of it.”

“I’ve got it,” Liam offered, rounding to her left side and using a cutting tool to get her out of the sleeve, which was soaked through with blood.

“Never again, amor,” Reyes intoned sternly. “From now on, you run away from the grenades, like a normal, sane person.”

“I knew the suit could take it. Yours, not so much.”

“So you threw yourself on a grenade for my sake?” he shrilled, as if that somehow made it worse.

“Well, you killed your ex for me, so call it even?” She hissed when Liam began packing her arm with medigel. She avoided looking directly at it, not yet ready to face the music for her heroics.

“Zia Cordier isn’t dead,” SAM chirped.

They all froze.

“What?”

“Signs show that she has massive internal injuries, and will die before intervening medical attention can be applied, but she likely has between five and ten minutes left.”

Reyes gave her hand a little squeeze and left to attend Zia’s side instead, grabbing her shoulders and giving her a little shake. “Hey. Zia. Wake up. Come on, don’t do this to me.” He patted her cheek, not too hard, but enough that her eyes flew up and she took a gasping, shuddering breath. “Tell me where the Gambler is. Come on, baby. Who’d you sell it to? Zia!” he barked.

“F...fuck...you,” she gasped out.

“Just tell me who you sold it to! Please, Zia! Wake up!” he ordered when her eyes fluttered shut again.

She sneered up at him. “I wouldn’t...tell you...for all...the credits...in Kadara.”

“You’re dead anyway! You’re going to do this just to spite me?”

“Fuck right, I am.”
“Please. Just tell me where my ship is!”

She laughed hollowly, bitterly and passed out again. SAM alerted them that with her level of blood loss, her body could no longer support full brain functionality and that she would not wake up again. Swearing, digging a hand against his forehead, Reyes fell back in disappointment. He stared down at the woman for a long minute, expression warring through multiple emotions. He probably didn’t realize exactly how exposed he looked, how raw, but she read frustration and grief as clear as day. The frustration, she understood. The grief...

Liam finished up sealing her arm back together and she felt moderately better. A little worse than the time she got shot with a shotgun point blank, but survivable. With some assistance, she managed to sit up, hissing out a long groan.

Cora hailed them over the comms. “Hey, I’ve got the last one cornered and pinned down, but we’re at a kind of an impasse. Can I get some backup?”

“On my way. Can you get her back to the Nomad?” Liam asked.

“I’m fine!”

“You’re not fine. Lexi’s going to lay an egg when she sees you. You’ve done enough heroics for one day, so just let him be your crutch for five minutes getting back to the car.” Nodding to Reyes, he hurried out to see to Cora and the last smuggler.

Left to their own devices, Reyes snaked an arm under her and lifted her carefully to her feet, keeping her locked securely to her side as she found her balance and new places that hurt. The noise she made was not a whimper, not if she had anything to say about it, but she tipped her face into his shoulder to muffle it just in case. It pained her to admit, but Liam had a point. Maybe blowing up pushed her past her injury threshold just a bit.

“You okay?”

“Fine. SAM. Mute outgoing comms.” She didn’t need everyone listening in on whatever conversation they jumped into next. She limped out with his assistance. “Are you okay?”

He shrugged.

“Pathfinder,” SAM said through their private channel. “The ship Reyes mentioned, the Gambler, is the name of the ship Crux from the Collective requested we look out for.”

Interesting.

“Did you know the Collective has a bounty out for that ship Zia stole from you?”

He made a non-committal noise. “I’m not surprised. It was one of the best ships in the Nexus fleet, second, of course, only to the Tempest. And believe me, if I’d have been able to get into the Tempest’s hangar when I decided to break up with the Initiative, your ride wouldn’t be half as classy.”

She laughed, which turned quickly into a groan as she clutched her chest amidst complaints stemming from her ribs, sternum, and lungs. “Shit.” She hung onto him a little tighter, vision blackening around the edges. “Please stop making me laugh.”

“Sorry.” His smile indicated a lack of remorse, but it faded quickly. “I get by without it, but it was home for a long time. I miss it.”
“Puts me in an awkward position. If I *do* recover it, do I sell it to the Collective, you, or give it back to the Nexus?”

“I’ll give you a good price.”

She almost laughed again, but bit it back at the last second. “Tell you what, if I get my hands on it, I’ll call you first to negotiate.”

“You promise?”

“Yeah. I promise.”

They made the rest of the hike in relative silence, Violet more focused on not vomiting from the pain lancing through each limb as she moved. Battered, bruised over every inch, she was in for a rough week of healing under Lexi’s exasperated ministrations. She could already imagine the lecture on grenades she was about to get.

At the Nomad, Reyes opened the passenger side door and helped boost her in. She sat facing out, her legs dangling over the edge, while he braced himself in the doorway looking down at her, cataloguing visible injuries. He checked her bloody arm with a terse little frown. From a distance, she heard the pops and cracks of rifle fire.

“Did you love her?” she blurted after a moment.

Their eyes met in surprise. She cringed. She hadn’t meant to actually ask the question out loud, but she wanted to know, suddenly, if Reyes shot a woman he’d once genuinely cared for, for her. He looked away quickly.

“You don’t have to answer. It’s none of my business,” she amended with a wince.

“I don’t know. Maybe,” he finally replied, the frown reappearing on his face. “You want to know something stupid? I was about to cut her in that night, but I got drunk. I decided I didn’t want to tell her my business while I was slurring my words, that I would just wait until morning. I woke up hungover in the asscrack of nowhere, and she and the Gambler were gone. Can’t trust fucking anybody on this planet.”

Violet grabbed his hand. “That must have hurt.”

“I didn’t want to kill her. Even after all of that. I said it was about the ship...but I didn’t want to kill her.”

“I know, Reyes. I’m sorry.”

He placed a gentle kiss on her lips, about the only place on her that wasn’t bruised. They lingered together, making her lament the interruption that would rob them of more enthusiastic activities. So she hung on, since the next interruption would probably separate them until she could next get back to Kadara.

“Okay, wrap it up, lovebirds. I’ve got a stubborn Pathfinder to deliver to a fussy doctor,” Cora called as she and Liam approached, finished with the remaining smuggler.

Reyes backed off, honey colored eyes avoiding her face all of a sudden. “You take off, then. I’m going to hang back. Dig a few holes, then fly the shuttle back to my middleman.”

“You’ll be okay by yourself?”
He nodded. “I work better alone.”

“Call if you hit any snags. I don’t want to have thrown myself on a grenade today for nothing.”

His dimple flashed quickly as a grin flicked her way. “Imagine the looks on everyone’s faces when I tell them the Pathfinder herself values my pitiful life so highly.” To the others, he said, “Get her back in one piece, if you can. I’m sorry this was more trouble than I expected.”

He boosted her long legs inside the Nomad and shut the door, turning to head back to the shuttle while Cora took her place in the driver’s seat. She napped lightly, with a little assistance from SAM, until they reached a rendezvous point with the Tempest to evac directly onto it and get her into medical.

“Hey, Vi,” Liam said as he assisted extracting her from the Nomad. The others were far enough away not to overhear a low word. “He’s not so bad.”

She could hardly believe her ears. “Yeah?”

“I still don’t totally like him, but you heard what he said. He thought you were already dead, and he shot her anyway to keep her from doing worse. That’s something.” He avoided looking directly at her.

“Hey.” She reached out and gave his hand a little squeeze. “Thanks for trying to keep things from getting too awkward back there, too.”

“It’s past. It’s not right to keep dragging it back.”

She nodded. “Yeah. So we’re good?”

“I’d like us to be.”

He relinquished her to Lexi then as the doctor stormed over.

“A grenade, Ryder, really?”

She smiled bleakly. “Any chance you'll wait to yell at me until after I've had a cup of coffee?”

“No. Now let's get you to the medbay. You're lucky your armor is the best this system has to offer. Anybody else and I'd be pulling shrapnel from your ass for days. If you survived. The concussion alone should have liquified your organs. And you were debating whether the impact absorbtion panel upgrade was worth the price. Ha!”

“It was the ‘anybody else’ that had me worried. Reyes was right there.”

Lexi flicked her an imperceptible glance.

“Don’t give me that look. It's in my best interest to keep his anatomy intact.” They limped up to Lexi’s domain and she eased down on one of her tables.

“Well, if you ever want to be fit to use any of that anatomy, you have to also keep your own together. This was--”

“Stupid and ill-advised?” she supplied.

“Incredibly.”
Violet would have laughed, but everything hurt too much. Instead, she fired off a message to Reyes thanking him for a great date--who wouldn't love hamburgers and hand grenades?--and settled in to let Lexi and SAM put her back together while she stole a nap.
Reflections

Chapter Summary

Reyes considers what got him to this point and what to do moving forward.

Chapter Notes

Anybody want some hints of Reyes's backstory? I've headcanoned this so hard for ages now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Reyes poured himself a drink as soon as he got back to his apartment, hiding the tremor in his hands. He shook them out, clenched them, buried his weakness. He threw back the drink. Cheap tequila burned down to his belly to accompany his writhing insides. Few things rattled him. He was the Charlatan. In control. The master chess player. The puppeteer.

"Did you love her?"

He saw the question leave his lover's lips and felt it knife into his soul. He'd been so close to losing everything for a woman. Zia had used him, much as he used everybody, and she died with no concept of how close she had come to holding his empire by the balls.

He saw her standing over Violet's twisted, limp body. His ears rang too loudly from the concussion of the blast to hear anything she said. He saw the gun in her hands. The look on her face. She would take whatever she could from him.

Reyes poured another drink, jaw aching from how hard he clenched it.

Zia could have the Gambler. She wouldn't take Violet.

He wasn't sure what he was supposed to feel when he shot her. Admittedly, he didn't feel anything for a couple of hours. Numb, all the way down. He'd buried the smugglers, recognizing most of them from business. They died afraid. It was an ugly way to go. None of them were fighters, just enough to defend themselves in right spots and squeeze through alive. No more than he was. Putting them against a combat-ready pathfinder team seemed cruel.

Reyes hated relying on luck, but even he could admit he was only alive because he had been out to lunch with Violet when he got the call. The line between survival and death was thinner than a knife blade.

He sloshed a third drink into his glass and retreated to his couch, dropping down with a long sigh.

Trust nearly got him a bullet to the head. He couldn't afford any more mishaps. Telling Violet that he was the Charlatan before taking over Kadara served nothing but sentiment and risked everything. Telling her could be a mistake. Telling her could get him killed.
He set the cool glass against his temple to ease the headache forming there and closed his eyes.

He saw Violet throw herself toward the grenade. It bespoke to their personalities. Reyes, self-serving, preserved his own life by any means necessary. Violet, self-sacrificing, knew his armor wouldn't take the blast and had absorbed as much of it as possible. The other smugglers thankfully, had rushed outside to avoid the blast and were met by Cora and Liam, sparing him their bullets.

He couldn't shake the feeling from his body, that gut-wrenching knowledge that she might be dead. Because of him. Because of Zia. It all knotted inside of him. Violet. Zia. The Gambler. The Charlatan. Survival. Betrayal. Fuck, he hated this game. It wasn't supposed to be this way.

"You would be doing something good, while doing something you're good at," the old man had said, sitting across from him in the bar he found Reyes sulking in a lifetime ago. "Your fuckup won't matter out there. Six hundred years and two million light years, and no one will remember Reyes Vidal. You'll be a new man, and you'll get to choose what kind of man that is."

He'd gone home after their conversation. Not the shitty apartment he existed in during the six months since he'd had his wings stripped, but home. Sat down with Veronica in her big, well-loved kitchen. Told her about the opportunity to Andromeda, the opportunity to fly again, to reinvent himself. She'd tearfully told him to go.

"Doing what you love? Clean slate? Back in the pilot's seat? You can't pass this up."

He'd embraced her. Thanked her. Promised to swing by again before he boarded so she could give him a proper sendoff. When he returned, the party was bigger than he anticipated, even though she only had two days to plan it. Veronica always blew away his expectations.

Andromeda had different plans than he could have imagined. He got pulled from cryo and thrust into the pilot's seat of a cargo shuttle and told to figure out how to navigate the Scourge or die. They needed pilots who could get planetside and return to them. He'd hated it. It wasn't what he signed up for, bussing ever-waning goods and scared settlers between Eos and the Nexus, sleepless days and nights, running on coffee and wits, waiting for supplies to run out so he could starve to death with the rest of them. When the uprising happened, he'd taken what opportunity he could. He wasn't going to die doing a job he didn't sign on to do.

A lot of shit had happened over the last year to get him where he was. He didn't exactly regret it. It was what it was.

When tried closing his eyes, he saw Violet jumping in front of that grenade again.

He had an unread message sitting in his inbox from her. He resented that email. Her ship had already left Kadara, so it was the only consolation prize he got. He wanted to bury himself in her scent and reassure himself that she was tougher than anybody he'd ever met. To kiss her bruises and confirm that she was alive and safe.

But she was gone, whisked away on her ship to chase down whatever adventure awaited.

Teeth gritted, he opened the email.

Thanks for a great day, babe. Hamburgers and hand grenades? Points for creativity, as well as alliteration. Rain check on the real fun until my bruises heal? Also, I attached a tit pic. Check out what happens when your boobs take a hit from an explosive. - V

He found himself smiling reluctantly as he opened the file attachment. He never thought he would cringe seeing her breasts. They were deep, deep purple with speckling fanning out from the center.
He could see exactly where shrapnel struck her shoulders and down her belly. He scraped a hand down his face, closing the picture. He'd make it up to her. Perhaps with an outpost.

He threw back the tequila with a grimace and stood, checking the time, and strode out to head to Tartarus. He'd pick someone up, get laid, cleanse his palate to shed the restless energy thrumming through him, and then get back to work. This week was too important to let himself get distracted.

He would tell Violet he was the Charlatan after he claimed Kadara. He would sort through his conflicting feelings about her then. Later, when this was all over, and he had the time for it.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so short chapter is super short, I know, and was pretty much an exposition dump, but I feel like you all deserved a reaction scene of what was going on in Reyes's head with all of this, and adding more would have just been filler (which I haaaaate).

Also, forgive me, but I'm going on vacation for a couple of weeks. I don't know what kind of writing time I'll be looking at, if there's any, so this may be the last update for a little while. But I promise to come back fresh, suburned, and hopefully ready to finish this out! We're heading toward the cave scene, while I hope will be...*steeples fingers*...eeeexcellent. >D
Lies of Omission are Still Lies

Chapter Summary

Violet learns something about Reyes he ought to have mentioned sooner...

Chapter Notes

Okay, a quick update, still pretty short, but hopefully something to keep you all entertained. I'm still on vacation, so I haven't written ANYTHING. I'm going stir crazy, but there just hasn't been time! Thankfully I had this chapter mostly completed before I left, so I wrapped it up so it was ready to post.

Thanks for hanging with me while I recharge my batteries. I'll be back in my normal routine in a few days, so hopefully I can crush out more chapters and get this thing rolling again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Violet’s torso had turned yellow. She studied her bruises in the bathroom mirrors with a pout. They speckled across her chest and belly, darker near her sternum where the blast hit first. Lexi and SAM had taken care of the worst of her injuries, focusing on her battered organs and working their way out. Her arm hurt where the muscle was damaged on her bicep. It would take longer to heal, it would scar, but Lexi was confident she would regain full motion in a few months.

Sighing, she tossed on a loose t-shirt over her bruises. She no longer moved gingerly, her aches fading away to a memory. She tossed her long hair into a loose, messy bun and headed toward the bridge.

Jaal caught her in the hallway next to the ladder. “Oh. Ryder.” He hugged her. He always hugged her. He seemed to be under the impression that hugs would help her heal faster. She wasn't convinced he was wrong.

“Something on your mind, Jaal, or are you just copping a feel?”

“I'm copping nothing.” Apparently someone had explained that one to him. “I worry about you. You've been out of the action. Your brother says you don't like sitting--”

“My brother? When did you talk to him? When did you meet him?”

“I introduced myself while you were seeing Dr. Carlyle on the Nexus. Or, rather, he introduced himself to me. He wanted to know if you were lying about how bad you were. He is very nice and very…tall.”

She nodded. “He is tall,” she confirmed. It was usually the first impression Avery made on people.

“Anyway, he says you prefer to be doing something, that sitting will make you crazy. I know you're
almost back on your feet. We are all looking forward to it.”

“Maybe we’ll be able to chase down Meridian once I’m cleared.”

“Can we tell if the predictive model is getting close?”

“The numbers are running. We'll know when we know,” she sighed.

Giving her one last squeeze, he meandered off. She detoured through the galley for a cup of coffee and finally hauled herself to the bridge. They were only orbiting Aya, having skittered around the planets and Nexus during her recovery, restocking and hunting down supplies and upgrades they were usually too busy to look for with commitment. It even looked like Liam’s movie night might actually happen.

Suvi wasn't in her usual spot, so Violet stole the chair and kicked her feet up on the console while she enjoyed the view.

“What's the good word, Kallo?”

The salarian glanced toward her. “Suvi is going to start drinking if we don't find Meridian soon.”

She snorted. “Why is she so stressed? It's not like we're going anywhere until Lexi gives me a clean bill of health. If we found Meridian last week, we'd be just as dead in the water.”

He shrugged. “Maybe hide the wine, just in case?”

“Sure thing. I'll drink it myself.”

They shared an easy grin, but Kallo’s faded too quickly. Again. They always enjoyed a friendly rapport, but the last few weeks in particular, he'd been acting strange. Lucky for her, Kallo was shit at hiding his feelings.

“What's that face for?”

“Nothing. This is just my face. Does it offend you?” he teased in a valiant attempt to throw off her suspicion.

She sipped her coffee. “You've been scrunching your smiles at me since before I got blown up. What's the deal?”

He turned his face away from her. “I am not.”

“Kallo…”

He huffed.

“Dish,” she ordered in her best “pathfinder” voice.

“It's...technically irrelevant. It changes nothing. Just a bit of trivia. I do find it odd he didn't mention it himself. I thought he would. Then he didn't. I thought about saying something, but what does it matter anymore?”

“You're babbling. 'He’ who? Be specific,” she laughed.

He squirmed in his pilot's chair, breaking out in a nervous sweat. “You know I was originally recruited to fly the salarian pathfinding team, right?”
She sucked in a choking break. “You're leaving me!” she accused. “That dirty little shitstain Hayjer is trying to snipe you from me! I'll kill him!”

“No! Ryder! I’m trying to tell you about your original pilot. The pilot Alec brought on to fly his team. The human pilot.”

She relaxed, releasing her grip on Suvi’s armrest before she broke it. “Good,” she growled. “Because you're not allowed to break up with me. Now what about this other pilot? I don't even know who it was supposed to be.”

He avoided her gaze. “That’s what I mean, because it was Reyes Vidal.”

The air sucked out of her lungs. “Shut the front door. You’re kidding me, right?”

“I wish I was. I wish I knew why he didn’t say anything.” His eyes studied her, searching for anger or disapproval at his deception.

“I wish I knew why you didn’t say anything!” she cried. “How long have you been sitting on this? SAM, why didn’t you know?”

He made a strangled noise. “I didn’t know if it was worth the mention. I never really met him. Aside from sitting in a few debriefs in the same room as him, we never interacted,” Kallo wailed apologetically. “And it’s not like it actually matters. By the time you showed up, he was long gone. Saying something didn’t add any information we already had on him. But now you’re in...relations...with him and it just got...weird.”

“So my fucktoy is supposed to have his ass in your chair.”

“I’m searching my databases now, Pathfinder. I think I’ve found the source of the error. The original pilot your father recruited, Norman Herschall, backed out of the Initiative the week before we were set to launch. Alec and I weren’t fully integrated at that time. He went to recruit a new pilot while I ran system updates in SAM Node. By the time my logs came back online, he mentioned he’d found a replacement and that I could sync with the files stored on the Nexus upon our arrival to Andromeda. When I did sync, those files were among the ones corrupted during the uprising.”

She gaped at Kallo. “Not your fault. He should have said something.”

“Unbelievable. My father very likely recruited him! SAM?” she demanded.

“Why hadn’t he? Maybe it didn’t matter. All original plans got scrapped the second things went to shit on arrival. Even if Reyes hadn’t split after the uprising, Kallo would still likely be piloting the Tempest. Nothing was how they originally envisioned.

For a moment, her brain twisted around the idea if they had arrived to a system of golden worlds, as planned. Her father would have lived and Kallo would be at home among the salarian pathfinding team. Reyes Vidal would have flown them around, spearheading discovery. And she probably wouldn’t have met him more than once, as determined as she was not to have anything to do with her father’s business upon arrival.

“This is so weird.” She shook off the thought. “SAM, is there any way you can get me a solid private video line to Kadara? Reroute the vidcom signal to my omnitool?”

He didn’t do her the indignity of suggesting she just use the vidcom table itself. She didn’t need a full
holo of the man in hearing range of eavesdroppers, but she did want to see his face. Promising to test
the connections, he quieted while he set up the channel.

“Thanks, Kallo.”

He drooped. “I really am sorry I kept it to myself.”

“You aren’t the one who needs to worry, but he is,” she promised on her way out.

Violet stopped for more coffee on her way back to her room, then shut herself inside the pathfinder
quarters and dropped into a couch.

“How are things coming, SAM?”

“I almost have a secure connection. The communications feedback from Kadara is not ideal, but I'm
working to strengthen the signal.”

She clicked her short fingernails together while she waited, mulling over how she wanted the
conversation to go. Kallo had a point. It technically didn't matter. Events were already in motion
before she arrived to nullify any impact his original purpose in the Initiative would have on her life. It
still felt like a major omission, and she needed to know how his recruitment went and why her father
picked him.

“I'm hailing Mr. Vidal's private line now,” SAM warned after a moment.

It took several long rings before her the call connected. The camera opened to black.

“SAM? Video feed?”

“This is not an error with technology. The lights are off.”

She heard the sound of a yawn through the speaker. “Vi? Everything all right?”

She checked the time. Midday on the Tempest, middle of the night on Kadara. She always forgot.

“I've got a bone to pick with you, Vidal.”

“It couldn't wait until after 0400 hours, amor?”

A light snapped on, revealing droopy eyes, sleep mussed hair, and an expanse of delectable bronze
skin. He was shirtless, foggy, and undeniably adorable. She wondered if he wore anything to bed.

Not the point.

She hardened her face, ignoring how his hair was slanted to one side, a lock falling forward across
his forehead. “Why did you lie to me?”

He dug the heel of his palm against his eye. “It's too early for an interrogation.”

“Not where I'm at.”

His eyes cleared. “Then I'm sorry, I thought I could get away with it, it won't happen again. Can I
get back to sleep now?”

“No.”
“Fine. How shall I apologize? If you were here, I would begin by kissing you just below the ear, the little spot that makes your breath catch. I'd lay you back and unbutton those tight, tight jeans of yours and slip my hand down…”

“Are you trying to have phone sex with me?” she interrupted.

“Why waste a perfectly good call?”

She exhaled furiously. “My father recruited you to fly his team!”

The last dredges of sleepiness fled his expression and he propped up on one elbow, shoving his hair back. “Oh. That lie.”

“Yes, that lie! Why didn't you tell me?”

“I figured Kallo would. He was there the whole time. He saw me. When he didn't appear to say anything about it, I just figured...it didn't matter. It's a big 'what if' that makes no difference, has no bearing on us.”

“Why did he recruit you?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “From what I understand, his last pilot backed out. I was second string.”

“Yeah, I got that part. Why you?”

Another sigh. A darting glance away. “My record with the Alliance spoke for itself, and I was the only one desperate enough to listen on such short notice.”

Her eyebrows jumped. “The Alliance? You were a pilot for the Alliance?”

“Is that so hard to believe?” When she didn't reply immediately, he said, “I got kicked out.”

“That, I believe.”

It was apparently the wrong thing to say, as he recoiled, stung. She grimaced, flashing him apologetic eyes.

“Sorry.”

“A twelve year career down the fucking drain.” Bitterness crept in. “Then this old ex-N7 found me in a bar, bought me a drink, and sold me Andromeda. I'd get a second chance. Clean slate. My own ship. Purpose. I would get to reinvent myself.”

“Shit.” She propped her head in her hand, elbow braced on the back of the sofa.

“I thought you'd be just like him,” Reyes admitted with a wry grin. “An old, battered hardass. I figured you would be just a slightly younger version of Alec Ryder.”

She made a noise of disgust.

“Imagine my surprise when I walked into Kralla’s and saw you, instead.” He licked his lips. “I only met him the one time, you know. It wasn’t like I was friends with him. Does that satisfy you? To know that I did not hold him in any esteem or respect?”

It did, which spoke to how fucked up her relationships were with everybody due to Alec Ryder. “You still should have mentioned something.”
“Forgive me?” he requested, voice sultry.

She had a hard time denying him anything when he used that voice and looked so perfectly disheveled. “Yeah, Reyes. I forgive you. Now, before we have to do this in the future sometime, is there anything else I should know? Any other little details you conveniently forgot to mention?”

He smiled disarmingly. “None that come to mind.”

“Think really hard. Now’s your chance.”

“You know everything, amor. Well, everything important. I only regret you didn’t come to argue this in person.” He lounged back down in his bed, eyes hooded again.

“Get some sleep, babe,” she cooed, reconsidering her stance on never sleeping over. She had no idea how cute he was sleepy and ruffled. She usually didn’t like waking up next to the men she slept with, preferring to hog the vast expanse of her bed to herself, but he made a strong case to make an exception with those droopy eyelids and unkempt hair.

“You sure? The phone sex idea has some merit. And I want to see how you’re healing. You should take your clothes off.”

“I’m fine. I’ll be back on active duty this week.”

He groaned, pillowing his head in his arms. “You should come visit me before you do. I’ll test your flexibility. Thank you properly for saving my life.”

“As if I could resist the allure of Kadara for long. Speaking of, how’s your water quality?”

“I don’t want to talk about my water quality. Take off your shirt.”

She rolled her eyes. “You have better lines than that, Reyes.”

“You want me to be charming? Call back when the sun is up.”

“I didn’t know smugglers kept regular business hours.

“It’s just been busy lately. I feel like this is the first I’ve slept since you left.”

“Maybe I’ll come take your mind off of it,” she cooed, studying him fondly as his eyelashes brushed his cheek. She wished she could reach out and smooth the hair off of his forehead.

Avery was right. She was terrible at keeping her emotions out of relationships. She always got too attached, but asking him to revisit their arrangement would be unfair. She didn’t really want exclusivity. Her lifestyle couldn’t support a full relationship and she didn’t think it was fair to either of them to try. That didn’t stop her from wanting more.

His weighted eyes dragged open. “Hey, Vi?”

“Yeah?”

“You threw yourself on a grenade for me. I don’t know how to…” He closed his eyes, this time on purpose. Then opened. “…to show my gratitude. No matter what happens, I want you to know, I haven’t forgotten.”

“Well, before you get too mushy on me, let’s not forget that I have a vested interest in keeping your anatomy intact.”
“I'm not mushy,” he muttered, eyes closed again. “And neither is my anatomy.”

“Goodnight, Reyes,” she laughed. “Remember to turn off your light.”

“Thanks, amor.”

He didn't get the light turned off before falling back asleep. She waited a minute before ending the transmission, a smile playing on her lips.

She finished her coffee while she mulled over multitudes of “what if” scenarios. It was too weird. The two men she chose to sleep with since arrival were both handpicked by Alec Ryder for the Initiative. She was so predictable she made herself sick.

Relocating to her desk, she pulled up a new email draft to her brother.

_Figured out why Reyes Vidal sounded familiar to you. Dad recruited him. Reigning queen if the daddy issues? Still me. - Vi_

She answered other messages and caught up on reports to distract herself for a few minutes. Despite forgiving the omission, from Reyes and Kallo both, she couldn't help but feel digs of anger this information had been withheld. Maybe she was spoiled from SAM being able to access anything and predict most of her wants and needs. And maybe she needed to let her father be dead and buried and keep pressing forward.

Finally her inbox pinged, but two messages cleared almost simultaneously. The first was from Sloane Kelly, the second from Avery Ryder. She decided to deal with Sloane in a second, opening the one from her twin first.

_That's right! Dad told me about him before we left. He was a pilot for the Alliance, used to run shuttles of reinforcements and supplies in and out of hot zones. Highly decorated. Highly skilled. What a waste, sitting on a dump like Kadara, smuggling. Dishonorable discharge from the Alliance, though. He assaulted another pilot and stole a shuttle full of drop troops. That, I remember, because Dad showed me the reports. He disagreed with an order. Refused to let them drop into heavy artillery. From what I read of the scenario, I tend to agree. Ground troops would have gotten fucked before their boots hit the dirt. That shit is what suborbital missiles are for. It’s a miracle he didn’t spend any time in a jail cell. But why didn’t he mention anything to you? --A_

She fired off a reply with her take on things, chewing over what she learned. Next time she was on Kadara, their conversation would be a lot longer. Maybe it was none of her business, but Violet had never been good when information was withheld from her. She wanted to hear his take. A twelve year career down the drain, he said. Did he regret what happened? Stand by it?

Before she could look at the Tempest’s schedule to see where she could rearrange supply runs to squeeze in Kadara, she opened the email from Sloane to see if it strengthened her case. It was a brisk message.

_Pathfinder, I need your assistance. Do me this favor and we can talk about your settlement. I need you here in 24 hours. --Sloane Kelly_

That certainly gave her the excuse she had been looking for. “SAM, how soon can we get to Kadara?”

_“From our current point, it is a 13.33 hour jump. The Tempest can be ready to depart in approximately one hour if Gil maintains his current rate of cargo storage.”_
Giving her about ten hours of playtime before she had to meet Sloane. Plenty of opportunity to pester Reyes and then some. It seemed odd that Sloane wanted to see her at 0500 Kadara time, but she didn't care too much. The temptation of getting her settlement was too good to pass.

Leaving her room, she walked to the medbay and caught Lexie pouring through scans, as per usual.

“No, I will not discharge you for active duty early. Stop asking,” the asari quipped sharply.

“Sloane Kelly wants something from me in 24 hours. She's offering me a settlement in exchange.”

“Wants what?”

“I guess I'll find that out when I get there.” She leveled her gaze. “I'm not asking, Lex. I'm telling. I'm still your boss.”

The doctor chewed her cheek, possibly sizing her up and estimating her capacity to subdue and sedate her for the next full day. Violet hoped she knew the odds weren't in her favor. She quite liked Lexie. It would be a shame to put a strain on their relationship.

“You will sign a waver saying you are returning to duty against my advice,” she finally bargained.

“Forward it to me while I get things set at the bridge and inform the crew. SAM, open comms to the ship.” She waited until they were linked, heading for the ladder up to the bridge. “Everyone stow their crap and buckle up. Her Highness Sloane Kelly has requested an audience, and we're going to oblige her, maybe get an outpost out of it. I want to be out of here in under two hours. Anybody need longer, speak now or forever hold your peace.”

Cora appeared in the hall behind her. “Is that wise? It could be a trap.”

She scurried up the ladder, aiming her reply over her shoulder. “Possibly, but has that stopped us before? We’ll indulge her for now. Everyone is rested, so I can take whoever feels up to being backup.”

“Drack and Vetra would be wisest. She’ll make you come unarmed. I’d feel more comfortable if you brought brawlers.”

She shrugged and nodded. “True enough.”

Striding across the bridge, she nodded to Suvi and Kallo as she stepped up to the navigation terminal between them, pulling up the galaxy map.

“Is this really about Sloane?” Kallo hedged.

“Two birds, one stone. Reyes and I had a chat, but I think a bigger apology is in order.”

“For the record,” Suvi quipped, “I told him he should have told you from the beginning.”

“*You* knew?”

The young woman blanched and swallowed. “Um. I mean...well...I suppose technically...”

Muttering a curse, she turned her focus on the star map in front of her. She debated sending a message ahead to Reyes to let him know she was on her way, but in the end decided against it. She was feeling petty. He could deal with her when she dropped in.

Hopefully he hadn’t made plans to have company.
OKAY. So this is my personal little headcanon I came up with after contemplating Alec’s original pathfinding crew. The team that heads down to Habitat 7 with him are all human. Harry Carlyle, the team's original doctor, is human. Suvi and Gil are human. The only (presumably) original team member that isn't human is Kallo, which made me wonder if he was ever supposed to fly for the human pathfinding team to begin with. What if the human pathfinding team originally had a human pilot?

Who do we know who also happens to be a pilot?

And thus, my headcanon was born.
Chapter Summary

Violet visits Reyes with a bottle of stolen bourbon to wring some details of his life out of him. (Aka, a chapter drowning in backstory.)

Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long! Vacation + plague threw me off my game and disrupted all of my schedules. Hopefully we're back on track now. Thanks for being patient!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kadara smelled marginally better. It would take a while to erase decades of permeated sulfur, but the air seemed a fraction fresher and the water no longer spouted flames. Violet stepped out of the Tempest onto the landing pad and inhaled with only a mild sensation of discomfort. The temperature and humidity were both up, though, swapping stench for sweat. She wrapped her hair in a rubber band to get it off her neck and aimed for the lift leading her to the slums, checking the time. A little less than ten hours until she had to meet Sloane after a couple of docking procedure delays upon arrival.

She toted a full bottle of bourbon she’d nicked from Liam’s locker, supposing that they were on good enough terms now that she could beg for forgiveness when he found it missing.

By the time she reached Tartarus, music throbbed through the soles of her feet like a heartbeat. The evidence of an untamed party spilled out of it's doors in the form of staggering drunks coming and going, looking for fresh air or a remote place to vomit. She shoved her way through greasy Kadarans inside the upper doors, all downing drinks and yelling to be heard over the deafening music. So much for a quiet night away from the Tempest.

The doors to the upstairs VIP room were locked when she tried. After knocking twice, it occurred to her that the odds of him hearing her were slim to none.

“SAM, standby on the hack. One sec.”

She sent Reyes a quick message. Hey, you wearing clothes?

She got an answer almost instantly.

Unfortunately, but if you want me to take them off, you just have to say the magic words.

You alone?

Sadly.

“Okay, SAM, go ahead and hack it open, please.”
“Right away, Ryder.”

It took less than a minute before the door whisked open. Reyes stood in the center of the room, mid-pace, stooped over a datapad with as serious an expression as she had ever seen from him. He reacted before he really saw her, datapad tumbling to the floor, gun snapping into his hand to aim at her. She instinctively stepped back and turned to the side, reducing the size of target she created.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Vi,” he gasped, dropping the gun down to his side.

“One, I don’t think that was his middle name, and two, jumpy much?” She lofted the bourbon. “You need this more than I thought.”

He glanced at his omnitool, then back at her, holstering his gun. “I almost shot you.”

“You expecting someone else?”

His expression smoothed and he set the datapad side, dropping into a suave smile. “If I was, you’ve already made me forget. What are you doing here? Here to put me in my place for the little miscommunication about my role in the Initiative?”

She waved the bourbon temptingly. “I have some business in the area, but I can find another smuggler to entertain myself with if now’s a bad time. You look busy. And tense.”

“You wouldn’t dare. Besides, I’m pretty sure Kadara is low on smugglers, as our business with Zia and the smugglers union left a power vacuum that I’m busting my ass filling.” His smile erred on the tired side, but was otherwise disarming. “I have an early job tomorrow running some cargo, but I’m wide open until then. Come in. Are you going to yell at me first, or are we going to get straight to the angry sex?”

“What, no view of the recently detoxed Kadara sunset while we sip priceless bourbon from the bottle?”

“How priceless are we talking?” Sauntering up, he took the bottle for inspection.

“Contraband from a crewmate. I’ll have to do some solid groveling to make up for the theft. So, I guess it’s price lays in whatever my sincerest apologies are worth.”

He looked up from the bottle, eyes sultry. “Kadara’s sunset isn’t for another three hours. We might have to entertain ourselves in the meantime.”

They drifted closer to each other. Violet let him get his hands around her waist, lips almost to hers when she said, “Perfect. You can start by telling me about the ship you stole that got you court martialed and dishonorably discharged from the Alliance.”

He groaned, head tipping back. “Where did you hear that? Those records stayed behind in the Milky Way.”

“Dad might have gossiped to Avery after he hired you.”

“Does it matter?”

“Probably not, but the devil’s in the details, and I do love details.”

She grabbed used glasses off of one of the tables, dumping melted ice into a third and eyeing them for cleanliness, shrugging and figuring they were good enough. Meanwhile, Reyes dropped back on
his sofa to consider the seriousness of her request while she poured them drinks. Or maybe he just spaced out. She couldn’t tell for certain. She gave them both two fingers of bourbon and joined him on the sofa, draped over his shoulder so she could provide extra incentive for answering her questions by nibbling on his ear, settling one of the glasses in his hand.

“So. Shuttle theft?” she prompted.

He tossed the drink back. “Simple. I felt spending the next twenty years in prison was a better option than spending my last twenty minutes flying myself and fifty other assholes to our imminent deaths. We weren’t surviving that drop.”

“But you didn’t end up in prison.”

“Barely. I made a lot of friends getting good people in and out of those places alive. I don’t know for certain, but I’m sure somebody pulled strings for me. They couldn’t save my career, but they kept me out of a cell.” He reached for the bottle and splashed more into his glass. “Your dad found me six months later wallowing in a bar. He needed a pilot, and my job prospects were...limited.”

“So off to Andromeda you went, and here we are.”

They clinked glasses and drank them. Reyes refilled both.

“Okay, so now that you know sordid history, I want some answers of my own. Why do you hate your father?”

Violet laughed caustically and sipped her bourbon with a renewed note of desperation. “Oh, so we’re trading personal details, is that it? We’re going to need a stiffer drink than this, if that’s the case.”

“I thought we were friends,” he pouted.

Groaning, she knocked back the drink and held out her glass for a refill. “I hate to disappoint, but it’s not exactly front page news. It wasn’t any specific event. It was just this combination of absent parent and helicopter parent. Either he was gone on N7 business—which was great, because it meant freedom—or he was micromanaging every facet of my life. He wanted Avery and I to be soldiers, not children, and my mother enabled it. I don’t think he ever wanted kids, but he’d give my mother anything, all the stars in the sky if she asked. I think he genuinely loved her, and I think he tolerated us because she loved us.”

Another drink. Another refill.

“We weren’t allowed to pursue our own interests if they weren’t signed off by him. He spied on us, had his eyes on everything we did in our personal lives, made sure we were following the protocol. No privacy. Ever. Not following protocol ended in punishment. If our grades dropped, we’d have the doors taken off our rooms. If we interacted with someone he didn’t approve of, we’d have to attend weekend boot camps, that sort of thing. Then we showed signs of biotic abilities and things went nuts. Our futures were decided for us. We were either the top of our class, or we were failures. And we were so dependent on him, so utterly incapable of functioning on our own because we were never taught how. I would have left, but I never had the guts.”

Violet finally shut up, recognizing the snowball of the rant. She needed another refill, which Reyes obliged. He gave her a double, also refilling his own glass. They sat together for a long moment while she ruminated over the grievances she’d stacked against her father over the years.

“You know,” she said at last, “Avery and I were always partners in crime against him. We had
complicated codes worked out so we could discuss things privately. Or we would help each other circumvent him. Get each other to social events or out of punishment duties. When we were older, we rebelled harder. For a class project, I once made a forty-five minute, multimedia presentation on why my mother should divorce my father. She was displeased. He was livid. I had made some really good points and I think they both knew it. Finally graduating the biotics program and leaving to work was the best thing to ever happen to me. It was his path for me, but at least it earned me freedom. I loved working security for those digs, without him breathing down my neck. Then, of course, he got himself and the rest of us shitlisted with his SAM research. God, I was mad.”

“Why did you agree to join him in Andromeda?”

She shrugged, scowling at nothing in particular. “I don’t know. Because he had this way of getting me to do what he wanted, and after twenty years, I still hadn’t figured out how to avoid it. Even from beyond the fucking grave, he’s still controlling me. Still aiming my life where he wanted it to go.” She thrust her glass in the air. “To you, Alec, you rotten bastard.”

Reyes joined her in the toast and tossed an arm around her, pulling her in to press his lips against her hair. “Fuck him.”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

He snorted. “Not my type, anyway.”

“Well, in any case, that is why I hate my father.”

She had begun to feel the effects of the bourbon, each motion seeming exaggerated, her thoughts shallow and fuzzy, and Reyes especially warm and comfortable. The objections she had against her father were an old wound, easily scabbed over these days since. Despite his continued meddling in her life from the afterlife, he was, in fact, dead. Eventually, she would pull out of his grasp. Until then, she was avoiding his memory triggers and making a name for herself no longer attached to his. To her relief, people generally stopped comparing her to her father. Alec was a memory. A “what if” scenario. Violet was there, and she was succeeding. That was all that mattered to people in need of actual substance.

“So, do I get to ask another personal question now?” she mused, hoping to get the heat off of her.

“You already asked one.”

“Yeah, but I have more things to ask.”

“Why rob me of my mystery?”

She sniggered, reaching out for the bourbon to make sure his glass was full. “Come on. What were you saying about us being friends?”

“Fine. What do you want to know?”

Her grin turned catlike. “Veronica,” she said, breaking up each syllable to let it glide off her tongue. His groan lengthened.

“Come on. You have the woman’s name stamped across your back. How could I not be curious? I didn’t see any other names of your girlfriends or boyfriends. She must have been special.” She’d spotted the tattoo, hidden just behind the ball of his shoulder amidst other seemingly innocent imagery within his tattoos. Before, it seemed like bad form to bring it up, but she was drunk enough
to cross a few lines tonight.

Reyes scowled at her. “She wasn’t a girlfriend.”

Violet tensed. “Wife?”

“No!” he cried, face pulled with disgust. “She raised me, Vi, Jesus.”

Now, she crooned. “Aww, you have your mom’s name tattooed on you?”

“I got it before I left for Andromeda. So I wouldn’t forget. Now it’s my turn to ask…”

“No, no, no!” she cried, shushing him. “I gave you the details of my childhood. Dish, Vidal. So you’re a mama’s boy? Tell me about her. What was she like?” She shook his arm, making herself a general nuisance until he gave in.

He scowled, tipping his drink back and finishing it and pouring himself another double, shaking his head a little. “It’s a longer story than you realize. You need a little history to understand. I didn’t meet Veronica until I was eight when my dad started dating her. My biological mother was in-and-out of my life until I was four or so when I think she finally went to prison or OD’d or something. Dad was never really clear. My dad was a mean bastard. Veronica had just gotten out of an abusive marriage, so of course, she fell in with the first asshole who would take her. We lived with her for a year before my dad disappeared, dumping me with her.”

“We’re going to need a second bottle,” Violet grumbled, topping off his glass.

He chuckled. “My story gets better. Veronica didn’t have to take me in. I was a shitty little kid, out of control. She had two kids younger than me I always picked on and got into fights with. If I was her, I’d have called CPS and dumped my ass into foster care. Believe it or not, I was not always this charming.” He smiled, shaking his head, slightly. “She took me in, she clothed me, she fed me, and she loved me. She stopped dating, got sober, and got her life back on track, dragging me along for the ride--willing or not. She had an alcohol problem, so she dealt with that first. We stayed with her mom while she did a stint in rehab. Then, she educated herself. Went to night school. Got disciplined. Got serious. Gave the rest of us structure so we could succeed. And that’s what I needed. Structure. Rules. Follow through. She taught me a few things during those years, but mostly work ethic and respect. By the time I was twelve or thirteen, I was doing well in school, home life was good, and for the most part I got along with her kids. It wasn’t perfect. I wasn’t perfect. Had a nose for trouble, you know. Maybe a little too much trouble.”

She giggled. “You don’t say.”

“Yeah. Anyway. Fourteen was kind of rough. Entered my shitty teenage years. Tried to do my best to make them extra hard on everyone. I swear, Veronica was either going to kill me or cart me off to military school. Then, everything changed. My dad came rolling back in right around my fifteenth birthday. Acted like he didn’t miss six years of my life. Demanded I live with him again. Of course I refused, so he got the courts involved. Veronica was never my legal guardian. She had no parental rights.”

“You didn’t have to go with him, did you?” she growled, clutching his arm a little too tightly.

Again, Reyes grinned. “She fought it. Hired a lawyer. It was an uphill battle, for sure. She had no legal claim to me. But my dad was enough of a shithole human that we got our case heard. Proved that my school performance and behavior had improved drastically after she started caring for me. A year and a half later, she’s awarded full custody. She and I sort of became friends after that. Like, not
just parent and kid. We were a team. A real family. We’d fought for it together. Kind of put everything into perspective for me.”

“You have any pictures of her?”

He nodded, opening his omnitool and flicking through to a buried folder where Violet glimpsed a piece of his life she never expected to see start to flash by. Smiling faces, life events, vacations. She didn’t get a good look, but she swore she saw images of him in uniform, posed in front of shuttles. She saw him smiling strangers in different scenarios, snapshots of a life well lived. Then, wedding photos.

“What’s that?” she asked, forcing him to pause.

“Oh, that was her wedding about six years ago--I mean, six years pre-Andromeda. Great guy. She finally figured out how to date non-assholes.” He pulled up an image of himself in a suit next to a dark haired woman in a blue and white wedding dress. She carried a few extra lines and a few extra pounds, but she looked radiant nevertheless. Full of life. Happy.

She jabbed a finger at another picture. “You walked her down the aisle?”

“I did.”

“Vidal. Is that her last name?”

“I took it when she was granted custody of me. I had no interest in being affiliated with my father.”

Violet took his hand, lacing their fingers together and leaning her cheek against his shoulder. “She the one to teach you how to dance?”

He laughed and closed his omnitool. “Yes, as a matter of fact. She was very good. Better than me.”

“What did she think of you coming out to Andromeda?”

“She encouraged me to go. Knew it was my best option at the time. You should have seen the sending off party she threw for me. I woke up from stasis still hungover.” Plucking her empty glass from her hand, he set it aside, along with his and the bottle. “Any more, and you won’t be able to stand. We better cut you off.”

“I can think of things to do horizontally.”

Unfortunately, she ruined the moment when she burst out giggling. It occurred to her that she might have overdone it on Liam’s bourbon. Reyes extracted himself from the couch and lent a hand down to her to get her to her feet. Still giggly, she allowed him to pull her to her feet where he began towing her across the room toward the exit.

“Where are we going?”

“To put food in us. Maybe a bed under us. Maybe you between me and the bed.”

“I can think of worse positions to be in.”

“Would you stay with me tonight?” he asked hesitantly. “I’m not in the mood to sleep alone.”

She normally had rules against sleepovers with booty calls, but she was feeling drunkenly sentimental after their childhood confessions over bourbon. Maybe it would be nice to have someone to cuddle up with until morning. Not just someone. Reyes. They were hedging toward proper dating
categories, but it didn’t scare her as much as she thought it should.

“Like a real slumber party?” she teased.

“Would that be so bad?”

“Not at all.”

They emerged into the crowded club to teeter their way to the exit. Each footfall felt clumsy, like it dropped a thousand meters before landing heavily on the metal walkway. She leaned against her smuggler. She had other questions for him, but until they escaped Tartarus, the bass would swallow her words.

Outside felt about as uncomfortable and muggy as the club, but at least the music didn’t beat in her skull, fading to a dull racket as they put distance from it. Reyes swayed as he guided her, clearly just as sloshed as she was.

“You know, I meant not to get drunk tonight,” he complained as they reached the rickety metal stairs outside his apartment. “I thought I might get through tomorrow without a hangover.”

“Hauling something special?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

They climbed one at a time up the narrow steps, even drunk, unwilling to tempt fate with their combined weight on the structure.

“Would you ever go back to just being a pilot if you had the opportunity? Give up the smuggling just to fly again?” she mused.

“I fly plenty.” He reached his landing and propped a shoulder next to the door while he fumbled with the lock code. “Why, are you offering me a job? Now that you know I come so highly recommended.”

She sniggered. “I don’t have that much weight to throw around the Initiative.”

“Just as well.” The door whisked open, delivering them into his cramped apartment. “The money in smuggling is good and the perks…” He planted a hand on her ass. “...are unparalleled.”

Violet made it to the couch where she dropped like a sack of rocks onto one end, her head taking a few extra seconds to catch up. He staggered to the kitchen where he dutifully procured both water and snacks before joining her. She kissed his cheek and tore into a package of contraband cookies that could probably be traded for organs on the black market.

“So why are you nervous about your job tomorrow?” she asked as she chewed.

He tensed slightly, but played it off lifting his water to his lips. “What makes you think I am?”

“Because you’re a terrible liar? I mean, I could probably have SAM run a biometric scan and confirm it, but what’s the point? You’re twitchy, you didn’t want to be hungover tomorrow, and you don’t want to be alone tonight. How much of an idiot do you think I am?” She shoved another cookie in her mouth.

“It’s nothing. I’ve just been under a lot of pressure lately.” He scraped a hand down his face, flicking her one of his oozing, charming smiles. “But if you wanted to help me blow off some steam, I could
hardly object.”

She set a not-so-innocent hand on his thigh. “Wait for the world to stop spinning so I don’t accidentally throw up on you, then I’m good to go.”

“Sexy, as always, amor.” He fiddled with his omnitool. “Vids it is, then.”

“Aren’t we domestic, eating in and watching vids.” She kicked her feet up on the couch and nestled against his side. “Next thing, we’ll be going to bed by 2100 and catching early-bird specials and drinking old fashions.”

“What’s wrong with old fashions?”

“My father drank them. I associate them only with crotchety old farts. And they taste like ass.”

Draping his arm around her, he said, “I’m not so worried about you. You lead a highly exciting life to ever be that old. Not to mention, you haven’t even hit your mid-twenties. You can probably still even bounce back from a night of heavy drinking with minimal suffering. Oh, to be young again,” he sighed.

“You’re hardly the spokesperson for age.”

“You were still in primary school while I was enlisting for the Alliance.”

She made a noise in her throat. “What can I say? Older men were on a very long list of things forbidden to me by my father, and I’m nothing if not predictable with my issues.”

“At least you’re self-aware.”

“Not that it seems to help. Point in case.” She gestured around.

“You think I’m bad for you?”

“You are a cheap, lowlife smuggler.”

“But a handsome one.”

She reached up and patted his cheek affectionately. “Don’t ever let anyone tell you differently, babe.”

They settled in to watch the vid he picked out for them while they sobered up, an obscure action flick with surprising cleverness. Violet made it about halfway through the movie before her eyelids put up a strong argument for a proper nap. From the deepening snores she could feel leaned against Reyes’s chest, he’d already lost his battle. It might be the middle of her work day, but slept very little on a good night, and things had been touchier since the grenade incident. SAM kept threatening to forward her sleep patterns onto Lexi if she didn’t start getting more than two or three hours at a time.

Apparently, from one thought to the next, she must have also dropped off. She awoke slightly when Reyes shifted a couple hours later, turning off the vid and stretching out under her and moving her into a more comfortable spot. She pretended not to come alert, hoping she wouldn’t have to move all the way to the bed if he thought she was asleep. He settled, one hand slipping under her shirt to settle against the skin of her back, thumb stroking along her spine.

It was the first time since they began sleeping together that didn’t hang out and end up unclothed. It was actually kind of nice, relaxed even. They could pick things up in the morning.
Chapter End Notes

A gold star to anyone who can guess what Reyes's "big job" is in the morning! :D
Coup d'etat

Chapter Summary

The Charlatan finally strikes directly at Sloane, who invites someone unexpected to the showdown. (Don't give me that look, you all know who's going to show up.)

Chapter Notes

You all were so good and patient while I wasn't writing, so here's a chapter early.
*blows kiss*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reyes slept on and off, but probably better than he would have if Violet hadn’t shown up to crash with him. The couch wasn’t the most comfortable spot in his apartment, but she was already suspicious enough of his nerves, and if she expected any kind of intimacy, he sincerely doubted his ability to perform. He kept seeing Sloane forcefully disemboweling him with her boot knife in his mind’s eye, which was a real mood killer. Letting her sleep seemed like the safer option.

He didn’t honestly think he was going to die that day. He’d done everything he could to wage a successful psychological campaign against Sloane to put her at her worst, and he intended to have plenty of precautions in place to keep her from savaging the entire Collective. He wouldn’t actually have to fight her—just lure her in and keep her eyes on him.

He used to pride himself on keeping cool under pressure. It made him a good pilot. Got people through hairy situations alive. He never lost his shit when it counted. Why, then, did he feel like he was potentially walking to his death?

Perhaps because Sloane was scrappy and a survivor. If she was easy to kill, somebody would have done it already. He’d at least robbed her of all of her backup, but she remained to be a force to be reckoned with. The odds, he felt, were only slightly in his favor.

Beside him, Violet had jammed herself between his side and the back of the couch, her cheek pressed against his chest, a bit of drool dampening his shirt. He smiled, fingers absently teasing the ends of her dark hair. If she wasn’t gone when it was time to take Kadara Port in earnest, he would have to tell her so she didn’t accidentally interfere, thinking she was doing something good. However, if she left, he could put it off. Get business settled, invite her back, and finally tell her the truth and offer her an alliance. Hopefully he could mitigate some of her anger over the lie with the promise of an outpost.

Everything was going to be fine.

No more heads on spikes. No more protection fees. Free trade with the Initiative. Independence. Everything he worked for since striking out on his own.

At a little after 0400, he eased his dead arm out from under her, flexing his hand to return some of the
blood flow, and pressed an impulsive kiss against the beauty mark high on her cheek. The corners of her mouth flicked upward, but she showed no other signs of waking. He thought the dark circles under her eyes had seemed especially deep when she showed up. A solid chunk of sleep would probably do her a world of good.

Slithering out the rest of the way, he stretched his crimped muscles, creating a symphony of pops and creaks resulting from the awkward sleeping position. Grimacing, he navigated his apartment in the full dark, first putting coffee on to percolate, then retreating to the back bedroom to don his armored flight suit and sidearm.

Violet hadn’t stirred by the time he made his way to the bathroom to scuff his fingers through his hair to tidy it and drain the rest of the bourbon from his body. He couldn’t tell if his cramping stomach was the result of a hangover or the thought that Sloane Kelly might be pointing a gun at him later in the day.

He poured coffee into a thermos to go.

“You make two cups?” a voice groaned from the couch.

“What kind of ignorant host do you take me for?” He poured her a cup and brought it to her, perched on the edge of the couch while she rubbed the sleep from her eyes and dragged herself into an unwilling sitting position, her hair sticking out in marvelous disarray.

“You’re dressed already,” she complained, taking the mug and tucking it greedily against her chest, like he might try to snatch it back.

“I told you, I have an early day.”

“There were things I planned on doing with you this morning.” She almost got her eyes more than halfway opened.

“I will be gone all day, I’m afraid. Any chance you’ll be here when I get back?”

She finally brought the coffee to her lips for a grateful sip. “I don’t know how long my job’ll take me today, but we need to head out once it wraps. I have a bone to pick with some scavs on Elaaden that needed to get done already, but got postponed when I blew up.”

He hooked a finger in her shirt and pulled it out far enough to peek down. “Speaking of, how are those bruises?”

“You sure you can’t stay?” she cooed, suddenly all spice and seduction.

Fuck, but that woman could end him if she wanted to.

He reluctantly pulled away. If he didn’t leave now, he wouldn’t get to the meeting point in time to set up his sniper, then he would really be screwed. “I have to get going, amor.”

“What time is it?” she asked around a wide yawn and another sip of coffee.

“0430.”

She blinked, suddenly alert. “Oh, shit. My meeting starts in half an hour. I have to get going. What’s my hair doing?”

Laughing, he stole a quick kiss. “Use my shower if you need it. No water ration anymore. Just lock
up when you go.”

“That bad?” She patted her hair in distress. “Oh, and good luck on your thing today. Let me know when you survive it.”

“Oh, I will definitely survive it.” He wished he felt as cocky as he sounded. “Have a good day, Vi. Let me know if you plan on sticking around Kadara.”

Leaving her, Reyes escaped the apartment before they wound up in bed and in trouble, late for both of their meetings. The party in Tartarus had ebbed, but continued to burn on. Kian had been tasked specifically with getting as much of Kadara as hungover as possible. Outcasts drank free. Other Collective agents had taken up space in bars all over Port, buying drinks and keeping the city sauced. Who said takeovers had to be steeped in blood, when they could instead be steeped in alcohol until it was over?

A land vehicle waited for him just outside the gates. The badlands had taken on an almost charming quality. The lakes would probably take years to clear fully, but the hills remained to be splashed with color from rich mineral deposits, and without the haze, sunrise would illuminate a truly spectacular landscape in about an hour.

Tabitha Holloway gave him a grouchy side-eye as he slid into the passenger seat. “You’re late.”

“Barely.”

“Cold feet?”

“More like, warm bed.”

“Getting your last kicks in before Sloane guts you?”

“Tab, I have complete and utter faith in your ability to keep me alive. I’ve seen you use that sniper rifle, remember?” he protested, bringing his thermos to his lips for a long pull. “The Pathfinder decided to drop in for a spontaneous visit.”

Her grip on the wheel tightened as they bounced over ruts in the ill-maintained road. Kadara Port could use some civilization—including proper infrastructure. “Is she going to be a problem?”

“I hope not. If she hasn’t cleared out by the time Sloane’s out of the way and we’re ready to take Port, I’ll tell her everything. She’ll default to the Outcast’s team otherwise and then we’ll really have a shitshow on our hands.”

“You could have told her before.”

He fixed his gaze out the side window. “I couldn’t be sure she’d take my side.”

And honestly, he couldn’t find out what it would feel like if she didn’t. The very thought of her throwing in with the Outcasts—no matter how justified her reasons—made him sick to his stomach. Now, he never would have to find out. By the time he was ready to come clean, there would be no sides left to take.

Tabitha switched gears with a little more force than strictly necessary. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“You’ve trusted me this far.”
“I’ve got your six. Always,” she promised.

It was an hour drive out to the meeting spot, so they arrived a full hour ahead of the meeting time to set up. The cave complex used to be a stash house of the Collective’s. Familiar territory. A few of his trusted lieutenants were already there with their orders. One would be on standby with the shuttle, two others with Reyes to back him up, and Tabitha on sniper duty. They cut out and discredited any backup Sloane might have thought about bringing, leaving her with scraps to pick from.

Cameras offered a live feed of the surrounding area for when she finally showed up. Tabitha, obscured under a camouflage structure, could only be seen by the vague lump she made on top of the bolder she perched. His people were set, the plan in motion, and all they had to do was wait.

His breath caught nervously as a land vehicle skidded to a stop outside the cave entrance, delivering Sloane to his doorstep. She came alone.

“Ballsy,” Avira, the asari to his left, breathed, transfixed as he was on the screen.

Tabitha made a noise of contempt. “As per fucking usual. Let’s not be overly impressed.”

“It’s almost time. Why is she loitering?” he growled, checking the clock readout on his wrist. “She can’t be trying to be punctual, can she?”

“No way she has an ace up her sleeve, is there?”

He drummed his fingers on his thigh, waiting to see what her next move would be with bated breath. He’d doubled-checked to make sure she didn’t have access to suborbital missiles or some shit. He didn’t put it past her to just blow up the meeting point and wipe her hands of the business before he got his fair chance at her.

“Another car, inbound.”

True enough, another vehicle entered the screen at the corner. At first, his stomach sank, disappointed that she brought backup, but then he recognized the car. From the sharp intake of breaths around him, so did the others.

“Fuck. We need to abort,” Avira shrilled.

“That’s the Pathfinder’s car. We can’t face the Pathfinder. She’ll chew us up like a meat grinder!”

“We have time for an evac. We take the hit. It’s not worth losing our lives over.”

“I can’t even believe it! I thought she hated the Pathfinder!”

He cut them all off sharply. “Enough! The plan doesn’t change.”

“Reyes…” Tabitha began.

“No! We’ve worked too long and too hard for this. Violet is here for backup, but she won’t open fire on me when she sees who I am. We might even flip her to our cause.”

“Do you honestly think…?” one of the other squeaked.

“I do.” He flashed a hard look around. “The plan doesn’t change.”

His heart made a wild attempt to escape his chest as she unloaded from the Nomad with Drack and Vetra in tow. Now he knew. He knew the lengths to which Sloane was willing to go to ensure her
own survival. He hated to imagine the look in Violet’s eyes when he walked out, but, if he was reading the signs correctly, they were more than just “friends with benefits.” Things were changing between them. It would have to be enough.

But if she chose Sloane…

The group entered the cave. It was a small walk to his position, giving him just enough time to curse himself for not inquiring exactly why Violet had come to Kadara this time. He should have known the timing was too much of a coincidence, but he never thought Sloane Kelly would ever reach out to anyone from the Initiative, especially the Pathfinder, for help.

She’d promised her the outpost. It was the only way Violet would have agreed.

By then, he heard their voices. Sloane, impatient and hostile. Violet, bored and sarcastic. The other two made small points of commentary to fill the silence of the cave.

Reyes squared himself up. The Charlatan had always been a mask, so now he wore it to hide his apprehensions. He wore it to get through the next few minutes intact. Sloane was his priority. He would deal with the fallout from Violet later.

Stepping forward to the ledge overlooking the cavern, Reyes showed his face into the light. “You look like you’re waiting for someone.”

The same thing he’d said to Violet when they first met. He prayed she liked him more than she wanted that Outpost. He should have struck a deal with her earlier, before Sloane could. That, in the end, was his mistake.

“Reyes,” she uttered.

He saw it land in her expression, the comprehension. Sloane wasn’t quite so quick on the draw.

“You? I’m here for the Charlatan, not some third-rate smuggler.”

He didn’t take his eyes off Sloane, afraid that if he looked at Violet, his nerve would shatter and begging her to understand would take priority over killing the queen of Kadara. He had priorities. His personal life would wait. People’s lives were at stake, people he swore to protect. No more heads on pikes. No more protection fees. No more isolationism. That was his promise.

“He is the Charlatan.” He didn’t look directly, but he heard the hardening in her voice, the ill-concealed fury.

“Surprise,” he offered. He could act like an asshole now and beg for forgiveness later. He had to seem in control, like this was part of the plan all along.

He braced himself for Violet’s wrath, but it never came. When he chanced a look at her, she had gone deadly quiet, dark eyes turned steely. “Pissed” didn’t even begin to cover her expression. For the first time, he believed she might actually help Sloane kill him.

“Oh, she’s mad,” one of the others in the back whispered into their mic.

Thankfully, ignorant of the drama unfolding in front of her, Sloane pressed on with all of the subtlety of a drunk krogan. “Fine. I’m here. You want to settle things? Let’s settle them. I have better things I could be doing with my morning.”

He’d wanted to be suave, charming. He had to keep Sloane from eyeing the cave out of boredom
and spotting his sniper. He hopped down from the ledge, landing on the same level as the rest of them. “I thought we could work out our differences the practical way—with a duel. Winner takes Kadara Port.”

“Practical. Right. Let’s avoid war by cutting straight to the point and shooting each other,” Violet growled.

“Two people shooting each other is better than a lot of people shooting each other. Who wins if we go to war? This way, we minimize casualties. It’s nothing if not efficient.”

He’d backed Sloane into a corner. Her closest allies were scattered, she didn’t trust her forces, and her hold on Kadara had already weakened considerably. She couldn’t win an all out war. She could, however, win a duel. It appealed to her ego, exactly the way it had always meant to.

“I’ll take those terms,” she finally agreed, a note of cockiness flirting with her voice.

“Let’s begin then. I have plans for later. Pathfinder, if you would give the word?”

Violet looked less than thrilled at her role. “This is fucking ridiculous.”

“Do it,” Sloane ordered.

Her nose crinkled up slightly, but she stepped back. “Fine. On my word, shoot each other to your heart’s content.”

Reyes and Sloane began circling. Slow. Predatory. He didn’t look at the mark on the floor he was supposed to get her to stand over for Tabitha’s best shot. If anything happened here, if anything went wrong, an entire year of planning would be for nothing. Every fight, every lie, every inch of progress, all negated in a single moment.

Violet’s head snapped right, gaze locking on Tabitha’s position.

Shoot, he thought frantically. Shoot, shoot, shoot!

He no longer looked at Sloane, but at the Pathfinder, as her eyes hardened a trifle further and he saw the decision come down upon her. He’d seen her walk into the path of bullets before. He knew she had no qualms disrupting gunfire with her own body, if need be. Would she do it for Sloane? Would she condemn all of his plans for a single, wretched life?

The shot tore through the cavern, echoing off the walls. Blood and brain misted out the back of Sloane’s head as she dropped into a graceless heap.

Part of him couldn’t believe it. He continued staring at Violet, who stood eerily still, her fists clenched at her sides, expression stormier than he had ever seen it.

His people emerged from the back cavern and Tabitha slid from her sniper’s position, jolting him back to reality. He had a job to finish.

“Get the body out of here. Prepare the crew. Kadara Port is ours tonight!” he barked, already in motion to scavenge Sloane’s omnitool from her corpse. It had access codes on it that would make the takeover easier.

Not far away, Violet turned sharply on her heel and, without a word, began marching out.

He abandoned the body without a second thought. “Vi. Wait. Please.”
It took almost a sprint to catch up. Her long legs carried her halfway to the exit in a couple of devoted strides. The second his fingers brushed her arm to catch her and stop her, she turned and hit him. Not a small, warning whack, but a full-swing, out-of-the-park-homerun, closed fist punch that would see half his face swollen shut in about twenty minutes. He caught himself on the rough stone wall while stars danced around his blackening vision and pain knocked between the back of his skull and his eyeballs.

“Friends?” she bellowed as her two companions smothered laughs behind her back. “Your word, not mine. Friends. That is what you asked for, and I fucking believed you.”

“You weren’t supposed to be here.”

“Obviously not!”

“Just listen--”

“When were you going to tell me? Were you ever going to bother? Fucksakes, Reyes, I asked you! I asked you if you were keeping anything else from me. I can’t believe I trusted you.”

“I-”

“I know better!” she cut him off furiously. “It always ends this way. I am willing to eat whatever shit men feed me. And somehow I’m surprised every single time. Avery was right. My crew was right. I’m such an idiot.”

“I was going to tell you,” he squeezed in when she paused to take a breath. Her eyes contained nothing but the sting of betrayal. “I’m done listening to your bullshit. I’m out. Enjoy your city.”

Reyes couldn’t lose her. Not like this. Cupping his rapidly swelling eye, he charged after her as she turned to go again. “Come on, Violet, you know this is what’s best for Kadara! Sloane would have dragged everyone into a war, and we don’t have the population to survive it. You would have never let me kill her if you didn’t agree this is best. I know you saw my sniper. I know you had time to make that decision.” Probing the edge of his eye made him see spots, so he settled for placing gentle pressure against the throb.

Again, she whirled on him. “And you think that makes me feel good about myself? To stand by while you murder someone in cold blood? That is blood on my hands now! Blood that you put there.” She jabbed her index finger at him. “Just because you’re the better option doesn’t make you a good option.”


She shook her head, lip curled in disgust. “Fuck the outpost.”

“Ryder…” Vetra began, but she cut her off with a sharp swipe of her hand.

“I didn’t ask for a lot, but I did ask for honesty. I expected at least that much from you. You looked me right in the eye and told me there was nothing more I needed to know.”

He ground his molars, at a loss and what to say to make this right. So, he took a stab at honesty, like she wanted. “How was I supposed to know if I could trust you? Everything you do is for the Initiative. If I’d come clean, and you took it to Sloane, you could have gotten what you wanted. A
peace treaty. An outpost. This is bigger than me and I couldn’t risk it.”

She took a step back, almost as if he’d hit her that time. “You honestly think I could have done that to you? That I wouldn’t have taken your side?”

By the tone of her voice, he knew now that it probably would have never crossed her mind. He wasn’t ready to feel like an asshole about it. He’d done what he did for the good of the Collective. He did it for safety and future of hundreds of people relying on him.

“Our relationship is not more important than the work I’m doing here. I. Couldn’t. Risk. It,” he ground out.

“You’ve made that very clear.”

For the last time, she turned to go, and when Reyes tried to follow again, he found his way blocked by a seething Krogan. He backed off, hand once again raising to his aching face, wishing he had the right words to call her back and soothe her anger.

His people hedged forward, having overheard every word. He doubted any of them really knew the nature of his relationship with the Pathfinder before this. He hoped they understood now exactly how much he was willing to sacrifice for the good of the Collective. Pissing off the Pathfinder wasn’t exactly the message he hoped they picked up, but he did pick them over her. He would pick them every time.

“Do you really think she’ll pull her offer of an outpost?” Tabitha uttered.

“One step at a time. We secure Kadara, then we open communications with the Nexus. Keema can work out the details from there.”

She glanced at his face. “We need to get medigel on that. I’ll be surprised if she didn’t fracture your orbital socket.”

His twisting guts hurt worse than the eye, to be honest. He only managed a simple, succinct, “Fuck,” to sum up his feelings. He sat while Tabitha fussed, allowing her to examine and mend him.

“You did the right thing,” she assured him, dabbing medigel against his aching face. “Not that it makes it easy, but if there was any chance she’d take that information to Sloane instead of helping us…” She shook her head. “It sucks, but it’s what you had to do. We’re going to save lives.”

Reyes felt sick. This day should have been his biggest victory since emerging from stasis. It should have been the start a new chapter. Sloane, in her final middle finger to him, ruined everything by bringing Violet.

The excuse sounded weaker every time he repeated it to himself.

She would have taken his side. He couldn’t have known...but maybe he should have.

“We’ve got to go,” he growled, shrugging her off. “We have a job to finish.”

It wasn’t like his problems with Violet were going to resolve any time soon. Or ever. The decisions were made and he would probably be lucky to ever see her again.

Chapter End Notes
Oh, I'm sorry. Did you all think this was supposed to be a happy story?
Avery dumped down in the booth across from Violet, pushing a fresh beer toward her. She knew it wouldn’t take him long to find her. She bet one of her crew alerted him the second they landed. He looked better than when she last saw him. His large frame had filled out so that he no longer looked like a crow-picked skeleton. He was skinny, sure, but not quite gaunt.

“So. How bad did he screw the pooch?”

She grabbed the fresh beer and tipped it to her lips. “They didn’t tell you?”

“I got like six messages the second you docked. Bad breakup. Nobody would give me details. Had something to do with the Outcast/Collective bullshit on Kadara is all I can figure out.”

She snorted. “Yeah. Something like that.” Folding her arms in front of her, she shook her head. “Let’s just put it out there. You were right. Again. I got too close. Turns out he was lying to me the entire time. And yet I was surprised, exactly how I am every fucking time. You called it.”

“Vi…”

“Please gloat. I can’t take the looks of pity. My crew is so goddamn understanding it makes me sick.”

“Tell me the lie.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m a nosy asshole and you didn’t want understanding. So dish the gossip. What was the lie?”

She licked her lips. “I don’t know if I should tell you.”

“Shit, that bad?”

Even after they hightailed it out of Kadara, they kept up with the news coming out of it. The takeover had been brief and largely bloodless. Many Outcasts were banished from the city, some killed, others imprisoned. Then, Keema Dohrgun took power. Another mask of the Charlatan. The people of Kadara seemed to understand this, but nobody minded. They even already received a
transmission from her, inquiring about a settlement.

Finally, she said, “The secret is not a little one.”

“Otherwise, what’s the point in keeping it?”

Leaning close, she beckoned him in, and pitched her voice low. “Mum’s the fucking word. You do not repeat this to anyone. You take it with you to your grave unless I say otherwise.”

“Cross my heart, hope to die.”

“Reyes is the Charlatan.”

Avery leaned back in the booth, leather creaking under him. “No shit. You sure he wasn’t fronting for the real one? Isn’t that kind of their schtick?”

“If he is, I’m punching his other eye. I don’t know, Ave. Does it matter? The lie is there, whether it’s the one I believe or not. And I’m the idiot who thought we had something. And I was wrong, as I am always wrong.”

“Vi…”

“No. No pity. Gloating only,” she snapped.

“Did he really not trust you that much? Why wouldn’t he have told you? You wanted Sloane out of there. If he is really…the guy …” Thankfully he had enough sense not to shout it out in a crowded bar. “…then the smart move would be to make a pact with you, which we all know you would have been amicable to, for obvious reasons. Not telling you makes no sense.”

“Yeah, well, he didn’t trust me. According to him, our relationship was not more important than the Collective’s end goal, and he actually thought I might rat him out to Sloane in exchange for my outpost on Kadara. So there you have it. You told me not to fall. You told me not to fucking fall…” she muttered, taking a long pull from her beer.

“You never listen to me.”

“Well, maybe I should. I’m tired of listening to me. I have shitty ideas.”

“So why are you keeping his secret?”

That was a really good question, and one she hadn’t quite figured out yet. Reyes had not come forward about his position. Keema fronted the Collective. In all honesty, Violet wasn’t positive he was the Charlatan. Would the true Charlatan truly put his life at risk facing Sloane personally? She couldn’t untangle it, and since it was the only version of the truth she had, she let it be the truth.

“Vi?” Avery prompted.

She shrugged. “Because I’m mad at him, but I don’t want him to die, and revealing it could get him killed. He’s a half-decent shot, but not a great one, and he can take a punch, but he’s a little sloppy on the delivery. He’s scrappy, but if I tried hard enough, I could kill him, so I figure others can, too.”

If he was dead, her anger would be for nothing. It would be a shame to let all of the energy she spent obsessing over it so far go to waste.

“So, how pathetic am I?” she asked.
Merciless, as she requested, her twin replied, “About on par as usual.”

She toasted him with her beer. “Sounds right.” Sighing, she added, “There’s more, if I’m being honest. Kadara is unbalanced. They need stability. Much as I hate to admit it, unmasking their Charlatan would kind of be the opposite.”

“Pathfinder,” SAM interrupted.

“Go ahead, SAM.”

“You must be to, as you say, ‘bust ass,’ if you intend to be punctual.”

“Bust ass?” Avery raised his eyebrows.

“We’re working on de-formalizing his speech and swearing.” She pushed the rest of her beer for him. “Thanks for checking on me, but I’ve got a few more days of pure rage to hold me over before I crash. I’ll call you when I’m ready for a proper pity party?”

“I’m here whenever you’re ready.”

She rounded the table to give him a hug, reassured when he felt solid under her arms, so much closer to his old self. Giving the back of his head an affectionate slap, in case he forgot his place entirely, she headed out of the Vortex toward the shuttle.

“Ryder,” SAM began, a note of hesitation in his voice.

She sighed, having put off this conversation long enough. “Go on.”

“Will you confide in the rest of the crew now that you’ve had the chance to speak with your brother?”

She paused, eyebrow perked, wondering where he’d come up with that logic. “You think I didn’t talk with the crew because I wanted to talk with Avery first?”

“Or me.”

“What?”

“The crew, or me.”

“You are crew, SAM. Don’t be a dip.” She threaded her way through the light traffic that occupied hydroponics this time of day. It hadn’t really occurred to her before that SAM might be hurt that she hadn’t discussed her breakup with him. If it could be called a breakup. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to shut you out. Avery just knows my long track record of stupid decisions regarding men. I hate getting judged from other people, but Avery is safe.”

“You thought I would judge you?”

“No...I mean…” She made a frustrated noise as she waited for the next shuttle to arrive. “I’m sorry. I should have talked to you about this.”

“I was waiting until you were ready.”

She grimaced, wishing she knew how to interact with the AI in her head better. Sometimes she forgot to consider that they were intrinsically linked and that he depended on her to provide context
to what he experienced through her. Sometimes she liked to pretend she didn’t have a little voyeur in her head, put there without her consent by her father.

“Okay, so what would you like to know?”

“How long do you plan on ignoring Mr. Vidal’s emails?”

“Forever. That’s why I deleted them.”

“And how long will you ignore his calls?”

“Also forever.”

“What if you have business with the Charlatan, Kadara, or the Collective in the future?”

“I’ll send another pathfinder. I’m no longer the only one in Andromeda.” She stepped onto the shuttle, grateful that all other passengers exited, but none joined her. She didn’t need this conversation snooped on by Nexus grunts. “Look, SAM, I’ll be honest. My pride took a really big hit. I mean, he didn’t just lie to me, he used me. He manipulated me right into the Collective’s hands time and time again and I never saw it. He used me to undercut Sloane and to benefit his organization. I keep going over the favors I did for him, the suggestions he made in passing, the people he introduced me to. And I was busy catching feelings for him, like a fucking idiot. I’m mad at myself, I’m embarrassed, and I can’t decide if I’m more angry at him for lying to me or me for believing him.”

“Will you always be this angry?”

She laughed. “I can hold a grudge, but even I have to burn out sooner or later. Let me be mad for a while. I’ll figure out what comes next when I get there.”

“Noted. You know I am here for whatever emotional support you need during this time.”

“Thanks, SAM.”

The shuttle dumped her in Operations where the buzz of activity swallowed her passage. A few months ago, she couldn’t walk anywhere without being noted and acknowledged, but now, she was another face in the blur. She didn’t pass through entirely unnoticed, however.

“Hey, Ryder!”

She veered toward security where Kandros flagged her down. “Don’t tell me you have another crisis.”

“No, I want to know what the hell happened on Kadara.” His mandibles twitched irritably.

“I’m headed over to debrief now, actually.”

“Sloane?”

She mimed cocking a finger gun at him and pulled the trigger.

“Seriously? You do it?”

“No, but I’ll fill you in on the dirty details after my meeting.”

“Damn. I almost wish I could have been there to watch her go down after everything she put us
Violet’s stomach cramped. In her mind’s eye, she could see the pink spray explode out of the back of Sloane’s head and felt the sinking feeling of responsibility. She didn’t like Sloane, but standing back to watch her be executed left a bitter taste in her mouth she couldn’t spit back out. She hadn’t slept since the cave. She’d handed Reyes Kadara on a silver platter, but she had no guarantee anything would actually be better. He might make for a worse despot than his predecessor. Everything she thought she knew about him had been a lie.

“I’ve got to go, or Tann’s sphincter will pucker so tight it’ll start collapsing matter,” she sighed, making punctuality her excuse to hurry off.

The important figures occupied the meeting. Tann, Addison, as well as the other Pathfinders, Hayjer, Sarissa, and Avitus. She took her place at the table, the last to arrive. Eyes landed on her with varying degrees of curiosity.

“Pathfinder Ryder. Good of you to join us. Now, from the top, what happened on Kadara?” Tann asked, cutting right to the point.

Violet stood, fixed her attention on a neutral point on the wall, and delivered her succinct report, starting with Sloane’s demand to meet and what she learned when she arrived, about how Sloane’s grasp on the Outcasts was crumbling, and how she wanted a neutral party for backup to meet the Charlatan. She described arriving at the cave and escorting Sloane inside, leaving the details sparse.

“The Charlatan appeared from the back if the cave and issued a challenge to Ms Kelly--a duel, the winner takes Kadara.”


She took a breath, eyes locked on the point on the wall. “Ms Kelly accepted the terms and she and the Charlatan faced off. I was asked to call the start of the duel. However, the Charlatan had placed a sniper hidden in the cave and before any shots could be fired, the sniper shot Ms Kelly through the head where she died instantly. I left Kadara shortly after, but I understand that the Collective successfully seized control of Kadara Port and has placed Keema Dohrgun in charge.”

“Is Keema the Charlatan?” Addison asked.

“No, but she is who we will be dealing with. She’s already reached out to me to discuss a partnership with the Nexus, including an outpost on Kadara.”

“Ryder, who is the Charlatan?” Tann asked point blank.

A muscle ticked in her jaw. Finally, she looked over and said, “I think we ought to consider negotiations. Sloane restricted her people to keep them dependent on her. Keema has expressed a desire for open trade and amicable relations. There are deep scars between the Initiative and the exiles. We have a chance to mend some of them.”

“We are not letting them come back! Not after what they did! You weren’t here when it happened--”

If Violet heard that phrase one more time, she was going to chuck someone out an airlock. “You’re right. I wasn’t here. I don't have that chip on my shoulder. I don’t see exiles, I see my people.” She finally allowed herself to tear her gaze away from her point and lash it between them. “We aren't on the brink of starvation anymore. We have our arks. We have viable planets. Give them a chance for reintegration. Keema’s offer is the best chance we will ever have to mend.”
“Can we trust her? Can we trust the Collective? Who is the Charlatan?” Tann demanded.

She set her jaw. “Fuck if I know.”

“You said you saw him...her...them. Whoever.”

“Pathfinder,” Addison beseeched. “I want this settlement as much as you do, but not if it puts my people at risk. We need to know.”

“I order you to tell us!” Tann shrilled, getting that constipated look in his face as he did every time she ignored his commands.

“I’ll vouch,” she said, directing her comment to Addison. “For Keema and Collective leadership. I won’t give you a name or names, but I will vouch for an alliance.”

Tann leaned forward menacingly. “If the Charlatan is someone responsible for the uprising--”

“They aren’t,” she interrupted. “The Charlatan left after the uprising because they thought you were too much of a fuckup to lead. They devoted all of their time and resources building a movement strong enough to overthrow Sloane because she was violent and unstable. This is about doing what's best for people, and they're willing to sacrifice plenty to make that happen.” Her heart twisted painfully. She may hate Reyes for making her one of those sacrifices, and she may hate herself for defending him so vehemently, but she had to do what was right for the people, just as he claimed he did.

Addison leaned back in her chair, expression measured. “I'll begin talks with Keema, see if we can't hammer out an agreement.”

“You can't be serious!” Tann cried.

“I'm going to need you to personally oversee the project as we get a presence there,” the director continued, ignoring the salarian’s outburst. “If we're going to forge a relationship, it needs to come with the condition that our pathfinder is intimate with all of the details.”

She was afraid of that, but she came prepared to weasel out of it. “I think Avitus is better suited. He's former Spectre. Reads people better than I do. Won't get lulled by convenient bullshit. I think he'll do better as liaison between the Collective, the Kadara outpost, and the Nexus than I ever could.”

Down the table, the turian perked in surprise. “Me?”

“Kadara is the type of place that will chew you up and spit you out. I'd like it to chew on someone else for a while, and I'd really like to see it try to see it chew on someone like Avitus without losing teeth.”

Addison nodded again. “Works for me.”

Meanwhile, Tann continued to splutter. “But how can you expect to do any business there without knowing who the Charlatan is? We're putting lives at risk!”

“I agree,” Sarissa put in. “Why are you protecting them, Ryder?”

She found herself grinding her molars. “I'll tell Avitus when he needs to know.”

“That's not an answer.”

“It's a danger. If it gets out, it puts their operation at risk,” she finally ground out.
Tann turned an interesting shade in his effort to keep a lid on his temper. “We won't publically release the name or names.”

“I've plugged enough leaks coming out of this office to know that it's often not enough.”

Addison rose. “I'm done arguing it. Ryder will tell us if it becomes relevant.”

“It's relevant now. It's intel we need.” Tann wasn’t ready to let it go.

“Well, it's not intel I need. Follow me, Avitus. We'll discuss the details in my office.”

The director and turian pathfinder left.

“I can get it from your crew,” Tann threatened.

“Go ahead.” Violet also stood and matched off.

Sticking her neck on the line for Reyes so soon after his betrayal stung more than she thought, but if his name became public, the ramifications could be deadly. The Charlatan was a symbol, one that garnered trust from his followers. If people could put a face to that name, and behaviors to that face, trust could crumble and Kadara could end up in yet another upheaval. Preserving his identity, at least for now, would hopefully give it all a chance to stabilize.

Predictably, Sarissa caught up with her in the corridor, humming with frustration. “If one of my people deliberately kept a detail of that magnitude from a superior, I'd have her jailed.”

“Yeah, because I'd totally never keep a significant detail out of my report to a senior officer when it benefited a good cause,” she drawled, lengthening her stride.

The asari caught her arm, forcing her to pause and turn. “Are you blackmailing me, Ryder?”

Violet paused instead of pulling away from her, gnawing the inside of her cheek. “Huh. I wasn't, but now that you mention it, that's not a half bad idea. Go back there and take my side.”

“That's not going to happen!”

“Really? Because it seems like you owe me a pretty big favor after I covered up the fact that you got your pathfinder killed.”

She withdrew, breath hissing between her teeth. “You know that was the best call. I saved lives.”

“I do know it was the best call. Just like I know this is the best call for now. Go tell Tann you changed your mind before I change mine.”

“It doesn't benefit you to come clean now.”

“I'm feeling petty.”

Sarissa jabbed a finger at her, calling her bluff. “Sometimes, it's easy to remember you're barely more than a teenager and never meant for this job.”

“I'm sorry, but I've made how many worlds viable and started how many colonies? How many have you done?” she shot back. “I made contact and paved the way for alliances with aliens, disrupted hostile plots, freed countless civilians from wrongful imprisonment and torture, hunted down and saved nearly all of the remaining arks, including yours...need I go on?”
“That doesn't mean you get to do what you want, when you want.”

“If it makes you feel better, I'd love to reveal their identity. I'd love to plaster their face and name everywhere. Defending that bitch-ass little coward was not on my to-do list today, but it’s the right call.”

The asari reared back, eyes narrowing suspiciously. “Why defend them?”

“Because they built everything on a fabricated image. The Charlatan is a symbol. It's a pillar of fucking salt and sand, and the second anyone realizes it's just a person--a flawed, tangible, unintimidating person--it all comes down. They're in a serious transition right now. They need stability. Maybe down the line, they'll survive that kind of scandal, but right now they need to get things established.”

Sarissa stepped back, arms folded. “Now why didn’t you just make that argument back at the debrief? Maybe I would have backed you.”

“What, you never thought of the perfect comeback after the argument's already over?”

“You better be right. But you should have suggested me, not Avitus. He's too green.”

Violet took in a steadying breath, cautioning patience in herself. “Not with that stick up your ass, Sarissa.”

“Yeah, fuck you, Ryder.”

They exchanged waves with their middle fingers. Violet avoided a follow-up conversation with Kandros and hurried back to the docking bay to flee to the Tempest. She needed to decompress and sort her feelings, still raw, like an open nerve.

She stole a beer from Gil’s stash and sat on the upper deck of the cargo bay. The engineer wasn't long behind her, dropping down beside her with his own beer and threading his arms around the safety rail in front of them, letting his legs dangle.

“So, how’d it go?”

She shrugged. “You know me. Making friends left and right.”

“I wish I could have seen their faces when you told them Reyes Vidal is the Charlatan.”

She took a long drink. “You should have seen their faces when I refused to tell them, instead.”

“Are you taking a fucking piss?” He stared at her, mouth agape. “Why would you protect that creten?”

“Kadara needs its Charlatan more than I need vindication. I tell the scrubs here, it's only a matter of time before it gets out. A secret is better kept when nobody actually knows.” She scowled down at the lower deck, thinking about what SAM said about confiding in the crew. “So, um, thanks for...giving me space. You and and rest of the crew. I was...embarrassed. I still am.”

He tossed an arm around her, giving her a little squeeze. “If it's any consolation, I have shit taste in men, too. And really, you should thank Liam. He was on Jaal duty and is basically the only reason you didn't get hit in the face with a spontaneous angaran therapy session.”

She almost sprayed beer across the cargo bay, but managed to choke it down, then laugh. “I feel bad
for hijacking his bourbon.”

“You're going to be okay, Ryder. You've recovered from worse injuries than a bruised ego and heart.”

“I took a grenade for that fucker.”

Gil barked a laugh. “Yeah, and he says he couldn't trust you. What a crock.”

“Should have blackened his other eye.”

“Hey, I bet the kids would be up to some sparring if you asked nicely, help you blow off some steam. You can make them all wear little Vidal masks. You got a picture of him?”

She squinted. "I've got a dick pic."

"Even better. You can punch his wiener."

“The plan's got merit. Bonus points for creativity. Help me print out some dick masks?"

He pried the beer out of her hands. “Better switch to coffee so you're functional.”

“Story of my life, darling.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I'm trying to scream through to a finish as fast as I can, so I'm going to post these about as fast as I write them. I have an original project I want to be working on, but I won't leave this without a conclusion first.
Politics and Punches

Chapter Summary

Kadara gets talks of an outpost and redemption for exiles, but somebody hitches a ride over for a different sort of conversation with the Charlatan.

Chapter Notes

Reyes kept busy. He threw himself into work or else he would throw himself into self-reflection, and he was pretty sure that would only lead to a whiskey bottle. He tried to be mature about it, reach out to apologize, but Violet had forcibly ignored all of his attempts. The next step was wallowing, and he wasn't ready to dive into that.

Kadara had plenty to keep him occupied--as a smuggler and as the Charlatan. Keema had taken decisive hold of the city, but she still took her orders from him. Meanwhile, afraid of what change would bring, all manner of seedy types wanted something smuggled out to the badlands or off planet. The desperation to get product moved out of the city even helped him squeeze out a few extra enemies. Some, he marked to be followed and watched, but others he went ahead and had them taken out. Sloane sympathizers would come back and bite him if he let them.

Eventually, though, he felt the burnout. It forced him to finally take an afternoon to himself in his private room in Tartarus. He kicked his feet up for the first time in days, pressing his cold glass of whiskey against his forehead instead of drinking it. Keema had a firm establishment, dissenters had been largely silenced, and new rules established and enforced. Soon, patterns would develop and wrap his people in the comfortable swaddle of routine. He could breathe, knowing they were off to a good start.

His inbox pinged with Keema’s personal chime. He had intended on ignoring everything for an hour or two, but Keema took priority, so he answered with a grimace.

“Yes?”

“Where are you? The Pathfinder is almost here to negotiate an outpost.”

He snapped upright, sloshing his whiskey over his hand. “What?”

“They landed an hour ago.”

“Nobody told me!” He had no idea where his people were who supposedly watched the docks. They alerted him every time Violet landed--or they were supposed to. “I'm on my way.”

Heaving himself out of the couch, he scuffed his fingers through his hair, dragged a hand down his face, and trudged out of his sanctuary. He knew he looked like shit. Violet could gloat over that, even take credit for it. He didn’t care. As long as she talked to him, even just to yell at him. Silence would drive him insane.

The slums had already begun to change. They were emptier, for one. Many had moved back topside. With the Outcasts cleared out, space opened up, and without the threat of protection fees, many
could afford it again. Power struggles had to be settled as property was snatched up and prices hiked, but most of those fluctuations died out as fast as they bloomed. He hoped to eventually give the slums some better infrastructure, improve housing and living conditions for anyone who stayed. Including himself.

The lift up contained more people than ever before, all still talking about the change of power, all struggling to give their opinions over each other. Reyes, invisible, had the privilege to hear them all. Good and bad. Not everybody was happy. Some people lost friends, loved ones, clients, sellers, property. No transition was ever clean. He catalogued their gripes. They would likely never be met or rectified, but there might be opportunities along the way to earn an ally instead of an enemy.

By the time he reached the market, his heart picked up to a gallop and his thoughts turned back to Violet and their last encounter. He choked on the words he said to her, declaring that the Collective was more important than she was. The look on her face when he said it...

He was a fucking idiot.

He passed into the former Outcast headquarters, which Keema had taken over. The guards at the door, his people, let him pass without question. He and Keema spun a fabrication of his role in the Collective, asserting that he was a sleeper agent secretly working in Collective interests the whole time. Most of his organization now understood that he was fairly high up on the food chain, although none were entirely certain how high.

He heard voices by the time he made it to the throne room. He thought about making a sneaky entrance, watching a minute, giving himself time to get his bearings before making a confrontation. In the end, he decided to go for drama, hopefully throw her off her guard so she didn’t try to punch him again when she saw him.

“You can’t ignore me forever, Violet,” he snapped as he strode in.

More people occupied the room than he expected. Three turians, an older human male, Keema, and her inner circle. No Ryder.

He stopped mid-stride, embarrassed.

Keema also flushed blue. “Ah, Reyes. I’m afraid I misled you. I was also under the impression that Pathfinder Ryder would be visiting until they walked in. This is Pathfinder Rix. He will be acting liaison between the Collective and the Nexus while they set up their outpost.”

“Just Avitus is fine,” the turian insisted.

“Where is Violet?”

Stupid question, but it popped out anyway.

Keema, clearly the brains of the operation these days, said to her guests, “I assume you all know who this is?”

Avitus and the others all shook their heads, waiting expectantly for an introduction. He and Keema met eyes.

Had Violet not told them?

“This is Reyes Vidal.”
They looked between each other, clueless.

“Oh, stars spare me,” Keema muttered. “We assumed the gossip would have gotten out. Reyes, until recently, was an agent working in secret for the Charlatan himself. Nobody knew until we struck against Sloane. Pathfinder Ryder was...displeased...when his loyalties were revealed.”

They didn’t appear particularly impressed with this revelation.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, we were sleeping together and she’s pissed I lied,” Reyes sighed, flabbergasted they genuinely had no clue he was the Charlatan, that Violet hadn’t told anyone in the Initiative. “I was hoping she’d show up, and clearly I’ve made even more of an ass of myself.” Again, he scuffed his hands over his hair. “Let’s not dwell on it. So, negotiations?”

“They don’t concern your business,” Keema snipped.

He and the angara had agreed on boundaries to keep anyone from suspecting his involvement, but he decided he wanted to be present after all. He oozed a dashing smile. “Ah, but it could be. I’m sure we could come to some amicable arrangements.”

“You can watch. It’s what you’re best at, anyway.”

“Charming, as always, Keema.”

He poured himself a drink from the sidebar while they got into it. The human turned out to be the intended mayor of the new settlement, a man with the unusual moniker of Christmas Tate. They negotiated the size of the outpost, the location, and then trade agreements, which took the better half of the morning. Reyes ghosted the background, affecting something akin to boredom. Lurking the meeting now at least saved him from scouring the reports later.

Before wrapping up, they hammered out details to allow exiles a probationary period to be possibly reintegrated back into the Initiative. Reyes breathed a small sigh of relief. People could go home, families restored. He knew so many people who craved reconciliation. Not all of the exiles took to their banishment with as much enthusiasm as Sloane and her posse.

“What about you, Mr. Vidal? Interested in reclaiming your citizenship?” Avitus asked.

How loud had his sigh been? “Tann still in charge up there?”

“Yes.”

“Then fuck no. I doubt they’d have me back anyway. I might have...redistributed...some valuable gear before I left.” He actually had already checked into it. Somebody--no mystery as to who--had flagged him with criminal charges, sabotaging any chance he might have had for reintegration. But they didn’t need to know that. He cracked a cocky grin and clapped his hands together. “Not to mention, Ryder might be compelled to rearrange some of my anatomy if she thinks I’m encroaching on her territory. But good work today. If we’re done here, I have a bottle of whiskey waiting for me.”

“Don’t deprive yourself on our accounts,” Keema drawled.

“Avitus, Christmas, it was a pleasure. And if you see Violet…” He sighed. “Ask her to call me.”

“She been avoiding talking to you?”

“So it seems.”
“Then she doesn’t want to talk to you.” Avitus scraped unsympathetic eyes over him. “Nothing I can do to change that.”

Reyes reminded himself that their breakup was fresh and raw and that she couldn’t ignore him forever. Nodding to the them all, tossing a half-mocking bow toward Keema, he let himself out to retreat back to solitude. Maybe take a nap, try to remember what real sleep felt like.

Tartarus didn’t see much business this time of day, most of the dancers off sleeping, the patrons nothing but the local alcoholics attempting to function, the music turned down to a bearable level. He swung by the bar for a fresh bottle of whiskey and meandered back to the private room upstairs. He would go ahead and wallow. Violet was so desperate to avoid him she’d assigned another pathfinder to his planet’s politics.

The lounge already contained an occupant when the doors hissed open for him.

“I’m not taking on any new business now and you’re trespassing. Please, kindly fuck off.” He grabbed a fresh glass from the sidebar and poured himself a drink.

The stranger rose, revealing himself to be a bit of a giant. He towered over Reyes by a full handspan. He had the nondescript dusky skin and dark brown hair that could belong to any blend of heritages, his most prominent feature a large, proud, hawkish nose. He wasn’t unattractive, but Reyes was in no mood to flirt or charm, and the man seemed in a piss-sour mood by the terse downturn of his mouth.

Reyes sighed, gesturing with his glass. “Try again next week, amigo.”

“You Reyes Vidal?”

“Guilty.”

“Huh. I thought you’d be taller.” He took a step toward him.

Reyes recognized the posture before the swing came–muscles tensed, fists clenched. The man’s stance gave away his intention long before he raised his arm. Unfortunately, Reyes forgot to compensate for his long reach. Despite his agile dodge, the first blow clipped the side of his cheek, not hard enough to put a fresh bruise over where Violet’s had begun to fade, but a reminder that a veritable troll was trying to smash him to pieces.

“Seriously? You don’t even want to try to talk this out first?” He scuttled out of reach, using the room to his advantage and putting the table between them. “I’m sure we can come to an arrangement. I can be very persuasive.”

“Nope.” He used his giant’s legs to step over the table to get to him.

“What if I know what I did to piss you off?”

The stranger wore a gun, reassuring Reyes that the fight wouldn’t turn lethal. Whatever his transgression, it wasn’t enough that he wanted to kill him.

However, the guy hit like a freight train. And was a lot faster than Reyes anticipated.

A fist connected with his jaw after an utterly failed dodge hard enough to put stars in his eyes. And piss him off. Recovering from the hit, he made his first effort to fight back. He took a few blows to his side and ribs, but got a few solid hits in for his sacrifice. They ended in a grapple, which wouldn’t end well for Reyes, as the other had the advantage on reach, so he upended both of their balances
and sent them crashing through the coffee table. The poor thing had no chance under their combined weights and shattered apart.

They both rolled off, taking to their feet and charging forward in an effort to knock each other down again. The guy fought with considerable skill, possibly Alliance training, or more, but he seemed to wear out quickly. His hits landed softer. He slowed down, breathing running ragged. Reyes would have had the upper hand if he didn’t also found himself at the end of his rope. Sleep deprived, probably a little dehydrated, stressed. He could only get so far on an adrenaline burn.

“Can I ask?” Reyes panted, doubled over his knees and dribbling blood on the floor after they separated to regroup. “What the fuck?”

“Obligation, I’m afraid.” The giant stood back, prodding his prominent nose back into shape. “Not that I didn’t want to, because I’m tired of fuckers like you using her like she’s fucking disposable, but I said I’d kick your ass if this happened.” He spat. “Asshole.”

His mind wound through possible scenarios. “You always take your word so seriously?”

“Usually.” He glared up at him, blinking blood out of his eyes.

Reyes hobbled back over to the bottle of whiskey at the sidebar, pouring himself a fresh drink, and another one for the giant. The fight seemed to have run its course. “You must be the twin. Avery, right?”

He nodded tersely, turning his nose up at the offered glass.

“I don’t know how much she told you.”

“She told me you neglected to mention you’re the Charlatan. Is there any more I should know?”

“Ah, so, everything then.” He tossed back both glasses one after another and limped over to his couch to sit. “She told you, but not Nexus brass? Fuck, she’s got balls.”

Avery seemed to regret his decision to decline the drink, because he shuffled over and poured himself a couple of fingers of whiskey over ice to sip at, leaving a smear of blood on the glass. They both needed a patch-up with medigel.

“Why didn’t she sell me out?”

The young man half-shrugged. “Something about protecting Kadara while it’s in transition. She seems to think the people will be less than impressed by the Charlatan’s true face and that finding out could bring down any stability. She also thinks nobody at the top of the Initiative can keep a secret.” He sank down on the other end of the couch, pressing the glass to the corner of his eye instead of drinking it. “So for now, your secret is safe.”

Reyes glared into his empty glass, chest squeezing. Her motivation was born from practicality, not sentimentality. No surprise, but disappointing. He did wish he could have heard the conversation where she let Tann and the rest know that she wouldn’t reveal his identity.

“What I can’t figure out,” Avery said, interrupting his train of thought, “is your logic. After everything she did for you, you still didn’t trust her. All I can figure is that you really are a vindictive, manipulative piece of shit.”

He didn’t reply immediately. Sometimes, Reyes couldn’t untangle it himself. Setting his jaw, he leaned back and shook his head. “I did what was right for the Collective.”
“Is that what you tell yourself so you can sleep?”

“Does this look like the face of a man who has slept lately?” he shot back, regretting it immediately. Admitting to weakness wasn’t his usual habit. Hissing out a sigh, he said, “I asked her once, you know? If she would be willing to forge an alliance with the Collective—as a hypothetical, of course. The answer she gave me wasn’t exactly inspiring. She didn’t find the risk worth the reward.”

“So you decided it safer to use her.”

“I was going to tell her! Once I had control of Kadara Port. So she wouldn’t have to pick.” So she wouldn’t pick the Outcasts over him.

“Remember how she threw herself on a grenade for you that one time? Yeah. She would have picked you, you fucking idiot.”

Grimacing, he shook his head. “Too late now.”

Instead of reassuring him about second chances and forgiveness, Avery said, “You’re damn right it is.”

“Why are you here?” Reyes griped. “You’ve gotten your hits in. Fuck off.”

“Do you at least regret it?”

“Shit.” He stood and poured himself another drink. “Yes,” he finally said. “I didn’t mean to hurt her.”

“You just assumed you could lie to her without consequence.” Avery drained the rest of his whiskey. “It’s a classic mistake. All you shitbaskets make it.”

That stung, knowing that Reyes was just the latest in a long line of assholes. “So her taste in men has always been this bad?”

Avery groaned and sucked a piece of ice into his mouth to chew. “You’re not the worst, you know. Hell, you’re not even half bad. At least your lie hid some arguably noble intentions.” He stood up to his impressive height and set his glass aside, swiping blood off his face with a grimace. “She was wrong about one thing. Your punches aren’t sloppy.”

He choked out a laugh. “And I thought you were supposed to be recovering from a coma.”

“It’s a work in progress. I ducked my doctor and hitched a ride with Avitus.” He strode toward the door to leave, but paused to pitch a look over his shoulder. “She ever takes pity on you and talks to you again, you fucking grovel. She deserves better.”

“Agreed,” he found himself saying. “What are you going to tell her?”

“Nothing. She’ll figure it out on her own. She always does.” Avery almost got to the door before he paused again, half-turning. “Did you ever have feelings for her? Was it ever more to you?”

Reyes set his jaw, fixing his gaze anywhere but Violet’s twin.

“Grovel hard,” Avery admonished, and his long legs carried him out.

Sighing, he kicked his feet up on the couch and reclined back, feeling fresh bruises sprout over his body. Pulling up his omnitool, he typed out another message he doubted would ever be read and sent it off anyway.
Okay guys. I'm getting a lot written and I'm closing in on a conclusion. I hope you all understand the magnitude of difficulty I have with finishing anything I start, so the fact that we're this close bodes well. This was all just an experiment to see if I could start, maintain, and finish a long fic, so while I started with good intentions, I wasn't wholly convinced it would work out. Thanks for following along with my little guinea pig project!
If Violet ever had a reason to find Meridian and fix the godforsaken planets of Helius, it was in an attempt to improve Elaaden. Somehow, even with an airtight, environmentally controlled suit, she still ended up basting in her own sweat with sand in every crack and crevice. The planet had improved--marginally--since she corrected the vault, but it had a ways to go before it was anything close to pleasant.

“I swear to god I have a breach somewhere,” she complained, checking her armor for a loose buckle or bullet hole she had yet to notice.

She had Jaal and Peebee with her on the jaunt, both of them about as thrilled as she was to be romping around the dunes. Normally she would drag Drack along, since he was the only one who actively enjoyed the heat, but he was dealing with clan business with Morda while she hunted down missing tech stolen by scavs. They were well overdue for a visit from the Pathfinder.

Both companions watched her squirm unhelpfully, both equally hot and limp. They camped out in the Nomad’s shadow, not that it offered much respite from the unforgiving sun.

“SAM, run analysis of my armor.”

“You have several microtears in the posterior, lateral section of your armor between the joints. There is, in fact, a small amount of sand trapped there.”

“I knew it,” she swore. “Peebee, could you help toss a patch on me to hold me over until we get back?”

The asari slumped toward her. “You are the single hardest person on armor I have ever met. That material is supposed to be indestructible.”

“As long as it breaks, not me.”

Rolling her eyes, she analyzed the area with the breaches and used her omnitool to print out a temporary patch, sealing it into place with a small application of heat--although Violet could have just stood out for five minutes in the Elaaden sun to accomplish the same thing.

“Ryder, I can see a ship incoming. Perhaps it will be our new friends,” Jaal announced hopefully.

“Fingers crossed.”

Jaal raised a hand. “Um…”

“Figure of speech. It's for luck. Can your fingers even cross...?” she wondered.
“Why is crossed fingers for luck?”

“Because humans are weird, which is basically the answer to everything about them,” Peebee replied.

“You know you love us. Humans being weird is what makes us endearing.”

The ship, meanwhile, settled in the valley below them outside a grove of surprisingly resilient trees that that pervasive heat hadn’t successfully killed off. Somebody with a hand for artistry had painted murals all over the ship that appeared to all be depictions of extreme krogan violence.

“SAM, take pictures for Drack. He'd probably enjoy this.”

A krogan, two turians, and a human disembarked to check the cargo drop they were supposed to be picking up. Violet watched through the scope of their sniper rifle.

“Probably a pilot still on board. Peebee?”

“I can ground it. EMP ready.”

“Jaal, you get the turian on the left, I'll take the one on the right. The human next, if we can get her. Leave the krogan for last. We're going to have to get closer to kill her. She'll duck for cover the second bullets start flying.” If she wasn't sure the krogan would just shake off a couple of hits from her sniper rifle, she’d target her first, but in the long run, cutting out her support would give them a chance to corner and eliminate her with the least amount of effort.

“Ready,” Jaal confirmed.

“On my count three, two, one…”

They fired, dropping the turians simultaneously. Violet turned her scope to the human, firing a fraction of a second after Jaal. Both bullets tore through the unfortunate woman. By then, Peebee had launched her EMP and the krogan charged back to the ship and up the loading ramp.

“Beautiful. Let's go bag the krogan. Shotguns.”

They switched weapons and piled into the Nomad. Violet gunned it down the hill, sand flying up behind her wheels, and skidding sideways onto the scene. She dared one of Liam's action vids to show up her moves.

They let the Nomad act as cover upon disembarking, bullets pinging of its doors and roof. Two guns fired off at them, indicating the pilot had abandoned his or her post and joined the fray with the krogan. Two against three didn’t seem like bad odds until you factored in the krogan. Peebee helped even up the score by unleashing Poc.

“Okay, triangulate. Jaal, you go left, I go right, Peebee, keep them from throwing any fancy tech at us. Who knows what else they've stolen along the way.”

She laid down cover fire while Jaal moved, and then they switched so she could squeeze in close, using the crates the scavs were attempting to pick up as cover.

The captain of the ship turned out to be a reedy salarian. Her biotics flared bright blue as she tossed a ball of energy at him, snapping the poor pilot up and tossing him against the nearest bulkhead with enough force to crack bones. Not the cleanest way to shut down an opponent, but it left the krogan as the last one standing.
The upside, they had the obvious advantage. The downside, krogans weren’t keen on surrendering. She, Jaal, and Poc moved in while Peebee watched their backs. Between a few more demonstrations of biotics and the expenditure of ammunition, they managed to wing the krogan enough to draw in for the killshot. She went down with her boots on. Sometimes, Violet respected the hell out of krogans. She much preferred them when they played for her team.

“Okay, Peebee. Let’s see what we can salvage from this thing. Jaal, could you scan the bodies for identification to send back to the Nexus?”

“Pathfinder, would you allow me to run an analysis of the ship?” SAM asked when they broke off to their tasks.

“Go for it.” She opened a scanner for him to do his thing.

“Looks like the cargo bay has some of the crap they nabbed off our friends from New Tuchanka. Not everything. Looks like they’ve sold some of it off, but hey, it’s better than nothing,” Peebee called.

“I’ll have someone from the settlement come pick up the ship and analyze what’s left to get it returned. The ship itself might be a solid acquisition. Looks like it’s in good condition, decent size. Might have Gil come out check out it’s guts, see if it’s worth a damn…”

“This ship is the Gambler,” SAM interrupted.

“The what?”

“The ship the Collective and Mr. Vidal both asked us to look for. This is the ship ‘that fuckhead’ stole when he left the Nexus. Second best only to the Tempest, according to him.”

She took a step back. “Well. Shit.”

Jaal came up behind her, setting a large hand on her shoulder to give it a squeeze. “That is unfortunate timing.”

“So what?” Peebee emerged from the ship’s hold, lip curled. “He’s shit out of luck. If he wanted his ship back badly enough, maybe he shouldn’t have been a complete and utter fuckpuddle.”

Violet’s heart plunged down to her stomach as she recalled their last conversation regarding the Gambler. Head tilted back, she let out a long groan. “I told him I’d call him. I told him I’d give him first dibs if I found it.”

“Fuck that! Fuck that and fuck him!” the asari shrilled.

“SAM, secure a line to Kadara. Run it through my omnitool. Audio only. I’m not interested in seeing his face.”

“Ryder…” Jaal began. When her eyes snapped to him, his expression softened. “We are right here if you need us.”

“Seriously? Seriously, Ryder? Please tell me you’re just calling to gloat.”

She didn’t feel like explaining herself. It took a few minutes for SAM to secure a fast enough line to give her a clear connection. The other two hovered close, eager to eavesdrop. She didn’t discourage it from them. She didn’t trust herself to speak with Reyes alone.
“The call is connecting,” SAM warned.

Somewhere behind her, Peebee scuffed a foot. “Maybe he won’t have the spine to pick up.”

No such luck.

“Violet?”

She couldn’t find her voice at first, buried as it was under a sudden surge of fury.

Reyes waited, but his patience didn’t last. “So? Can we talk?”

“No.” She firmed up her voice.

“Look, I’m--”

“You can shove your apology up your ass. I’m standing in front of the Gambler. I told you I’d call you first, so I’m keeping that promise.”

A pause, then, “Sorry, I’m having a moment of deja vu. You take your promises very seriously, don’t you?”

“You have no idea. Well, I called. Promise fulfilled. Goodbye, Reyes.”

“Wait!” he cried, a note of desperation seeping into his voice. “You said you’d let me negotiate. That was part of the agreement. You can’t hang up yet.”

“No, I only said I’d call you first.”

“I’m pretty sure you said you’d let me take the first crack at conviencing you to give me the Gambler.”

SAM helpfully supplied a tiebreaker. “Mr. Vidal is correct. You said you would call him first to negotiate.”

“Right. Thank you, SAM.” He actually had the audacity to sound smug about it.

It was a pity SAM couldn’t see her expression, because if looks could kill, his circuits would fry. Fury clamped her jaw shut for a minute while she considered hanging up. Peebee was right. Fuck her promise and fuck him.

“Don’t hang up,” Reyes uttered, voice strangled. “Tell me how she looks, at least. Did they keep her in good shape?”

Before, Violet would have sent him a full set of pictures of the outer hull where the murals of krogan battle glory had been painted and cackled as he bore witness. Before, she would have had Gil check over its inner workings to make sure it lived up to its reputation, maybe tease Reyes a little about handing it back to the Nexus. They’d have gotten a laugh over it. She’d have demanded some ambiguous favor. She wouldn’t have realized she was securing a favor from the Charlatan.

“Violet? Hermosa?” he prompted.

“Don’t,” she snapped, stomach twisting at the nickname he used to pant in her ear, the heat of his body burning against her. “Don’t call me that.”

“I would have told you. You have to know that. I was going to come clean.”
“Look, you wanted the first chance at bargaining for the *Gambler*. Don’t waste your shot.”

“You didn’t sell me out. Avitus Rix and Christmas Tate looked at me like I was insane when I showed up to their meeting with Keema. Don’t pretend like you don’t see why I did what I did. If you didn’t understand, you would have told everyone.”

“That doesn’t mean I feel okay about how you used me!” She exploded. “Was it all just bullshit? The comm towers, the ice, solving murders, checking in on agents. It all either undercut Sloane's business or directly benefitted yours. And the stupid thing is, you could have just asked! I wanted Sloane out of there just as badly! I keep recalling pieces of our conversations, hints I never picked up on. You one time asked me why the Charlatan likes me so much. You were literally just toying with me.”

“Then maybe you remember the time I asked you if you’d be willing to make a deal with the Collective and you blew me off,” he argued.

“Yeah, because I didn’t know them! But I knew you. And I trusted you.”

Violet had the word “naive” tossed at her from the moment she became Pathfinder. She’d proved them all wrong until now. Her Achilles heel, always in the shape of a man with a cocky attitude and dangerous vibe.

“Make an offer,” she snapped when he didn't have a comeback. “I'm not going to wait forever.”

He exhaled loudly. Finally, he said. “*Your coffee supply comes from me.*”

“Pete Ostrowski…” she began.

“Works for me. Has always worked for me. Why would I have talked business in front of him if not? I roped him into the deal because it was always meant to benefit him.”

“All just bullshit,” she uttered.

“Apparently,” he agreed sourly. “I’ll have him cut you off.”

Her pulse quickened. “You wouldn't dare.”

“Why not? You’re already pissed at me. You probably even hate me. I have literally nothing to offer you that you want. So what’s left if not blackmail? If I threaten to pull the outpost, you'll threaten to expose me as Charlatan, but coffee…”

“I can get coffee elsewhere. Ostrowski’s not the only source in Helius anymore.”

Reyes snorted. “*But coffee is one of the most sought after resources. I keep tabs on prices. Trust me, you're getting a steal from Pete. But let me sweeten the deal. I'll cover your coffee consumption for six months.*”

“Shit,” she swore.

Violet also knew the skyrocketing price of coffee around the cluster. Her deal on Kadara kept her flush while others paid exorbitant prices. Coffee was less prevalent and more coveted than even alcohol these days. Caffeine stimulants existed to placate some of the addiction, but the fact remained, people *liked* coffee. They wanted more than just the energy boost, they wanted the taste, the smell, and the morning ritual.

“*Not only that,*” he continued, “*but I--or at least the Collective--do business with some of the other*
coffee dealers. I can make acquisition hell for you.”

“Now that's just petty.”

“That's my offer.”

She looked to her companions. Peebee mimed shooting someone. Jaal just shook his head sadly. Setting her jaw, she considered that he might be bluffing. Could she risk her coffee over it?

“I want a year,” she finally bargained. “You cover my coffee costs for a full year.”

“Eight months.”

“Nine.”

“Tell you what, I'll give you ten, but you have to read my emails when I send them. You don't have to reply, but you have to open them.”

She exhaled noisily through her nose. “Fine. Deal. I have some stolen cargo to offload from the ship, but as soon as I have it, I'll send you the coordinates and access codes. And I'd move quickly, Reyes. Finders keepers on Elaaden, and I can't guarantee scavs won't get to it first.”

She ended the transmission before he had the chance to reply.

“What a douche,” Peebee snorted.

Predictably, Jaal hugged her.

“I'm good,” she promised. “Let’s wrap up and get out of this heat.”

She took pictures of the Gambler’s murals for Drack and tagged it so reps from New Tuchanka could find it and retrieve the stolen cargo it contained. They loitered until they could lock it up and leave. True to her word, she sent off the location and codes to Reyes as soon as they were finished and washed her hands of it.

Within a couple of hours, she got back to the Tempest, showered, and sat in the galley with a hot cup of coffee to brood over while her hair soaked a wet path down her back. Vetra joined her, sliding into the booth with a long sigh, nudging her playfully in an effort to pull a smile from her.

“You want to talk about your little call today?”

“Do you? You’ve had surprisingly few opinions on the state of my love life lately,” Violet mused.

“I wasn’t sure where I stood on it.”

She raised an eyebrow over at the turian.

“I’m your friend,” she said, “and as such obligated to take your side.”

“Oh don’t tell me…”

“I'd have done the exact same thing in his position. It was a well played game,” Vetra confessed. “So it’s hard to call him an asshole without feeling like one. Which he is. I’m on your side one hundred percent.” She settled her hands on the table. “But there’s something other than your dick of an ex I want to talk about. If you want a sad breakup pity party, you can go see Jaal. I’m here because Gil, Drack, and I have a bet going and you need to settle it.”
Violet chuckled into her coffee. “Color me surprised. What is it?”

“You’re a stickler on promises. We always knew you were good for your word, but we didn’t quite realize you took it that seriously. What gives?”

Now, she outright laughed. “Ah. That’s got a bit of a story attached to it. I guess the first thing you have to know is that my dad wasn’t so good with promises. Avery and I spent a lot of our childhoods in disappointment because he would promise to do something then drop it.”

Vetra pumped her fist. “Called it! They both owe me twenty credits.”

“There’s more.”

“How much more?”

She sighed. “Avery and I made a bet. First one to make a promise and break it has to wear an ‘I heart Alec Ryder’ t-shirt every Saturday for a month. We made that bet ten years ago and so far, nobody’s gotten stuck in the shirt.”

“Couldn’t you just lie?”

“Not when it’s Avery and me. Anyone else and he and I would both probably cheat, but when it’s just us…it’s just us.” She grinned sidelong at her. “And trust me when I say, calling Reyes was far less painful than wearing that fucking shirt.”

“Well, I still technically win. I said it was to avoid being like your father. It’s close enough.”

“What did the other two bet?”

“Drack said you were using it as a convenient excuse to talk to him, Gil said it’s because you wanted to rub it in that you were going to sell his ship back to the Nexus—before he hustled you, of course. I do wonder if he was bluffing about that, by the way. He knows the consequences of what would happen to a decaffeinated Violet Ryder.”

“It honestly wasn’t worth the risk.”

Violet wasn’t ready to admit out loud that she probably called him for all of the reasons stated. Her stomach did a little uncomfortable writhing as she talked herself out of rationalizing forgiving him. Those thoughts would never end well.

“Well, bluff or not, I get free coffee for ten months.”

“Has he emailed you yet?”

“SAM?”

“No new correspondence from ‘that fuckhead’ Mr. Vidal,” he confirmed.

Before Vetra could ask, she said, “I asked him to start calling him that. It made me feel better.” Then she added, “Thank you, SAM.”

“I am entirely committed to Ryder’s emotional well being during this time, and referring to Mr. Vidal in a derogatory manner seems to improve her spirits,” the AI agreed.

“Although we had to have a talk about emotional support versus mean spiritedness,” she added.
“The sticks and stones analogy seems flawed. Words have a great potential for emotional distress.”

“I can’t wait to hear how well you teach him about forgiveness.”

Violet wrinkled her nose. “Yeah, we’ll see about that.”

“I’m actually interested in what it would take for the fuckhead, Mr. Vidal, to earn back some of Ryder’s trust, if anything.”

“Not going to happen. Our entire relationship was built on lies.”

“That’s not entirely true. He spun fabrications about his role on Kadara, but your interpersonal relationship was built on mutual admiration, attraction, and a genuine desire to share each other’s company. Your conversations touched on topics only shared with others you are emotionally close to. I believe he was earnest in the more personal details he shared about himself.”

“Shit, Vi. Betrayed by your own AI. That’s cold,” Vetra laughed. “But now we know that SAM has a huge crush on your bad boy.”

Violet found herself too busy gaping to really comprehend what she’d heard. “Do you think I shouldn’t have broken it off with him?”

“I, of course, fully support your decision. He took advantage of your trust and proved calculating and manipulative.”

“How come you never caught on, SAM?” Vetra asked.

“Oh, that one’s my fault,” she growled. “I asked him to quit running biometric scans during all of our encounters. Because I trusted him. Because friends don’t let their AIs scan you for evidence of foul play every time you hang out. And I didn’t need the biological breakdown of...anything else.” She tucked her face angrily into her coffee cup for a long drink.

The turian’s mandibles clicked as she squinted over at her. “Do you miss him, SAM?”

Not a question Violet ever thought asking the AI.

“I think I miss...the idea of him. He had a significantly positive impact on Ryder’s moods, even during small interactions. Increased endorphins, serotonin, and dopamine, lowered blood pressure, decreased corticosteroids...”

“Well, good time to learn the whole ‘plenty of fish in the sea’ lesson.”

“Indeed.” He didn’t sound convinced, however, he changed the subject before Vetra could press him any further. “Ryder, you have a new email in your inbox. It is from the fuckhead.”

“I’ll leave you to it, then.” The turian rose from the booth. “Good luck dealing with your poor, heartbroken little AI. Sounds like he had it worse for Reyes than you did.”

“First breakup is always hard,” she laughed, not feeling as amused as she sounded.

Also removing herself from the booth, she poured another cup of coffee to take with her into her quarters to hold up her end of the agreement and read the message. She dumped down heavily into her chair, folding her long legs up underneath her and tucking the damp strands of her hair behind her ears. Her heart stuttered along pathetically, betraying her nervousness. She had to admit, she was with SAM on his assessment. Reyes did make her feel good. She used to live for these emails.
“Hey, SAM.”

“Yes, Ryder?”

“I miss him, too. It’s complicated and it’s messy, but it’s going to be okay.” She pulled in a steadying breath. “Shall we see what he has to say for himself?”

“I think so.”

She clicked open the email.

Violet. What the FUCK happened to my ship?? I hope that mural comes off. Did you pry it from savage krogan cannibals? On second thought, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know. - Reyes.

The corners of her mouth twitched upward, but she banished the smile and deleted the email without replying.

He was going to have to work a lot harder than that to get her attention.

Chapter End Notes

What? You didn't think I forgot about that little subplot featuring Reyes's missing ship, did you?

SO GUESS WHAT? CAN YOU SMELL THE END? The next chapter is going to get exciting...
A Bonafide Fleet

Chapter Summary

It's never a good sign if someone exclaims, "Ryder did WHAT?"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Whoever had been masquerading as an engineer on Reyes’s ship deserved to be shot, resurrected, and then shot again. He was a better pilot than a mechanic, but he knew enough to keep himself from falling out of the sky and he knew when he was looking at an utter shitshow. The Gambler’s unfortunate paint job fell to the bottom of his list of issues to fix. After optimizing the drive core, recalibrating its landing sequence, and replacing a half a dozen parts, he still had to work on the stench ground into every single conceivable surface. He planned on just replacing the bed in the captain’s quarters entirely. It was a lost cause.

The only good news was that the scavs had upgraded the Gambler’s weapon’s system and armed it to the teeth. He had more firepower than ever, not that he particularly needed it, but at least it would make for some fun trips out to the badlands to play around with it, maybe take up a bit of kett hunting for fun.

The stifling humidity and heat made repairs a hellish venture. Sweat soaked his shirt through, sealing it against his skin between smears of grease. He sat just on the docking platform in the shadows of his ship on an upended cargo box, cataloguing parts he wanted to upgrade or replace before their neglect caught up with him. The Gambler was spaceworthy in the meantime, if smelly and ugly.

“Vidal.”

He squinted across the landing pad where a turian approached, brushing his sleeve across his face to mop of the gathered beads of sweat, leaving a streak of grease in its wake. “Pathfinder Avitus. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Avitus Rix paused to survey the Gambler with a skeptical click of his mandibles. “Doesn’t really seem your style. You lose a bet or something?”

“She may not look like much now, but I promise you, she’s high class. She just needs a makeover and some tender loving care to get her back to her old self.”

He grunted skeptically.

“Did you need something or are you just here to bask in the pleasure of my company? I can be quite accommodating to pathfinders, you know. I wouldn’t mind being able to brag that I knew more than one in a carnal way,” he suggested with a perk of his eyebrows.

“Oh please, I have standards. I actually came because somebody mentioned you had a list going of people you helped moved product out of the city when the Charlatan seized power. More than a few were Outcast, close to Sloane, and on my list of fugitives the Nexus wants brought in to face formal charges now that order has been established.”
Reyes shrugged, using a rag to wipe off his hands. “I may have a list. I may not. I offer my clients full confidentiality for their identities and the cargo they transport. I have a reputation for integrity, Pathfinder, and reputation is everything.”

The list actually meant very little to him. He wasn’t about to waste his time on vendettas that nobody cared about fulfilling, but he hung onto it for opportunities like this. He patted the hull of the Gambler. Pathfinders were useful to have willing to part with favors, and with Violet on a crusade to ignore him forever, playing Avitus only made sense. If she didn’t want another pathfinder to get manipulated, she should have just sold out Reyes’s identity.

“So, hypothetically speaking, if the list were to exist, what would it cost?” Avitus asked with a vague gesture.

Lucky for him, Reyes knew exactly what he wanted. “I want a passport.”

“A passport?”

“I’m not interested in reinstating my status as a citizen of the Initiative, but I would like access to your settlements. I want to be able to come and go as I please. Prodomos, Taerve Uni, the Nexus, wherever my heart takes me, really, for whatever it desires. Business...or pleasure.”

The turian’s mandibles flared slightly as he considered it. “You are a smuggler with connections to the Charlatan and you want a free pass onto Initiative property?”

He flashed him an award winning smile. “Nothing gets past you.”

“SAM, do we have access to Mr. Vidal’s file?”

“One moment, Avitus,” a mechanical voice hummed, not identical to Violet's SAM, but similar. “Yes, it is among the database we downloaded before leaving the Nexus. It has been flagged. Mr. Vidal is a smuggler with several confirmed ties to criminal enterprises, an exile, and a thief.”

“Flatterer,” he drawled with a jaunty wink.

“It appears Pathfinder Ryder has submitted that he is not a suitable candidate for exile reintegration, and furthermore requests that he be forbidden from all Initiative endeavors.”

Avitus spread his hands. “Looks like she set up a pretty decisive roadblock.”

Undeterred, Reyes flashed him a confident grin. “You're a pathfinder, are you not? Isn't finding a way in your job description?”

“Giving a smuggler and thief access to the Initiative sounds counter-productive.”

“Well, then, you'll have to hunt your quarry the old fashioned way.” Dismissing the man, he stood from the upturned crate and rolled a kink out of his shoulders. “Don't be a stranger, Avitus. Come back and visit if you change your mind.”

Shaking his head, mandibles twitching, he turned to go. He paused after a few paces, head cocked in the exact same way as Violet's did as when she listened to someone over her private channel.

“Ryder did what?” Avitus exploded, charging into a long stride that led him back to the main docking platform.

Reyes bolted after him, heart stuttering up a click. That kind of exclamation could mean any number
of things, from making deals with kett, to hijacking pirate ships in a caffeine-fueled rage, to dying—again. He couldn't stand not knowing.

“And the kett…? Fuck. Double fuck. Get everyone back on board, now! We leave as soon as everyone's ass hits their seats. Get in contact with docking control and have us prioritized to leave ASAP.”

Reyes, almost directly behind him, set up a countermand directive to have the Pathfinder’s ship hung up in docking procedures. Just before he sent it, the ex-Spectre whirled on him, grabbing him with laughable ease to throw into the nearest barrier and pin there, his face mashed up against concrete.

“I do not have time for this. Do not follow me,” Avitus hissed.

“What happened with Violet?”

The turian let him go and turned to continue on, ignoring the question entirely. Reyes shoved off the barrier to catch back up, self-preservation be damned.

“What did she do? Is she in trouble?”

“We're all in trouble.”

“Tell me!”

He ground to a halt with a noisy exhale, his entire body humming with tension. “SAM, forward this information onto Keema Dohrgun.” He regarded Reyes. “Ryder went after Meridian, which is—”

“I know what Meridian is,” he interrupted.

He eyed him skeptically, but pressed on. “She got the location, but the Archon ambushed her...somehow. Disabled her SAM. He then attacked and hijacked the Hyperion and kidnapped Violet’s brother and he's on his way to Meridian. It looks like he's going to use Avery's implant to interface with it.”

Reyes’s heart stopped in his chest. “Is she alive?”

The turian nodded curtly. “She's more than alive. She just raised a whole fucking Remnant battle fleet. She's using it to assault the Archon to keep him from claiming Meridian.”

“She did what?” he cried.

“She's called for backup. She's in transit to Meridian now. She’s the only line between the Archon destroying all of us.”

Reyes held up a hand to keep him from walking off again. “Her ship isn’t armed! It’s a science vessel, for chrissake! She's going to need more than a handful of half-cocked scientists and explorers. She needs a fleet.”

“Reinforcements from the angara and APEX militia are inbound…”

Reyes jabbed a finger at the docks, where a dozen armed ships belonging to the Collective waited to be utilized. “What the fuck do you think that looks like? Give me an hour. I can mobilize everyone.”

Avitus paused, head cocked as he listened to his private line for a minute. “Keema says she's putting out a request for volunteers, but her people aren’t altruistic. They’re going need something in return and I have no leverage to offer them. Except maybe not death by the kett.”
Reyes's hands danced over his omnitool. “I'm overriding the request and making it a demand. I'm going to need a gunner for the *Gambler* …”

“How the hell do you have that kind of authority?”

He glanced up impatiently. “We're in a hurry. I'll let you puzzle it out on your own.”

“Shit. No wonder she is mad at you. And here you're asking me for full access to places like the *Nexus*.”

He almost smiled, but it died on its way to his mouth as he thought about Violet flinging her body between the Archon and Meridian, with or without backup. She was tough, but she would die before allowing him to take it, her brother, and the human ark.

“Tell you what,” Avitus grunted. “You get these assholes mobilized without wasting any more of my time and resources, and I'll think about keeping my mouth shut to Tann about your identity.”

“Let me counter-offer. You keep your mouth shut about my identity, and I'll also give you that list you're after. If we survive this, you can chase exiles to your heart’s content.”

He didn’t take long before nodding. “Good enough for me. Deal. Your secret is safe.”

Reyes transferred the data. “There. You have my list, and in a moment, you will have my fleet.”

“Fleet” was a bit of a strong word. Exiles and pirates with illegal weaponry attached to their ships didn't exactly constitute an army. Nevertheless, if the Charlatan said jump, they would jump.

He started with Keema, since she was his mouthpiece, hurrying back to the *Gambler* to make the call privately. He kept it brief, instructing her to threaten to ban anyone who ignored the call from Port and promising unspecified rewards for those who hauled ass to the coordinates to take on the kett. He had access to vast caches of money, weapons, tech, and drugs. He'd figure something out to placate them once they all survived.

He fired up the *Gambler*’s engines, petting the console lovingly as the computer ran through redundancy checks. He set up a comm channel for everyone to link to. Getting these assholes to work as a cohesive unit would be about as fun as herding pyjaks, but he had no time to put them through a crash course of battle protocols. They would just have to wing it.

“Anybody else wondering why the fuck Reyes Vidal has been appointed the lead of this half-assed squadron?” A surly asari with possible pirate connections demanded as soon as she linked.

“Unless anyone else has a decade of Alliance flight experience, you can shut up and do as I say. You might make it out alive,” he shot back.

Tabitha Holloway requested access to his ship as others made their grumblings known. He let her through and let his people complain. As long as they did as they were told, they could bitch all they wanted.

The woman joined him on the bridge, sliding into the defense station while he granted her access.

“Thanks, Tab. You'll have to get a feel for the weapons system on your own. I haven't had the chance to play with the upgrades yet.”

“It smells like an eiroch’s asshole in here.”
“I know. It's on my list.”

Her fingers danced over the console. “Lucky for you, the system is pretty sophisticated. It's going to pack a punch like you wouldn't believe.”

Smirking, he keyed the comm to address his makeshift fleet. “Listen up, *pendejos*. From all accounts, we're flying into a shitshow. You aren't a proper squadron, so I'm going to skip the lecture on keeping formation. If it's kett, you shoot at it, and try not to run into each other or shoot our allies by mistake. Rack up kill tallies, and to whoever blows the most shit up, drinks are on me.” He paused, drawing in a breath. He never thought he'd have to make an inspiring speech before. “Now I know we aren't usually the cavalry. Hell, we aren't even the good guys. We're exiles. The paint is barely dry on our alliance and we don't owe the Initiative shit. What we do have is a sense of self-preservation, and in accordance with that, we'll suck it up and play along. If the kett claim this Meridian place, our planets die, and then the rest of us not long after. The Initiative can't protect themselves and we've always known that. So let's show them the strength of an exile and what they cast aside when they cast it out. We can shove it in their faces forever when it's over.”

“Seriously?” Tabitha snorted.

He cut the transmission. “They're smugglers and pirates. You want me to appeal to their sense of morality and justice?”

“Fair enough.”

A few stragglers showed up, the coordinates for Meridian were broadcast across the fleet, and they were released by the docking computer with Reyes in the lead. He typed in the code to get them to Meridian, running calculations to get them there as fast as possible.

“We have a couple of hours in FTL. I don't know Violet and the Archon's ETA to Meridian, but I hope to god they don't get there too long before us.”

“Oh good. ‘Ready, set, wait.’ My favorite game,” she sighed.

He kicked his legs up on the console, crossing one foot over the other and reclining back, both grateful to be back in his own ship, but driving himself mad with worry for Violet.

“Avitus said the Archon disabled her SAM. How the hell did she raise a Remnant army? How did she interface?” he remarked abruptly.

“You're asking me?”

“No,” he sighed. “I just don't like this.”

“God, Reyes, you have it so bad.”

“Don't remind me,” he groaned.

He knew, even if he rode in to save the day, Violet didn't owe him her time. He would be perfectly content as long as she survived long enough to continue ignoring him forever. Of course, he hoped she might be a little grateful for the assistance, but he just needed her to make it through.

The next few hours passed like torture. Reyes had nothing to divert himself, so he sulked in his chair and thought about all of the things he should have said to Violet when she called him about the *Gambler*. He hadn't been fully ready to apologize. Now, he prayed it wouldn't be too little, too late.
They exited FTL just beyond the battle zone. He leaned into the console, surveying the debris field of kett and Remnant ships, much of which spiraled lazily out near the edge of the Scourge. They were late on the scene, as he saw a sprinkling of APEX and angaran vessels in the middle of the fray.

“Well. This looks like fun,” Tabitha muttered as she brought their weapons online.

“I have eyes on the Hyperion. Looks like its entering atmo through...whatever the fuck that is.” Describing how the planet’s solid surface opened to accept the ship inside of a supposedly hollow center damn near boggled his brain.

He sent out a request for comm links to their allies so he could figure out what was going on. He was sent a request code and added into the group immediately.

“Anybody need a hand?”

A surprised voice echoed through his mic. “Reyes?”

His stomach clenched. She was alive and out there somewhere.

“I heard there’s a battle for humanity. I come bearing gifts.”

“We’ll take all the help we can get,” a turian voice growled.

“I have a dozen or so heavily armed exiles about to exit FTL any minute now. If anyone asks, they’re doing it for selfish reasons. Where are we needed?”

“This is Tiran Kandros, Nexus security. I need all assets to defend the Hyperion. The Archon’s gone to find Meridian control and I need my teams freed up to drop in planetside once the Pathfinder has a relay point for us. She’s going to need backup.”

“We’ll take care of it.”

“Told you I was bringing the cavalry,” Avitus muttered smugly, his ship already in the middle of the battle.

By then, other ships started appearing behind the Gambler, dropping out of FTL a safe distance away to get their bearings before charging into the planet. Reyes got them ordered enough to give instructions on defending the Hyperion before gunning it into the planet, where his perceptions hit a moment of havoc while he oriented himself and gravity played topsy-turvy.

Tabitha worked her panel, monitoring several screens simultaneously. “Weapons going live in three, two, one…”

Once Reyes had the ship stabilized in the planet’s gravity, he burned hard toward the ark and the hive of swarming kett ships, banking hard to line up Tabitha’s guns with the action. He wove into the fray, darting around and between ships, scraping through gaps with barely a meter on either side of his ship.

“I hit a roadblock. Going the rest of the way on foot. Guns hot, people,” Violet declared.

“Be careful.” Did his voice sound as strangled as it felt?

She choked a laugh. “We are well beyond careful.”

“Don’t die.”
Again, she laughed.

“Fucksakes, Violet, you did not die again!”

“Hostiles at ten o’clock. Watch it, Vetra.”

He muted his comm so he could swear vividly in as many languages as he knew. “When did she have time to die again?”

“What’s her number at, anyway?”

“If she’s being serious, this would make three.” He circled around the human ark, aiming for any point where the kett tried to group up in formation.

He listened to the chatter of comms as Tiran Kandros organized strike teams to assist getting the Pathfinder into the complex. They eventually had to pull back, but Violet forged stubbornly forward, taking each step by force, and god help anyone who got in her way. He would have liked to hang onto every report of her progress, but the kett forces never seemed to deplete.

“Exiles, don’t get drawn away from the Hyperion. Keep the heat off the cryo bay!” he barked as the battle wore on.

“Pack of idiots. Haven’t they ever heard of a thing called concentrated fire?” Tabitha griped. “Did your Pathfinder stop for lunch? What’s taking so long?”

“What about any of this looks easy to you?”

Thankfully, Violet earned friends easily. More ships dropped out of FTL to join the fray and keep the kett from overwhelming the Initiative resistance. Debts had been called in and friends wanted to lend a hand. Ships from all over the cluster came to fight, creating a solid barrier between the enemy and the ark.

For the Hyperion, time bought wasn’t enough. Systems began failing. Gravity began pulling.

“What can we do?” Violet asked, as if she alone could intervene.

“Stay out of our way!” Captain Dunn snarled.

“Exiles, please remove yourselves from the path of the crashing ark. Assemble around the flank and get an eyeful of her ass for a while,” Reyes instructed, his heart hammering away, despite his cavalier attitude.

He watched in awe and horror as the massive ship glided toward the surface. The chatter increased as power and biotic shields were prioritized to the medbays containing cryo pods. He couldn’t tear his eyes off, focus diverting from the battle as the ship began its final descent. To Dunn’s credit, she put it down as smoothly as anybody could have. It carved a scar across the earth as its inertia slowed, leaving behind pieces of the ship it snapped off. It finally came to a standstill at the edge of a dropoff, and Reyes swore every eye above Meridian watched to see if it would teeter over, including the kett.

“Captain Dunn? Captain Dunn!” Violet shrilled frantically through the comm.

After a pregnant silence, a voice crackled through in response. “Still here, Ryder. Cryo pods intact. Looks like we’ll be making ourselves at home here.”

Reyes hit the thrusters and took them back toward the thick of battle while Tabitha tore through
gawping enemies, momentarily distracted by the *Hyperion*'s crash with the rest of them. The *Gambler* took a few hot burns to the hull as the kett launched a coordinated attack specifically on him. He took that as a good sign that he had pissed them off, and in response, made sure to position Tabitha’s weapons so they aimed where it hurt.

“You think they scratched the paint?” he mused.

“God, I hope so.”

He activated the automated coolant system and adjusted his shields to keep the scorch marks from becoming a breach on the next hit.

“Point me due southwest. I’ve been hammering that shuttle over there and I think it’s softened up to pop,” Tabitha requested.

He made the adjustments, wincing as their flank opened up to one of the cruiser’s guns. It drummed against their shields, but she got her kill and he rolled them out of range. The *Gambler* would need repairs when they got back, but they were too deep to back out now. Several of the exiles had been forced to retreat from the battle or risk losing their ships and their lives. Some hadn’t made the call fast enough and now lay in scattered pieces on the planet below.

“Any update on Ryder’s team?” he demanded as he fell into formation with some of the *Nexus* ships, grateful to have his flank covered for a while. They may not play for the same team anymore, but most of them had the same training. They knew how to coordinate among others in the middle of chaos.

“We lost contact a few minutes ago. Interference from the structure containing Meridian control,” a heavily accented voice he vaguely identified as Violet’s science officer told him.

“This is what she does best,” Liam interjected reassuringly. “We do our part up here so that she doesn’t have to clean up any more messes when she gets back.”

Reyes knew their confidence stemmed from experience. Violet had charged into places no person had any right walking back out of. The stories she could tell sounded made up to anyone who didn’t know her. This would just be another on her list.

Before he had the chance to reply, a huge crash enveloped his senses and the *Gambler* pitched in the air, losing altitude.

“What the fuck?” Tabitha shrilled.

Warning sirens blared as he lost control entirely and they hurtled toward the ground. The culprit became apparent to the periphery of his attention as he fought to stabilize. A kett ship falling out of the sky smashed directly on top of him, taking him to the ground with it. It also had its remaining thrusters engaged, forcing them down faster than a freefall. A veritable kamikaze as final ‘fuck you’ to the enemy.

“I can’t shake it off. It’s taking us with it. Brace for impact!” he bellowed, snapping his own harness into place and rerouting all power to the shields.

Meridian’s surface rose up to greet them at terminal velocity, the very definition of a rock and a hard place as the *Gambler* impacted with the ground and the kett fighter crashed directly on top of him.
Seriously guys. It's so close to wrapping up. I can taste the end.
Metal creaked and groaned as the *Gambler* sank into the soft, spongy ground of Meridian’s surface, the kett ship directly on top of it. Reyes regrouped, taking in deep, slow breaths and confirming he was all in one piece and that his underwear was clean. He thumped his head back against the seat with a long exhale.

“Well. Fuck.”

He glanced over at Tabitha. “Intact?”

“You couldn’t have landed that any softer?” She freed herself from her harness.

“I had a fatass kett ship bodyslam on top of us. No, I could not have landed it any softer,” he snapped. Keying the comm, he said, “My ship is out. I’m going to need to be picked up when this is all over.”

“My ship is out. I’m going to need to be picked up when this is all over.”

“Reyes, it’s Suvi. I’m sending you a couple of nav points. The first is to the Hyperion, but it’s not quite in your neck of the woods. The second is the point where Ryder’s team entered the underground system. It’s closer to you and we have APEX teams defending it. One of your people can pick you up there.”

And possibly be there when Violet emerged?

“We’ll head that way.”

“Arm yourselves for a solid fight. There are plenty of kett between you and that door,” Avitus warned over the comm.

“Just what I fucking needed,” he growled.

Tabitha rolled knots out of her shoulders. “Please tell me you stocked your armory before we left.”

He led the way off the bridge to the locker where he stashed extra weapons and ammo, letting her get first pick of the rifles, since she was by far the better shot. They packed on as much as they dared to carry at one time and headed out. They were forced to take the airlock attached to the sole escape pod, as the other exits were pressed firmly into the ground.

“Keep it tight and move quickly,” Tabitha instructed as their feet hit the ground. “I hope to god you’re in better shape than you look.”

“I don’t exactly spend my days hiking the mountains of Kadara for fresh air every morning.”
She sighed, motioning him on. “Let’s go. We’re in low ground here and going to get our shit wrecked if we come across any with solid numbers.”

The area they landed in was a pretty, lightly forested region nestled with lakes. The battle above them could be seen through the sparse canopy, ships whizzing back and forth, smoke spouting from many of them, others hurtling to the ground much like the Gambler had. They kept one eye on the sky, one on their surroundings, as careful for falling debris as they were an enemy ambush. If not for the flaming ships trying to shoot each other out of the sky, the planet—or whatever it was—was quite beautiful.

Without warning, Tabitha raised the assault rifle to her shoulder and peppered off a burst of fire. Reyes moved instinctively for cover, grateful his reaction time paid off as bullets ripped through the foliage on either side of the tree he sheltered behind. The kett party they came across, much like them, appeared to have climbed out of some wreckage, all a little worse for wear. Reyes leaned around his tree to fire his sidearm at them.

“This is going to take forever,” the woman growled.

“Well, unless you have any better ideas…”

“I do.” She pulled the pin on a grenade and lobbed it. “Keep your head down.”

“Whatsoever you say.” He hunkered behind his tree until after the explosion, when he and Tabitha picked off the rest scattered by the grenade. “Makes you wonder if they were exalted here or somewhere else,” he muttered as the dust cleared.

“Thinking about that crap will make you crazy.”

One of the kett suddenly rose like a goddamn zombie between them, snapping to a sitting position like a wraith rising from the dead. They each emptied half a clip into it until it laid back down.

“Let’s keep moving,” he suggested, clutching his spluttering heart.

“You’re the boss.” She at least had the decency to sound shaken.

Reyes was a pilot, with only basic training for this kind of assault, but he was also a survivor. He had sharp reflexes, decent aim, and an instinct for ducking when it counted. Tabitha had done security work before he signed her onto his team, better at hitting her targets on the first try and cool under pressure. They made their way steadily to the nav point, cutting a bloody swath through the kett that stumbled across them.

“Kett are putting in a retreat. We’ve got them on the run, people!” Kandros announced.

“Any word from Ryder?” the asari pathfinder, Sarissa, demanded.

“Nothing yet. Comms are still not connecting.”

Sweat beaded his brow and soaked the back of his shirt. Meridian, at least in this region, proved fairly temperate, but Reyes usually had his ass in a pilot’s seat or the lounge in Tartarus. He did enough to keep from getting flabby, but his cardio had gone mostly to shit. His increased alcohol consumption and decreased healthy meals over the past couple of weeks might have also been a contributing factor to his labored breathing.

“Remind me to start running and eat more vegetables when we get back,” he huffed as they climbed a gentle rise toward the high ground Tabitha so desperately wanted.
She made a noise in her throat.

They almost made it to the top of the hill when something slammed into Reyes with enough force to knock him off his feet. He toppled backward, followed shortly by Tabitha.

“Snipers,” she wheezed, clutching her side. “You okay?”

“Armor took it.”

Although it left a smoking chemical burn in the middle of his chest. He prodded his flight jacket with a frown. Like all things kett, their weapons were ugly and left behind serious damage. Any more direct hits and he wouldn't feel so chipper.

“Keep your head down. Those shots hit close together, so there's more than one. I'm going to need you to put down cover fire while I figure out where they are.”

They had a few trees to take cover behind while they regrouped. A sniper battle sounded like the last thing he wanted to do that day, but there was a reason he brought Tabitha along. The only other person he knew to rival her with a rifle was the Pathfinder herself.

“The shot that hit me knocked me down at an angle. I'd say about thirty degrees east.” He stowed his pistol to use a rifle instead and switched it from burst to fully automatic.

“I sometimes forget how goddamn observant you are.”

“Thanks, I think?”

“Usually when people get shot, they aren't thinking about the angle in which they fall.”

“You do recall that I am, actually, Alliance trained?” He may not have specialized in ground combat, but the Alliance made sure it's pilots knew how to survive hostile territory if they got shot down.

“Not even the Alliance can fix stupid, which seemed like most of their recruits from my experience.”

“I'm flattered. You think I'm smart, Tabby?”

“Would you please start shooting so I can get a look and we can move on?”

Grinning, he peeked out from his cover and started firing. The waste of ammo made him cringe a little on the inside, but extra rounds did them no good with their brains painting the forest floor. He centered his fire the direction he thought the shots came from, hoping it was enough to keep them from returning fire.

“Hold,” Tabitha barked, and he pulled back. “Okay, I can figure some of their positions, unless their bleeding idiots. Mind playing bait for me? Just fire off a few rounds every minute or so to keep their eyes on you. But don't, whatever you do, poke your head out from cover.”

“I know how to not get brained,” he drawled.

Keeping low, she shrugged and slithered off to find a different vantage point.

Reyes fired at uneven intervals, hoping he looked like a desperate idiot to the kett pinning him down. They occasionally tossed a few bullets back at him between shouts for him to stand down. He wondered, if he did surrender, would the execute or exalt him?

He didn't have to contemplate for long. Shots rang out from a sniper rifle in quick succession after a
“Three of the four dead. The fourth hightailed it out. Let's go,” Tabitha called.

Rubbing the little burn spot on his armor, he stepped cautiously out from cover to rejoin her. They were only a couple of kilometers from the rendezvous point, giving them a bit of light at the end of the tunnel.

Overhead, kett retreated to their cruisers and fled in earnest. Drop troops and crash landers were gathered and shuttled out, leaving a clear path the entire rest of the way. He listened to the victorious chatter on the comms as the Hyperion and her sleeping cargo were left alone. Then, even as the two of them made it to the Remnant door marked on their maps, as the strike teams guarding it waved them behind the line of defense, a voice crackled through their comms.

“This is Ryder. The Archon is dead, Meridian back online, stolen cargo retrieved, and I need a stiff fucking drink. We're on our way topside. ETA fifteen minutes.”

Reyes’s heart clattered in relief and he doubled over with a long exhale. It hadn't been for nothing. She was alive. His voice didn't join the cacophony of cheers hammering through the comms as he was too busy remembering how to breathe again.

“You are a fucking mess,” Tabitha snorted.

“Trust me. I know.”

They didn't wait alone for long. The Tempest dropped down and unloaded her entire crew. They regarded him with polite distance, nodding terse acknowledgements. He couldn't blame them. He didn't know where they all stood, either. Other ships landed, unloading pathfinders and leaders alike. Friends and allies and favors called in, all waiting to greet Violet Ryder on her victorious return.

“Her father couldn't have done this,” Cora Harper commented to the other Tempest crew. “Brought all these people together. Some of them, but not all.”

“Make sure she hears that,” Reyes said, drawing the entirety of their surprised looks. “You know how much it would mean to her. Make sure she knows.”

Their expressions ranged from openly hostile to thoughtfully contemplative. He set his jaw and turned away. It wasn't her crew’s approval he was after.

The door leading into the Remnant abyss hissed open, stealing everyone's attention. Vetra and Peebee flanked the two humans, Violet supporting her twin’s huge frame. Their doctor, Lexi, darted forward to relieve her of the weight. Avery slumped, his body limp with exhaustion, looking a hundred times worse than he did after their fist fight.

Violet was also in rough shape. Blood crusted under her nose and dark circles made bruises under her brown eyes. Her hair escaped it's braid to straggle where it wanted. She looked tired. Viciously triumphant, but tired.

Her crew closed around her and she took a moment to sweep her gaze over the gathered allies, a smile twisting its way to her lips. She stood straight, taking a moment to just look at them all.

Their eyes met. Reyes, smile quirking his own lips, nodded once.

She glanced quickly away to instead address the crowd. “Look around you all. When I arrived here in Andromeda, we were a fractured dream. Some of your allies today were enemies yesterday. Some
you'd never even met. I see Initiative, exiles, krogan, angara, soldiers, criminals, scientists, and leaders. This is what I came here to Andromeda for. This is where we are at our strongest. What we achieved today benefits us all. I didn't make this win happen. This was all you.”

He saw the pride in her face, but the exhaustion in her frame. Clapping Liam's arm and nudging Drack playfully, she headed for her ship. Reyes watched, breath stilled in his chest, as she disappeared up the cargo ramp into her ship where, at the top, her legs buckled and Cora scooped an arm under her to keep her from hitting the deck.

Reyes found himself halfway up the Tempest's ramp before he realized he moved and a pissy looking redhead with a wrench moved into his path. Others joined him. Liam, Jaal, and Peebee, expressions stern.

“Where do you think you're going, Charlatan?” the asari began icily.

He held up his hands in surrender. “I just want to make sure she's okay. Please.”

“We'll send you a postcard,” their engineer--Gil, he recalled--quipped.

Fuck it, he wasn't above begging. “I don't deserve it. I know I don't deserve it. She has every right not to want to see me and I will go if she tells me to, but let me try. I have to see her.”

“Pathetic. It's a good look on you,” Peebee cackled.

“He is heartsick. We could have pity,” Jaal suggested.

Gil shook his head. “She just saved the cluster. You think she wants to be bothered by an ex?”

“To be fair, he helped with that saving,” Liam said grudgingly.

They all looked at each other, conflicted.

Peebee crossed her arms. “We don't owe him. It was in his best interest to show up. Self-preservation.”

“Generosity is not about what is owed,” the angara shot back.

Liam drummed his fingers on his crossed arms. “Where's Drack? We need a tiebreaker.”

Reyes wasn't about to turn around to go back down the plank, even with the threat of bringing in the krogan.

“Let him through,” SAM chirped.

For a good minute, nobody moved or spoke. This was the second time SAM came to his defense.

Slowly, the crew parted aside to grant him access, apparently accepting the AI's opinion on the level with their own. Jaal pointed deeper into the ship. “Through the cargo hold, up the ramp on the right. She's in the med bay.”

Nodding, he strode past them.

“Reyes,” Tabitha said through his comm. “I'm grabbing a ride back to Kadara. You're on your own with the Gambler.”

“Got it. See you back at home.”
He paused on the ramp leading further into the ship near a speaker box he was positive connected him to the ship and AI.

“Thank you, SAM.”

“I find myself desiring resolution between you and Ryder. She is conflicted. I think I will not know how to process how she feels until she moves on in some way.”

He almost laughed. “Welcome to humanity.”

The med bay was located exactly where Jaal said it was. He took a breath and let himself in. Violet sat on one of the tables, cleaning up the blood around her nostrils with a damp cloth while she sat patiently under the beam of a scanner. Lexi fussed over Avery, who was stretched out on another bed, in significantly worse shape than his twin.

Violet looked up, eyes widening in surprise. “Reyes. What are you doing here?”

He stepped hesitantly toward her, praying she didn't insist he leave. “Can we put a pause on our fight for a few minutes, on account of I'm so fucking relieved you're all right?”

She sagged a little. “Yeah. Timeout accepted.”

Lexi pointed a severe finger at the Pathfinder. “If your blood pressure raises even a fraction, he's gone. No fighting, and absolutely no makeup sex. SAM, monitor for any additional hemorrhaging.”

“I'd kill for a cup of coffee.”

“And no coffee!”

Reyes’s own blood pressure spiked. “Hemorrhaging?”

Violet groaned. “I might have...overdone it a little raising the Remnant fleet without SAM to interface for me. I'm fine. And with SAM restored, it won't be a problem anymore.”

“Probably,” Lexi stressed.

He tentatively reached out, catching her fingers with his own and reassuring himself that she was here and fine.

“So. I don't remember sending you an invitation to my party,” she began teasingly.

“If I recall, it was an open invitation.” He stepped closer, now up next to her, near enough to breathe in her scent. Even sweaty and dirty and bloody, he wanted to bury his nose against her. “Although I might have overheard Avitus getting the call and forced him to give me the coordinates.”

She smiled tiredly, squeezing his hand. “Thank you.”

If they got any closer, he would try to kiss her, on which she would either get aroused or pissed, and Lexi would kick him out no matter what.

“Did you actually die?”

“Well...it's unclear. I was definitely out after the Archon separated me from SAM, but my vitals weren’t being monitored and recorded. Drack said I looked pretty dead.”

“Fucksakes, Vi,” he breathed.
“It’s fine. Like five minutes later I raised the Remnant fleet, which isn’t half bad for someone who might or might not have been dead.”

The last time she died, he’d taken her back to his apartment to remind her exactly what living felt like. It kickstarted the rest of their relationship and all of the benefits that went with it. A painful reminder of what he had in his hands before he lost it all, like an idiot.

She raised her free hand and dug her finger into the chemical burn on the chest of his flight suit, wiggling it into the fabric. “What about you? Are you okay?”

“You know me. Making friends wherever I go.”

The corners of her lips perked up. “Yeah, I see that.”

For a moment he just let himself look at her, to savor a single moment where she didn't stare back with the hurt or anger justifiably owed to him. A reprieve was far more than he deserved, but nobody said Reyes was perfect, so he took it.

“Oh. Unpause,” he murmured, eyes lowered. Any longer and he would be tempted to try to extend their timeout indefinitely. He had to fix things for real. He reclaimed his hand and took a step back, flexing it down at his side. “I'm sorry. I let what happened with Zia get in my head and I closed myself off. I should have never taken advantage of your trust the way I did. I did ask for your friendship, like you said. It should have come with some basic conditions of trust.”

Violet sighed, tearing her eyes away uncomfortably. “Reyes…”

Not the reaction he wanted. His heart plunged to his stomach.

“Look, I'm tired, it's been a crazy day, and I can barely process anything that's happened in the last twenty-four hours. I need some space to just sort through it all, including us.”

He nodded quickly, trying his damndest to flash her his signature, cocky smile. “Of course. I could have had better timing.” He turned to go, determined to leave her be, but hit a wall when it occurred to him that he had nowhere else to go. Grimacing, he turned back. “Unfortunately, I have a favor to ask. I crashed the Gambler. Can I catch a ride to the Hyperion.”

She almost smiled. “No wonder you look like shit.”


“Permission granted.”

He backed out of the med bay. “You’re the best, hermosa. Oh, and good to see you, Avery.”

From his bed, her twin raised a hand. “You too, Vidal. Solid grovel, by the way.”

“Wait, what?” Violet cried.

Reyes hurried out to let Avery explain that one. A little recompense for the black eye he gave him that day.

He gave himself a quick tour of the Tempest, familiarizing himself with the ship he might have piloted in another life. He made his way up to the bridge where Kallo Jath warmed up the engine to take off. Suvi Anwar sat opposite of him at a sophisticated science console. It really was a shame
he'd been unable to steal this ship.

“Reyes Vidal,” the pilot said distastefully.

“Just getting a look at what I missed out on.”

“How does the Gambler look?”

He winced. “Pancaked between a kett ship and the ground. I didn’t get a full damage report before I left, but it’ll be stranded here until I put some serious repairs in.”

“Shouldn’t have stolen it to begin with,” the salarian grumbled, focused strictly on his flying.

He smirked. “You can’t knock my taste.”

“Hey, Vidal,” Avitus interrupted through his comm.

“Yeah? Go ahead.”

“You’ve got a problem. You’re still blacklisted from Initiative property.”

“Well. Shit.”

“I talked to Dunn, reminded her that her people are alive because you hauled ass and put your neck on the line. I’ve secured you a temporary passport. It's limited to common areas and you have no access to computer terminals, but you can stay until you arrange for ship repairs.”

“I assume there’s a catch?”

“You owe me one. Big.”

He snorted, but he doubted he would get a better offer. “Fine.”

“See you on Kadara.”

And this was the reason he usually kept the fact that he was the Charlatan to himself. Avitus would require a Charlatan sized favor, but he would cross that bridge when he got there.

“Problem?” Kallo asked.

He shook his head. “Everything’s fine.” He cocked an ear as they lifted off. “Your drive core has a click.”

Both of them sucked in sharp breaths. “The drive core is optimized better than ever before! You take that back you cheap, second-rate, son of a--”

“Kallo!” Suvi cried.

“I’m cool! I’m cool!” He exhaled noisily.

“But seriously, it’s got a click. I thought your engineer was supposed to be top notch.”

“Our engineer is the best!” Kallo roared. For a moment, Reyes thought he was going to explode out of his chair swinging.

“Don’t let him hear you say that,” Suvi muttered, focused suddenly on the screens in front of her.
Reyes fought a smile. “Tell you what, I’ll go bother him myself about that click.” He turned to go, but paused at the door. “Funny to think that I could have been flying this thing all along. If the golden worlds had panned out as promised. Alec alive, my ass in that chair, and Violet putting as much distance between herself and her father as she could. Just weird, you know?”

“Would you have wanted it that way?” Suvi asked.

He rolled his shoulders. “And break up the dream team here on the *Tempest*? I wouldn’t dare.”

Flashing them a jaunty wink, he headed out back into the belly of the ship to find a corner to wedge himself into until they landed, somewhere innocuous and out of the way where the crew wouldn’t be tempted to squeeze in a hit or two, verbal or otherwise. He’d taken enough knocks for the day. It gave him time to go over the gutpunch that came with Violet avoiding his apology, to really face that she might be lost to him forever. It felt worse than any breakup he’d ever had. It felt worse than waking up with a hangover and the *Gambler* and Zia missing.

The ship flew smoothly, only a couple of minutes in the air before they landed at the *Hyperion* crash site. Reyes was the first to disembark as soon as the ramp lowered, the prickling sensation of multiple sets of eyes on his back as he left. Despite the hesitation and hostility from the crew, he at least came away certain that they would take care of Violet, no matter what kinds of hell she walked through. He never had to worry about her being alone or lacking in allies or family. She didn’t need Reyes. The most he could hope for was that she might want him.

Chapter End Notes

First, I want to throw out a special thanks to the breakout OC of this entire fic, Tabitha Holloway, who I threw in arbitrarily early on to help me get some plot points across, but then I kept finding uses for, so I had her pop up again several times. So big round of applause to Tabby for taking the minor character role by the balls and making the most out of it.

Second, I AM ALMOST FINISHED WRITING. I'm currently working on the last chapter and trying to wrap it up. Which is harder than it looks. How do people end things? I HAVE LIKE NO EXPERIENCE WITH THIS. I typically abandon the projects I start, so I'm in largely unexplored territory. Bear with me.

Next chapter miiiiiiight be featuring some *cough*smut*cough* because...well, do I need a reason? It seemed like the right thing to do at the time.

*screams a little* We're getting so close to the end!
Negotiations and Logistics (nsfw)

Chapter Summary

Recovering from the events of Meridian, Violet bumps into a familiar face.

Chapter Notes

Smut warning. No clean companion chapter revolving around coffee this time. I didn't have the energy. x.x

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Violet put on real clothes for the first time in over a week. Having been kept under lockdown in medical while Lexi and SAM monitored her every breath, she stayed in pajamas, mostly, and sweats when she wanted to feel fancy. At least she had Avery there to keep her company. He lost some of the weight he’d painstakingly put on since his coma, his mood deep in the dumpster at being on the injured list again, but if there was anything that brought them closer together, it was bitching about mutual misery. Just like old times.

When she finally convinced them she was healthy enough for discharge, she got Avery transferred to her apartment on the Hyperion where he could at least finish recovering away from the clinic. He needed a few extra days to restore his strength, and if they trapped him in med op any longer, he was going to go savage with boredom. At least in her quarters he had a proper vid screen to zone out in front of.

“You sure you don’t want to come?” she asked, sliding into a thin, cream colored sweater she brought with her from the Milky Way.

“And be forced to watch every person in Helius line up to suck your dick? I just want a goddamn nap.” He sprawled out on her bed, having just gotten back from physical therapy. “When this is all over, we never speak of how much of a baby I was during this period of time.” He muttered something that sounded like it included “fucking naptime like a toddler...”

Shaking her head, she picked through her drawers, having relocated most of her wardrobe from the Tempest while she recovered, since they weren’t going anywhere until Lexi approved her for duty, tugging out a pair of boots that had been stuffed away for months. They were more fashion friendly than durable, but they did good things for her butt.

“I don’t know how you do it.” Avery said, rolling onto his stomach and stuffing a pillow under his head. “Smile and wave while a bunch of desk jockeys pat themselves on the back for your achievements. If you want a party, I bet I could convince Liam and Jaal and Peebee to throw you a kegger.”

“Vetra.”

“Huh?”
“You want to convince Vetra to throw me a kegger. She’s an acquisitions ninja. The others might have good intentions, but you really need Vetra and her black magic to make any sort of party worthwhile.”

She sifted through a box of accessories, disregarding most of it until her fingers brushed against the soft, light fabric of a vibrant blue scarf she’d buried down at the bottom, hoping never to find it again, but unable to make herself throw it away. She crushed the scarf in her hands for a moment, debating putting it back.

“That’s a good color,” Avery commented.

“Yeah? You like this one?” She draped it loosely around her neck.

“Sure. Where’s mine? We could totally match.”

“Come on, Ave. Do you honestly want to do that whole ‘matching twins’ thing?” she scoffed. “I know you were brain damaged, but still…”

He laughed. “Fuck off, Vi.”

Crossing the room, she leaned over the bed and slapped a kiss over his hair. “Have a good nap, big brother.”

Violet didn’t particularly want to make an appearance at the party, but every important figure around the Helius Cluster had flown back to Meridian to see the progress being made. Workers were given the day off after pulling nonstop shifts turn the Hyperion into a habitable structure planetside. She had SAM sneak her damage reports, despite Lexi’s declaration to leave work alone until she was recovered. The list they had to fix versus the amount they got done in short order was nothing short of miraculous. They all deserved a beer and a lap dance.

Putting on her patient face, she threw herself into meet-and-greets to get it over with, filling the diplomatic part of her Pathfinder role with as much grace as she could muster. Thankfully, with the battle for Meridian still fresh in everyone’s mind, they hadn’t quite fallen back to complaining about all of the things they wished were done. She gave it another couple of days before those emails started piling in.

Liam saved her from going crazy by delivering a drink as soon as he noticed her. Most of her crew were scattered about with a healthy distance between themselves and the diplomats and leaders, opting to stick close to the work crews who were taking to their day off with vigor. Drinks, music, and animated debates lit up the corners, screening her from having to grin her way through a dozen more conversations with leaders who wanted to know “what comes next.”

“Has Lex officially signed off?” he asked.

She sipped the cheap beer he handed her, wishing it was a cup of coffee instead. “Yep. We are officially back in business. I’m just not allowed to interface with any more Remnant solo. She promised me a stroke next time I try.”

He snorted. “Yeah, maybe just let SAM do it from now on.”

“So what did I miss? I feel like I’ve been in a bubble for the last week. No news. No work. I can’t remember the last time I was this out of touch with current events.”

“Yeah, but only because you’re dead center of every current event since we arrived in Andromeda.”

He shrugged. “We’ve all just been lying low. Nothing really to report.”
“You all? Lie low? Ha!”

He held up his hands. “Honest. We needed a break as much as you did. Peebee might be getting a little antsy, but the rest of us are taking advantage of the extra hours of sleep. We know the work isn’t over. The kett are still out there, worlds are still hostile, and not everybody is Team Initiative.”

She toasted him sarcastically. “The fun never ends.”

“We are on the cutting edge, Ryder. We’re ready to get back to it when you are.”

He was so disgustingly earnest she almost patted him on the head like a puppy. It would probably send a confusing message, so she gripped her drink a trifle harder and promised to catch up with him later.

She meandered around to mingle some more, finishing her beer and opting not to try to find another one. It would probably be a few years before microbreweries sprouted up across the cluster and they got some proper distilleries going.

Violet about turned to head back to her quarters to join Avery in his nap when a familiar face caught her eye across the room. Her heart made a noise that she was pretty sure she was supposed to report to Lexi. What was he even doing here? He stood near where Addison and Dunn conversed, sipping innocently at a cup with a vaguely vacant expression, but if she had to bet, she was willing to put money down that he was close enough to overhear everything.

He looked good, reminding her of the first time she saw him in Kralla’s. He wore a battered pair of cargo pants and a long-sleeved t-shirt that teased at his musculature underneath. The bored expression on his face didn’t fool her, but she did wonder at how many people overlooked Reyes Vidal in a room, never wise to the fact that the Charlatan himself had half an ear on their conversation.

Switching her trajectory, she angled toward him, edging out to the side so he wouldn’t notice her immediately. Her plan to sneak up on him fell apart when his attention snapped to her the second she started his way. She should have known. He probably knew she was there the whole time.

Reyes smiled and winked, almost like nothing happened between them. The smile kind of pissed her off. Where was the kicked puppy look from when he visited her in the Tempest’s med bay?

“What do you think you’re doing here?” she demanded as she approached.

“What do you mean? I’m a guest of the Hyperion while my ship undergoes repairs. They have been quite accommodating.” His brow furrowed slightly. “I’m surprised you didn’t know. I thought Gil might have mentioned something.”

“Why would Gil say something?”

“Because he’s been helping me with the Gambler.” Now, he sounded genuinely bewildered. “It wasn’t a secret,” he added quickly.

“Uh-uh. Why is Gil helping you with repairs?”

“Because I’m paying him to. It’s not like he’s had anything better to do the last week.”

She folded her arms, eyes narrowed. “Paying him with what?”

“Credits. Why, aren’t you suspicious?” he huffed, lifting his cup back to his lips. “I’m just trying to
get my ship back on her feet. I’m not sulking here to ambush you or anyone else. I promise.”

Her anxiety settled down to a low grumble and she immediately felt like an asshole for the interrogation. She didn’t like treating him like this. She didn’t like being suspicious of his every move. She wished she could have approached him for a hug or a kiss or even a goddamn handshake. She didn’t want to be this angry.

He exhaled, shaking his head a little in frustration. She caught a rich, bitter flavor on his breath.

“What are you drinking?”

It was his turn to narrow his eyes. “Don’t even think about it. I paid through the nose for this cup of coffee and you can’t have it.” He closed protectively around it.

She took a step forward. “Lexi banned me from having any while I recovered and I think Vetra traded my stash for something while I was away.”

“Not my problem.”

“Just a sip?” she pleaded.

He sterned his expression. “Sips are for friends only.”

“We can be friends again.” She knew she meant the words even as they passed through her lips. She intended to be flippant, to try them out before she decided whether she was serious or not, but her voice took a husky tone and she knew she would stand by them.

Pain flickered across his face, but he shut it down, staring very intently down into his cup. “No, Violet. I can’t be just your friend.”

Just.

The breath squeezed tightly in her chest. “Okay.”

“Okay?” His eyes snapped up to search her face. “Okay, what?”

“Let’s go talk somewhere, um, not fifteen feet away from my boss.” She jerked her chin toward Addison.

“You have quarters here?”

“Avery is in them right now. The Gambler?”

“Other end of the station. Still smells like filthy, unwashed junkers. The Tempest?”

“Kallo and Vetra have it. They’re resupplying at the Nexus and won’t be back until tomorrow.”

Reyes exhaled in annoyance, then jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “I know where there’s a supply closet around the corner. We can recreate our first date.”

“Our first date was the market.”

“No.” His eyes darkened as he reached out with his free hand to touch the corner of her scarf. “I spent that day with you to maneuver you. It doesn’t count.”

She’d gone over all of their interactions with a fine-toothed comb after she found out he was the
Charlatan. That day in the market had felt like one, big manipulation. At least he owned it now.

“Well, it sounds like it’s the Gambler or a closet, and as much as I liked our first time in one, I’d rather be somewhere people don’t come running if shouting breaks out,” she declared.

He hesitated. “Angry shouting or…?”

“That depends entirely on what you have to say.”

He licked his lips and jerked his chin. “We’ll want to take the shuttle. It’s a long walk otherwise.”

She eyed the cup in his hands as they turned to go. “So, you going to share or not?”

“That depends. Are we friends, or not?”

“You said you don’t want to be friends.”

“I said I don’t want to be just friends.”

Her heart did that thing again. It was a wonder SAM wasn’t raising hell, demanding she return immediately to see the doctor.

She managed to utter, “Well, I guess we’ll find out.”

He tipped the cup back and drained it. “I guess we will.”

“Asshole.”

“The worst,” he agreed with a casual wink, his dimple making a brief appearance on his cheek.

Violet almost grabbed him then. Her fingers itched, her body betraying her with a deep ache. She stuffed her hands in her pockets before some part of her broke out in full scale rebellion. She had conditions to set first. Boundaries. Things that needed to be said before she could give into the burning need for him that was becoming harder to push aside and ignore. And oh, damn, why did he have to look that good?

She needed to be smart about this. She couldn’t fall back into old habits. She couldn’t leave herself vulnerable to that kind of hurt again.

“Hey, Pathfinder!” They didn’t make it far before Liam shouted to get her attention. “You good?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” A blatant lie, if she ever heard one, but she wasn’t ready to face it yet.

“Call if you need help moving a body. You know I’m here for you.”

She couldn’t help but grin. “You’re the best, Liam!”

They weren’t the only ones headed to the far side of the ship where the only intact docking bay existed. They loaded into the shuttle with four other people, effectively putting their conversation on hold. They sat shoulder-to-shoulder on a seat at the back, almost touching, acutely aware of how close they were. The shuttled bumped as it passed through a damaged section of the ship, knocking their knees together.

Violet felt like a goddamn livewire. She sucked in a sharp breath, her leg tingling where his brushed against it. One of Reyes’s hands slipped over her knee, lighting up every nerve in her body. She set her hand over his, meaning to pry him off with a stern warning, and instead tangled her fingers in his,
heart drumming against her ribs. After another minute, he angled his face against her neck, inhaling deeply and teasing gentle kisses under her ear.

“Fuck,” she whispered, body so taut she thought she was going to snap. They weren’t going to make it through an honest conversation. They were going to hook up first. She knew, and from what she could tell, so did he.

His teeth grazed her earlobe. “I can stop.”

“Don’t you fucking dare.”

She felt his grin against her skin.

The shuttle glided to a gentle stop before they lost any more control. She hung onto his hand as he led the way briskly off the shuttle and out of an airlock that had been transformed into an open exit. The space beyond had been cleared into temporary landing pads for a half dozen ships, including the Gambler. She cringed when she saw it. The good news was, the mural was no longer the ugliest thing about it. Significant chunks lay scattered in pieces, contained by thermal netting so nobody with light fingers made off with it while he wasn’t looking.

“Shit, Reyes.”

“It’s not as bad as it looks. It’s just slow getting it back together.”

He dropped the cargo loading dock using his omnitool to let them on. The ship still smelled, unfortunately, like sweaty pirate, but it was private and it was quiet. Her body practically hummed as he turned toward her with questions in his eyes.

Violet cut him off, grabbing the front of his shirt and pressing a breathless kiss against his lips. They could hash things out later. Her shoulders hit the bulkhead as he spun her and pinned her there, a knee sliding between her legs and fingers pressing hard into her hips.

“Do you…” He gasped between desperate kisses. “…want to talk first?”

“No.”

“Okay.”

He tasted like the coffee he denied her. Their tongues tangled, seeking, demanding a makeup for lost time. She couldn’t get enough of him fast enough. His fingers tugged at the button on her jeans while she shoved both hands under his shirt. Their frantic pace made them clumsy, knuckles knocking together, kisses missing their target.

“I hate these fucking pants,” he complained, breathing raggedly against her mouth as he broke away to look down between them.

They were the same pair she wore their first time together, the ones he always struggled to peel from her body. He dropped to his knees, hooking his fingers in the waistband on either hip, and dragged them down, focusing on getting one boot off and one leg out before calling it good. Still kneeling, he set his mouth against her cunt and licked into it. Not much technique, but points for enthusiasm. She dropped her head back against the cold wall and threaded her fingers in his hair, letting out ragged moans as fire pooled in her belly. She didn’t know if she should be embarrassed or impressed how hot and slick she got for him without a proper warmup.

When her knees threatened to buckle as pressure built under his ministrations, she tugged his hair
gently to pull his head away, drawing him back up to make a second attempt at declothing him with trembling fingers. “Bed?” she asked between breaths.

“Um…” He cringed a little. “I haven’t even been sleeping in it. I’m ripping it out and replacing it before I even consider it. It’s got...stains. And smells. The crew bunks aren’t as bad, but they’re still rough.”

She peeled his shirt over his head, revealing an expanse of warm, bronze skin already misted with sweat. “Um. Pilot’s seat?”

“That’ll work.”

“Where have you been sleeping, if not any of the bunks?”

“Pilot’s seat,” he confessed.

“That can’t be good for your back.”

“I’ll live.”

They maneuvered further into the ship, past the cargo hold and up toward the bridge. The *Gambler* wasn’t as large as the *Tempest*, but it had been built similarly for science and exploration, so it had most of the same features, if on a smaller, more compact scale. Instead of having separate tech and bio labs, it had stations built into a larger meeting room, a closet-sized med bay, and lines of lockers built into one wall instead of a full armory.

Violet managed to kick off her other shoe and pry her remaining leg out of her pants on the way, leaving a sprinkle of clothes behind them. Reyes similarly got himself out of the boots and cargo pants. She unwound her scarf and swept her sweater over her head, dropping them haphazardly and shoving him down into the pilot’s chair once they crossed the bridge. He gazed up at her with lust-blackened eyes and parted lips. Her breath to lodged in her chest he looked so damn good.

He shared her train of thought. “You are so fucking beautiful, Vi. God, you are so beautiful.”

She reached behind her back and unclipped her bra, letting it slide sensuously from her shoulders, flinging it on the flight console and dropping to her knees, scraping her nails down his thighs, smirking at the resulting shiver. His cock already stood to attention, eager and begging to be acknowledged. She explored it with light, teasing touches first, finding it heavy and familiar. His breathing seemed to stop entirely until she traced the length with the tip of her tongue and then fit her lips around the swollen head. A sigh exploded from his lips as he remembered to breathe. She worked her way further down his shaft, taking more with each pass. A deep groan built in his chest and he strained to keep still under her, one hand tangling in her hair, not quite tightly enough to control her movements.

As far as blowjobs went, she admitted, it was sloppy. She didn’t care to pull out any tricks that would leave him a writhing mess, she just wanted to get him hard enough to fuck. It was a sad excuse for foreplay, but she couldn’t dredge up a single fuck to give. She wanted him inside of her, wanted their bodies joined and rocking together in mutual ecstasy.

He apparently had the same idea. “That’s good enough, amor. Come here. I want the rest of you.”

Pulling back, dragging her hair out of her face, she pressed kisses up the center of his body until she reached his mouth, climbing into his lap with her legs draped on either side of him. She studied his whiskey eyes as she guided him into her slick heat, watching every minute change on his face ranging from relief to longing to ecstasy. What lingering doubts remained turned to ash, the tiny
voice that whispered warnings that this might be yet another con dying out. This was just Reyes.

Violet had to pause, eyes half-lidded, body frozen in place. It felt right. It felt amazing. The last few weeks seemed so distant, they might as well have happened to another person.

“Vi?” he prompted after a moment.

“I’m good. Just...fuck. I missed this. Missed you.”

“Yeah, same. But *amor*, if you don’t start moving, I’m going to die,” he warned huskily.

“I was savoring it.”

“Your savor is torture. Please start moving.”

A slow grin bloomed on her face as she combed his hair back with her fingers, pressing the whisper of a kiss against his lips. “Or what?”

“Or I bend you over that console and fuck you until you can’t walk.”

“Promises, promises.” She rolled her hips, releasing some of the tension between them. “Is that what you want?”

“Yes. Fuck. Vi.”

Another roll, more of a buck this time. “I don’t know. This whole console idea has some merit.”

“I’ll do whatever you want, just don’t stop moving.”

Violet’s toes barely reached the floor. Unable to get leverage that way, she draped her arms around his shoulders and used it to brace every lift of her body. He assisted, large, rough hands closing around her hips and pushing and pulling at his leisure. Her jagged breaths turned into frantic grunts as the seat creaked in time with their movements, but she couldn’t quite get the angle and friction she was after.

“This isn’t working for me,” she huffed in his ear after a minute.

He froze immediately, chest heaving. “You’re right. We’ll stop. We shouldn’t have--”

“No, idiot. This position. I’m never going to come like this.”

He dropped his head back with a long exhale. “Shit, I thought you were seriously going to tell me to go.”

She found herself laughing, ruining the mood entirely as she clapped a hand over her mouth. She pressed her palm to his chest, aware that his fluttering heartbeat had less to do with their exertions and more to do with unadulterated panic.

“Oh, you think that’s funny?” he growled, grabbing her by the back of her neck.

She took her bottom lip between her teeth and pressed her forehead to his, stroking his chest and broad shoulders. “You should see your face.”

“I’m on pins and needles here, Vi. You have all the power.”

She cocked her head to the side. “How does that feel, at a loss for control?”
“I thought you wanted to talk after we fucked.”

She kissed his scowl. “I do. In the meantime, the pilot chair was a good thought, but…”

Holding her hips steady, he flowed out of the chair and boosted her so that her ass settled on the cold, dark computer panel that he normally used to fly the ship. She hissed, the panel frigid under her body. Hooking her ankles behind his thighs, she pulled him in and tried to escape the chill of the console.

“Lay back,” he coaxed, hips starting a slow, easy rhythm.

“Hell no! It’s cold.”

Catching her hands, he bent her over, pressing her back along another screen until her knuckles brushed the window projection, his body covering hers from the point where they were joined. She sucked in a breath through her teeth, groaning at the dichotomy between the heat of his body on one side and the chill of the panel on the other. After a moment she settled, lip fastened back between her teeth, moving to meet each rock of his hips. Releasing her hands, he roamed her body, caressing over her shoulders and breasts, squeezing her small swells then smoothing over her ribcage, all the while burning inside her with hard, fast snaps that made her toes curl.

He leaned away to watch her for a minute, lips parted, eyes hooded. She reached up and caught his fingers, anchoring herself as the rest of her body strained against him. Using the hand as leverage, he pulled her into a sitting position, releasing her from the panel’s cold surface and drawing her close. He tucked his face into the crook of her neck. Lips, teeth, and tongue painted patterns against her skin, his breath shuddering in her ear.

“Perdóname,” he whispered into her hair. “Por favor, mi amor.”

Settling a hand on the side of his face, she met his honey brown eyes. He groaned and squeezed his eyes shut again, digging his fingers into her hips to keep her steady for each thrust that shoved her back on the console.

“How much did you miss me?” she whispered.

“Every moment was agony.”

She smirked, dragging her fingernails over his scalp, messing his hair. “How often did you think about me?”

“All the time.”

“Did you touch yourself thinking about me?”

He groaned and confessed, “Yes.”

Turning her lips against his ear, she uttered, “So did I.”

His body shuddered, losing its rhythm.

“I was so fucking mad at you, but I missed you and I wanted you,” she panted.

“I’m sorry. Forgive me.”

“Do you honestly think I’d be here if I hadn’t?”
“So, you’re what, just torturing me for fun making me guess?”

Her smile turned wicked. “Maybe a little.”

He kissed her hard on the mouth, stealing the smile away, but some of the tension bled out of Reyes’s body.

The truth was, she couldn’t have eased his thoughts before they started. She didn’t know, until that moment, how much of her anger had already seeped away. She couldn’t seem to recall all the reasons the betrayal upset her. But, then again, it was tough to say anything for certain with his mouth on her neck and his fingers circling her clit.

“Harder,” she huffed, seeking purchase on the console with her hands.

Contrary to her demand, he slowed down.

“Oh, we’re playing this fucking game, are we?”

He pulled her down off the console, standing her up and pulling away. “I think I’ve spent enough time worrying what you want.” He spun her roughly, fingers digging bruises into her hips. “I think it’s time, hermosa, to take a little for me.”

“Oh, so that’s--” she began, but her words bit off with a languid groan as he hilted himself in her.

She surrendered control, palms pressed against the array under her, back arched. Reyes fucked her into it, the corner digging painfully into her belly, but she found herself pleading for more. One of his hands snaked around to pay attention to her clit while the other tangled in her long, dark hair. Their gasps and moans mingled together, filling the bridge with their personal symphony.

A familiar tightness coiled within her. She staved it off, unwilling to give in just yet, not ready to cross that finish line and return to real life. The noises spilling from her lips were something she could deny knowledge of later, but between her desperate sobs, she heard her name rasp against her skin. The building pressure in her body shattered, leaving her a boneless mess beneath him. He rode through her orgasm with fractured comments of approval, teasing out little aftershocks. He came after another minute, slowing to a disjointed pace and then stilling on top of her. Neither moved for a long minute, relearning how to breathe and think.

After he eased his weight off of her he dropped back into the pilot’s seat. Violet scraped sweaty strands of hair from her face and slowly rotated around, slick between her thighs. She dropped heavily into his lap, claiming a languid kiss or two.

“Probably…” He shifted, a glimmer of discomfort crossing his features. “Probably ought to have used a condom.”

“You’re both clean.”

They both jumped at SAM’s voice.

“Um…” he began.

“The doctors in medical tested your blood sample when you went to see them about minor injuries sustained during the crash.”

“They released my medical record to you?” he asked, bewildered.
The AI hesitated. “...no.”

“You hacked his records?” Violet cried.

“Only after it was clear you two were going to engage in unprotected sex. I thought it more prudent to hack the records than interrupt.”

He laughed, dragging a hand down his face. “Thanks, SAM.”

“If my father had any idea what his precious AI was doing for me…”

“You mean, helping you get laid.”

“Exactly.” She smiled, searching his face. “But now we need to talk.”

“You sure you want to do this without coffee?”

She let out a noise of pure agony. “Don’t remind me. Now come on. Things are complicated. Lord knows I want them to work, but we have to both be on board. I can’t make the same mistakes over and over again. Don’t make me be that person, Reyes.”

He trailed his fingertips up and down her arms. “I want to explain. There is no excuse for the way I used you, but there were reasons I did what I did. Not good reasons, but reasons.” He avoided her eyes. “The whole thing with Zia…it fucked me up. I was going to tell her that I was the Charlatan, cut her in, and I was originally going to do it the night she betrayed me. I ended up drunk and figured it ought to be a sober conversation, so I put it off. I was that close, Vi. That close to complete ruin because I let my heart get in the way. I wasn't going to let it happen again. Every time I thought about telling you, Zia popped up in my mind and I just couldn't do it.” His eyes pleaded with her to understand.

Having been well and truly screwed up by men in the past, Violet couldn't say she totally blamed him.

“So what now, then?”

“No more secrets,” he swore.

She reared back. “No.”

“No?”

“Don’t do that to us. Don’t set us up for failure. You’re the Charlatan and I'm still the Pathfinder. There are going to be things you can't tell me and things I don't want to know.”

He gazed at her with a critical eye, a gaze that belonged to a cunning businessman, not a lover or a friend. She matched it stubbornly.

“We have to find a way to make this work, but not with idealistic bullshit,” she snapped. “I told you, I'm not making the same mistakes over again.”

“I love you.”

She faltered, her next declaration dying before it reached her lips. “W...what?”

“Te amo, Violet. I love you.”
Fluttering, panicked, she squeaked out, “What did I just say about idealistic bullshit?”

“What can I say? I'm a romantic.” He searched her face, seeming to find what he was looking for. He kissed her stunned lips with a smirk, “I am going to have secrets. That much is inevitable. I will share with you what I can. The rest…”

She unstuck her tongue from the roof of her mouth. “I'll risk it,” she breathed. “I'll take the chance. I'll trust you not to screw me over or get people hurt.”

“You'll trust me?” he echoed, smile failing.

“That’s what you're asking for, isn't it?”

“I didn't expect you to agree so easily.” He glanced away again, studying the walls, looking at anything but her. Finally, he said, “That's a lot of trust I don't deserve.”

“So earn it. And if you take advantage, I won’t stop any of my crew from carrying through all the threats they’re going to make to you this week.”

He drew a deep breath. “Thank you.”

They sat quietly a moment, each reflecting the conversation and its implications.

“You want to clean up? My shower, at least, is functional,” he eventually offered.

She nodded and extracted herself from his lap. He stood, catching her hand and raising it to his lips before leading the way back the way they came. He took her to the crew quarters, which certainly contained an odor she didn't care to identify, but the bathroom looked like it had been viciously scrubbed until it sparkled.

“So how did you become the Charlatan in the first place?” she asked as she adjusted the temperature of the shower.

He laughed curtly. “Not on purpose. The name wasn't even my idea.”

“Was 'Shena’?”

Another laugh. “No, that one was my angaran liaison to Evfra.”

“Not because you talked his ear off, I take it?”

“Jealous?” he purred.

She climbed under the spray of the shower. “Who wouldn't be curious? It was all my crew could do not to ask Jaal to drop trou and show off his assets when he first came aboard. Thankfully, we have a full crew and limited shower space. No secrets among us.”

“Should I be jealous?” He climbed into the little cubicle, angling her so he could claim part of the spray.

“I love Jaal to pieces, but I think he's the type who needs the expression of undying commitment before jumping into bed with someone. I don't have that kind of patience.”

“Clearly.”

They passed a bar of standard issue soap between them to scrub away the evidence of their exertions.
“You were telling me how you became the Charlatan,” she reminded him.

“Right. I couldn't move openly against Sloane, but I wasn't going to put up living under her shit any more than I was Tann’s, so I started gathering anyone who agreed. To protect myself, I used proxies, people to pose as me to recruit or pass out orders. The locals started calling them charlatans because they were never who they claimed to be. The name stuck from there. It was truly an amazing phenomenon to witness. It gained its own reputation and rumors. I just had to keep my people organized and build.”

She spun him to squeeze further under the stream of water to rinse. “So now that you have Kadara, what's in store for the future for the Charlatan?”

“I'm so glad you asked.” He shut the water off and retrieved them towels from a locker across from the shower, passing her one. “Step one was to eliminate Sloane and strike an alliance with the Nexus. Step two will be securing leadership positions for those with an ounce of integrity that won't use Kadara as their personal toilet to shit in until all revenue possibilities are clogged. Step three, build a functional economy with long-term goals for success. Step four, hold open elections among the people so they can begin self-governing and I can relinquish any remaining control. Step five is to retire.”

Violet paused to gape. “You have a five step plan to retirement.”

“Ideally in less than ten years.”

“You're just going to step down and walk away?”

“Kadara needed the Charlatan to get started, but they don't need a king in the long run. The whole point of all of this was to live and work not under the thumb of a despot or a dictator. I just want to fucking fly again. This isn't exactly the life I envisioned when I signed my name on the dotted line back in the Milky Way.”

She folded her lips in, fighting a hysterical laugh. “So you built a criminal empire, violently overthrew a dictator, stole a city, and started a relationship back with the Initiative all because you want to fly your ship in peace?”

“What? Isn't that what you would do in my position?”

She framed his face with her hands. “You are so fucking brilliant and insane. I don't know what to do with you.”

“I have some ideas on where to start…”

“Hold that thought. This conversation isn't over. We have an issue of distance. My work is far from done and you can't rule Kadara off-planet.”

They returned back to the main hold of the ship, gathering up scattered articles of clothing.

“Right, distance,” he sighed. “Look, I'm not tied to Kadara. I'm off-planet all the time running cargo, especially now that I have my ship back. If you can get me a pass to Initiative property, I can meet you at any of the outposts or the Nexus. I currently have other people running those jobs, but I'd rather do them personally. Most of my Charlatan business doesn't require a physical presence. The name honestly does more work than I do.”

She eyed him skeptically. “What else would you do with a free pass to Initiative property?”
“So suspicious,” he huffed. “But you're right. I have to delegate every time I want to run cargo to and from outposts and the Nexus. I'm hemorrhaging money hiring people to do jobs I could do myself, especially because paperwork keeps getting fudged and cargo shifted, not to mention some people don't know how to be discreet and occasionally get themselves caught and either jailed or blacklisted.”

“I thought you were going legit with the alliance and outpost,” she accused.

“I still have to make money somehow,” he protested.

“And what happens when you get caught and jailed or blacklisted?”

“Please. I know how to conduct my business.”

She sighed, sorting through her assembled clothes to begin dressing. “So you want me to aid and abet?”

“Just a tiny bit.”

“It's a good cover, I admit. Arrive to meet your Pathfinder girlfriend for a torrid weekend and fly away with a couple of extra boxes of cargo?”

“Right?”

She was less impressed with his ingenuity than he was. “Not going to happen.”

He hooked his hands around her waist and pulled her in, kissing the side of her neck. “How about this? You think about it for a while. Come visit me on Kadara when you can. And when you get to the point where you miss me so much you can't stand it, we'll revisit this conversation.”

She groaned, arching into him. “And what about you in the meantime? There might be some serious stretches where we don't see each other.”

He grimaced. “Ah. Yes. I'd negotiate for an open relationship, but you're stuck trapped on your ship with only your crew. It hardly seems fair.”

“Your sense of nobility and fair play never ceases to amaze me.”

“While I'm flattered you genuinely believe that my libido is so overwhelming that it can barely be contained, I do, in fact, have a sense of faithfulness,” he protested, but added, after a pause, “And if I can fuck around, you can fuck around, and I want you frustrated and pliable the next time I bring up lifting the restrictions on me from Initiative property.”

She had to admit, she was a little relieved. Maybe down the line they could reconsider the terms of their relationship, but she needed him to herself at first. She needed reassurance that they could do this with a basic set of expectations.

“So how long do I get you here before you have to leave and we start our experiment in intermittent celibacy?”

She was half dressed, but he seemed intent on reversing that process again. She swatted his hand away from her underwear. “We head out the day after tomorrow.”

“Damn. I don't know how to fit all the things I want to do to you in a day.”

“Pathfinder. I can delay us almost a week,” SAM informed her.
“What? How?” She redirected Reyes’s hands again from getting into her pants.

“I can inform Dr. T’Perro that you are experiencing a headache with blurry vision. She will postpone our departure until you have been asymptomatic for five whole days.”

“Your SAM is learning some bad habits from you. How to wingman, helping you call in sick to get out of work…”

She finally let him plant his hands on her ass and tug her in. “My father would be so proud.”

“I don’t want to talk about your father,” he murmured against the skin on her shoulder. “Now, if I recall correctly, now that I think about it, there’s a bench by the drive core in the engine room we might get some use out of. Might be better than the pilot’s chair and flight console.”

“Fine, but the second the Tempest docks, we’re doing this in a real bed.”

“Where’s your sense of adventure, Pathfinder?”

“Well and truly dead, Reyes. Do you know how much goddamn adventure I’ve had since I arrived in Andromeda? I need a night in missionary followed up with some spooning where I can fall asleep by 2100. I’m so over adventure,” she groaned.

He chuckled, the rich, husky noise wrapping around her.

“Well,” she added musingly, propping her chin on his tattooed shoulder. “Maybe after we do it by the drive core.”

“Make you a deal. We defile this ship beyond what it’s already been defiled with, and as soon as the Tempest gets back to port, I’ll give you the most mundane, least adventurous sex of your life. All you’ll have to do is lie on your back and fake your own orgasm.”

“My god, that sounds perfect.”

He laughed again.

“Reyes.”

“Hmm?”

She took a steadying breath, and finally said, “I love you, too.”

Chapter End Notes

ONE MORE CHAPTER TO GO. We're almost finished! How did this beast even get this long? What do we do afterward? Does anybody else hear Sarah McLachlan singing mournfully in the background as the end draws near?
Reyes woke up disoriented. He squinted into the darkened room as lights bloomed overhead, gentle, so as not to sting his eyes.

"Good morning, Mr. Vidal."

Right. The Tempest.

"Morning, SAM." He stretched his arm across the empty space in the bed next to him. "Bit early for a wakeup call, don’t you think?"

"We have an early departure this morning. The rest of the crew is already mobile, making final preparations."

He groaned, rolling to a sitting position and dragging a hand down his face, palm catching over unshaven stubble. SAM meanwhile slowly raised the light level in the room as his eyes adjusted accordingly, giving him enough to be functional. Biting back a yawn, he groped around the piles of clothes off the edge of the bed until he came up with a pair of underwear, offering him enough modesty to make it to the showers next door.

Violet one time complained that the Pathfinder’s suite on the Tempest lacked a private shower. At the time, he thought she was being a bit spoiled, but after sharing the shower with the entire rest of her crew for a week, he would never judge her again.

The outside hallway smelled strongly of coffee, as it always did. The scent seemed to have permeated the entire ship, spreading room-to-room in steaming mugs.
The shower contained two open stalls side-by-side with no option for privacy, which Reyes learned, nobody cared about. Showers were claimed when they could by whoever had the time and opportunity to squeeze them in. He was reminded of being back in the Alliance and their utilitarian sense of resources and modesty. Nobody had time for to bother, which was how he ended up showering next to a spunky asari that morning with an incredibly distracting figure.

“Better not let Ryder see you peeking. I don’t want to be the cause of contention,” Peebee sang as she rinsed off.

“Please. You have nothing I haven’t seen before.” He kept his eyes fixed on the wall in front of him, ducking his head under the water. “And you made a stupid bet, giving us a two week max. Don’t blame me that you’re going to lose fifty credits to it. Contriving fights won’t help you.”

“Who told you?” she gasped.

“You all gamble worse than any exile I’ve met.” He lathered standard Initiative issue soap into his hair from the dispenser. “And you’re sloppy with your datapads.”

“Translation: you snooped.”

He flashed her a grin. “Who am I to deny the allure of free reading material left out in the open? It was sitting in the galley where anybody could find it.”

Her counter hit zero and shut off while she huffed over that. She squeezed past him to grab her towel leave. Reyes finished long before his timer ran out, the shower stripping away the last dregs of sleep. He retreated back to Violet’s room to dress, then beelined to the galley to pour himself a mug of coffee, pausing when he recognized it as his mug she stole months ago from his apartment.

“Hey. Kid.”

He glanced to the krogan taking up space in the doorway, blocking his way out. “Yes, right. If I hurt her in any way, shape, or form, you pop my head off like a zit. Do I have that right?”

“Yep. Glad we understand each other.” He turned and ambled off.

Laughing into his mug, he took it with him to find his errant Pathfinder and demand to know why she hadn’t squeezed in a quickie before starting her day. He found her up at the bridge at the computer between Kallo and Suvi, looking over star maps and gesturing around with a stylus. She wore the blue scarf he bought her back on Kadara. He stood back and watched for a moment, thinking about when he first caught sight of her in Kralla’s. Younger than he thought she’d be, but she held her own.

She glanced over her shoulder and caught sight of him, a smile working its way to her mouth. “That for me?” She nodded to the cup in her hand.

He quickly took another drink. “Some of us have our own addictions to feed, you know. When are you set to leave?”

“About an hour,” she admitted with a weak smile.

An hour. He had an hour left with her. How did five days go by so fast? If Kallo and Suvi weren’t sitting on either side of her, he would get to work making the most of it. He tried not to let his disappointment show in his face, burying it under a heavy dose of sarcasm.

“Oh, and were you going to bother waking me before taking off, or did you expect to Shanghai me
into service?”

She leaned back against the panel behind her, the screen showing the cluster framing her back, arms folded. “I’m not going to lie, the thought might have crossed my mind with some measure of seriousness.”

Crossing the bridge, he pretended they didn’t have an audience as he pecked a chaste kiss to her cheek and surrendered his coffee cup to her greedy hands. “Te amo.”

She perked a flirty eyebrow and lifted the mug to her lips. “I know.”

Kallo made a gagging noise and Suvi threw a pen him to shut him up.

“Your crew, at least, will be happy to be rid of me.”

“Not all of them. Jaal likes you,” Violet reasoned.

“Jaal likes everyone.”

“If you knew Jaal, you’d know that’s really not true.”

He lifted his eyes to the map behind her, studying it and realizing she’d been drawing up their schedule, circling the cluster, hitting planets and settlements and areas for exploration, ending in Kadara after a distressingly wide loop. Just calculating the time it would take in FTL, they were looking at weeks apart, if not more, depending on how long she stayed at each stop.

“What’s our separation looking like?”

“Little over a month.”

He groaned. “You couldn’t tighten it up any more than that?”

“Damage control, I’m afraid. I just saved this goddamn cluster, I’m not letting it go to shit overnight. I have work to do.”

“I could meet you at some of those spots, if you got me access…” At her unamused expression, he backpedaled. “Call me if you reconsider in a few weeks when you’re stressed and twitchy.”

“Reyes, I’m not helping you rob the Initiative. Especially because the second Tann finds out you’re the Charlatan, it’s my ass, not yours, that’s in the line of fire. Then we’ll both be stressed and twitchy, and separated by bars.”

He grimaced. “You’re right. I’ll work on Avitus, instead.”

“Damn right you will.” She patted his chest with one hand, sipping coffee with the other.

“Ryder, we’re cleared for departure in forty minutes,” Kallo informed her.

Reyes narrowed his eyes. “You really were going to kidnap me, weren’t you?”

“You aren’t a kid. I was going to abduct you.”

“Very funny. I guess that’s my cue to leave. Thank goodness the Gambler is almost fixed. This planet won’t be the same without you.” With the help of Violet, Gil, and a few volunteers from her crew, they’d about gotten it all back together.
“I’ll walk you out,” she offered with a small, apologetic smile.

“No. I hate long goodbyes. You keep doing your pathfinder thing and I’ll slip out the back.” At the risk of more eye rolling and disgusted noises from her pilot, he stole a breath-defying kiss and perhaps copped a bit of a feel. “Be. Careful,” he admonished sternly after pulling back. “If you die again, next time, please just lie to me.”

“And if I stay dead next time?”

“Then really don’t tell me.”

“Perfect opportunity to do a cliche twin switch with Avery. He can just impersonate me from then on.”

He choked a laugh. “I almost want to see that.” Shaking his head, he claimed one of her hands. “Call me when you get the chance. I’m having some people look into upgrades for Kadara’s satellites. Subspace communication is spotty at a certain distance, so we may run into problems once you reach the far side of the cluster, but we’ll get a few new buoys in orbit in middling star systems. I’ll have it cleared up before you miss my face too much.”

Nodding, it was her turn to issue warnings. “Don’t get into too much trouble. Please. And don’t be mean to Avitus. He’s a good pathfinder.”

He winked, releasing her to walk backwards out of reach. “Scouts honor.”

“You were never a scout of anything,” she shouted after him. “And your honor is highly suspect.”

Chuckling, he turned to go, forcing himself to leave before he convinced himself to stay. He had a few possessions still tucked in her quarters, but he abandoned them, assuming she might like a reminder and he might like them already in place for his next visit.

They had really jumped feet first into the idea of a committed relationship, but after losing her, after being forced to separate, he knew it was what he wanted. He didn’t think he would be as certain if he hadn’t first lived his life out of her orbit. Reyes generally had to learn these things the hard way, but at least he did learn.

He only wished Veronica could have had the chance to meet her...

“Hey, Vidal. You got a sec?” Vetra asked, catching up with him in the research room.

“I’m on my way out. What do you need?”

“I have list. Any of this stuff comes through Kadara, I want you to hang onto it so I get first dibs.” She handed him a datapad.

“Yeah, and what do I get in return?”

The turian’s mandibles clicked smugly. “You know I’m Ryder’s best friend.”

“Sure.”

“So when you fuck up, I’ll take your side. Soften the blow a little. Mitigate some of the damage.”

He thumbed through the contents of the datapad before transferring the information to his omnitool. He didn’t plan on putting himself in the position to be spaced from the relationship again, but he wasn’t perfect.
“I'll tag it. If anything comes through, you'll be the first to know.”

The rest of the crew scuttled around, preparing for departure, most of them waving him out. He wouldn't call the rest of them friends, just yet, but they tolerated him reasonably well.

He almost made it all the way out, doing, in his opinion, an admirable job not pining until he was out of visual range. He got one foot on the ramp before a metallic voice stopped him in his tracks.

“You weren't going to leave without saying goodbye, were you?”

“This isn't goodbye. I'll see you soon, SAM.”

“You cannot guarantee that.”

If he didn't know any better, he would say the AI was also anxious about the impending separation.

“We’ll be okay. Did you find the resolution you were looking for?”

“I believe I did. I don't think I fully appreciated the amount of personal risk contributed to maintaining a romantic attachment.”

“To be honest, neither did I,” he snorted.

“You and Ryder raised the stakes, though, despite the adversity you have already faced. You are strengthening the nature of your bond, but if it falls apart now…”

“It'll be worse than before? Yeah. That's why it takes a whole lot of trust.”

“But the risk is worth the reward.”

He grinned, flashing back to the things they did on about every surface of her quarters. And then all of the moments before, after, and between. The taste of coffee on her lips, her laugh, the twitch in the corner of her mouth that gave away when she was giving him crap.

“Worth the risk. And worth the effort. Violet and I have some...extra complications. There will be times of difficulty ahead. It will be hard.”

“There have already been difficult times.”

He laughed curtly. “Considering my job and considering her job, this was probably the easiest part of our relationship so far.”

“Do you not find that discouraging?”

“SAM, what about me makes you believe I don't revel in a challenge?”

He whirred for a moment. “I see your point.”

“I know you experience the relationship through Violet, but my door is always open if you want my perspective.”

“Thank you, Mr. Vidal.”

“I think maybe it's time for you to start calling me Reyes.”

“Of course. Have a safe trip back to Kadara.”
Shoving his hands in his pockets, he resumed course down the cargo ramp. He didn't have far to go. Violet had Kallo put the Tempest in the landing bay directly next to the Gambler. It was mostly intact. If he put in a hard day of work, he could be on his way back to Kadara by evening.

Several new messages pinged to his inbox by the time he heaved into the pilot’s seat. He intended on taking care of Collective business, to catch up and get a firm grip back around their progress, shaping and guiding them where he needed them to go to achieve his goals. Instead, he ended up opening the new email from Violet she managed to send in the two minutes since he last saw her.

_You ruined my plan. I was going to wake you up 15 minutes before taking off, just to see what you could accomplish with a deadline and give you a proper walk of shame off the Tempest. -V_

He smiled into his hand with a small shake of his head, and wrote back.

_SAM woke me up. Sneaky, cockblocking AI..._

They both predicted that it was only a matter of time before his role as the Charlatan and her job as the Pathfinder put them at odds again, but they were both fighters and both survivors. He’d built the Collective from scratch and a relationship from the ashes of lies. He could make it work.

He clicked out of his personal email and over to the Charlatan’s. If he wanted to retire on time and be free to chase the Pathfinder down across the cluster, he had get busy. Kadara wouldn't run itself.

Yet.

Chapter End Notes

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