Go Row the Boat to Safer Grounds

by lottielovebuzz

Summary

Ryder wakes to find her father is dead and he named her Pathfinder. She must navigate a strange, new galaxy whilst undertaking a task she had no preparation for. No big deal. It's not like she's got entire species expecting her to find them new worlds, delivering on the "Golden Worlds" promise that the Initiative sold them. And it's also not like she's got new aliens to deal with and Kett to kill. She can totally manage. No problem, whatsoever.

A retelling of Mass Effect: Andromeda with heavy focus on the Jaal/Ryder romance.
Notes

So, yeah, I really enjoyed playing Mass Effect: Andromeda (already on my 3rd play through) and I wanted to write a fic for it. I wanted to explore the relationships more because we didn’t really get that in the game. This is heavily focused on the Jaal/Ryder romance but there will be other pairings and friendships and that. I have no intention to go into serious depth of the missions -- I think that just gets a bit boring? There'll be recaps and if it is important to the Overall Story, I may go a bit into it but mostly? This is like, in between takes. I'll always reference missions, though, so we know where we are in reference to the rest of the game! :D

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter Notes

This is the most "walkthrough" it's going to get... well, after the next chapter with the Angara and that. It may be a bit boring but I had to start somewhere! I didn't want to start far in and have it be confusing af.

Ryder lies back on her bed with a huff. She closes her eyes as she throws an arm over her face. 'SAM, tell me when we're getting close to the destination.'

'Of course, Pathfinder.'

She draws a deep breath in and lets it out, trying her hardest to ignore the constant stream of thoughts in her head. They've been there ever since she woke up to the news that her father was dead — died to save her — and that his final act was to name her Pathfinder.

No matter how often people use that title, she knows she will never get used to it. It is foreign to her ears — probably always will be.

It feels like she's only been out for a minute when SAM informs her that she best make her way to the bridge as they were nearing their destination. Giving a loud huff, Ryder hauls herself from her bed and leaves her quarters, quickly climbing the ladders to take her into the cockpit.

'What have we got?' she questions, her eyes flickering between Suvi and Kallo as she strides towards the bridge. The console lifts from the floor as it senses her arrival and she rests her hands on it, taking in the sight of dark space before her.

'Nearly at the—' Kallo starts only to stop. His hands fly over his console in a whirl of movement. 'We're on a collision course with unknown objects!'

Ryder's eyes widen but despite the shock at her pilot's words, her mind is already working out a solution. She is a solider's daughter. She is Pathfinder. She may not have trained for this but she wasn't going to fail by crashing into some unknown object. She was not going to turn into rubble.

'Make corrections! SAM, are you on this?'

'Collision is imminent,' SAM declares and Ryder grinds her teeth together because really? That's the best the AI in her head can come up with.

'All stop! Now!' she orders as she slams her hand onto the bridge, falling forward as the engines cut off. The bridge console digs into her ribs but that sensation falls away as she glances at the huge ass ship right in front of her. Her mouth falls open and she takes a step backwards, hands hanging limp by her side.

'Oh, shit,' she whispers as her eyes roam the sight in front of her. Not only is there one huge ship blocking their path, but there are smaller ones surrounding it.

'Kett ships. A dozen — no, more!' Suvi declares as if she had been reading Ryder's mind. A part of her has enough sense to hope Suvi isn't hearing her thoughts now as all that's going around her head
is shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!

Even as Kallo informs her that they're stuck between a rock and a hard place — the Kett ships and the Scourge — and SAM informs her that the Kett are scanning them, it's that chant that fills her mind. She can't think of anything as she turns briefly, looking behind her as if her father were still there, waiting to correct her and show her the answer.

She's greeted only with thin air, however, and so she turns again. 'Well scan them back!' she snaps at SAM, unable to keep her anger in any longer.

Ryder turns when a voice comes that doesn't belong to any of her team. She hears them running from their own areas on the ship to her side, yet all Sara can focus on is the face in front of her. It's a Kett, that's for sure, but there's something different from the other ones she met on Habitat 7.

She remains silent even as it demands to know where "the one who activated the vault" is. It takes her a second to realise that it's looking for her father. And now it's looking for her thanks to the SAM transferral.

'You're the one in my way. Who the hell are you?' she demands, even though a part of her is screaming not to piss off the aliens with the huge guns pointed at them. She can't help it. Even when she was back on Prothean dig sites and dealing with pirate Bartarians, she always got snarky. It was a coping mechanism. That and humour.

The Tempest veers and Ryder struggles to keep her balance. Kallo and Suvi pitch in, telling her that they've locked the navigation and are trying to steer them into the ship.

Stepping forward, Ryder snaps, 'Just tell me what you want!'

'I won't explain what you can't understand.'

Ryder clenches her hands into fists, desperate to punch his ugly face. She was sick of people saying shit like that to her. It had started when she was a kid back on the Citadel and everyone danced around her questions because she was "too young" to understand.

Ryder, SAM's voice breaks her thoughts. She looks around but notices that no-one else is reacting to the AI. Private channel then. *I have almost regained control of the ship. I just need a few more seconds.*

Delay. She smirks. That is something she can do. She would always be the one to distract the person whilst Scott sneaked in behind her and stole whatever they were looking for.

'I actually happen to know a lot about the Remnant,' she declares, *thanks to the handy AI in my head,* she adds in her mind. 'We should compare notes. Maybe even over a drink. I have some great Krogan beer from the Milky Way. Though I have no idea how you'll react to it.'

'Enough!' the Archon spits and Sara manages to hold back a grin. *That's it. Get mad. Lose your concentration.* 'Your defiance is naive and reckless. This day marks the beginning of your greatness.'

'Well that was a cheery goodbye,' she murmurs as the Kett disappears and their controls come back online. The entire bridge is bright with light once more and Ryder takes a deep breath. *SAM?*

'I have plotted a potential course through the Scourge.'

SAM has barely finished speaking when she snaps, 'DO IT!'
Kallo steers the ship in a tight U away from the ship and straight into the hell of the Scourge. Ryder can only watch as they weave through the webs of the dark matter that makes the Scourge. She knows what it does to whatever it touches and she can only pray that Kallo and Suvi are talented enough to keep them clear from its tendrils.

She sees Kett ships pursue them but they all combust as they drive straight into the Scourge, not nearly as nimble as the Tempest as she dips and dives around the darkly beautiful phenomenon.

Sara can feel a scream building in her throat as the crew keep her updated on the state of her ship. She hears Suvi tell her that the Scourge clipped something but they were still moving so she could only assume it wasn't serious.

'It will be tight,' SAM declares as Vetra calls Kallo's name in either warning or prayer.

And then they're clear. The Scourge is behind them and Sara can't keep the whoop of joy from exploding from her throat. She moves to Kallo and claps him on his shoulder, a wide smile stretching across her face as Drack compliments him.

'Yeah, but who the hell was that guy?' Cora questions and Ryder feels the smile fade as she remembers the Kett and their conversation.

Before she can reply, Gil's voice comes over the comms: 'Ryder! We've got trouble down here. You need to find us a port. Now.'

So, maybe serious after all, she thinks as she turns her attention back to the bridge. 'Where did we end up anyway?'

Taking a deep breath, Ryder tells Gil to do whatever he can for now as they start their descent. She hopes that Suvi's right and that they really are at the location of the Vault. It would be nice for something to turn out right for a change.

Of course, she knows better than to think that as Suvi announces someone is trying to contact them.

'Damnit. We need to land.' She sighs. 'Open the comm.'

Ryder has no idea what to expect but of course, it just had to be a different language. She should have guessed as much. They clearly weren't Kett so why should their language be built into her translator? Gnawing on her lower lip, Sara tries to explain her intention but receives only more words she can't understand in reply.

Until Kallo announces that they sent a navpoint.

'Set us down,' Sara demands as she looks out over the planet. Most of it looks to be made of ash and fire and magma, but as they draw closer and closer to the navpoint, she sees a hint of lush greenery hidden in the middle of it all. Letting out a breathless laugh, she says, 'Look at that! It's beautiful!'

The second the Tempest sets down, Sara pushes away from the bridge. 'We need in that vault.' She starts to stride towards the door, ready to head outside, but her crew stops her.

'Please. You're not really going out there alone,' Vetra declares, making Ryder smile. It's heartwarming, really, how tight they've become already. How protective of the others they are, even after such a short period of time together.

'We can't have a repeat of last time.' She pushes forward again, moving through the loose wall made of Drack, Liam, Cora and Peebee. 'I'm Pathfinder — first contact is on me.'
'Most important thing ever. No pressure,' Liam jests and Ryder wants to both punch him and hug him for making jokes. It's almost like having Scott back at her side.

'Yeah, well, if this goes badly, like me getting eaten alive — even if it's hilarious — please destroy the vids,' she jokes as she walks backwards, only allowing herself a moment when the doors to the cockpit slide shut behind her and she's alone.

It takes herself only a second to steel herself, to turn her nerves into iron again, before she's making her way off the ship. She keeps her arms above her head, showing that she has no intention whatsoever to harm these new aliens. Even as they send a small army rushing towards her, all of them armed with huge guns that would easily blow her to pieces.

It makes her a little edgy but she doesn't care. First contact was going to go different this time. No deadly force unless attacked.

And no-one had opened fire yet. She was going to keep it that way.
Sara pulls herself into a sitting position with a loud groan. Her eyes glance around the room, looking over at SAM's glowing orb before licking her lips. She had tried to get a tiny nap after briefing her crew on their newest member, especially when she was heading to Voeld, a planet covered in ice.

Only, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't fall over.

'SAM?'

'Yes, Pathfinder?' comes his reply as she stands from the bed, moving over to his node. It rolls and pulses, a bright light that sometimes makes it hard for her to sleep.

'Where has our newest member settled?' she questions, stretching her arms above her head as she gives another groan. She walks over to her private terminal, quickly checking her emails.

'He is the Tech Lab, Pathfinder.'

She frowns, stopping flicking through her messages to turn to the glowing orb. 'The Tech Lab? Seriously?'

'Yes.'

Licking her lips, Sara pushes away from her terminal and walks towards the door to leave her chambers. 'Is he still awake?'

'Yes, Pathfinder. It is still the afternoon.'

Ryder stops for a moment, turning to the orb with narrowed eyes. 'That better not have been judgement in your voice, SAM,' she mutters as she leaves her quarters. She climbs the ladders to her left and moves down the glass pathway, making her way to the Tech Lab.

Vetra and Liam are working at the consoles beside it, tinkering away and she smiles in greeting at them. Her blue eyes dart towards the Tech Lab for a second before she veers over to the turian and human who are working side by side, in tense silence.

'Ryder,' Vetra greets, her subharmonics giving her voice a pleasant hum. 'Please, whatever you do, do not take me to Voeld. Turians do not like the cold.'

Ryder giggles as she leans against the wall next to her. She needs to crane her head to meet her eyes, hidden behind her visor. 'I'll keep that in mind. I was thinking Jaal and Liam then, anyway. The last thing I want is for my favourite turian to get frozen into an ice-cube.'

'I'm pretty sure I'm the only turian you know,' Vetra replies, her mandibles flaring in a way that Sara has started to compare to a smirk.

'Not true! I know Kandros!' Ryder says, her voice indignant. 'And I knew a couple back on the Citadel. Especially this one C-Sec officer who used to bust Scott and mine's asses all the damn time. And you are definitely my favourite!'

Vetra snorts. 'I'm honoured.'

'Have you spoke to the new guy?' Liam leans back, looking at her and apparently ignoring Vetra. She finds herself hoping that those two sort out their problems. Or at least, Liam stops being an ass
and harassing Vetra about her treatment of her younger sister. It has nothing to do with him — he should keep his comments to himself.

If things don't improve soon, she'll have to talk to him about it.

'Just on my way, actually.' Sara smiles. 'Please be nice to him. Remember, we are the aliens here. And after their run in with the kett, it's understandable why they're hesitant to trust us.'

'No need to tell me, Ryder. I feel sorry for the angara.'

'Pretty sure they don't need your pity, Kosta,' Vetra replies and Sara gnaws on her lower lip. After a moment, where Vetra and Liam refuse to back down from their glaring contest, Ryder huffs and pushes away from the door.

'You two have fun,' she mutters as she makes her way to the Tech Lab. She takes a second to steel herself before she opens the door and steps inside.

The angara in question has his back to her as he unpacks his belongings and makes the Tech Lab a bit more homey. Sara takes that moment to study him; he's unlike any of the aliens in the Milky Way — nothing like turians or krogan or elcor. She's amazed by his skin, a beautiful purple hue that looks soft like the worn leather couch that Liam brought from home. His cape is a bright azure that Sara remembers thinking brings out his eyes — and the second she thinks of those eyes, she longs to see them again. Every angara she had met had the same but Jaal's were… brighter somehow. Like galaxies of his own.

'Jaal?' she calls when she realises she's been studying him too long and if she gets caught, it's going to be pretty awkward.

He stands and turns towards her, and she has to fight a smile as she finally gets to look into those beautiful eyes again. There's something about him that draws Sara in… that makes her thankful that he brought up the idea of coming with her. 'So?'

Ryder swallows. 'We haven't had a chance to talk alone. You comfortable in here?' she asks, looking around herself. In all honesty, it doesn't look comfortable but she can't say anything. She's used to the Pathfinder Quarters. It's one of the only benefits that has come with the new job title.

He comes walking towards her then, closing the distance between them in a few strides of those strong, powerful legs. 'I took it. It feels strange to stay with the others. They're—you're—aliens,' he finishes and Ryder has to bite the inside of her cheek.

He had to remind himself that I'm an alien too, she thinks as she fights her smile. She has no idea why that makes her want to smile, but here she is. She shifts her weight onto one leg and smiles at him, shaking her head softly. 'And you're alien to us! So there! Something in common!'

He considers that for a brief second. 'We can consider that a place to start.'

Sara nods. 'Exactly.'

'Perhaps then, if we're all aliens, it's about what kind of aliens we are,' Jaal says softly and Sara can't stop her smile from turning softer. She stares at him for a moment, eyes open in wonder as she drink him in.

'You had no reason to trust us, and yet you signed up to help us anyway,' she finds herself saying, unable to hold her amazement inside for any longer.
'Perhaps it had nothing to do with you,' he replies and ouch, that hurt more that it probably should have.

Sara swallows and raises an eyebrow. She puts a smile on her face because that's how she's always dealt with her emotions. She hides behind a smile, a grin, a joke. 'Care to elaborate?'

'I do not.'

A silence descends over them and Ryder looks for anything to break it that she ends up asking about how he knows Moshae Sjefa. She thinks they're going to find common ground when he says he was her student as she studied the Remnant, but that idea falls short when he declares that he was so awful that he quit. Or was thrown out. He can't seem to remember.

Another silence follows and Sara cannot believe that it had started so good and now here they were. 'So… is that your rifle?'

'It is now. It's kett. With my own modifications,' he starts. 'I like to tinker — to get my hands on something and take it apart.'

Ryder smile returns then. 'That is a skill I know we can use, but I have one request,' she says, her grin growing until she baring teeth in that way Scott always calls "varren-like". 'Please don't take apart my ship.'

That earns her a smile, something that seems to transform his face. He gives a snort of laughter as he studies her. 'You're right. I signed up — volunteered — for this. It's… exciting. There's something unique about you — uneasy, raw — but somehow profound.'

Sara feels her cheeks redden and she only hopes the angara is still completely clueless on human behaviour that he doesn't understand what's happening. And he still doesn't trust her enough to ask.

'Face value,' she starts, trying to distract herself, 'that sounds like a compliment. A nice one.'

'It is. Angara feel deeply.' He chuckles. 'We have more trouble hiding our emotion than showing them.' He briefly turns to look over his shoulder, back at the things he had been occupied with before Sara had interrupted. 'I should get back to my work.'

And because Sara is still reeling from this entire conversation, and is mesmerised by his eyes, she says, 'When we have some downtime, I'd love to watch you work.'

'Sure. I could show everyone.'

Sara closes her eye for a second, reaching up to rub the back of her neck. *This would be an easy out, Sara, you should take it and lessen the embarrassment.* But she should have known. She never listens to her head. 'Um, no. Just us. So we can get to know each other a little better. Or just share a hobby.'

'Oh? Of course,' he says and Sara can't read the emotion in his voice. Nor can she read the expression on his face. She has no idea what Jaal is thinking about her proposition and so all she can do is end this before it just gets super awkward.

'Good! Good.' She almost rolls her eyes. *Smooth, Ryder.* 'I'll let you get back to it. If you need anything, I'm just down the hall on the deck below. Or you can just get SAM to get my attention. Also, we tend to gather in the galley at dinner for some bonding time. You should come along — if you feel up to it.'
He doesn't say anything for a bit, just looks at her before he replies, 'Thank you.'

Ryder nods her head. Then nods it again. 'Okay, see you, Jaal.'

'Ryder.'

Without waiting for the silence to turn awkward, Sara quickly leaves the Tech Lab and purposefully ignores the snickers coming from Vetra and Liam at the sight of her burning cheeks.
Sara often joked that Sara was ruled by her stomach.

It isn't exactly a lie. She's a snacker — eating little and often — and often having to stop whatever she's doing if her stomach even gives the hint of being empty.

So when her stomach gives a rumble, Sara pulls herself away from her datapad as she writes up her report of how first contact went on Aya, and makes her way to the galley. It's a welcome distraction if she's honest. She's always hated writing reports, even when they were on things she loved like Prothean artifcats.

Now that she was Pathfinder, the reports were more often and had to be more detailed than a simple "this is what we think this thing does" essay.

'SWhen did Tann say he wanted the report by?' Sara questions as she steps towards the door, blessing the ship's makers for putting the galley right next to her quarters. It was almost as if someone knew this would happen and that Sara Ryder would need easy access to her supply of snacks.

'Tomorrow morning, Pathfinder,' SAM replies causing Sara to groan. She rubs a hand over her face as she steps into the galley, amazed to find that Drack is nowhere to be seen.

She's even more amazed by the sight of Jaal Ama Darav sitting at the table, eating some sort of paste. He looks up, almost in guilt, when she steps inside and notices him. Ryder can't have that, so she smiles at him. 'You know, when I mentioned the galley, I meant coming down when everyone else is here.'

Sara reaches into the cupboard and pulls out the box with all her food inside. It's rather nice, to serve on a ship where no-one steals food. They're all so possessive over their own that they don't consider doing it. She can remember on one particular dig site, there was a guy who always forgot to order stuff and just scrounged off the others.

It annoyed Sara to no end.

She hates sharing food.

'I did not mean to offend—' Jaal starts but Sara turns, shaking her head with a kind smile on her face.

'I was joking. If you're still not ready to eat with us, that's fine.' She turns back to her collection and pulls out a few packets. She knows she'll be working late into the night and it's good to be stocked so she doesn't have to move again. 'Honestly, if it were the other way about, I'd probably still be locked in my room, refusing to even learn anyone's name.'

After deciding on what she wants to eat, Ryder shoves the box back into the cupboard and turns, leaning against the counter as she looks him over. No matter how many times she sees him, she's always amazed by how he looks.

'And yet here you are, talking to me right now.'

Sara shrugs with one shoulder. 'I suppose I'm used to aliens now. My dad fought in the First Contact War — it was this slaughter when we first encountered turians, what Vetra is. And yet, after that, we learnt to accept each other.' She snorts. 'Or at the very least, tolerate each other. I guess I know that not everyone is bad — except the kett. Those fuckers are awful.'
Jaal says nothing for a long time, looking at her with a blank expression on his face. Or maybe it just looks blank because Sara hasn't learnt how to read his expressions. Or maybe he's just masking his emotions because expressing to an alien is a hard thing to do.

Sara swallows, turning around briefly to examine the cupboards again. She opens and closes a few before turning back to him, hands empty except for the snacks she already had. 'So, tell me about yourself, Jaal. What's your story?'

She can read the expression that comes onto his face then. It's hesitation and wariness. His eyes narrow slightly as he grumbles, 'Why?'

Faltering, Sara puts a smile on her face. 'Well… why wouldn't you? Are you hiding something?'

'Possibly. That would only make sense.'

Tilting her head to the side, Sara glances at him through eyes narrowed in mock concern. 'You're messing with me, right?'

'Maybe. What does it mean?'

Immediately, the look of teasing disappears from Sara's face. Her shoulders drop as she licks her lower lip. 'Uh, it's an idiom. It means you're joking and trying to make me feel uncomfortable, that sort of thing.'

Recognition floods Jaal's face as he shifts in his seat. He shakes his head and Ryder feels a little bit better. 'Ah. Then no. Evfra warned me to be cautious… I'm not very good at it.' Ryder opens her mouth, ready to make a joke or tease him or ask him more questions, she's not entirely sure what'll come out. But Jaal speaks, cutting her off as he stands. 'That's enough. Until we've established a better trust with each other.'

Before she can say anything else, he strides from the galley, no doubt returning to the Tech Lab.

Sara watches him go, mouth pressed into a thin line, before she heaves a sigh. Without thinking, she shoves a biscuit into her mouth. At least it wasn't a straight out "get to fuck" thing. He holds faith in us establishing trust... so that's a win... I suppose.

With that in mind, Sara steps out of the galley, and walks headfirst into Drack's armoured chest. She yelps, bringing her hand up to rub her sore forehead, glaring at the krogan as he chuckles at her.

'Need to watch where you're going, kid.'

'Stop being so big, old man,' she replies as she steps aside, letting him step into the galley. Before the doors slide shut, a thought occurs to her and she turns, following him inside. 'Were you waiting for Jaal to leave before coming back here?'

He shrugs with one shoulder as he starts to rummage through the cupboards. 'I'm not here to make small talk with strangers.'

'Okay, a) you're part of my team, and so is he, so like it or not, you two need to get along, b) trust me, he's not big on small talk. You two would get along swimmingly, and c)...okay, I don't have a "c" but still!' Sara points her finger at Drack. 'Do better, old man.'

The battle hardened krogan only chuckles again in reply, so Sara turns and makes her way back to her quarters, trying to focus on the report to Tann that she still has to write.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I've made this a series! This fic will go on until the end of the game. I'll do a sequel of what I imagine comes after seeing as BioWare sucks and we aren't getting a sequel. And then I may do some one-shots in between of scenes that didn't fit into either story!! :D

I also have a Fem!Shep/Garrus walkthrough fic coming soon! I'm working on the first chapter of that now, so if you're interested, keep an eye out for that!!

'We're approaching Havarl, Pathfinder,' Kallo's voice filters through their private channel. Sara grins as she dashes from her quarters and quickly climbs to the bridge, rushing to the galaxy map between Suvi and Kallo.

She opens her mouth to say something, anything, but finds that no words will come to her. She just stares at the strange and new planet. A beautiful teal hue with white clouds, it is unlike anything that she has ever seen in the Milky Way.

'Sending the navpoint for Daar Pelaav,' Jaal's voice comes in through the comms. Sara watches as something pings on the galaxy map, as well as Kallo's console, marking the area that Jaal mentions. 'That is where the Moshae's team should be.'

Sara's hands tighten around the bridge console as she draws a breath in. This is us. We're starting to get somewhere. They'll get to talk to the Moshae's scientists, and then maybe get some information or a plan of action for getting her back and getting into Aya's vault. And when they finally get in there, they'll maybe get answers on how to live better in Andromeda.

'It used to be an angaran town,' Jaal continues, causing Sara to frown. Used to be? she wonders, thinking what happened that made it stop being an angaran town. She wants to ask him but remembers their last conversation. He refuses to share any information until there's trust between them and the only way she can do that is by landing on Havarl, and doing whatever needs to be done. Maybe then she'll get answers from him. 'There'll be landing pads and good sight lines for a safe approach.'

Taking a step closer to the window, Sara drinks in the growing sight of Havarl in all its plush greenery. A part of her realises she still hasn't said a single word since arriving — not even a simple hello to her crew members — but she's just too excited; to happy; to anxious.

Then Kallo speaks and his words dampen that excitement. 'Anomaly on sensors! Something big! Possible hostile. Taking evasive action.'

There's a beat as the three on the bridge are sat in tense silence, then Suvi speaks. 'Wait! I don't think it's…'

Sara had turned away from the window, looking towards her pilot at his exclamation, but now with Suvi's words, she's too curious again. She turns her head and her eyes grow wide in wonder at the sight before her.
Strange looking creatures float in the air. A part of her knows there's science behind it — that there's a solid reason for their ability to fly. But as she stares at them in that moment, all she thinks is how they seem to float in the sky, dancing on wind. They look unlike anything Sara has ever seen back at home and she feels the need to share this.

Kallo and Suvi say nothing, too rapt by the creatures themselves to reply, but she can sense their wonder. It's palpable. Her entire body hums from the energy and excitement, only growing and growing as they approach the landing zone and Kallo brings them in, setting the *Tempest* down.

Sara pushes away from the bridge. She quickly fidgets with her omni-tool, finding the right channels. 'Jaal and Cora meet me in the armoury and get ready. I want us on ground in ten minutes.'

'Be right there,' comes Cora's reply.

'Right away, Pathfinder.'

It doesn't take them long to get organised. There's a tense silence as she and Cora slip their armour on, then take their guns from the locker. Jaal sits, tinkering away with his kett rifle as they do this and she can't help but watch him. There's a tenseness in his shoulders from being surrounded by two aliens, but despite that, he seems almost relaxed as he works away on his gun.

Sara knows it's just the familiarity that's easing that tension a little, but it's nice to see him let loose a little.

'We ready?' she questions, waiting until both Cora and Jaal reply before she starts to head towards the air lock. As she walks, she tinkers with her omni-tool, channeling into the main comms. 'I have no idea how long we're going to be out here for. If you need me, get me on this channel. Until I get back…' she falters as she tries to think of the proper chain of command. Cora is her second, but if she takes the biotic with her… who is in charge? 'Uh. Until I get back, listen to Drack.'

His grumbling chuckle comes as no surprise. 'Don't expect me to thank you for that.'

'Well everyone just needs to behave themselves and we won't have any problems. I want to come back to my ship in one piece, please.'

She doesn't wait for a reply before she takes off, leaving Jaal and Cora to trail after her. Sara only stops on the ramp so that she can turn to the angara with a kind smile on her face. 'Lead the way, Jaal.'

Without saying a word, he takes off, not noticing when Sara draws to a sudden halt. She's too overwhelmed by the world around her to say anything to either Jaal or Cora… to let them know that *hey, the Pathfinder may be a little late, she's too distracted by the glowing plants.*

They both seem to notice, however, when they stop and turn to her. Cora raises an eyebrow but Sara can only shrug in response. 'Beautiful, isn't it?' Cora calls back, making her way back to Sara's side. 'I'm honestly in awe.'

'You're better at hiding it than I am, though,' Sara chuckles in reply. She shakes her head and makes herself walk again. 'Never mind, there'll be plenty of time to admire the flora later… if this all goes to plan.' Her gaze lands on Jaal and she offers him another gentle smile. She has no idea what it is about her and smiling at this guy. She just can't seem to stop. 'Take us to the scientist!'

He nods his head and starts walking, Ryder easily falling into step with him. They walk in a tense silence for a beat before he softly says, 'It is rather beautiful, isn't it?'
Sara is too amazed by the fact he's speaking to her that she takes longer to answer than usual. 'It really is.'

'This is the birthplace of the angara,' he declares, his voice wistful as he looks around himself. 'Our home world.'

Sara has no idea what to say to that. Especially when all she can think about in that moment is Earth and how much she'll miss it. It still doesn't seem real. Even after signing up for the Andromeda Initiative… even after being put into cyro… it doesn't feel real that there's no way of going back to the Milky Way.

She's got to make this work otherwise thousands upon thousands of lives came here for nothing.

She waits too long to reply and before she knows it, they're standing outside the building where all the scientists are waiting on her. She draws a deep breath and throws her shoulders back, steeling herself. It's no big deal. Just the future relationship between the Milky Way species and the angara. Nothing will go wrong if she epically fucks this up.

When they step through the door, they are greeted by a much smaller group than Ryder had expected. She isn't really sure what she had expected, but due to her previous experience, when someone says "science team" she imagines at least ten or fifteen people.

There are only three people in the main room.

A female angara steps forward, her wide eyes flitting over Ryder — almost scanning her — before they land on Jaal. There is clear disgust in her voice when she asked, 'Jaal, what are you doing here?' Her eyes dart over Ryder and Cora once more. 'And in the company of these... people?'

Sara turns her attention to Jaal. She knows that the angara on her team is here purely to supervise... and kill her if necessary. A thought that she often buries deep down whenever she is on the Tempest — though she does sleep with the door locked now, just to be safe. She has no idea what to expect him to say. They angara do seem to be brutally honest so maybe a "I'm here because Evfra sent me to keep an eye on her and take her out if she becomes a threat"? That doesn't seem so far off.

'Kiiran, this is Pathfinder Ryder from a long way away,' he says and she can't help but feel a little bit shocked that he's introducing her so easily. A part of her also smiles at that last part — a long way away — but she keeps her laughter in to avoid explaining why her weird sense of humour finds that funny. 'Ryder, Kiiran Dals, lead scientist at Daar Pelaav.'

Ryder has no idea what to say. A part of her just wants to gush about how beautiful the planet is — her inner explorer coming out — but she knows this isn't just a random meet up of a fellow member of the field crew. She is the Pathfinder and that means representing everything and everyone at this moment.

'I am honoured to meet you, as a representative of the Andromeda Initiative.' She smiles, feeling her pride swell and how easily she managed to say that. She didn't even stumble over any of the words or anything!

'Are all their people this formal?' Kiiran questions and shit. That was too formal? Sara wants to bang her head against a wall. Damn it, is anything good enough for these people? No doubt if she had just gone straight with gushing, Kiiran would have complained about that as well.

'I... don't think so,' Jaal replies slowly, turning to look at Kiiran. Sara can already feel her cheeks redden — an effect she's sadly never learnt to control — but focuses on the two angara in front of
her. 'Where's the rest of the team? Ryder has experience with Remnant. We might be able to help their investigations.'

_Huh, that's not so bad_, she thinks. At least he's seeming to admit that letting her try to help is worth it. If it were up to Evfra, she had no doubt he would have just shot her and be done with it.

Kiiran turns to Jaal. Sara takes that moment to study her — her skin is a different shade of purple, almost grey in some places and white in others. Her markings are two white lines stretching up from her eyes. The females are differently shaped than the males; smaller in frame, larger lips and a more pert nose.

'You haven't heard? Whilst they were exploring the monolith, something went terribly wrong.' Kiiran turns her attention back to Sara. 'They were caught in some sort of Remnant stasis field. Frozen in place. Unresponsive.'

Sara gnaws on her lower lip. She's never heard of anything like this before. Of course, her only experience with Remnant was the time it killed her and her father, and resetting the vault on Eos. Other than that... her experience is slim to none. All she knows is that, thanks to SAM, she can control it.

'I know how to work Remnant tech,' she says, hoping this isn't going too far. The last time she offered help to an angara, he had nearly snapped her neck. 'I can help you.'

'Ryder has seen a vault. And apparently reset it,' Jaal pitches in and God, he is just full of surprises today. Even if there is still some doubt in his voice, he is vouching for her. That's more than she thought he would do. 'Somehow.'

'Ocean of fish, one will have gems in its mouth. But if you think this alien can help, I'll set scepticism aside.' Ryder cocks her head to the side. _Ocean of fish, one will have gems in its mouth? What the hell does that mean?_ 'The monolith is not far from here. See what you can do. But be careful. We don't know what triggered the stasis last time, and it may happen again.'

Sara nods her head. 'I'll be back as soon as possible.'

Kiiran says nothing else as she turns away from her, back to whatever she had been working on. Sara takes that as her sign to leave and promptly comes back the way she came, listening as SAM fills her in on where the monolith appears to be.

'C'mon, guys, we've got scientists to help.'

By the time they make it back to the _Tempest_, Sara's stomach is growling. Her muscles ache from all the running about she did trying to find the monolith, rescue the scientists, fight all the wildlife that kept trying to eat her and her crew... and then she had spent a good while listening to the stories of Havarl's decline and the sighting of turians.

A part of her wants to stay out there and fix everything in one night. Find the turians and help them. Reset the vault and stop the decay of this beautiful planet. But she knows that it'll take time. She has tomorrow and the day after that, at the very least.

She'll have to talk to Evfra at some point as well but right now, helping the people of Havarl seems to be her main drive.

Jaal, Cora and Ryder all remove their armour in silence, though as usual, Ryder is the last to be finished due to the amount of gear she wears. Being Pathfinder is a shitty job with more people
shooting at you than usual.

And with the Archon on her ass... well, she can never be too prepared.

'Drack better have something good made up,' she declares as she finishes stepping out of her armour. She still needs to clean it but that can wait. She's too damn hungry to even lift her arms, let alone polish and buff her AI-issue armour.

'You can say that again,' Cora agrees as they all leave the armoury and make their way towards the galley. Sara idly notices Jaal tagging along behind them but says nothing — the last thing she wants to do is scare him off.

When they reach the galley, they find everyone else already there. The smell of whatever Drack's made fills the air and makes her stomach grumble loudly, announcing her presence to her entire crew before she can even summon a "hello".

'Got a plate already waiting for you, kid,' Drack mutters in that deep, gravelly voice of his, handing her and Cora a plate.

Sara smiles in thanks.

'How did it go?' Liam asks and she quickly recounts their encounter with the scientists. Her eyes notice Jaal standing by the threshold. He says nothing and doesn't add to the conversation at all, even when she butchers a few names that Cora corrects her with. But he stays and that's all that Sara needs at that moment to feel like she's making progress.

'Tomorrow, we're doing some more work. I know we need to work on rescuing the Moshae but we still don't have a location. Or Evfra's permission. Until we get that, we're staying here to help out.' Sara takes a mouthful before continuing. 'Vetra, do you mind coming tomorrow? Torvar — Kiiran's assistant — said that he saw turians. It may be a lead on their ark. Thought you'd wanna be there for that.'

Vetra's mandibles flare in what Sara knows is the turian version of a smile. She lowers her head just a bit as her eyes lock on Sara. 'Thanks, Ryder. I'd like that... I'm still not going near Voeld.'

Sara snorts. 'I didn't expect you to change your mind. You're good.' She stands, placing her dishes in the sink knowing full well it's not her turn to wash them so she's not going to bother. She turns and gives the crowd a wave. 'Well, Tann will need to hear about this. If you need me, I'll be next door... try not to need me.'

That earns her a chuckle from her crew and she leaves, stopping at Jaal's side for a moment. She smiles and lowers her voice. 'You up for coming out tomorrow as well? I plan on getting to Mithrava tomorrow to find out more about the vault. Thought you'd want to be there for that.'

Those large, galaxy-like eyes study her face for a long moment, before he nods his head. 'I'd like that. Thank you.'

He says nothing more, turning back to watching the crew interact for another minute, before he leaves for the Tech Lab. Sara watches him go before she turns to enter her chambers, trying to ignore the size of the smile on her face at that moment.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

i had intended to do more in this chapter but i thought it was long enough so... yeah!! here it is. hope you enjoy! :D also I have a drawing of my custom Ryder that this one is based off of, if you're interested!

It doesn't take them long to find the turians — to be honest, all they needed to do was follow the sound of shooting — and the discovery that they're in trouble with the Roekaar only makes Ryder groan before she pulls her sniper rifle from her back.

'Roekaar,' Jaal sneers as he comes up beside her, his gun already drawn. 'They hate all aliens. That will be why your people are being attacked.'

Sara sighs. 'No way of talking to them? Showing them we aren't all bad?'

Jaal only snorts. 'The Roekaar do not talk to aliens.'

Rolling her eyes, Sara pushes forward, moving into cover and aiding the turians as best she could. It doesn't take long for them to defeat the Roekaar, leaving countless bodies in the wilds of Havarl. It makes her heart ache as she passes them — pointless death all because they refuse to listen; refuse to see that they are not like the kett.

She's surprised when she meets up with the turians Pathfinder's second in command, Avitus Rix. It's almost a relief to hear that SAM hasn't passed to him yet — that means the Pathfinder is still out there. That the ark is still out there.

'I'll call you if I hear anything about the turian ark,' Sara says in a soft voice. She tries to keep the frown off her face because she doesn't want the turian to think she's frowning at him; that she's hiding bad news. The truth is she's just sick of this bloody rain. It hadn't rained yesterday as she had saved the scientists from their stasis field... but now? Now it was lashing against her skin and if there's one thing Sara Ryder hates, it's rain. 'I promise.'

'Thank you, Ryder.'

She turns, ready to leave and head to Mithrava when another turian catches her attention, asking for help to recover salvage from their escape pods. Sara tries to change the woman's mind, trying to make her see that it's just junk but the turian is stubborn as they always are. And Sara is too damn nice to refuse.

'Okay, we're going on a little detour,' she declares as she leaves the turian, checking her omni-tool for the navpoints the turian had given her. 'I said I'd help mark some salvage, so we'll do that and then head up to Mithrava to speak to the sages... sound like a plan?'

She lifts her head once she's got her bearings in mind, only to find Vetra scowling at her. The armour around her cowl is starting to fill with water and she looks downright pathetic. Ryder has to bite her lower lip in order to stop herself from laughing. It takes a solid ten seconds for her to get herself under control before she can reply.
'Vetra, why don't you head back and tell Peebee to meet us here? Kiiran said we'd run into RemTech so no doubt Peebee will love that.'

The second the words are out of her mouth, Vetra's brow plates shoot up in gratitude. She turns, waving her hand over her shoulder as she calls out, 'Thanks, Ryder, won't be long!'

Giving a chuckle, Ryder draws her pistol and sits down on the nearest rock, after checking it for any slime or fungus. She lays her gun across her lap, just in case anything jumps out of the bushes at her — she's learnt pretty quickly that whilst Havarl is beautiful, it's also deadly as fuck. Roekaar hiding around every corner; challyrions, rylkors, eirochs and other weird ass alien creatures trying to eat her; Remnant thrown in because organics just aren't enough of an enemy. The only damn thing missing from Havarl is kett trying to kill them.

'Turians do not seem made for rain,' Jaal says. He doesn't sit beside her but stands in front of her. It's progress, Sara realises as she smiles up at him.

'Oh hell no. Their home planet is called Palavan. It's got high solar radiation. That's why they evolved as they did with the metallic carapace and such. So, they tend to prefer dry, warm planets rather than...' Sara waves her hand around herself. 'This.'

'You seem to know an awful lot about this.'

Sara's smile widens. 'Yeah, I've always enjoyed biology and history and the turians interest me so much. I have no idea why.'

'You have no idea about what?' a familiar voice calls out and Sara turns to see Peebee jogging towards them. She has a grin on her face as always, and when she sees Jaal, she sends him a wink. 'Hey, Jaal.'

Sara stands and shakes her head. 'Never mind. Come on, we'll quickly tag this salvage and then Mithrava awaits.'

The salvage doesn't take as long as Sara thought, and they thankfully find their last piece by the entrance to Mithrava, which makes her even more grateful. Maybe there is someone looking out for her.

But by the time the reach the top, all of Sara's muscles are screaming in protest, and she's starting to think she was wrong. There's no-one looking out for her. There are muscles that she hadn't even felt before that are in absolute agony thanks to this relentless climb. Her jump-jets definitely helped — she couldn't imagine having to do that without them — but even still... she really needs a long shower after this.

Or a bath. That would be even better. She almost wishes that the Tempest had one. She may have to send a request to Tann — she's sure they'll be able to fit it somewhere.

Before her mind can start pulling up the plans of the Tempest and trying to find the perfect spot for her imaginary bathtub, someone is speaking. She blinks, finding an angara walking towards her. They're male, grey with pinkish undertones and white markings on his face. But with those huge, blue eyes that hold countless constellations in them.

'You bypassed our security. How is that possible? An alien?'

Sara is too sore and tired to try and find the right tone for these angara. She's gotten on better terms with Kiiran. She's trying to help Havarl. Surely that means she can let her guard down a little. 'What?
Is it supposed to be hard?'

Peebee snorts at her comment. And she even sees Jaal's lip twitch into a smile from the corner of her eye.

The man in front of her doesn't share in the amusement, however. But he doesn't look pissed off which is something. 'That doesn't explain how or why you were able to operate Remnant doors.' He shakes his head. 'Never mind. You must leave. We do not entertain guests here.'

*Oh hell no, Sara thinks, I did not climb to the top of this fucking thing just to leave without any information.* She takes a step forward. 'Havarl is in decline. If you tell me about the lost monolith, I can help fix it. I can reset the vault.'

Jaal, who had been looking at Ryder, turns to the sage. 'With Ryder's help, Havarl could be healed. Our birthplace, restored. Isn't that worth something?'

Ryder can hear the passion in his deep voice. There's a little bit of desperation there as well. He wants to see his planet restored and somehow, that makes Ryder warm to the angara even more. He normally appears so calm and cool and distant — no doubt because of his distrust of her — but to see him care about this...

Reaching up, Sara runs a hand through her blue hair. It clings to her face and oh, how she wish she wore her helmet. It almost makes her wish that Havarl was like Habitat 7 where the oxygen levels were too low. At least then her hair would be dry.

'It's lost. The memories of its location haven't been reclaimed.' He pauses. 'On Mithrava, we have accepted Havarl's eventual ruin.'

Sara shakes her head. 'But this is your home planet! You can't just give up! Don't you want to save Havarl?'

'A chasm separates "want" from "can". What you ask, no-one can give. The memory of the monolith resides within a thread that has slipped from our grasp.'

Ryder blinks.

What?

'I'm not sure I follow.'

'We believe in reincarnation,' Jaal chimes in and Sara turns to him. Once again, she finds herself amazed by his eyes. No matter how many angara she sees, his always seem... special. 'An unbroken thread.'

'There was one, long ago, who had knowledge of the third monolith. Zorai, a champion of the angara before the Scourge. Zorai's soul has returned and could be made to remember what it knew, but we have no contact with it.'

It takes her a long moment to realise that they're being completely serious with her. She almost expected them to be pulling a joke on the strange new alien... but nope. They are completely serious.

'Wait... you're saying you can make people remember their past lives? How is that possible?'

'Souls return within families. An object — heirloom — tied closely to that bloodline could cause memories to resurface.'
By his tone, Sara knew what was coming next. 'But it's not guaranteed,' she finished. She listens as he explains it more and as he tells her that the last known location for Zorai's heirloom resides in a Remnant invested area. She feels her entire body deflate because of course, why is this never easy? It's just one shit heap after another.

That feeling only grows as he says that Zorai's latest descendant is called Taavos, and that he is a member of the Roekaar. She wants to scream to the heavens because now, not only do they have to fight Remnant to get the heirloom, they now have to fight their way through a Roekaar camp to get to him. And then hope that this whole entire thing works.

'A Roekaar?' Jaal says. 'That'll be difficult.'

She puts a grin on her face as she turns to him. 'That's why you're here, Jaal.'

'They won't like that I'm helping you.'

'This may be a dead end but it's our only chance. We have to give it a try.'

'I will send you the relevant coordinates. We considered Havarl a lost cause but, perhaps now, there is hope.'

The sage turns away then and Sara takes that as her cue to leave, but before she can make it back to the gravity well, she sees two angara and her attention is diverted. She walks over to them, listening as the woman gives the man a lesson. Only the second they spot her, the female trails off and she turns to Ryder.

After introducing herself as Sage Fleera, she says about how there's unearthed RemTech hidden on Havarl and that piques Sara's interest. She makes a mental note to SAM to keep an eye out for anything that seems familiar, before allowing Fleera to continue with her lesson.

'Come on, Ryder!' Peebee moans, causing Sara to shoot her a grin. But the second she does, she sees a distraught looking angara over her shoulder. Before she knows it, she's walking over to him, ignoring Peebee's groan in response.

'Is everything all right?'

'Amurd is ill. He hasn't got much time left,' the woman accompanying him says. 'Amurd, perhaps this stranger can help. If they've been to Pelaav, maybe they've seen something.'

It takes them a little while to remind Amurd that Pelaav had been run over by forest and abandoned. Sara agrees to go and search for some sort of evacuation information, no matter what, and return to Amurd to let him know where his sister, Amara, is so he may speak to her.

'Are we done?' Peebee asks as they finally start to head back to the gravity well. 'No more picking up stray tasks? We're going to retrieve this object?'

With a grin on her lips, Sara steps up to the gravity well. 'Hell yeah.'

As the last Roekaar falls, Sara feels like she's about to join him. Her entire body aches and her mind is tired and her body is drenched, and all she wants to do is return to the Tempest, shower, eat and then sleep.

She finds herself dreaming of that bath once more as she holsters her gun and moves towards the cabin that Taavos should be in. The glove that they retrieved from the Remnant is tucked into her
belt, and she tries not to think about all the bruises that'll be over her body from facing that fucking Remnant Destroyer. She also tries not think about all the trouble she went through to get the glove, and how it may have been completely pointless.

The door slides open, revealing a blue angara with black markings, dressed in the orange armour of the Roekaar.

'You've killed the men under my charge,' he states as soon as they're through the door. 'And now you'll crown that achievement by killing me too. And you.' He turns to Jaal. 'I know your face. Why do you help these murderers?'

'Ryder's an ally,' Jaal replies and God, if that doesn't warm her heart just a little bit. Not that long ago, he was unwilling to share any information with her. Now she's an ally. 'She helped the scientists at Daar Pelaav.'

'I know, and they should be ashamed. After all we've been through with the kett... tell me why you've come here so I know why I have died.'

With those words, Sara cannot take it anymore. She rolls her eyes in such an overdramatic way, she's almost amazed they're still in her eye sockets as she focuses on Taavos again. 'Can we dial the dramatics back a notch? Two notches, even? I don't even have a gun up!' She pulls the glove from her person. 'I have an... artefact or heirloom, or something. I'm going to set it down, and I need you to take hold of it.'

Sara sets it on the floor before she slowly straightens, holding her breath as she focuses her attention on the other angara. Taavos hesitates for a brief moment before he leans down and takes hold of the glove. Sara watches with trepidation as... nothing... happens. Shit. All that trouble for nothing. Her hand curls into a fist and she's tempted to punch a wall.

'Well, that was a bust,' Peebee drawls, crossing her arms over her chest and shifting her weight to one foot. Now, she's rather tempted to punch Peebee. It's a good thing she's able to control her temper.

Then Taavos speaks and she finds her attention diverted. 'Wait, there are things like this in the museum on Aya. Ancient angaran tech. This fits over a hand... contacts on the inside for myoelectric control of... Taavos trails off with a loud gasp, his hand flying to his head. 'What did you do to me?'

Ryder steps forward, hand automatically rising to rest on his shoulder before she remembers she's dealing with an angara; a Roekaar. She drops her arm. 'Are you all right?'

'I know things. The underground monolith. I remember... pain, desperation.'

Eyes widening, Ryder can feel her heart quicken in excitement and amazement and wonder. She wants to know more but she needs the location more than anything else. 'I need you to take me there. Please. If you do this, we can save Havarl. Together.'

'You're... you're an alien. I can't trust—'

Biting back a groan or some sort of short tempered reply, Sara takes a deep breath. She needs to make friends with him, not turn him into an enemy. She managed to win over Kiiran, she's winning over Jaal, even the sages. She can do this by being herself and staying calm. 'Then let me try and earn your trust. Please. I just want to help.'

Taavos hesitates. 'Deep beneath the surface. But... but not far. Meet me here, at these coordinates, I
will guide you the rest of the way. Just... let me compose myself first.’

Knowing better than to push her luck and ask for him to go with her right that second, Sara nods her head and turns, bringing up the navpoint on her omni-tool. She frowns as she works out the distance and time it would take to get there. ‘Right, just to activate the monolith, reset the vault, then we can head back to the _Tempest_ and shower. And eat. And sleep. Sounds, good, right?’

She turns to Jaal and Peebee, who are looking at her with almost sympathetic gazes in their eyes. Before they can say anything, another voice speaks.

‘Pathfinder, the files on Sage Armund’s sister should be near by. You may wish to look into them whilst you are here,’ SAM chimes in just as the door slides shut behind her.

Letting her head fall back and whack against the top of her armour, Sara lets out a loud groan that’s only silenced by Peebee’s chuckle. The asari throws an arm over her shoulder and starts steering her towards those files — away from the monolith. ‘Nothing is ever easy for us, Ryder, remember?’

Ryder can only groan again in reply.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

i feel like, after promising that this wouldn't go into missions in detail, i've done nothing but go into missions in detail. so the next few chapters (after this one!!) are going to be in between scenes like i promised. let's just pretend that travelling across clusters doesn't happen instantly like in the game - it takes a few days. i mean... how does that happen if they don't have mass relays in andromeda?? there's only so fast a ship can travel by itself, you know. anyway, i'm rambling now. hope you enjoy!!

'So, she's still on Havarl?' Peebee questions after Ryder tries the console again, after activating the ancient generator behind the building. She was leaning against the doorway and hadn't moved, not even as Ryder had struggled to climb back in through the window. The hologram of the angara lights the dark room, and Sara takes a long moment to study her before shutting it down, marking the navpoint to return to the sage at some point.

'Seems like it,' Sara mutters as she turns to the asari. 'Where's Jaal? I thought he'd be back by now.'

'You did tell us to look about,' Peebee reminds her with a shrug. 'Some obviously take exploration more seriously than others.'

'I thought you lived for adventure, Peebee?'

'I do... but not this kind. This is running errands. I could have stayed on the Nexus if I wanted to do this. Can't we go to the monolith, find the vault and outrun death again?' Her entire face is bright with excitement as she remembers resetting the vault. Sara can't hide her smirk. 'That is what I call fun.'

Sara shakes her head as she steps out of the cabin and into the wilds again. The ancient courtyard of Old Pelaav is home to many of the animals that Sara hates. Especially the challyrions — those fuckers just always seem to appear when she leasts expects it, clawing at her and trying to bite her head off.

'You know, there's a reason Lexi is so obsessed with you — it's because you clearly have issues you need to work through.'

Peebee only snorts in reply. She's saved from replying when Jaal steps out of a nearby building, a datapad in hand. He calls for Ryder, who starts moving towards him, meeting him halfway. He extends the datapad to her. 'You may want to take a look at this.'

With a frown on her face, Ryder takes the datapad and reads what's on the screen:

Truth

Translated from Shelesh:

How did our lives come to this? How could our ancestors let the kett conquer our worlds so easily, and why do our present leaders fail to protect us now? Disunity destroys us from within. Our
people have repeatedly failed to join forces when we needed to most. We've blamed each other, bickered and betrayed, and given our conquerors easy prey. Now we see a new enemy invading our space, offering extinction disguised as hope. Lies meant to divide us.

It falls on those who can see past these deceptions to prevent our people from repeating the mistakes that doomed us in the past. All angara must become one to have any hope of defeating the evil forces surrounding us. This is the single belief of the Roekaar, and I feel it's truth in my blood. Our cause is just.

'Well, shit,' Sara sighs. She lowers the datapad, her free hand coming up to rub at her eyes. 'There's bound to be more of these, right? We'll need to keep an eye out for others, whenever we come back to Havarl. I would say we search for them now but we need to meet Taavos.' She quickly scans the datapad, transferring the message onto her omni-tool before setting it down.

She swallows, turning her back on Jaal and Peebee who are looking at her with such concern she can't stand it. This is just another thing that Pathfinder Ryder has to deal with.

'Come on, I don't want him thinking we're not going to show,' she says as she pulls her rifle from her back. She doesn't wait for either of them to agree with her as she takes off into the wilds.

'It's here. I just have to...' Taavos trails off as he takes a deep breath in. He stops and glances around himself. Sara takes that moment to study the area as well — the location of the third, hidden monolith is somewhere near here.

She can tell that they're on the right track with the amount of RemTech littered about the area. Towers and blast shields and odd walls. The strange glowing flora that is unique only to Havarl also filled the area. It's such a strange, calm place.

'It helps if I still my mind,' Taavos continued, drawing Sara's attention away from her examination. 'I've been here before. Familiar. One, two, three... indentations. Palm here...' he places his hand over a hovering light It's a piece of RemTech Ryder hasn't seen before, but the second his hand hovers over it, the pillars making a wall in front of them collapse into the ground, revealing a new passage. 'It worked.'

Unable to stop her gasp of amazement, Ryder is the first to start moving into the buried cave.

'It's been here all this time,' Jaal declares in wonder as he follows behind her. 'And no-one noticed.'

'The rest of the remnant in the area may have prevented scans from detecting it,' SAM replies as they press on following Taavos as he discovers the fallen Remnant that Zorai had disabled. Sara still isn't one-hundred-percent sure what he means when he says "Zorai watched the watchers" but she doesn't feel like pressing the matter.

A part of her wonders if its rather like the stasis field they found the scientists in... if he somehow managed to fight off the effects and become aware. Then break free. And that changed him.

They follow Taavos as he leads them into a small room, something in the back of his mind telling him that there's something important there. Sara says nothing as they reach their destination, stopping at the sight of bones. She feels like all the air has been knocked out of her lungs as she realises who this probably is, something that's only confirmed as she plays the datapad that had been found there.

'The sages got it wrong. Zorai was a woman. That was her voice... my voice... may I have this Pathfinder?'
Sara smiles at him. 'It's yours,' she reminds him, handing him the datapad. 'It's always been yours.' She pulls up her scanners and scans the remains, trying to find out more information about this hero to the angara.

She half expects Taavos to stay there and mourn his past self, but he manages to recover himself, guiding Ryder the rest of the way to the third monolith. It's easy enough to to activate — she feels proud at how easily she's getting the hang of all this — as the large beam leading towards the other monoliths, and triggering the opening of the vault.

'You finished what Zorai could not, so long ago,'

'I'm so sorry, Taavos.'

He shakes his head. 'No. There's nothing to be sorry about. She didn't complete what she set out to do, but she didn't fail.'

And Sara can't help but agree. Without her setting the first two monoliths, Havarl would have been destroyed so long ago. She gave the planet more time. More time for Sara to travel across dark space and end up in this wild position of finishing her legacy. It's odd, how things work. It's that faith that she and Suvi have in common. That something is out there, making everything happen for a reason.

She's not surprised when Taavos says he wants to stay behind and think things over, so she turns and leaves him to it, not wanting to disturb him as he discovers more about himself. So, she guides Jaal and Peebee out of the cave, back out to the main grounds of Havarl.

'I cannot believe it,' Jaal says as he steps up beside her. 'After all this time... all this worry... we're so close to saving Havarl.'

Offering him a soft smile, Sara nods her head. 'I can't imagine what it must have been like. Knowing your home planet would eventual die, and then suddenly, everything is all right again.'

He looks at her with those strange, wide eyes. He doesn't look away. Normally, they just share the odd glance or the common courtesy eye contact, but he refuses to lower his gaze. She can feel her face warm as she stares back, wondering what he's going to say when his lips part.

'Not yet!' Peebee reminds her, practically bouncing on her toes as she shoulders herself between Jaal and Ryder, ruining whatever that moment had been. 'We've still got to reset the vault.'

Sara shakes her head, trying to clear her mind. 'That's true. Come on then! Let's save Havarl once and for all.'

The second Ryder enters her quarters, she collapses on the bed. It's nice, soft and huge, everything that Sara loves in a bed. She's gotten so used to sleeping in it that it's one of those perks that makes being Pathfinder all worthwhile.

She throws her arms over her head, ignoring the ache in her muscles as she relaxes into the mattress. Closing her eyes, she tries not to think about how close it had been, resetting the vault. How close it always seems to be with those damn things. How often will she outrun death? Then again, she's already died once before — twenty-odd seconds, wasn't that what SAM said she was clinically dead for when her father transferred SAM to her?

'Pathfinder,' SAM says, pulling her from her thoughts. 'You haven't checked your messages in some time. They have started to pile up. You may wish to read some of them.'
'Ugh, SAM, can you never give me five minutes to rest?' Sara protests, even as she pulls herself into a sitting position. She fixes the Initiative hoodie she shoved on after her shower, then makes her way to the terminal, sitting down on the seat.

Her eyes widen the second she sees just how many there are, grown from what seems to be the second she landed on Aya. It makes her wonder when the last time she did check her messages. SAM had a habit of reminding her every time she passed the terminal in the bridge, but she very rarely listened. Most of the time, she was already in the middle of something and by the time she finished that, she had forgotten about emails or something else had come up.

'All right, let's see what we've got,' she says, her voice quiet as she starts to flick through them all. The ones that stick out are the ones from her team — the others always seem to just fall into the pits of her mind the second she's finished reading them.

'So, Liam has some idea to help us all unwind; Cora wants to talk to me about the asari ark; Peebee is... being Peebee about RemTech and Jaal...' she trails off as she reads Jaal's messages. The first of them is when he first came aboard, a long list of the things he brought with him so that she didn't have to worry. It makes her smile and wish she had noticed earlier. It's a bit late to be replying to it now.

She sees a second email from him that was sent not too long ago. As she checks the timestamp, she realises that he sent it to her whilst she was in the shower.

Gnawing on her lower lip, she opens it:

**Communication from Jaal**

**To:** Ryder  
**From:** Jaal  
**Pathfinder Ryder of the Human Initiative:**

*I've heard privately from Evfra, the leader of our Resistance. He's very impressed that we were able to help our scientists on Havarl, and I've made sure that he knows that you played a key role.*

*Maybe he's already said these things to you, but if I know Evfra, he probably hasn't.*

*As for me, I've learned a lot about trust--being on this team, letting myself be open to trusting you and the others. I've learned that trust is more of a feeling than a science. And it seems like it is a universal truth. Universal. Get it?*

*I'll try to be even more trustful in the future. This assignment might change my life.*

**Good-night,**

**Jaal**

Sara can't stop her snort of amusement at his attempt at a joke. Universal. God, it sounds like the same kind of stupid joke she would make. Scott would always roll her eyes at her but would smirk anyway; Mom would laugh, just because she knew that's what she needed to hear. And Dad... well, she never really made jokes in front of Dad.

She takes only a moment to hesitate before she hits the reply button.
re: re: Communication from Jaal

To: Jaal

From: Ryder

I'm glad he's starting to realise I'm here to help. We still have to have that vid-call with him... does tomorrow work? I'd offer tonight but I am far too tired and sore from, well, everything to try and be whatever Evfra needs me to be.

Also, I'm happy to hear that! I know trust isn't always easily gained — and it definitely must be earned — but to know I've started to earn yours... it means a lot to me. I do hope we all learn to be more open and trusting in the future... it's the only way relationships can grow, right?

Night,

Ryder.

She hits send before she can talk herself out of it, only realising after pressing the button how that last line could have sounded. She lets out a groan as she lets her head fall to the desk with a smack. It hurts a little but she doesn't care.

'SAM? Is Jaal even still awake?'

'The vital signs in the Tech Lab read that he is, Pathfinder, yes.'

Giving another groan, Sara lifts her head as she focuses her attention on the terminal, trying not to count the second before it pings with a reply.

re: re: re: Communication from Jaal

To: Ryder

From: Jaal

You have done more than enough to earn it. You didn't need to help the scientists. You didn't need to reset the vault or tag all the turian salvage or agree to help Sage Amurd. You are... definitely different from the kett.

I look forward to seeing how our relationship grows.

Jaal.

Sara feels her eyes widen as she reads that line over and over again. I look forward to seeing how our relationship grows. She had never, in a million years, expected a reply like that. It's almost ridiculous how much it makes her smile — how light it makes her body feel as she pushes away from her desk.

A part of her wants to reply but another, larger part of her knows better. She's hopeless when it comes to crushes and it just leads to her saying embarrassing shit. She's not going to ruin anything with Jaal — with the entire angara species — by letting her heart rule her.

As she shrugs out of her trousers and slides into bed, however, she finds herself pulling up her omni-tool.
To: Jaal

From: Ryder

I just want to help. I just want to make this a place where our people can live in peace and harmony. It won't be easy — I know from experience it's easier said than done — but I at least want to try.

And I can't wait to see how our relationship grows either. I enjoy your company, Jaal. Despite the short time you've been aboard... I couldn't imagine this ship without you.

Ryder.

It eases that heaviness in her heart that had come with not replying, even as she clicks out of the message, saving it to her drafts. She clicks her omni-tool off and rolls onto her side.

Sara Ryder falls asleep with a smile on her face, the first time since arriving in Heleus.
so, the more time I spend in Sara's head, the more I realise she's very... unsure of herself. Let's just say I see her dealing with depression/anxiety/self-harm/self-worth issues (lmao call it projecting maybe) but yeah. So, that'll start to feature more. Especially as she and Jaal grow closer and she lets down her guard around him. So, uh, yeah.

Also, I couldn't not mention Shepard! There's this adorable fanart that inspired this here!

And the quote thingy! I have no idea if it's canon but either way, I read this fic and it stuck with me and I adored it, so I had to pay a little homage to it!! Change The Wall

As the Bio Lab doors slide shut behind her, Ryder takes a moment to just gather her thoughts. She leans against the wall, her hand idly scratching behind the huge ears of Pyjak, the onboard pet of the Tempest. He's one of the messiest little shits she's ever encountered, and the fact he will never stay put in his cage infuriates her to no end, but she enjoys having the odd little creature around. Especially when he's taken to using her quarters as his resting grounds.

Ryder closes her eyes and tries to put her conversation with Cora to the back of her mind. She's happy — relieved, really — to have positive news about the asari ark. Even more so when Cora told her about Sarissa. It makes her relieved to know that someone out there can come up with a plan for this mess.

All they've got right now is Ryder... and Ryder is... she's not good at coming up with plans. Hell, she doesn't have a clue what she's doing most of the time. It'll be nice to have someone else to help.

But that means finding her first. And the task of finding her — and the ark — has fallen on Ryder's shoulders. As if she doesn't have enough to deal with. It's just pressure upon pressure and she wonders how long it'll be before she's crumbling under the strain of it all.

Her father would never have crumbled.

But she's known for a long time she's not her father.

'Hey, Ryder!' a voice pulls her from her thoughts. Her eyes shoot open and her hand falls away from Pyjak. I really need to think of a better name for the little guy, she thinks but Pyjak is a good enough name for now... especially when he is, in fact, a pyjak.

She finds Liam coming through the door that leads to engineeering and the cargo bay. He has a kind smile on his face, his hand fluttering over his omni-tool.

That is, until he seems to notice her expression. He frowns, altering his course from the terminals beside the Tech Lab, to where she stands. When he stops in front of her, the silence stretches on as if he hasn't quite figured out what to say.

'Everything okay?'

Forcing a smile on her face is easy enough. She's been doing it all her life. 'Yeah, of course.' She tilts
her head, remembering his email. She needs to distract him before he goes pester ing her further. 'What's this about your plan to help take everyone's mind off things?'

He studies her for a bit, as if he's debating whether to press the matter or just follow through with her very obvious attempts at changing the subject. Sara holds her breath, waiting for him to come to his decision, only releasing it when he smiles and says, 'Oh yeah! Movie night!'

Pursing her lips thoughtfully, Ryder allows herself a moment to consider that. It reminds her of all the times she and Scott would sit on the couch, watching whatever movie they could find on the extranet. Or sometimes they would just watch the news and wonder if they would ever be there one day. Sara's favourite memory was watching Commander Shepard receive her Star of Terra for her effort during the Skyllian Blitz.

Shepard was something of a hero for Sara Ryder. She still is, even though they're galaxies apart and Shepard's long gone. She hopes she left behind some sort of legacy. It seems only fitting.

Realising she let her mind wander, Sara blinks, focusing on Liam again. 'Movie night sounds fun.'

Liam's smile grows, even though she has no idea how that's even possible. 'Great! Well, I already started looking for some but there's nothing great. Could you maybe see if there's any on the Nexus?'

'Of course.'

'Awesome, let me know when you've got them!'

And with that, he turns and heads to the terminal that he had previously been headed towards.

SAM, can you tell Jaal I'm heading to the conference room for our vidcall with Evfra, if he wants to meet me, Sara thinks as she starts to make her way up the ramp. She leans against the railing when she gets there, steeling herself for whatever Evfra is going to throw at her. She knows how much the Resistance leader dislikes her. She doesn't want him to hate or distrust her even more. It's just hard for her to get into the mentality that she needs to deal with him.

She can't be her usual sarcastic self around him. A part of her is glad she's not angaran, she couldn't cope without humour as a defence mechanism.

When she sees Jaal leave the Bio Lab, she turns and starts fiddling with the vidcall terminal, establishing the link to Evfra just as she hears Jaal step up beside her.

Evfra's heavily scarred face appears through the hologram. It makes him look even more intimidating and Ryder feels her spine straighten in response. 'Commander,' she greets.

'Pathfinder,' he grunts in reply. 'Jaal has been keeping me updated on your "adventures", your "good deeds" on our behalf.'

You say that as if you don't believe his accounts, Sara thinks. She has no idea what's gotten into her today. Everything seems to be pissing her off and being too much. Nothing is ever good enough for anyone it seems — they just want more and more.

Instead, she manages to grind out, in a decently civil tone, 'I meant them. I want you to know you can trust me.'

'You went out of your way to rescue that science team. A selfless act,' he says, and Ryder feels herself relax until Evfra continues. 'But your true intention is clear — to explore Aya's vault. Jaal says you want to help find the Moshae. Why should I let you?'
Sara moves her hands behind her back, clenching them into fists so that Evfra won't see. She grinds her teeth together as he speaks, fighting back the urge to scream. There's also a stinging in her eyes — a telltale sign of tears of frustration — and she can't let this man see her as weak. God, her father would have been so much better at this. What the fuck was he thinking?

Taking a deep breath, Sara tries to think of what her father would say... she comes up blank. So, she goes for what her mother would say. 'I... want this to be the beginning of a strong relationship, Evfra,' she says, feeling Jaal's gaze heavy on her.

'Keep your promises and little by little, our bond might grow.' At Evfra's words, Ryder lets herself relax a little, unclenching her fists. 'We've managed to trace the Moshae to a special kett facility on Voeld.'

'Why special?'

'These facilities are protected by a dynamic shield tech we haven't been able to crack. We're close, but its ability to adapt outspeeds our current processors.'

The second Evfra is finished, SAM pipes in through their private channel, Pathfinder, adding my processor to their program would no doubt make the difference.

That's all Sara needs to hear. Taking a step forward, she returns her gaze to Evfra. 'Evfra, I can help. Respectfully, you need my help this time.'

The sneer on his face is evident, even with the hologram's crappy graphics. 'Respectfully, the angara don't need anything from you. We take care of our own.'

Throwing her hands in the air, Ryder can't seem to stop herself. She knows an outburst will probably ruin this relationship before it's even developed but she doesn't care. In that moment, she gives not a single fuck.

'Bullshit! With my AI, I can guarantee a shield breach.'

Evfra doesn't seem to notice her outburst or either that her curse doesn't translate. He just focuses on the latter. 'Of course, an AI, that makes sense.'

'And he's connected to me. Physically. So, where SAM goes, I kinda need to go.' She takes a deep breath. 'And I want to go. I want to help.'

There's a beat of silence. 'It was risky to be honest about your AI — and honesty makes you different from the kett.'

'I hope so.'

'You're welcome on the mission.'

'Thank you.'

'A team will meet you at our base on Voeld. They'll take you to the kett facility.' His eyes study her, almost as if he's trying to decide whether he'll later regret this decision or not. Ryder just clenches her jaw and stays silent. 'Stay strong and clear. Goodbye.'

The second his image disappears, Ryder lets herself fall forward, bracing her arms on the table in front of her. She closes her eyes and heaves a sigh, forgetting that Jaal is standing right there until he speaks.
'You've earned Evfra's trust. Not an easy feat.'

Sara can't stop the incredulous laugh that bursts free. She pushes herself away from the desk, straightening as she turns to Jaal. He's staring at her with those huge eyes of his again. It makes it hard for her to keep her thoughts on track.

'He still doesn't like me, though.'

He gives her a grin as he moves to stand in front of her. 'That's just his way.' The smile disappears then, a frown replacing it. 'You should be more worried about the Roekaar.'

'Right, the group of alien-hating angara that wants to kill me.' She gives another humourless burst of laughter. Jaal is probably wondering what the hell is wrong with her but she can't find the energy to care. Everything just seems to be falling apart. She shakes her head. 'Evfra made it sound like you had experience with them.'

'I know their leader. Akksul,' Jaal explains, letting Ryder stand in horror as he explains what led Akksul away from his study and love of RemTech and into forming the Roekaar. She can almost understand why he did it. She has witnessed the kett up close, but only fleetingly. She has no idea how she would have coped, had she spent a year in their camp, being tortured and god-knows what else.

After all, she knows just how hard things were between humans and turians after the First Contact War. Even before they left for Andromeda, things were still tense... those kind of wounds don't just disappear overnight.

'I convinced Evfra I'm not a threat,' she reminds him. 'Maybe I can do the same for Akksul?'

She knows the confidence is lacking in her voice when that last statement sounds more like a question than anything else.

'I admire your courage. But Akksul is dangerous... and he lacks Evfra's pragmatism.' He steps closer, those blue eyes bearing into her soul. 'He'll make you want to kill him.'

'I have to try! I can't just sit back and let this fester until it leads to war between us. My people are here for good — there is no going back for us. I can't just give up. I can't...' she takes a shuddering breath in as she breaks eye contact. She turns her entire body away from him, facing the console again. 'I can't fail.'

There's a beat. A beat where Sara is certain Jaal is just going to leave because who wants to deal with the nearly-crying alien? But then she sees him step closer and his hand raises hesitantly, resting on her shoulder. It's enough contact that her gaze darts up to his face, her own eyes blown wide with shock. She can't remember if he's ever touched her before.

This may be the first time he's touched her that wasn't an accidental brush on the battlefield. It makes her heart stutter and her breath catch in her throat.

'You won't fail,' he declares. There's such confidence in his voice that she can almost believe it. She can almost feel the doubt lifting off her shoulders... but then she comes back to herself. She remembers the life she's had and all the shit she's been through and suddenly, she's not so sure.

'How can you be so certain?' Sara questions, her voice a soft whisper. She knows she sounds small and pathetic — she's supposed to be filling him with confidence for her species and her abilities, and yet here she is, crying on his shoulder.
'Because, from what I have seen so far, you seem... strong. Determined. Even when things get in your way, you don't let it stop you.'

'If you can't change the wall, use it.'

Jaal frowns. He looks at her with open confusion and it's so nice to just be able to read the emotions on his face. So many Milky Way species are so closed off. The only ones she knows what they're feeling for certain are Elcor... because they start every single sentence with their feelings.

Sara turns, feeling warmth in her heart when his hand stays on her shoulder. Managing a brief smile, Sara explains, 'It's something my dad says... said... if you can't change the wall, use it. It means using everything to your advantage. Even if it seems to get in your way.' She sniffs. 'I actually forgot all about that.'

Her smile grows as she stares at Jaal, watching as his lips start to twitch in a sort-of smile. It reminds her of the one he gave her when they first met. Just after she had sputtered about how it wasn't her plan to land on Aya on fire. He had just grinned at her and told her that it would have been a very silly plan, had it been.

'Pathfinder,' Kallo's voice comes in over the comms, almost making her jump. 'Will you come to the bridge?'

'Be right there, Kallo.' She returns her gaze to Jaal, noticing with disappointment that his smile has disappeared. 'Thanks, Jaal,' murmurs Sara, not wanting to move away from his touch but knowing that she should. She reaches up and gives his hand a gentle squeeze, before she steps away.

Just as she's on the ramp, ready to descend the meeting room, Jaal calls her name. She turns to him, raising her eyebrow and hoping she doesn't look too damn pleased that he called her again.

'I know a contact on Havarl. Her name is Thaldyr. She escaped with Akksul from the kett. She may help set up a meeting for us, if you truly wish to try for peace with him.'

She wants to smile. To show him that she is grateful for that but she can't make her face cooperate. Sara can just hope that it shows in her eyes as she nods her head. 'Thanks, Jaal. We'll go after we rescue the Moshae.'

'SStay strong and clear, Ryder.'

'You too, Jaal.'
'We're nearing Voeld,' Ryder states as she steps into the Tech Lab. She sees Jaal working away on his rifle, modding it every way he possibly can for the upcoming mission. A part of her wants to tinker with her own guns, make them as good as possible but she has no idea where to start.

He doesn't say anything in reply. There's a vague nod in acknowledgement but he just continues working. Ryder hovers on the threshold for just a second before she sighs. She turns. 'I just thought you'd like to now.'

She can't blame him wanting to be alone. He's going to be embarking on this mission that will either end in their slaughter, or he'll be a hero for rescuing their beloved Moshae. He'll be leaving the ship after it's all done... Sara tries her hardest not to think about that. He's only been sent to see if she's trustworthy to gain access to the vault in Aya.

After that's been decided by the rescue of Moshae Sjefa... well, the Resistance will need him more.

Just as she steps over the threshold, she hears him sigh. The clatter of a rifle landing on a table stops her, and she turns when he calls her name. 'Ryder, wait.'

Turning, Ryder faces him with a raised eyebrow before realising that he probably will have no idea what that even means. 'Is everything all right, Jaal?' she questions as she steps back inside. The doors slide behind her this time and the silence that follows washes over her. She can see the tension in his shoulders and it makes her worry for him. He looks so worried — more worried than she's ever seen him.

'What if... what if she's already dead?' he asks after a long moment, looking down at his rifle. She knows repressed emotion when faced with it. Hell, all she needs to do is look in a mirror. It's just so strange to see it coming from Jaal — someone who's normally so free with his emotions, even admitting to it.

It takes her a moment to realise that he's holding himself back for her benefit. That he's worried about making her uncomfortable.

She can't have that, so she moves over to sit beside him, placing her hand on top of his own large, gloved one. She wonders how they look without them, but the thought disappears as he he turns his hand and grips hers tight.

'I... does it feel like she is?' Sara asks, her voice soft and tender. She hopes that this isn't a weird question but the angara are open and emotional. Surely, they work off gut feeling sometimes. 'Like... in your soul? Do you feel like she's still here or that she's gone?'

Jaal lifts his head, glancing over at her. There are tears in his eyes, threatening to spill and God, Ryder really can't bear to see him look at her like that. She much prefers when they are bright and...
teasing or even a little guarded and judging. She hates seeing him look this distraught.

Eventually, after studying her for a moment, he shakes his head. 'No. I do not. I... still hold hope in my heart that she lives.'

Sara offers him a gentle smile. 'Then I'm going to bet that she's still there, fighting the Archon as much as she can.' She gnaws on her lower lip. 'It's like... my brother. He isn't well. But I know in my heart and soul that he's going to get better. It was different with Mom. I...' she shakes her head. 'I never had that belief. But my gut... the Ryder is gut is never wrong. I believe the Moshae is alive. I believe we're going to kick the kett in face by rescuing her from the "impregnable" facility. I believe we're going to win — even if it's going to be a hard fucking fight to get there.'

He studies her for a long moment, those huge, brilliant eyes flickering over her face. It's like she's a puzzle that he's desperately trying to solve. She's not sure how long they sit there, sharing each other's gazes, before he shakes his head and turns away, a brief smile on his face.

'You truly believe that. No doubt or hesitation.'

Ryder shrugs with one shoulder, patting Jaal on the shoulder as she pushes herself into a standing position. 'I can't promise it won't go sideways. I can't promise it'll be easy. But I can promise that I'll do everything in my power to get the Moshae back to you.' She waits a beat, offering him a smile. 'Now, come on and get suited up. The sooner we're ready to go, the sooner we get her home.'

Jaal stares at her a moment longer before he too stands. Without another word, they leave the Tech Lab and head to the armoury to get ready for their mission.

Ryder feels like she's going to be sick.

Her stomach won't stop churning. The image — the angara, lifted in the air, being injected with God only knows what, falling to the ground, being broken and transformed into kett, rising without any memory of itself — was seared into her mind, constantly playing until everything was dizzy.

She doesn't really remember everything that happened afterwards. One minute, she's locked in the containment chamber, watching in horror as an angara is twisted into a kett, then the next, she's in her quarters on the Tempest, changing back into her hoodie and sweats.

Taking a deep breath in, Sara closes her eyes and rests her head against the nearest surface, which just so happens to be the door of her wardrobe. You got her out. You did it. You proved yourself... so why do I feel so damn worthless? she wonders, realising a moment later that she knows the answer.

The Moshae wanted to blow the Kett's "temple" up, completely destroy it to stop it from being refilled. But Jaal had wanted to save the angara inside, come back later and blow it up. And Sara couldn't argue with him. Those angara had family who thought they'd never see them again. She couldn't be the reason they had a chance of reunion but had it snatched away.

'Okay,' she says, pushing herself away from the wall. 'Can't dwell on that. SAM is the Moshae in the Med Bay?'

'Yes, Pathfinder.'

Nodding, Ryder moves from her quarters, feeling as if her feet are made of lead as she walks towards the Med Bay. The doors slide open and reveal Jaal holding the Moshae's hand as she lies on one of the beds, Lexi scanning her over.
'I'm sorry we fought. What we saw will set our cause on fire.'

He drops her hand as Sara steps up beside him.

'Yes, my broken heart can't even begin to process it.'

And then they're hugging. Ryder feels her throat constrict, trying not to think about the last time she had a hug. Hell, it must have been six-hundred-plus years ago. Just before she and Scott when into Cyro, they had shared an embrace.

There hadn't been any emotional family reunion with her dad... then he died. She wasn't a clingy person as such — the only people who really got to touch her were Mom and Scott... but still... it didn't mean she didn't crave attention like that.

Swallowing, Ryder turns to Lexi. 'Can you give us a minute, please?'

'Sure thing. But go gentle — she's in a fragile state,' Lexi warns before she disappears from the room.

The second the doors slide shut behind her, the Moshae turns to Ryder. 'Did she just call me frail?'

She can't stop the corner of her mouth quirking up at that. 'Fragile. Anyone would be after what you've been through.'

Moshae Sjefa just gives a laugh, waving off her words. 'Jaal tells me your a "Pathfinder" from the Milky Way.'

Ryder nods because honestly, what else is she supposed to say to that. Whenever she opens her mouth, the wrong thing always seems to come out — at least to the angara, anyway. And she's in no mood to have her emotions played with today.

'Are you okay to talk?'

'Ah,' Moshae Sjefa says, and in that single word, Ryder feels her heart plummet to her stomach and her veins flood with ice. Of course. She's never going to have a simple first interaction with an angara, it seems. 'So now you value what I have to say?'

And for once Ryder is thankful for her childhood — for learning to grow up with a mask firmly in place to hide her emotions around those she can't disappoint. She buries the burning emotions in her heart as she slips her "Alec Ryder" mask on.

'I feel for you... but I don't regret my decision,' she replies, her voice almost robotic that it's no surprise when the Moshae rebuffs her words. And even so, she fills Ryder in about the facility and exaltation, and what her time spent there was like.

When Ryder is certain she has everything she needs — and has permission to go with the Moshae into Aya's vault — she leaves the angara to rest.

Jaal stays behind with her, something that doesn't surprise Ryder, and so she quickly leaves the Med Bay, smiling at Lexi as she passes the asari doctor.

Just as she's about to reach her quarters, Ryder veers suddenly and heads for the bathroom, locking it behind her to ensure no-one will disturb her from either door. She leans heavily against the sink, bracing her hands on either side of it as she lifts her head and stares at her reflection in the mirror.

Her skin is pale, and for once her light blue hair seems to drain her rather than give her life. Her blue
eyes — inherited from Mom — stare back with deep purplish bruises underneath them. She remembers a time when she never had dark circles or lines of wear and tear — people used to comment about how glowing her skin looked.

Now... she's an utter mess.

It's amazing how not having enough sleep can ruin everything. Your body, your mind, your everything. Practicing self-care was always easier when you didn't have the weight of the fucking world on your shoulders. Or five worlds, even. When the worst thing you faced was batarian slavers.

Ryder closes her eyes, tired of looking at herself; tired of seeing her worn face staring back at her with dead eyes.

_I feel for your people — in a way you clearly do not for mine._

Moshae Sjefa's words enter her mind almost instantly. Her eyes shoot open again and when she's faced with herself staring back, Ryder loses it. She gives a scream and brings her fist up, smashing it into her reflection.

The mirror cracks under her onslaught, collapsing into the sink and mingling with the blood that it managed to draw from her fist. Her knuckles burn in pain, blood flowing down over her arm but she doesn't care. She lowers her gaze to the broken pieces of mirror.

The long healed scars on her thighs start to tingle, almost as if sensing what's coming next. Her good hand moves, picking up the jagged glass, turning it this way and that in examination. It's definitely sharp enough — it'll do the job.

She pushes the toilet seat down, ready to use that as a stool—

'Ryder!' a deep voice calls, followed by a knocking on the door.

Coming to her senses, Ryder drops the piece of glass as her senses flood her body once more. The pain in her knuckles makes her hiss between gritted teeth, as she darts towards the door, unlocking it and letting it slide open to reveal Jaal.

He takes one look at her bloodied hand before his eyes widen. 'You're injured! I'll get Dr. T'Perro.'

He goes to turn, but Sara is faster, using her good hand to grab his arm. A small part of her brain focuses on how huge and firm the damn thing is, but mostly, she's just focused on stopping him from moving.

'No! Jaal, please!' He stops and Ryder takes a breath before continuing. 'It's not that bad. I can clean it up myself. She'll just worry and really, she should be focused on the Moshae right now. It's fine. I'm surprised you're not still at her side.'

Jaal hesitates only a moment. 'She is sleeping.'

'Good. That's good. I'll deal with this then tell Kallo to head for Aya.' She gives him a smile, starting to turn and let the door slide shut.

But he moves quick, stepping into the bathroom with her and with wide eyes, he takes in the sight of the broken mirror.

'Is... this a human... thing?'
Sara sighs, the adrenaline making her body heavy and tired. All she wants to do now is sleep. 'A little. I never really learnt to deal with my feelings well. Girls with daddy issues rarely do.' She can see him going to ask, so she beats him to it. 'Ask Liam, please. He'll relish telling you. Anyway, I... punched the mirror. It broke. I'm bleeding. But I'm fine, honestly.'

He's staring at her still, and there's concern in those eyes that Ryder wonders how he isn't staring at her in judgement instead. That's the normal reaction when someone breaks a mirror because they're temper got the better of them.

'What made you punch the mirror?'

'...' she trails off, hearing those words repeat over and over in her head again. She can't get rid of them. They'll be scarred onto her brain for the rest of her life, it seems.

_I feel for your people — in a way you clearly do not for mine.

_I feel for your people...

...in a way you clearly do not for mine.

She just wanted to give them a chance.

'I thought I was doing the right thing.'

'What do you mean?'

'Rescuing the angara from the kett facility. It felt like the right thing. Giving people back their family.'

She has no idea where all this is coming from. She has no idea what it is about this strange, purple and pink alien that makes her feel so open and vulnerable — but never in a bad way. He looks at her like he wants to listen and learn. He looks at her like no longer thinks he needs to kill her in her sleep.

He tilts his head to the side. 'It was the right decision. You restored hope to our people. You proved that by working together, we can defeat the kett.'

Sara is silent for a long moment before she sighs. 'The Moshae doesn't agree with that statement.'

'Is that what worries you?'

She can't keep her worries inside anymore. Throwing her hands in the air, Sara explodes, 'Well can you blame me? The entire population of your people worship her! If she says that she hates me then that is going to ruin everything for our alliance. I'll have no-one to blame but myself and Tann will probably chew my ass off, or probably just fire me from being Pathfinder, and I'll have doomed everyone on the Nexus to death.'

Her shoulders are heaving by the time she's finished. She remembers vaguely that her hand is still bleeding, and it's that thought that makes her move. She leaves through the side door, stepping into her quarters. She grabs a towel and presses it to the cut, hissing as the pain starts to seep in.

A part of her hopes that Jaal will just leave her alone but she should have known better when he appears behind her. He watches her in silence as she wipes the blood off her hand. She's rather surprised that SAM hasn't chimed in, telling her how much of a fool she is for her actions.

_You are obviously in distress, Pathfinder, I did not think my opinion would help you_, his voice comes
a second later and she snorts to herself. She doesn't reply as she pushes by Jaal again, wetting the towel in order to clean her wound properly.

'I had no idea you feared this so much.'

'Yeah, well, I don't like talking about... anything, really,' she wraps the towel around her knuckles, stops and sighs. She turns to him, shoulders slumped forward and her eyes heavy. Right now, all she wants is her bed. 'Listen, can we just pretend this never happened? After all, the second we get back to Aya, I'll be out of everyone's hair, so...'

Instead of waiting for his reply, she turns on her heel, ordering SAM to close the door behind her as she does. It's an overreaction and she'll probably hate herself in the morning for just leaving him like that, but it's what she needs. She takes a long moment to gather herself, taking deep breaths in and out to calm her racing heart. The tears are already starting to sting her eyes, so she closes them to keep them in bay.

Don't cry, don't cry, don't fucking cry, she chants, waiting until she's certain the wetness has receded before opening them. Her legs are wobbling, her body aches and she can't really feel her hand anymore.

With a deep sigh, Sara stumbles to her bed, mindlessly working her way under the covers after asking SAM to turn the lights off and inform Lexi about her hand.

The door slides open almost instantly and she's greeted by the sight of the worried asari doctor, who lifts her hand and examines it, berating Sara as she goes but informing her that there's nothing seriously wrong with it.

'Have you been doing anything like I asked? Yoga? Knitting? Sara, it'll really help with all this stress. There must be something you can do to help direct your attention.'

Sara, who had remained silent during Lexi's examination, sighs. 'I always enjoyed drawing. Whenever I had a free moment on digs...'

'That would work. It's surely got to be better than punching a mirror.' There's a mixture of concern and judgement in her voice, but the former definitely outweighs the latter, so Sara just smiles in reply.

'I'll see. I just... I need sleep.'

'I'm here for you if you need anything, Sara, no matter what it is.' Lexi moves towards the door. Sara guesses that she must have sensed that she needed sleep in that moment more than she needed treatment or a lecture. 'Remember that.'

Giving a grumble in acknowledgement, Sara rolls onto her side and is asleep almost instantly.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

this one is kinda short but it just felt like the most natural place to end it, to be honest.

The first thing Ryder feels when she wakes up is pain. Mostly it comes from her hand and she has no idea why. It takes her a long moment to remember the events of last night — rescuing the Moshae, talking to her afterwards and then punching a mirror and cutting her hand right open.

Groaning, she rolls over onto her back and throws her good arm over her face in an attempt to drown out her thoughts but it doesn't really work. They just keep creeping into her mind, no matter how hard she tries to hold them back.

Giving a sigh, she asks SAM to switch the lights on and open the blinds, revealing the great abyss that's just outside her window. As soon as she's adjusted herself to the new light, Sara pulls herself into a sitting position, allowing herself a moment. She examines her hand, finding it wrapped in gauze and whenever she tries to move it, it twinges just a little.

Definitely not as sore as it was last night.

Yet, she knows from experience that it's still going to be usable. A part of her is still thankful that she's heading for Aya, where she's not allowed any weapons and won't get into any fights. She can take a day or two to just relax and let her hand heal.

Whatever Lexi had done to it last night... must have helped a little as well.

'SAM, where are we?'

'Currently circling Aya, Pathfinder,' SAM's voice comes in reply. His orb glows a little as it speaks and Sara turns towards it, almost as if it's a real person. She was always taught never to be rude.

However, the second those words are out of SAM's proverbial mouth, she turns towards the windows. The odd volcanic-like planet stares back at her. She finds herself wondering how the hell that very same planet can be home to the lush greenery that they land on, but if there's one thing she's learnt about Heleus, it's that strange things are a normality here.

'Kallo did not wish to land without your permission,' SAM continues as Sara pushes herself off the bed and towards her wardrobe. She's aware that she slept in the clothes she had on last night, which stink and are covered in blood as well.

Quickly bringing out a new hoodie and trousers — black and red, just like her father's N7 uniform — she turns back to SAM, shoving them on as she speaks. 'Tell him I'm up and to set her down. I'd go to the bridge myself but there's... something I need to do first.' She takes a deep breath as she bundles her dirty laundry into a pile, kicking it to the side with a mental note to wash later. 'In a completely unrelated note... where's Jaal?'

'In the Med Bay with the Moshae, Pathfinder.'

Ah, shit, Ryder thinks as she closes her blue eyes. She runs her hand through her blue locks, trying to
comb out the knots. She has no idea where her hairbrush is and no intention of spending ages trying to find it.

Despite growing up with a military father, Sara Ryder never quite learnt to be neat, organised or tidy.

'Uh, can you ask him to ping me when he's back in the Tech Lab? I need to speak with him.' She wanders over to her terminal, sitting down in the chair. 'I'll just be checking my messages until then.'

In truth, her stomach was growling due to its lack of food but there was no way she was ready to leave her quarters. Not really. No doubt the story would have spread and she didn't want anyone looking at her with pity or doubt or anything.

She knows she'll need to leave eventually. Especially when the news comes that they're docked and they need to return the Moshae. But until that moment, she'd much rather hide in her bedroom until then.

SAM confirms her orders and goes silent as she flicks through the messages. She finds her inbox flooded with them and it's enough to make her throat thick.

They're all from her crew. She can see that much. That at least makes her a little bit better. No email from Tann saying she's lost the plot and is fired. Or exiled. Or whatever you do to disgraced Pathfinders.

'Okay, no day but today, and all that shit,' Ryder mutters as she clicks on the first email.

_I believe in you_

to: Ryder

_from: Liam_

_hey Ryder. I know we've only known each other a short time but honestly. I couldn't imagine anyone else in this role. You're awesome. You're going to do amazing things._

_Liam._

_Sorry kid_

to: Ryder

_from: Drack_

_Heard about what happened. All I can say is, you handled it like a krogan. We tend to break stuff too. Just remember you have squishy skin that breaks easier._

_Chin up._

_Drack_

[Drack has included 23 images of guns and ammunition — most of them low quality]

_I don't do feelings_
to: Ryder
from: Peebee

I just want you to know that. But I heard about what happened. It sucks. I'd offer you a shoulder but... that would just be uncomfortable for us both.

Uh.
Bye.

Just like your old man

to: Ryder
from: Cora

Believe it or not. I remember once we had been on training and things just weren't going right. Afterwards, he disappeared. I found him later, wailing on a punchbag. I tried to steer him towards reading and mantras... didn't work. But maybe it'll work with you.

Cora

[Cora has included several documents of asari papers]

Faith

to: Ryder
from: Suvi (& Kallo)

I'm always here if you need to talk, Ryder. It's not easy when faced with challenges. But talking things out always helps me.

Kallo also sends his regards. He just had no clue what to put in an email of his own.

Communication from Vetra

to: Ryder
from: Vetra

Things like this used to always happen on turian ships. It's half the reason we always have a spar ring. Next time you want to get some energy out, I'm here. At least I'll last longer than a mirror... sorry... was that too soon? I know things are tough but... we're all here for you.

Vetra.

Emergency Poker Night?
to: Ryder
from: Gil

look, if you need to move up the poker game, that's fine. It always helps me. If not, also fine. Whatever you want.

Check-up

to: Ryder
from: Lexi

Your injury will need rebandaged tomorrow. But It shouldn't take too long to heal. You'll be back on the field in no time. I don't know if you remember what we talked about last night, but if you're serious about trying art to soothe yourself, talk to Vetra. She may know where to get some supplies for you.

Just try something, Sara, please. Don't worry me like that again.

-Lexi.

By the time that Ryder has finished with the messages, the tears have long since fell down her cheeks. They leave wet paths but she doesn't bother reaching up to wipe them away. She rereads some of them again, wondering how she could have possibly been worried about their reaction.

They maybe have only been together for a short time, this oddball little group, but it's an oddball little group that works. That cares for each other. That's as close to a family as Sara has right now.

Taking a deep breath, she opens the final message. It's the oldest of them all. She can't really remember times or such for whenever everything started going shit last night, but she's pretty certain this one came through quite soon after she collapsed into bed.

Dear Ryder

to: Ryder
from: Jaal

I'm... I find it hard to formulate words right now. Dr T'Perro has just informed me that you are well and not in grave danger, despite your wound. She assures me all you need is rest and a lack of stress.

I'm glad to hear this.

It is strange, to find myself so worried for an alien. An alien who, when we first met, I thought I would have to kill. I thought I could not trust.

Now that is no longer the case, seeing you in pain like that... hurt me too.

I stand by my decision. Rescuing those kett was the bravest choice and I have told the Moshae as much myself. Do not feel guilty for that. You restored our hope and faith. We have much to thank...
you for.

I have much to thank you for.

I hope... this message isn't out of line for your kind. I just wanted you to know I was worried. I am worried. And I hope that... despite your running away... nothing I did was... wrong.

Yours,

Jaal.

Sara clenches her jaw as she closes her eyes. She can feel her entire body start to shake. She tries to wrap her head around those words but finds she can't. She's pretty damn sure no-one has ever cared for her like that. Not outside of Mom and Scott, anyway. And Dad, she supposes. Given that he gave his life for hers.

But for someone who was a stranger mere months ago... to have such feelings towards her.

She shakes her head.

'Is Jaal out of the Med Bay yet?' she asks, pushing herself out of the chair before she even gets an answer.

'Yes, Pathfinder.'

That is all Sara needs to hear before she leaves her room and walks down to the Tech Lab where she knows Jaal is waiting.
Chapter 10

Sara stares at the Tech Lab door.

For once, there's no-one else around, which is something she's extremely thankful for. She knows from their messages that her crew don't judge her outburst and don't blame her for it either, but the last thing she wants is to have to talk to them. She's still not quite over it, herself.

She needs to talk to Jaal first.

Taking a deep breath, Sara knocks on the door, feeling her heart begin to race when Jaal's deep voice replies, telling her to enter.

When she walks in on him, he's crouched over something, tinkering away as usual. It almost brings a smile to her face, seeing him in such a familiar stance. It's like he's always got to be working on something — it's rather adorable.

'Jaal,' she starts as the doors close behind her. The last thing she wants is for someone to appear and overhear their conversation. He straightens the second she speaks, turning towards her. She's pretty damn certain she sees his gaze flicker to her hand, but it happens so fast she can't be sure. 'I... I wanted to apologise. For yesterday. For just... walking away.' She takes a deep breath. 'After all, you had a shitload to deal with too. I shouldn't have made it all about me. I'm sure finding out what the kett are doing to your people is worse than my overreacting.'

Her lips twitch in a humourless smile. It's an attempt to ease the tension but it doesn't seem to work. Not as his strange, accented brows pull down over his eyes.

His strange, entrancing gaze definitely does flicker to her hand this time. It lingers, taking in the sight of her bandaged knuckles.

'Everyone's problems are valid.' His eyes return to her face, burning into her eyes. She runs her good hand through her hair, pushing it behind her ear. His eyes track the movement before returning to her gaze. 'I'm all right, however. I need to be. Otherwise, it would be impossible to go on.'

Ryder lets out a gust of breath. 'That's understandable. I'm here if you need to talk. I have a good shoulder. Even if I don't know how to use it myself.' Her sore hands flexes into a fist and she hisses as a faint twinge of pain shoots through her. 'No-one in my family is good at controlling their emotions. Mom, maybe, but even then... it was easy to push her to explode.'

His head tilts to the side. 'That's kind of you. You are... kind.' He offers her a small smile. 'I really miss my family at times like this. I take it you are close to your family?'

Knowing this conversation is steering into deep ass territory, Ryder turns, leaning against the nearest workbench. It takes her weight as she hops onto it.

'I... was. I guess.' She frowns, a deep thing that shows on every crevice of her face. 'Mom was a scientist, she studied biotics.' Ryder takes a deep breath and channels her power, bringing the purple light to her fist as if she's planning on using a Nova. She stares at the brewing power for a moment before releasing it, taking a breath and just letting it fizz away. 'When I got my implant, she was always watching over me. Even though she was busy a lot, she was always there whenever I needed her.'

'That's nice,' Jaal says as he moves to stand beside her. He leans on the bench as well, not quite
sitting on it but he's close enough that his huge shoulder is pressing into Sara's.

It makes her smile.

'Dad was... Dad. Always busy. Always something more important to do. I loved the man but, I didn't really know him. And when Mom died, he grew even more distant.' Her lips quirk. 'Yet, despite all that, when he told me about the Andromeda Initiative and asked if I wanted to come... I didn't even hesitate. I signed up. I thought it was a chance to grow closer — finally have that bond. Then the bastard goes and dies, saving me from suffocating to death on Habitat 7.'

Jaal is silent. She can feel his gaze on the side of her face but she keeps her own straight ahead. There are tears stinging her eyes and she knows if she looks at this strange purple alien, they'll spill free. She's already had enough drama in front of him — she's not going to make him think she's even more unstable. She's trying to instil trust in these aliens, after all.

'I'm sorry. I did not know about that,' he finally whispers and Sara nods. She reaches up and rubs her eyes furiously. She wants to say more — she's still not over his death. There are still times she wakes up from nightmares as she relives it over and over again. It kills her just a little bit more inside every time.

She's certain by the time she's finally settled Andromeda, there'll be nothing left of her. She knows she needs to talk about it. Process it. But there's only one person who she feels comfortable doing that with...

She sniffles. 'Scott is who I'm closest to, though. He's my younger brother. By a minute. I never let him forget it.' Her lips tug into a grin as she finally turns to face Jaal. He returns her smile. 'But even he's left me now. There was an... accident when we arrived here. With the Scourge. He's in a medically-induced coma. I know he's going to be okay. He's too much like Dad — too damn stubborn — to go out like that. But... I could use him right now. He's my partner in crime. Whenever something goes right or wrong, I turn to him. It's hard... not having that.' She snorts. 'I suppose I'm kinda like an orphan right now.'

She shakes her head, trying to clear her head of the dark thoughts that have suddenly managed to take hold.

'Anyway, you talk about family a lot...'

She had planned to say more but Jaal laughs, crossing his arms over his large chest. 'Do I? I guess it's just part of our culture. Our families are large and we share our parents with the community. We all have many mothers.'

'Wow. I couldn't imagine that. My family is tiny. Then again, this crew of oddballs is like a family, which is somewhat bigger. It's nice, having so many people care...'

'I agree. I've never really felt like I had a purpose — but here, I do.'

Sara frowns slightly, turning on the table so she can better face him. 'What about the Resistance? You seem pretty important to them. There was that kid on Aya, when I first landed. He looked up to you so much!'

'My place is not what I'd like it to be. And you, Ryder, you are going to do something important. I feel it. This is where I should be.'

Ryder looks up at him. He's closer than he's ever been before. She can hear her heart drumming in her chest — all she really wants to do is tilt her head, seal their lips together. Which is strange in

Yet, nothing had ever turned serious and it was just as it was. Even her human exes had never gotten any further with her than a few fumbling hands beneath her shirt.

It's one of those things with being demisexual, she supposes. She liked her partners. Loved them even. But there had never been enough there for her to feel ready to take it all the way.

Now, all she can feel is heat. A heat she's never felt before as she stares into Jaal's strange, cat-like eyes. She licks her lips, knowing better than to move but all she wants to do is lean towards him and close the gap.

'Yeah,' she smiles, somehow breaking the spell but not entirely. There's still a haze but she has full control of the situation, at least. She's not going to ruin things by leaning forward. 'I like having you around. Specifically you.'

He looks down, breaking the eye contact and just like that, the spell is completely broken. Sara blinks and leans back, still feeling her heart ricocheting in her chest.

'Because of my skill and knowledge?'

She cannot lie to him, so she doesn't bother. She lowers her gaze to her knees and replies, 'Not really.'

'Because you enjoy spending time with me as much as I do with you?' His tone has gone lower, huskier and yet somehow softer. It's so strange and alluring.

Sara's head pops up as she turns to him again, too stunned by his words to forget to be coy or anything else. 'You do?'

'Yes. You're fascinating. And special. And strange.'

She can't stop herself from snorting in amusement. 'Aw, thanks.'

He joins in, giving a chuckle of his own. But his tone is serious when he finally speaks again. 'And I mean it.' He reaches for her hand, her bandaged one, and gently cradles it in his hand. He tilts it this way and that, examining it. Thankfully, no blood seeped through as she slept. She was too far gone to know what Lexi did to it, but whatever it was, it worked wonders. 'I'm glad you're okay. Even after Lexi told me, I was still... concerned.'

It occurs to Sara that, had it been anyone else, she would be pulling her hand away, but she doesn't. She leaves it in his hold, her eyes constantly flickering between their joined hands and his face. Her throat as thick and she has to swallow three times before she can get words out.

'I'm sorry I put you through that. I should have at least... assured you that I was okay. A message or something. But as soon as I paged Lexi and got into bed, I was just exhausted. I'm sorry.'

'You have already said that.' He offers her a kind smile. 'There is nothing to forgive. I am sorry it was the Moshae who upset you so. If I had known her words had been so harsh to you, I would have...'

'No, no,' Sara cuts him off. 'Don't apologise. Please. It's definitely not your fault either.' She takes a deep breath in and then lets it out. 'What say we just... put this whole ordeal behind us? Move on. We're both fine. We're both happy... no need to stress.'
His hand curls around hers. It's huge and her own is lost in it, but his touch is gentle, barely any pressure that her hand doesn't even hurt. She can feel a soft hum run through her fingertips, moving towards her knuckles and palm and then wrist.

Eventually, it spreads up her arm and that's when she realises it's Jaal's bioelectricity. It's helping alleviate the pain from her hand and she's so awed by the gesture, that all she can do is stare at him in silent wonder, with a ridiculously soft smile on her face.

Their eyes meet again and just like before, she can feel that strange pressure building in her body. It's making her lightheaded and dizzy in the best possible way, and all she wants to do is stay here. With him. Enjoying the strange buzz running up and down her arm.

'Pathfinder,' Kallo's voice comes through the comms, startling Sara so much she yelps, yanking her hand from Jaal's and stumbling off the workbench. 'We're nearing the LZ. Thought you'd like to know.'

Sara swallows, feeling her cheeks on fire. 'Uh, yeah, thanks Kallo. Be right there.'

She can say nothing else when she turns to Jaal. Their eyes meet and that seems to be enough. So, she turns on her heel and leaves the Tech Lab, trying to ignore the fact that her hand is still tingling from his electricity.
Chapter 11

The second they step off the Tempest, Ryder sees the huge crowd beginning to appear. It's a large enough crowd that it douses fire that had come from her conversation with Jaal. As well as the one that followed with Suvi and Kallo saying that Eos' radiation was finally falling, thanks to her work. She knows she needs to go back at some point, there's still things to do there, but first, she has to see this through.

Now, she almost wishes she had just kicked the Moshae off the ramp and taken off to see how Podromos is faring.

Her entire crew stands behind her. Jaal is at her side, enough distance between them that's probably respectable but even still, she can feel his presence as if she's still humming with his bioelectricity. She feels giddy, remembering that he had admitted to enjoying spending time with her — that he found her fascinating and strange.

Then her eyes land on the crowd — still growing — and it disappears again. Nothing kills her happiness more than the prospect of public speaking.

The Moshae takes the lead. She smiles, raising her arm above her head and greeting the crowd with a "Stars and skies light our way!"

The governor, Paaran Shie, returns the greeting and Sara can't stop herself from commenting. 'She knows how to play a crowd.'

Jaal snorts. 'She's the Moshae,' he says, as if that's explanation enough. Sara realises it probably is and just smiles in return.

The two angaran women reach each other then, stopping to press their forearms together, clenched fists touching the other's shoulder. It doesn't take Ryder long to realise that it's probably the equivalent of a handshake.

'Welcome home,' Paaran Shie says.

'I never thought I'd see it again,' Moshae Sjefa replies, before she lowers her arm. She takes a step back just as Ryder and Jaal step up to her. 'Without the Resistance — and the Pathfinder — I wouldn't be here.'

Immediately, Ryder feels a phantom pain in her hand. She clenches it into a fist, curling her fingers into the new bandage that Lexi had put on before she disembarked. Everything was healing fine, she'd be ready to go in a day or two.

'We made a good team,' she says, looking at Jaal with a small smile etched on her lips. It's still strange, hearing the Moshae praise her when just yesterday she was pretty much cursing her existence. Maybe Lexi had been right — maybe it had just been the trauma of her ordeal that she just wanted revenge without thinking and everything that she said, was said in the heat of the moment.

Which somehow makes Ryder feel even more like a fool, breaking her hand open like that over something that wasn't even real.

'We freed more than just the Moshae,' Jaal starts, and she feels his gaze on her for a second before he turns to Evfra and the governor. 'And the Pathfinder killed a kett leader.'
Her heart stutters at hearing him speak like this. Of course, she knew he agreed with her but to hear him defend her, in the presence of his commander, the governor and the Moshae? Ryder almost feels like her heart is going to burst from the emotions coursing through her veins.

'We have a lot to celebrate,' Evfra says, his voice still a growl. She wonders if anything ever pleases him and makes some emotion appear in his voice. Or face. She's yet to see his face contort into anything but a sneer.

'I promised I'd lead the Pathfinder to Aya's vault.'

'Take your time. You're still recovering.' She offers the Moshae a smile. 'I'm not going anywhere.'

The Moshae returns it and Sara starts to feel like maybe, they'll be able to mend bridges. To make things right.

'Not without our help,' Evfra chimes in and just like that, her good mood and optimism goes crashing. He still hates her. Great.

'I'll prepare the Vault for your arrival. A shuttle will bring you to me when you're ready.' She turns her head towards the shuttle launch pad, just to the side and up some stairs of where they stood. At least it wasn't that complicated a place to get to.

After she thanks the Moshae, Paaran Shie steps forward. 'We've been against the kett for too long. You've proven it doesn't have to be that way. It's time we discussed an alliance between our people.' Ryder is speechless. The words are ones that she's longed to hear ever since discovering the angara… and now that she's faced with them, she can't think of a single thing to say in return. She needs to do this right, to make it look like she's thankful and grateful and trustworthy, and once again, why did Dad think this was a good idea?

'We're happy to make room for you on the Nexus,' is what comes out. She's certain it's not what she should have said but hey, it's words and no-one looks offended.

Especially when the governor says, 'We'll provide an embassy here as well. Our city is open to you. Join us.'

Paaran Shie offers her one last smile before she turns away. Sara can pretty much feel her crew's excitement buzzing behind her. All of them have been dying to explore Aya ever since they crash landed. She knows how disappointed they were when Sara pretty much just collected Jaal and then was forced to leave again.

Now, they'll be able to look about and enjoy themselves. And hopefully not offend anyone in the process.

Just when she's starting to let their excitement rub off on her, Evfra steps in front of her, taking the place the governor had previously been. 'Well done, Jaal,' he says and that's about as much emotion Sara's heard in his voice. 'Report for reassignment.'

No! is on the tip of her tongue, nearly bursting out. She just manages to bite her tongue in time and clench her hands into fists to stop herself. If she had to countermand Evfra's order like that, no doubt he would hate her even more. He would probably end up doing whatever he could to cancel their newfound alliance. No matter how much she's gotten used to Jaal on her ship — how much her heart beats whenever he's around and the fact that he admitted to enjoying spending time with her, she can't insult Evfra like that.
This is between him and Jaal and if Jaal wants to go, now that he's home and faced with his duty again, she isn't going to stop him.

Sara holds her breath, waiting.

'I need to stay with the Pathfinder.'

She tries to hold back her smile of joy as she releases her breath. 'Jaal has already become a valued member of my crew,' she says, wanting to add I couldn't imagine doing this without him now. She keeps her mouth shut about that, though. A part of her hopes that Jaal manages to hear the unspoken words, however.

'Of course he has,' Evfra replies, almost as if it displeases him how easy Jaal makes friends. She can't dwell on that thought for long. Not as Evfra continues, 'I see the benefit. Request granted.'

Evfra turns and walks away, leaving Jaal and Ryder alone. Or as alone as they can be with her crew still standing behind them, waiting for permission to go and explore like a bunch of kids in a candy store.

'I need to file a mission report,' he says, starting to move away from her. No doubt he's following Evfra back to the Resistance headquarters. 'Don't leave Aya without me.'

She waits until he's a good few feet away before snorting. 'Fat chance of that happening,' she whispers, before she turns, facing her crew. They all look at her in a way that makes her spine straighten. 'What? Stop looking at me like that. Nothing is happening.'

They murmur a little in disbelief and Ryder just sighs, waving her hand. 'Whatever. Look, you're finally allowed into the city. Be careful, don't insult anyone or cause any problems. I swear, if I need to get called to the principal's office, I will not be pleased!'

They all grin at her before they start moving. Peebee is the first to move, practically skipping by Ryder. Next is Drack, grumbling about seeing what kind of drink they have on the planet. Liam follows him, deciding that is also a great way to begin their exploration of this new world. Vetra disappears, talking about finding new contacts and so Sara finds herself left with Cora, who steps up beside her.

'Everything all right?' she wonders, and Ryder feels her gaze dart to her bandaged hand.

'Yeah, getting there. What about you? How are you doing?'

'I'm still reeling about exaltation. The kett are just… they're monsters. They're the worst kind of enemy, making you fight your own people and you don't even know it. The angara didn't even choose this, they were forced into it. It's sick.' Cora takes a deep breath. 'I wish your dad were here to help give me his take on all of this.'

Ryder steps forward then, placing a hand on Cora's shoulder. 'You don't need him. You're good enough yourself, Cora. You're helping Kandros on how to better prepare to fight the kett. You're getting leads on the asari ark and Sarissa. You don't need my dad.'

Cora sighs. 'It's just… your dad, Nisira. They always had a plan that I could follow. Right now, we've got nothing. And without a plan, that's when people start getting hurt.'

'I know we're flying blind right now, and it's such a mess that it'll be years before everything is sorted out and normal, but we've got this Cora. I believe in you and I know that if anyone can help us figure this out, it's you.'
Cora takes a deep breath, closing her eyes before she nods. When she reopens them, there's a certain hardness in them that wasn't there before. 'Thanks, Ryder. I'm going to go and... I don't know. I guess I'll find somewhere. See you later.'

Without another word, Cora takes off and leaves Ryder alone. She watches Cora go, wondering just what to do. A part of her wants to find Jaal but she knows he's busy with his report — knows that the last thing she wants to do is push him away. She wants to give her crew a moment to themselves, exploring this new and beautiful city without worrying about her hovering over their shoulders.

Licking her lips, Ryder turns and walks straight up to the shuttle. She offers the pilot a smile. 'Has the Moshae headed to the Vault yet?'

The pilot nods. 'Left about ten minutes ago. You want to follow already?'

Casting a final glance over her shoulder, trying to see if anything catches her attention. When nothing does, she turns back and nods. 'Yeah, I'd like that please.'

He nods. 'Then hop in.'

Sighing, Sara hauls herself into the shuttle and sits down, resting her head against the window as she watches the city shrink and disappear as she heads to the Vault.
Chapter 12

By the time she returns from the Vault with the Moshae, she's started to feel pretty damn tired. The sun hasn't set completely and a part of her wants to know what makes up a typical day on Aya; how long it takes for the planet to rotate on its axis.

Sara got so used to living on Earth after Mom's diagnosis that everything in her mind is 24 hours. Even when on the Tempest with no set rotation, she tends to go by Earth time.

No matter whether it's still considered early for them, she plans to leave the Moshae and starts the long trek back to the Tempest, planning on taking the rest of the day to go over everything she and the Moshae had discovered in the vault.

Knowing now that all the vaults were in fact connected, and connected to this so called Meridian, it meant a lot. But of course, nothing's ever easy and the Archon not only knows of its existence, but has previously been there. He just hasn't a clue how to use it or activate it. Sara knows in her gut that instead of trying to save Heleus, he'll use it for his evil plans and try and exalt the entire cluster.

'I'm going to discuss what we discovered with Evfra,' Moshae Sjefa declares. 'When you're ready, come and meet me at the Resistance Headquarters.'

Ryder smiles, nodding. 'I will do. And thank you, again, for letting me inside the Vault. It's been just what we needed.' She goes to walk away, already imagining the softness of her pillow but before she can take another step, the Moshae is calling for her again.

'Pathfinder!' Sara stops and turns. 'I wanted to apologise myself. I said some awful things back on your ship. I still wish we had blown that place up,' she takes a deep breath, 'but I understand why you did not. I accused you of being uncaring when in truth, you saved more people than my course of action would have.'

Swallowing hard, Ryder wonders if Jaal actually did say something to the Moshae before she decides against it. He doesn't seem like the type to betray trust or take part in idle gossip. She probably just managed to put two and two together. She is the smartest of all the angara — that's why they love her so much. She's a scientist, a brilliant mind.

She wouldn't have been fooled by Ryder's chirpy demenour and false smiles like others would have.

'Honestly, I understand,' Ryder finally replies, after taking a deep breath. 'After everything you had been through, the last thing you needed to deal with was the new alien deciding to keep your torture grounds intact. You had no reason to believe that I wasn't doing it for the kett's sake or whatever. I don't blame you, honestly, just... humanity is strange. Our minds can warp things and turn it against us until we...' she trailed off, looking down at her fist. A twisted smile appears on her lips. 'End up punching mirrors.'

The Moshae's lips twist, almost as if she's uncertain whether she can laugh or not. In the end, she just nods and reminds Sara about the meeting with Evfra before disappearing into the city.

'SAM,' Sara starts as she turns, moving towards the Tempest, 'is anyone else aboard the ship or are they all still ashore?'

'Most seem to still be ashore. Dr. T'Perro and Kallo are aboard.'

'Okay, good, I'm not really in the mood to talk right now. If Lexi tries to get me, just say I'm busy.'
Ryder takes her time as she makes her way through Aya, heading towards the Resistance Headquarters to meet up with Evfra and the Moshae. Already she's had people asking her for favours, trusting her more than they had when she first landed.

Sohkaa Esof has asked her to track down a shipment for him, and in exchange, he's willing to set up a trade with her. She knows it's too good of an opportunity to miss, so the second she can, she'll head to Voeld again and try and find out everything that happened.

She has also bumped into Arbiter Ranaav, who has given her NavPoints to two other people, who will give her books to read so she can get familiar with the angara's culture. It makes things a bit better than constantly pestering Jaal with her questions, she reckons, so she agrees to check in with the other Arbiters on her way back from the Resistance.

She dips into the museum to have a quick chat with Avela, the curator, who asks her to check out another NavPoint on Havarl which is the location of a crash site that may hold certain information or relics for the angara's history.

More than eager to help, she agrees without any hesitation. She notices a few other angara miling about the museum, studying the relics of the RemTech and their history. She can't imagine what that must be like, losing your entire history.

Even though she's left Earth behind, she still knows where humanity has been and where they've come from. It makes her life a little easier.

But the angara have nothing but speculation and that makes her heart heavy as she steps into the streets. She tucks her hands into her pockets, determined to no longer get sidetracked and head straight to the Headquarters.

That is until she sees some strange fruit and has to stop to ask questions about it. She's too curious for her own good, and it's always shown. Surely, the others will understand. Or at least, she suspects the Moshae will. Evfra, not so much.

She turns, starting to move again when she hears a name mentioned that is all too familiar by now. It brings the same strange butterfly-in-stomach feeling that she's started to get whenever his name is mentioned, or whenever she sees him.

But then she hears the words the women are speaking and those butterflies freeze.

'Of course, Pathfinder.'
her and Jaal, despite the tiny crush she has on him.

'He's so oblivious to any advances, however,' the other says, a chuckle in her voice. 'Why do the cute ones have to be so dense?'

That definitely makes Sara frown. So... he's not a big flirt who says fancy things and has a hundred girls on the go.

She shakes her head.

She can't get sidetracked by things like this. She's got to meet up with Evfra and Moshae Sjefa. That's more important than a couple of angaran females gossiping in the centre.

She turns, her feet moving faster than before as she follows the familiar path to the Headquarters. Even as she walks, though, those words are still repeating in her head and when she finally sees Jaal, standing by the railing, she's completely at a loss.

Ryder knows she can't face him. Not now. Otherwise, she'll just end up demanding answers about his private life, and that isn't a good look. Not even across species, she's sure.

So, she turns her head to the Headquarters and marches on, hoping and praying that Jaal doesn't see her. As she steps inside, she realises that she has no idea where to go but it doesn't take long for her to find Evfra and the Moshae. She just needs to follow the raised voices coming from the back room.

'I deserved to be told. You had no right to keep it secret from me,' the Moshae hisses, her hands leaning on the table. She raises one, pointing it to Evfra accusingly.

The other angara crosses his arms over his chest. 'It's an ongoing investigation. I meant no disrespect.'

That gives Sara pause. She stops, watching as the scene unfolds. The Moshae pushes herself away from the table, taking a second to gather her thoughts before she asks, 'Did Jaal know?'

And god fucking damnit, it's actually impossible to put that angara to the back of her mind. Every time she thinks she can have a moment, without having to examine the reasons behind the fluttering in her stomach, his name is brought up and with it all the feelings.

'Of course not. Neither did the human.'

Sara raises her eyebrow. She finally has had enough lurking in the shadows and pushes forward, stepping into the room and up to the table. A part of her wants to demand answers, but one look at Evfra's face and she rethinks that idea.

The Moshae asked her here. She'll inform her, she's certain of it. So, she just murmurs a quiet, 'Sorry to interrupt.'

Evfra sneers at her, lip curling. 'This isn't your concern.'

Moshae Sjefa turns away from him, moving closer to Sara. 'It is now. We need to find the kett command ship.' The Moshae looks at her for only a second before turning to Evfra. Her voice is like iron when she speaks again. 'Tell her the truth about my capture.'

For the first time ever, Evfra looks... contrite. He lowers his head and pleads, 'Moshae, please...'

She's not phased. Sara admires how unconcerned she is about upsetting Evfra or going against his
orders. Now that they've managed to put the awkwardness of their first conversation behind them, Sara finds her admiration grow for the woman. *Damn, I wanna be her when I grow up.* 'It may be our only route to the Archon.'

Heaving a sigh, Evfra folds his arms over his chest once more. 'One of my men helped the kett take her. A Resistance commander named Vehn Terev.'

That is definitely not what Ryder was expecting to hear. Her gaze flickers between the Moshae and Evfra for a second before she replies. 'One of your own gave her to the Archon? No wonder you kept it hushed up.'

'This isn't about hiding the truth,' the Moshae explains. 'I'm working to capture him. Make him pay for what he did.'

Sara listens as they explain Kadara Port to her and just how vital he is to getting information on the Archon and his flagship. She knows, without any doubt, that the only way to get a lead on Meridian and that relic that he has, is Vehn Tarev. And Kadara.

Licking her lips, she agrees to go to Kadara as soon as she possibly can, smiling when the Moshae sides with her against Evfra. She's more than willing to do whatever it takes to keep Vehn alive, handle the exiles and hopefully not start some sort of war.

With a nod, she takes off, leaving Evfra alone with the Moshae once more, who still has fire in her gaze.

Her mind is still whirling from everything that she forgets about Jaal, until she's right in front of him, and he's calling her over.

'Well, what do you think?' he asks, his hand gesturing out in front of him, over the view of Aya. Ryder takes a moment, swallowing as she turns. It's honestly awe-inspiring. There's some lush vegetation growing, but then that fades into the volcanic surface. It's one of the oddest sights but no less breathtaking.

The longer she stares, the more she feels at ease. Nothing seems to matter as she stares out over the sight. Not until she can feel the side of her face burning, and when she turns, she finds Jaal staring at her.

A flush creeps onto her cheeks and she clears her throat. 'I could get used to a view like this. It's beautiful.'

'We take turns living here. You can see why.'

He's turned his gaze back to the horizon, totally captivated by the vision before him. A part of her wonders what he would make of Earth, with all its greenery. The thought rises unbidden and she coughs, trying to distract herself from these ridiculous and impossible ideas that keep rising.

'You seem relaxed here,' Sara admits instead, before she can stop herself. A part of her realises that this is also utterly ridiculous and obvious, but she doesn't care. 'There's a sparkle in your eye.'

'I am. Thank you...' he seems almost hesitant. Bashful. Embarrassed. It makes her heart leap. 'It's nice of you to notice.'

Too encouraged from the response and her mind clearly rebelling against her wits, she replies, 'You're interesting... I like to notice.'
He turns to her then, offering her a soft smile. Their eyes meet and just like before, when they were in the Tech Lab, she feels that electricity pass between them. There's the damn butterflies, thawed from the effects of the conversation with those two angaran women. They won't seem to stop this time.

Returning her smile, Ryder swallows, turning her gaze back to the view. She reaches out and grabs the bars, leaning against them. 'I've just been talking to Evfra and the Moshae. We've got a lead. I'll fill everyone in back on the *Tempest* but... looks like it's a rather short stay again.'

He leans his arms on the railing too, right beside her. 'I thought as much. The Moshae does not stand still. I knew when she came back from the Vault that she would have a plan to help. Luckily, I've done everything I need to... and I am not that disappointed... I much prefer Havarl.'

Craning her head, Ryder raises an eyebrow at him. 'Why is that? This place is... stunning. And peaceful. Havarl is... well... Havarl.'

He laughs with her and that makes her heart soar. 'I know, but Havarl is home. Havarl is where my family are. It is... special to me.'

Everything makes sense then. She gives him a soft, warm smile. Just something that lets him know that he understands completely. 'I understand that. Truly. If I could just sit on the *Hyperion*, next to Scott, and never have to worry about anything again... I would.' She sighs. The same heavy feeling settling on her stomach that comes whenever she thinks about her brother. It feels like so long ago since she saw him.

Jaal's hand covers her own. 'I am certain he will be fine. If he is anything like you... he is not going to give up.'

'It's almost like you've met him,' Ryder says with a grin, pushing herself into a standing position once more. 'Anyway, I'm heading back to the ship. We'll hopefully be leaving shortly so if you think of anything else you've got to do, best get 'em done now. Wouldn't want you getting left behind now, would we?'

She gives him a final grin before she turns and walks off, feeling his gaze on her back as she does.
Sara stands at the bridge, gazing out over the galaxy map. In all honesty, she has no idea where she really needs to head to next. The map looks huge, with a million different places for her to go. There's Havarl, where she still has unfinished business and errands to do; there's Eos, where she needs to return at some point to check up on; there's Voeld, which she didn't even get a chance to explore. They just landed and then were off to the kett facility to rescue the Moshae.

Her mind is still reeling from everything that happened after she left Jaal. Getting scanned by that angaran woman, who was worried about the future of Heleus with them now in it; collecting all the information on Aya's customs from the arbiters. The first one wasn't too bad, 241 pages she could deal with. But the second one... how the fuck was she supposed to read 5,983 pages? She told SAM to do it for her and just let her know if she ever does anything offensive.

There had been a quick talk with Paaran Shie, getting to know more about Aya and how everything worked. Then another talk with Enroh Bosaaan, who answered some more questions and also informed her about the message terminals he set up — she promised to collect them the next time she returned. And finally, she had been caught up with Maariko, Aya's chief astronemer, who asked for her help in tracking missing satellites — and Ryder, being Ryder, couldn't refuse.

'Everyone is aboard, Pathfinder,' Kallo's voice disturbs her thoughts and she turns to the salarian pilot with a smile. 'Where do you want to go?'

'That's the million credit question, isn't it?'

She heaves a sigh just as SAM announces, 'Director Tann would like to talk to you, Pathfinder. The link is set up in the meeting room.'

'Oh, how exciting.' Ryder rolls her eyes, unable to stop her smile as Suvi gives a giggle. 'Okay, take her up and just orbit Aya right now. I'll see what he's got to say and then come back and choose our destination. Supposing, he's not calling to fire me.'

'I don't think he could fire you, even if he wanted to,' Suvi says, her Scottish accent thick. It makes Ryder smile as she waves them off, heading to the meeting room.

She passes Drack and Liam standing in the Research Room, talking about what fun they had at Aya. She keeps walking, not wanting to hear whether or not they already managed to strain relations between the Initiative and the angaras.

'Right.' Sara takes a deep breath. 'Patch him through, SAM. Let's get this over with.'

There's a few seconds where nothing happens before Director Tann's form enters the room. The holographic appearance makes him look even stranger. In her lifetime, Sara has never been around many Salarians. Mostly because they didn't seem to like humanity. The only ones who tolerated them were the asari, it seemed — but even they never sided with them completely.

So, she's never completely used to seeing them. Especially when they're semi-transparent and with odd blue tinges to their skin, rather than the usual warm oranges.

'Direction Tann, good news,' she starts, putting a smile on her face. 'The angara opened an embassy for us on Aya.'

Tann pauses. 'That is... a surprise. What are their expectations?
Sara can't stop herself from rolling her eyes. Any tension she had at dealing with the Director of the Initiative disappearing. She crosses her arms over her chest, leaning heavily to one side. 'Tann, these people survived the Scourge and the kett, and rebuilt their *entire* civilisation. Don't forget it.' *Asshole*, is what she doesn't add.

She almost wishes she had when he says, 'Appeal to their pride. Sensible.'

'No, that's not—' Ryder starts but he cuts her off, talking right over her as if she had never interrupted.

'I'll gather envoys and send them to Aya. Thank you, Pathfinder, we'll take it from here.'

Before she can say another word, he's gone, the connection link dropped and she grinds her teeth together. Her arms drop to either side of her body again, but her hands clench into fists. 'Just don't ruin my hardwork, you shithead.'

Turning on her heel, she starts to head back to the bridge, slowly coming down the ramp into the Research Room when she hears Peebee and Vetra talking. She stops, looking over the railing. Liam and Drack have disappeared. Vetra stands by the terminal and Peebee rests on the research centre.

'Why can't you ask her yourself?' Vetra questions, the exasperation clear in her voice.

'Because!' comes Peebee's reply.

'Because?'

'Just because!'

Vetra heaves a sigh. 'Fine.' She then turns from the terminal and starts fiddling with her omni-tool. 'Lexi, Peebee wants to look at Jaal's scans?'

The smile freezes on Ryder's lips. Her hands curl around the railing as she watches the asari, hopping about as she waits for Lexi to reply.

It doesn't take the doctor long to reply, her voice irate. '*Peebee* knows I cannot divulge patient information.'

Ryder can't hold back her sigh of relief, even as Peebee mutters about Lexi being useless and storms back to her place in the escape pod. 'Lexi, Peebee wants to look at Jaal's scans?'

The smile freezes on Ryder's lips. Her hands curl around the railing as she watches the asari, hopping about as she waits for Lexi to reply.

It doesn't take the doctor long to reply, her voice irate. '*Peebee* knows I cannot divulge patient information.'

Ryder can't hold back her sigh of relief, even as Peebee mutters about Lexi being useless and storms back to her place in the escape pod. She hates the feeling that has started to grow in her chest. Sure, she's seen Peebee flirt with, well, everyone really. But hearing her ask for Jaal's scans just raised something in her chest that would have made her biotics flare if Lexi hadn't replied as quickly.

'Hey, Ryder,' Vetra calls, pulling her from her thoughts. She steps down from the ramp and wanders to the catwalk that leads her back to the bridge. 'Where we headed to next?'

Ryder heaves a sigh. 'Honestly, not sure right now. I'm going to check my messages and see if anyone needs us. I... do still have to tell that Sage on Havarl about his sister. I should really do that, seeing as he hasn't got much time left.'

She purses her lips, thinking.

'Well, please don't take me ashore if we do go there. Remember what happened last time.'

That brings a smile to Sara's lips and she turns, moving back to the bridge with a wave of her hand. She hears Kallo and Suvi chatter away, so she takes that opportunity to step to the terminal, scrolling through the messages that have appeared since she last checked.
There's one from Cora, thanking her for their talk when they first docked on Aya with the Moshae. Another from Liam who says that he's started making contacts with the angara, just in case anyone messages her. One from Kallo about the tight escape they had whilst rescuing the Moshae and how pleased he was with the *Tempest*'s performance.

The ones from Eos about a project that Hainly's working on, Havaral about the science team being deployed to help the angara and Voeld from Raelis who has intel on the kett, don't make her decision on which planet to go to any easier. Neither does the one from Doctor Aridana asking for assistance back on the Nexus.

Sighing, she pulls up the final message, the one she's been eyeing since she saw it but knew better than to open first because it's from Jaal. And his words always make her smile like a weirdo and get all distracted.

*Communication from Jaal*

*to: Ryder*

*from: Jaal*

*To Sara,*

*Ryder,*

*The Moshae sent some news from Aya that she asked me to share with you.*

*Under her guidance, officials are again allowing study in the Aya vault. It comes with great risk, of course, so she's restricting participation to her brightest students, under armed guard. Although she doesn't have your ability to interface with the Remnant, she wants to be ready to assist you--however she can--once Meridian is found.*

*These are interesting and exciting times.*

*Jaal.*

Sara reads and then rereads the message, feeling her grin grow. It's strange how happy that knowledge makes her, to know that things are opening up for the angara again. That the Moshae is starting to study the vault once more.

She also cannot get over how he started the message. He called her by her first name. He called her Sara, then went on to call her Ryder, as if he realised his slip-up. It makes her heart stutter to see that. Makes her wonder what he was thinking as he wrote the message — did he spend a long time, staring at it, wondering whether to delete her name and keep it as Ryder or did he not even think twice about it?

Swallowing, Sara starts to type her response.

*re: Communication from Jaal*

*to: Jaal*

*from: Ryder*

*I am so happy to hear that! It's honestly such a unique place and I'm glad that it's not just going*
to sit around forgotten. Tell the Moshae I wish her and her students success in their studies. And if they ever need help with anything, just to message me. I'm always here for them.

She stops, ready to sign it off and click send when a memory rises. It was just before they reached Voeld and started the mission to rescue the Moshae. She had been talking to Jaal about the Roekaar and how she wished to try and work out a peace between them. He had shared his sceptism but offered to help her try...

Frowning, she turns back to her terminal.

Also, I just remembered... your contact for the Roekaar... the one who knows Akksul... where is she again? I've been so caught up with the Moshae rescue my mind has gone blank.

Sara.

And with that sign off, it's almost likes she's giving him permission to use her first name. Her finger hovers over the send button when SAM choses that moment to interrupt her. The contact's name Thaldyr and she lives in Havarl.

Thankfully, he talks to her through their private channel and so Kallo and Suvi don't know about this attempt to keep the conversation going with their new alien friend.

Grinding her teeth together, Sara sends her reply. Yes, thank you for that SAM. I am trying to keep our angaran friend in the loop and keep up a conversation with him.

SAM is silent for a beat. Oh. I understand.

Humming, Sara steps away from her terminal and turns to Kallo. 'Hey, I've got a NavPoint for you to check out. It's about a missing satellite that's gone offline for the angara. Do you want to check it out whilst I double check something?'

'Of course, Ryder!' Kallo's chirpy voice replies, punching in the location the second that she's pinged them to him.

After giving that lame ass excuse, the last thing she wants to do is linger on the bridge waiting for a message. So, she turns and leaves, sliding down the ladders and quickly stepping into her room. She notices Pyjak sitting on her couch, and so she goes and gives him a quick pet before darting over to the terminal in her quarters.

She almost gives a giddy laugh when she notices a message from him waiting in her inbox.

re: re: Communication from Jaal

to: Ryder

from: Jaal

I will be sure to pass on your kind words and offer.

And yes. I still believe this to be a fruitless mission but many said the same about our rescue of the Moshae. You seem to have a way of doing the impossible. Her name is Thaldyr and she lives on Havarl. I will send you the NavPoint so you know exactly where to go — though, of course, I do hope you will bring me. It would be easier on Thaldyr to have a familiar face present.
'What is that human phrase...' SAM starts, pulling Ryder from her third read through of the message. She frowns, turning to the small node that sits beside her on the desk. 'I told you so?'

Ryder purses her lips. 'Oh, shut up,' she says with no real malice behind the words. 'And tell Kallo that our next destination is Havarl after he's done with the satillite.'

'Of course, Pathfinder,' he replies, and Sara is pretty certain she can hear a smirk in his voice. She doesn't pay it much attention, however, as she turns back to her terminal and starts to type out her reply to Jaal.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

trigger warning for mention of suicide and self harm. Tbh, this is purely from my experience when I had to play through the Thaldyr scene the first time. With, of course, some changes for Ryder's history but yep. This one isn't pretty, headspace wise.

The first thing she does when she gets off the Tempest, even though it's the middle of the night and she's tired, is go to the research outpost. She has Jaal and Peebee with her, even though she's doubting that very decision with every step she takes. Peebee definitely takes some getting used to and whilst she has no idea what kind of state Thaldyr will be in, she realises a bit too late that she's probably not going to be in the mood for Peebee.

But she's not going to send her back. Not as she and Jaal seem to be chatting quite easily as Ryder waits for the connection to establish between her and Addison back on the Nexus. Her email had been pretty blunt, just a brief "contact me the next time you're on Havarl", so she's not surprised when the conversation doesn't last that long.

She is, however, surprised when Addison seems to understand why Ryder is so against placing an outpost on Havarl. And when Addison asks her to say something for the records, she's pretty certain she sounds like a fool but it works and Addison seems pleased enough to end the conversation.

So, Ryder turns, ready to tell Jaal and Peebee that she's ready to go, only to freeze at the sight before her. In all honesty, it's nothing. A part of her brain realises that and tells her to calm down — she has no claim on Jaal, nothing to feel this jealousy at seeing Peebee's hand on his upper arm as she smiles up at him.

In truth, it's not even that which makes her turn into a solid block of ice. It's more the fact that Jaal is smiling back at her. A smile Ryder is familiar with — a smile she thought that only she had been blessed enough to truly see.

Well, what a bloody fool I've been, she thinks as she takes a deep breath and steps up to them. She forces a smile on her face but she knows it doesn't work — not as Jaal frowns and Peebee just looks at her and asks, 'What is wrong with your face?'

Sara just rolls her shoulders. 'Addison,' she mumbles in reply, before she's heading for the door without saying another word. She hates how much she's acting like a clown, but she spent all of last night messaging Jaal. It had gone from information about Thaldyr to simple talk about angaran culture and Jaal's history and Sara's past. There had even been flirting.

Now, she feels like an absolute idiot because he obviously is a massive flirt, despite what she thought when she heard those two angaran women talking on Aya.

'Okay, SAM,' she says to distract herself from their heavy stares coming behind her. 'Bring up the NavPoint Jaal sent. It's late enough and I'm tired and well... I want to get back to the Tempest.'

A part of her knows that she could have waited until tomorrow to go to Thaldyr, but there was just something nagging in the back of her mind, telling her that she needed to go and go now.
The trek through Havarl is as grueling as ever. Drall, chalyrions and even a rykllor attacked them as they made their way to the destination. The drall she can deal with — they're just huge bugs that explode with one shot or a stab from her omni-blade (which she doesn't like doing seeing as their green insides get everywhere) and the chalyrions are a bit of nuisance. They take some more shots and they just appear out of nowhere thanks to their cloaking abilities.

Far too often she's had to stab those bloody things between the eyes because they just appear in front of her, and they're clawing at her, breaking through her shields and trying to get through her armour.

But the rykllor. Those fuckers are almost the worst things. Second only to eiroch — which she hasn't had to face today. Yet. She prays she makes it back to the Tempest without having to.

'Thaldyr's home is just around here,' Jaal starts but stops when they hear it. The sound of shooting. Sara reloads her weapon and takes off without another thought, rounding the corner and halting at the sight.

A group of kett stand outside the building, desperately trying to get inside. Sara already knows who is inside, even as Jaal starts to shout that they won't take her again. He rushes into the fight, Peebee quick behind him as Ryder drops to her knees and brings her rifle up.

She's always been a better sniper than close fighter. It almost makes her miss Scott — they were the perfect team. She could snipe from any distance, always managing to hit her target when she had the right tools. She's good with pistols too, even though they're needed a little bit closer to combat.

Scott, however, liked shotguns and hand to hand combat. Something that had only flourished as he joined the Alliance. He had dreams of joining the N7 programme some day... dreams that were thrown into disarray when Alec Ryder ruined his reputation by talks of AI and saying he was going to a new galaxy and wanted his kids to come with him.

Her thoughts make her miss her target, her shot going a little wide and disappearing into the bushes. She hisses and clears her mind. Now is not the time to be thinking about that. The second she knows her mind is free, she takes another shot, watching with grim fascination as the bullet pierces the kett's head and makes it explode like a watermelon.

Peebee takes one down as Jaal cloaks and plunges his blade into the base of the kett's skull. Sara draws in a breath and fires at the Anointed, waving its machine gun about like a clueless monkey. It takes a few more shots, and help from both Peebee and Jaal, but eventually it drops to the ground.

Shouldering her weapon, Ryder takes off running towards the house. She wonders if it's wise of her to go barging in first — maybe she should have let Jaal go but she's here now and she can't stop herself.

The doors open and she sees an angara lying on a bed. She groans in pain and Ryder is at her side immediately, even as the woman — Thaldyr, she guesses — growls out a 'Don't touch me!'

Drawing back only slightly, Sara takes in the wounds. Huge gashes on her wrists, her blue blood pouring from them non-stop. It makes her throat seize up as she sees them, finding the dagger that caused them lying not too far away.

'You're... you're wounded.' Sara's mind is going into overdrive. These wounds. She's seen these wounds before. She's been this close to these wounds before. Hell, she looked at her own wrists and considered doing it to herself. 'You need medical attention!'

She turns, looking for something — anything — that she can place over them, to try and stop the
blood flow before she bleeds out. She can see nothing.

'It's too late for that,' Thaldyr grinds out with a scoff. 'I made sure of it.'

'Your wounds... they're self inflicted?' Jaal asks and that almost makes Sara scoff. She's pretty sure she would have if her own wrists weren't tingling with the memory of having a blade hovering above them. Her thighs ache from the scars she put there. Similar scars with less deadly consequences. She had always made sure to avoid her arms — they were always visible. But her thighs? She very rarely wore shorts and when she did, she never wore extremely short ones. It was the safest place for her to take out her fear and misery and loathing and worry.

'The kett. I can't go back.' Thaldyr winces in pain. 'I won't.'

'Hush now, sister,' Jaal says, his voice soothing. He steps around Ryder, up to Thaldyr, taking her hand in his own. Sara stumbles backwards, her mind working over time. The sensation comes rushing back to her. The culmination of self-worth, of never being good enough, of feeling unwanted, all coming to fruition when she'd take a razor and drag it across her skin, watching as the blood welled from the cut. The hiss of pain and total relief that came with it — the thoughts drowned out momentarily as the shock of physical pain took over.

She wonders if that's how it felt for Thaldyr. Hearing the kett at her door and feeling victorious when she drew the blade across her wrists.

'They kett are dead. They can't take you. We won't let them.'

'You sound like **him**. So confident. So sure.'

Even through her breaking mind, Sara can understand who he means. Akksul. She wonders how Jaal will react to that but the wonder is only brief.

'You mean Akksul?' Peebee prompts, stepping forward. She looks at Sara from the corner of her eye, as if she had expected her to notice and question that.

'He saved me. Gave me a chance to live... and die on my own terms.'

Jaal's voice is quiet as he says, 'We need to find him Thaldyr.'

But his words come too late. Thaldyr's entire body goes lax, her head rolling back and her eyes falling shut. She goes limp on the bed as her life leaves her body.

Jaal lets out a long breath. He folds her hand over her stomach and steps back. 'Isharay, brave one.'

She can feel their gazes on her, almost expecting her to say something. But she can't. All she can see is how still her body is. No rise and fall of her chest. No signs of life. The blood that's pooled on the floor. It's so different from the memory in her head — blue instead of bright, vivid red. Blood so similar to humans but not human at all.

'She was devoted to him, right until the end,' Jaal starts, before he scoffs, shaking his head. 'And Akksul is using that to spread hate. The only person who can reach Akksul is the Moshae.' He groans. 'I had hoped to leave her out of this.'

Sara knows he's talking to her but she can't say anything. She shakes her head and turns. Jaal is closer than she thought and she bumps into his chest in her desperation to leave. His hands come up and steady her but the touch is far too much. She wrenches free from him and is running before she realises it.
She pays no attention to any of the creatures that could jump out at her, she just pushes on and on until she's standing at the bottom of the *Tempest*'s ramp. With shaking fingers, she keys in the access code to open the door. The second it opens, she throws herself through the door and starts ripping her armour off. Everything is stifling and her body is warm. She just needs to get out of it.

'Ryder,' Gil starts but stops when he sees her face, her fingers clawing at all the buckles of her armour.

She starts to snap at him but takes a deep breath. 'Just help me get out of this.'

'Where are the others?' he asks, coming up to her side and helping her remove her armour. His hands are steady and it takes no time for him to start revealing her underarmour.

His question makes her falter, however, and she cranes her head over her shoulder, trying to see if she can find her friends. She can't believe that she just ran away and left them, ignoring whether or not they would be in trouble — anything could jump out at them in Havarl's wilds from Roekaar to eirochs.

Before she can say anything, Jaal and Peebee appear. They're huffing with their eyes wide as they study Ryder. She can feel their gazes wandering over her, looking for answers to their questions.

'Ryder, what the hell just happened?' Peebee demands, unloading her pistols, the places her hands on her hips.

Sara shakes her head. 'I can't...' Gil finally finishes removing her armour and so she takes that as her cue to leave. She moves straight through the ship, straight to her quarters and throws herself onto the bed.

*Sara, you appear to be having a panic attack.*

Ryder scoffs. *Yeah, no shit SAM.* She rights herself, moving to the edge of the bed and leaning forward, positioning her head between her knees as she takes deep breaths in and out, trying to control herself and calm down.

*Shall I alert Dr. T'Perro?*

No... no I really just need... but that's what happened when she ended up punching the mirror. She thought she could handle it herself but she really couldn't. *Yeah, please SAM.*

It doesn't seem to take any time at all before the doors are swooshing open. She wonders what her crew must think of her. Two breakdowns in the span of mere days? They're probably questioning her mental stability.

'Ryder! Sara! Is everything all right?' Lexi questions, moving to stand beside her. Her hand lands on her back, rubbing soothing circles. 'SAM, what happened?'

Sara wonders if SAM is actually speaking aloud or if Lexi has a private channel as well. No matter what, she doesn't pay attention. Not as she closes her eyes and sees the sight before her.

The body changes. Sometimes, it's a purple angara; other times it's a blue-green drell. Sometimes the blood is blue, sometimes it's red. But no matter what, it doesn't change the scars on the wrists. The voice is still the same crackling, deep voice of a drell saying he couldn't go on.

She rights herself, moving so fast that she almost headbutts Lexi. The asari doctor just manages to move out of the way with a yelp. Sara grimaces in apology before she reaches for her, grabbing
Lexi's hand.

'I need something to help me sleep, Lexi. If I stay awake, I'll relapse, I know it. I can't...' Sara takes a deep breath, trailing off when Lexi's hand squeezes back around hers.

'I'll see what I can get you. But please talk to me first, Ryder. I don't want to just drug you up and have that be the solution. If you need a sleeping aid, I'll provide, but only when you tell me what's wrong.'

'I... we went to see Thaldyr. Jaal's contact.'

'Yes, I remember you mentioning it. What happened?'

'She... she cut her wrists. The kett were there, attacking, and she refused to be captured again. So, she... and it just reminded me of... of him.' Sara isn't a fool. She knows that it's in her file and that Lexi has read it because that's what good doctors do.

So, really, it's no surprise when Lexi asks, 'Shasi?'

Sara nods her head. 'I haven't thought of him in so long. Hell, I haven't had nightmares either. Not since landing in Heleus. I thought... maybe his ghost had left me alone. Now...'

'You've been confronted with a similar situation. Someone dying from self-inflicted wounds and you are powerless to help.'

Sniffling, Ryder reaches up and wipes her eyes. 'Exactly. It's their decision. They made their minds up. I shouldn't feel bad that I was there, that I tried to get them to cling to life at the last second but couldn't. And yet I do. What if we had came back to Havarl first? Before the kett arrived? What if I had stayed the night with him, like he wanted?' She gives a humourless scoff of laughter.

'Sara, take it from someone who lives for a millennium,' Lexi gives her a teasing smile as she speaks, 'you can't spend the rest of your life wondering what if. Nothing you do will change it. We have a lot of technology but time travel isn't one of them. Not to mention... we're a whole galaxy away. As sad as it sounds, back on earth, there is no-one who remembers you. Or Shasi. And in a few hundred years, no-one will remember you here either.'

'Well, I certainly hope they will! I'm not going through all this trouble not to have shit named after me at some point!'

That eases a laugh from Lexi, the sound of which coaxes one from Ryder. She heaves a sigh and thankfully, no longer feels like there's a crushing weight on her shoulders. 'Thanks Lexi, I needed that more than I realised.'

'That's what I'm here for Sara. I'll bring you the sleeping aid if you still want it?'

'Yes, please, I don't want to deal with nightmares tonight.'

Lexi nods, standing from the bed. She starts to head to the door, only stopping when Ryder calls her name again.

'Tell the crew that I'm okay, that it just brought up old memories. If they wanna know, they can pry all they want, but I have no doubt they'll just respect it and stay quiet about it.'

'As you say, Ryder.'
Sara watches her leave and falls backs onto the bed, staring at the ceiling, waiting until Lexi comes back with the pills to help her sleep through the night.
Sara heaves a sigh and falls to the ground. She thinks about lying back on the grass but reconsiders it. She doesn't have her helmet on and she can't be bothered washing her hair tonight.

All her muscles ache from everything that she's done today. The second she woke up she had paged Jaal and Drack, telling them to get their butts in gear and off the ship. She had needed to do something to stop the recollection of the night before coming back to her, so she had climbed to the top of Mithrava once more to pass on the information of Amurd's sister.

That had reminded her of the Roekaar manifestos and the hidden Rem-Tech relics that were littered about Havarl, according to that other sage. So, they had spent the entire day running about the wilds of Havarl, looking for the datapads and the relics.

She had already found one of the manifestos the last time she was on Havarl, the one titled "Truth". Now, she was pretty certain she had found all the others: "Hope", "Legacy", "Invasion", "Fire" and "Conquerors".

And on the way around, they had found a few of the Remnant devices. SAM couldn't say exactly how many there would be but after they had found nine, he said that that was enough for him to upgrade his knowledge on the Remnant and enough for the scientists to study, seeing as a lot of them weren't out of cyro and most who were, still didn't have a lot of firsthand experience with the new alien technology.

After that, she had went to the NavPoints Aevla had sent her, finding some sort of star map, according to Jaal. It was a beautiful thing, even if she had no idea how it worked or what it did. That had passed another hour or so.

She had considered heading back to the Tempest then, and they had made it all the way to Daar Pelav, when she was accosted by two Nexus scientists and an angaran scientist called Raashel, who had lost all her research in a disaster.

So, she had found herself heading to her house and then towards a network memory centre location, where they had managed to find an access point and relocate Raashel's lost research.

Then, she had started to locate the mutated animals that the Nexus scientists wanted. First the mutated challyrion pack that had just come out of nowhere, as those creepy cloaking bastards had a habit of doing. Then to the rkyllor which had been hell to kill, taking a million rounds and a good amount of biotics and some serious clubbing from Drack. And finally, the eiroch, which was also being attacked by the Roekaar. They followed them to their camp and it took even more fighting, but eventually, all of them were dead and she had found the information saying that the Roekaar were also researching the mutations — but in order to turn it into a weapon.

Needless to say, she hadn't hesitated in deleting the information.
But now that she's found and done all that she needs to, it makes her feel weird. Like she has nothing else to do with her time now. She sighs again, turning her head slightly to the side and finds a sight she never expected to see — Jaal and Drack with their heads close together, whispering slightly. There's no way she can pick up there words, they're standing too far away from that, even with the advancements SAM gave to her.

It doesn't take long before Drack wanders off, looking around the camp to see if there's anything else that they can maybe pick up or use. And Jaal takes that opportunity to come over to her side.

Without saying anything, he sits down beside her, his kett rifle at his side. That's definitely weird, seeing him set down his weapon in the middle of a Roekaar camp... maybe he just has faith that they got them all and backup won't be around for a while. Or maybe he thinks that whatever they have to talk about is super important.

'Ryder,' he starts and just that deep voice saying her name has her jolting. She turns to him, eyes wide and raising an eyebrow in question.

'Yes, Jaal?' she replies, wondering where the hell this is going. It's got to be serious enough for Jaal and Drack to be working together.

She shifts a little, feeling her muscles ache in protest. Now that she's stopped, she can hardly stand the pain. She can't quite believe all the trauma she's put her body through today — she'll definitely need to take up Lexi's recommendation of doing yoga to help ease the pain. Otherwise she'll be in a worse state tomorrow.

That almost makes her groan. Back to the ship, into a shower, some yoga and then food. A lot of food. Then into bed whilst she writes up reports. *That sounds truly wonderful.*

'Drack and I have noticed...' he begins and immediately that feeling of relief goes away. She feels her muscles clench and spasm in response to his words. 'You seem to be a little tense today. We are... concerned. Drack thought shooting these Roekaar would make you happier, but when that didn't seem to be the case, he asked me to talk to you...' He swallows and turns those huge cat-like eyes to her. 'You once offered me a shoulder should I ever need it. I would like to do the same.'

The dismissal is on the tip of her tongue — telling Jaal that it's honestly no big deal but a part of her wants to tell him. He was there and saw her reaction yesterday, he deserves to know why. And in the end, he'll pass it on to Drack, who'll tell everyone else and at least then, it'll all be out in the open.

Swallowing, Ryder threads her fingers together.

'This isn't exactly a happy story,' she says, her voice a whisper. 'Just a warning. And I don't cry, so this isn't going to be long because I don't want to cry.'

He says nothing, only looks at her with understanding.

She keeps going. 'Back on Earth, I had this drell boyfriend. His name was Shasi.' It occurs to her that he has no idea what a drell is but she's started and now she can't stop. 'I really liked him. We were really good friends but when he asked me out, I said yes, even though I wasn't really that attracted to him. We were doing good, however, despite that and despite being nineteen. Then he was diagnosed with Kepral's Syndrome. It's this disease that drell get — it stops their ability to take in oxygen and such. There's no cure. And it progresses fast. He asked me to spend the night with him one time, saying it would mean a lot to him but I just couldn't do it. I loved him but not enough to... so I said no. And I left. But like I said, I loved him. So, I went back the next morning hoping he had managed through the night and was ready to talk...'
Sara takes a deep breath in and out, already feeling the tears stinging her gaze. Oh gods, she hasn't talked about this is so long. The last time she had was just after it happened and she was telling Scott.

'He had left a note saying he couldn't go on but he was still alive when I got there. He hadn't cut quite as deep as Thaldyr had.' She gives a humourless snort. Her hands tighten, clenching into fists so much that her bones start to ache. 'He didn't apologise — he just kept saying he didn't want to fade away. Lose himself to the disease. I could understand but it was... it was horrible to walk into...'

'And seeing Thaldyr's wounds brought back all these memories,' Jaal says, filling in the blanks.

It isn't really a question but she nods anyway. 'Yeah, that's it exactly. With everything that had happened when I woke up from cyro, I hadn't had time to think about my old memories... now this won't go away.'

There's a moment. A moment where she has no idea what he's going to say or do. She almost feels like he's going to push her away, even though she knows that's not really in Jaal's character.

So, it doesn't really surprise her when his huge arm winds around her shoulder. He gives her a small nudge, making her collapse into his side. She buries her face into the soft fabric of his rofjinn.

A part of her feels like a foolish little kid, cuddling into him like this, but that part is only tiny. The comfort that washes over her is stronger than anything else. She sniffles, thankful that Drack left them alone for this moment.

'I am sorry, Ryder,' he says, and his voice vibrates in his chest in a pleasant way. It reminds her of the cat she used to own back on Earth — Mittens, because she had no imagination when it came to naming things. She still doesn't. 'I understand why that would affect you so... I was also worried I had done something wrong. I am... glad that is not the case.'

Sara pulls back. 'What? No, not at all. Jaal, you're awesome. In fact, if I hadn't seen you kill as many kett as I have, I'd consider you incapable of taking a life. You're... sweet.' She frowns. 'Is that wrong to say? If I called a turian sweet, they'd kill me. So would a human male. And a krogan, to be honest.'

He chuckles, cutting off her rambling. 'Sweet is a nice word. Thank you.' He frowns, looking as if he's thinking something over. She tries to make her expression open, so he knows he can ask her whatever he wants. 'You... loved this alien? This Shasi?'

She nods. 'I did. I loved him a lot... but was I in love with him? Probably not. I takes a lot for me to fall for people; to feel attracted to people.' She tilts her head, suddenly overcome with a thought that she knows will never leave her mind until she gets an answer. 'What about you? Have you ever been in love before?'

Jaal tenses suddenly, and she wonders if this is some sort of taboo things that they don't discuss. It seems strange, the amount of things they do discuss, but hey, who is she to say anything? With all the issues she has.

She opens her mouth to apologise but Jaal beats her to it. 'I have. Once before. Her name was Allia.'

'So how does this story ends as happily as my story does?' she asks in a soft whisper, resting her head back against his shoulder. He doesn't complain so she reckons that he's okay with the close contact.

He says nothing to her comment. 'It was my first Vessal on Aya. We worked on the same farm. She was a little bit older, a researcher. I can still hear her laugh and see her eyes. She kissed me and... I
was hers. Thrilled and seduced.'

'What happened to her?'

'My older brother came to Aya. He was already famous in the Resistance.'

Ryder grimaces. She couldn't imagine that — losing someone that she loved to Scott. Granted, despite being twins and similar in a million ways, they weren't at all similar in their tastes of partners. Where Sara needed strong connections and emotional bonds to go anywhere near sex or romance, Scott was open. He was what the people in the old vids would call a "lady's man" — but even that term wasn't accurate seeing as he was pansexual.

'I'm sorry,' she whispers, turning her face into Jaal's chest in some weird form of a hug. 'I can't imagine what that must be like... I take it she and your brother worked out?'

'They came back to Havarl and she joined our family. She became one of the mothers.'

'Wow, so you need to see her every day? And I thought Shasi's ghost was bad enough.'

He is silent for a beat. It's long enough that Ryder manages to guess the words the second they come out of his mouth. 'No. They were taken by the kett. Their children survived.'

Shaking her head, Ryder pushes herself into a sitting position. 'Love really likes kicking us in the teeth, doesn't it?' He gives her a strange expression. 'Idiom. It just means we don't have much luck in the department.'

'Ah.' He gives a soft smile, and Sara realises that his arm is still wrapped around her shoulders. 'But maybe, one day, that'll all change?'

There's a look in his eyes. Something that bears into her soul, especially as he says those words. He looks at her with... hope? Longing? She can't quite place it but it makes her stomach do somersaults. She licks her lips, watching as his wide eyes track the movement.

She just wants to lean in... close the gap between them...

'You two finally talked it out?' Drack calls, shattering the illusion. Ryder shoots to her feet and finds the old krogan hovering a few feet away, his shotgun at the ready. 'Because we got an angry rykllor incoming.'

Sara snorts, pulling her rifle free. She gives Jaal a thankful look, her heart light when he returns it, before she turns to Drack. 'What you couldn't handle it yourself, old man?' she asks jokingly, as she jogs over to his side.

'Course I could, kid.' He gives her a grin. 'Just didn't want to hog all the fun.'
Ryder steps out of the shower room, her towel secured under her arms. Her hair sends water droplets down over her shoulders, but she doesn't really mind. Her room is right next door and she honestly doubts anyone is going to be awake at this moment. Maybe Gil because he never seems to sleep, but even then, he pretty much always stays down in engineering.

Her entire body is lax and warm, something she hasn't felt in a long time. She had hoped to get her shower when she returned to the *Tempest*, after going back to the Nexus scientists and giving them the results of the mutated creatures, which they had done after killing the angry rykllor that Drack tracked down.

But that wasn't to be. Because every little thing she does, even if it's a simple task, requires a report. And she knew that if she left it too long, she'd forget and then Tann would be hounding her ass. So, she had retired to her room, not even coming out for dinner, and worked on them.

Now, she's finally done.

She has no idea what tomorrow will bring — more work she's sure of it — but at least now she can have a moment of peace and quiet and relaxation.

She goes to step into her room when she hears a familiar voice call her name. Startled, she turns, dropping the towel in her hand that she had been using to dry her hair occasionally.

Jaal stands just outside the crew quarters. She knows that he doesn't sleep there — he still doesn't feel quite that trusting yet — so she wonders what brings him down from the Tech Lab.

He comes towards her, unaware of her sudden shyness at having him this close with only a cotton towel to cover her. A part of her wonders how the angara deal with nakedness. Is it as taboo as humans? They definitely dress, but do they have shame and doubt and hesitation? Do they look in mirrors and note imperfections? Or are they proud of their skin, seeing not a single fault?

She gnaws on her lower lip and trying to ignore that her skin is tingling all over. 'Hey, Jaal, what are you doing up this late?'

'Liarn and I were sharing information in an attempt to learn more about each other. He was showing me vids of...' he trails off as he tilts his head to the side, as if something has suddenly caught his attention. 'Your... hair...'

*He showed vids of my hair?* is her first thought, before she quickly realises that her hair has distracted him from his original sentence. She reaches up, touching it just to double check there's nothing wrong with it. She has no idea what he sees but it was fine when she checked it in the mirror — newly replaced from a dealer on Aya — five seconds ago. She raises an eyebrow and prompts, 'What about it?'

'It's... longer. And darker. I did not know it could change so much, so quickly.'
'What?' she asks, but then realisation hits and she gives a soft giggle. She shakes her head. 'No, it's just because it's wet. It gets heavier when wet so the colour looks darker, and instead of curling, it falls straight.' She plucks a strand from where it's glued to her shoulder, and twists it between her fingers.

That's when she gets an idea that has her smiling.

'Touch it,' she says, stepping forward. She tilts her head, offering it to him. 'You can feel it now and then tomorrow when it's dry, you can touch it again and see the difference.'

He looks hesitant but also curious. His pupils are blown wide — it is utterly adorable. 'Are you certain?'

'Of course! I wouldn't have offered if I weren't.'

That's all the encouragement Jaal needs. He takes a step closer to her, his hand outstretched before he realises he still has his glove on. He grumbles, quickly pulling it free and Sara finally can witness what his hands are like. They're huge, which is something she already knew, but she had no idea how many fingers they had. The gloves made it seem like two fingers and a thumb.

And that's partly true.

In truth, they're much like drell fingers. A thumb, a finger, and then three fingers that seem fused together with small idents that show they were, probably, separate at some point. The backs of his hands are the same colour as the rest of his skin, a beautiful soft violet, but his palms are paler, almost white. There's just a tinge of purple that doesn't make it seem quite as much of a contrast.

A part of her mind wonders, very briefly, how that would feel should he ever touch her and fill her. But just as quickly as the thoughts enter her head, she banishes them. She should not be thinking like that.

He doesn't hesitate as he sinks his fingers into her hair, picking up a clump and rubbing it between the tip of his fingers. His eyes widen, and he gathers some more, slightly pulling it to watch as it straightens, then springs back to a slight wave when he releases it.

Sara smiles. 'I will say that it's much better when dry. It feels softer and stronger. It's much weaker when it's wet and liable to break. You need to be careful with wet hair.'

He nods his head as if he's taking every word onboard, filing it away for later reference. He caresses the strands for a few more seconds before finally lowering his hand. Sara tries not to miss the contact. 'I am still amazed by how many shades and shapes and textures your "hair" comes in. Yours is so different from Cora's, whose is also different from Liam's. It's... strange and beautiful.'

Her cheeks redden at his words. She tightens the towel tucked her arms, once more very aware of the fact that she's naked save for a piece of cotton. She clears her throat and takes a step backwards, offering him a smile. 'Thank you.'

His pupils are blown wide as he stares at her, and she's too drawn in by it to look away. Even though she knows she should. All she can do is stare and stare, until eventually, he clears his throat and steps away from her.

'I best get back to the Tech Lab. I told my true mother I would write her — she'll be worried if I don't.'

Sara bobs her head, throwing her thumb over her shoulder. 'Yeah, and I need to get... dressed... it's
cold out here. Night, Jaal.'

She doesn't wait for his reply as she turns on her heel, and enters her room, only breathing again when the doors hiss shut behind her.
Chapter 17

I tried something new by putting this in Jaal's POV. They won't be regular as such but expect more at certain intervals!!

He's anxious.

His whole body is tingling, even as he tries to train his attention on his weapon. It lies in a dismantled heap on the table, a million pieces that he's taken apart and adapted to make the gun his own.

Cleaning it or improving the mods normally sets his mind at ease but not today. He barely reassembles one piece before his mind is drifting again.

It's odd and strange, how comfortable he's gotten fighting by Ryder's side. He's so used to covering her six now, that when they landed on Eos, a part of him had just assumed he'd be tagging along — then she had called for Cora and Liam and he realised his assumption had been wrong.

Now, here he is, trying to keep his mind off the fact that she's out there without him watching over her. Not that she needs much assistance — she is deadly with her pistols and sniper rifle.

He never thought he'd care this much. When she first landed on Aya, the Tempest on fire after making it through the Scourge, he had thought her odd. And untrustworthy. She knew too much and not enough, and it wasn't until they rescued the Moshae that he stopped sleeping with his Firaan under his pillow.

He wonders what she's doing in that moment. He knows that she had planned to find the contact of Cora's, to find more about the Asari ark. He also knows that she wanted to check in around the place to make sure her "baby", Podromos, is safe and thriving. So, it's really no surprise that she's been gone for a good few hours and hasn't come back yet.

That doesn't really make it any easier on him, however,

He can't take it anymore and with a grunt, pushes away from his table. He strides from the Tech Lab, his mind a whirlwind. He's so used to all his siblings and mothers and cousins littering the halls, that when he steps out into silence, he stops dead in his tracks. His heart aches, longing for his family. He agrees with what Ryder said all those months ago — that the group of Tempest oddballs can rather feel like family, but he's still alien to them.

The only person he truly feels comfortable with is Sara and she's away on her usual Pathfinder business. He has no doubt that she's been sidetracked, agreeing to countless side jobs because she's just such a pure heart, that all she wants to do is help.

Jaal moves down to the crew's quarters, not entirely sure what to do with himself. He can hear Drack moving around in the galley, but he and the krogan haven't exactly had a lot of interactions. He could deal with Liam but he is also away with Sara, and it seems that he's got almost no-one to talk to.

He finds Pyjak sitting on one of the beds. The strange creature looks at him, cocking its head to the side. Jaal smiles at it, walking up and then holding his hand out gingerly for the animal to smell. It
doesn't take long before Pyjak moves forward, nudging its nose into Jaal's palm.

'You have very intelligent eyes,' he says to it, even though it just tilts its head in the opposite direction at his words. It's a strange thing to bring from another galaxy, he realises, the more he stares. He wonders just what had to be said and done for the thing to be allowed aboard. He's heard enough talk about the Andromeda Initiative to know that there had been a lot of rules and regulations. Everything and everyone had to serve a purpose, in a way.

'We used to shoot them for sport,' a deep, gravelly voice declares. He turns and finds Drack leaning against the door frame. His huge arms are crossed over his huge chest. There's a grin on his mouth as he stares at Jaal, who steps away from Pyjak. 'They're stupid. Honestly. But they're also tasty.'

'Shoot for… sport?' Jaal ponders, wondering just what that means. Angara have sport, yes, but it seems strange to hear shooting referred to it. Shooting is survival; a necessity.

'For fun,' Drack clarifies. 'Krogan do a lot of fighting and killing for fun, but that's more because it's all we were allowed to do.'

Jaal isn't sure what to say, not completely, but he's never been one to hide his feelings, even if these Milky Way aliens wish he were. 'The krogan remind me of my people in some ways. Where my people are abducted and killed and transformed into monsters, you have been infected with a disease that kill your children before they can live… all because of who you are.'

Drack stares at him for a long moment. Jaal looks into those strange, small eyes. It's intriguing, how different all these Milky Way species are. The many shapes and forms even the same species come in.

The silence drags on and Jaal begins to wonder if he's maybe said something wrong. If his words have somehow offended the old krogan. He's thinking about apologising when Drack suddenly starts laughing — loud and long and cheery.

It startles Jaal for a second, before he feels himself respond. He smiles, a brief laugh escaping from his mouth.

'You've been with us five minutes and you've managed to figure out what everyone from the Milky Way couldn't in all their history.' Drack's laugh teetered off. 'You're all right, kid. I can see why Ryder likes you so much.'

Jaal frowns. 'She does?'

'You'd have to be an idiot not to see it.'

'See what?'

Drack gives another soft chuckle. He turns away from the door, moving back towards the galley. He shakes his head. 'Clueless,' he mutters before he disappears, leaving Jaal alone in the crew quarters once more.

He hears her laugh first.

It filters in through the door and into his mind without any warning. His hands still over his gun and he stands, setting everything aside once more as he moves towards the door. They slide open at his arrival and he sees her in the middle of Liam and Cora, smiling at them.
'Good trip?' Vetra asks, appearing behind them. She moves over to the terminal beside Jaal, quickly muttering a greeting. She types in a few things before turning back to Ryder and the others.

'Not bad. Podromos is doing great. We ran into a few idiots who thought they could try and control RemTech.' She rolled her eyes. 'But we managed to talk them out of it without anyone getting hurt or killed. We met up with Hydaria and got a lead on the asari ark. And I managed to do a few extra tasks around Site 1 and Site 2, as well as help some people out at Podromos. All in all, things are working out fine.'

Jaal can't seem to stop the soft smile that spreads across his face as he hears her talk. There's passion and excitement in her voice. It's almost ridiculous to think he first assumed she was just like the kett. They never spoke about things with such vigour — everything Sara did, she did because she cared. This may not have been the role she was meant to play, but she was doing it to the best of her ability.

It warms his heart to know that she just wants to make this place a home for the countless lives depending on her. And that he is a part of it all makes him even happier.

'Anything exciting happen whilst we were gone?' She asks after a beat, glancing around the small group that's appeared before her. It occurs to Jaal in that moment that it always seems to happen whenever she and the group she's chosen return. Everyone congregates in the Research Room for a quick recap of how things went.

Everyone glances around themselves, seeing if anyone has anything to report. No-one says anything, so Ryder claps her hands and smiles. 'Great! I am going to shower. We had to fight this fucking fiend-thing and I swear, I can still smell it on me.'

'Yeah, you're not the only one,' Cora says, her nose wrinkling in disgust. 'So don't take too long.'

Ryder says nothing, only rolls her eyes again and then takes off towards the bathroom. The small group starts to disperse, but he notices Peebee glancing at him from the corner of her eyes. He offers her a small smile and wave before he steps back into the Tech Lab.

---

Hours pass. His eyes grew weary and he knows he cannot put off sleep any longer. He removes his rofjinn, folding it carefully and placing it aside. Afterwards, he removes the rest of his clothes, giving them equal care and attention. His monocle is the last to go, and he feels as strange as he always does without it. It's his greatest asset, even more than his kett rifle. He hates removing it but sleeping with it is just asking for trouble.

Despite his weariness, he takes the time to massage his lotions into his skin. The two most important times to apply lotion to his skin was just after he had cleaned himself, and before bed. It allowed his skin to absorb all the ingredients that helped keep him soft and supple and nice-smelling.

Once he's done, he slides into the small bed that he brought with him. It's not the most comfortable thing but it does. He still isn't ready to sleep with the others. He may have stopped sleeping with a weapon within reach, but to put that amount of trust into them… he's not ready for that yet.

His manages to get himself comfortable when there's a ding. It's a familiar sound — he's received a message. A part of him just wants to ignore it and sleep, but he knows better. If it's one of his mothers, they will never rest until he replies.

So, with a groan, he rolls over and fishes his "omni-tool" from the table by his bed. He slides it back onto his wrists and brings up the orange holographic image, going straight for his inbox with bleary eyes.
That feeling disappears almost immediately when he sees the first line.

Hey =)

to: Jaal

from: Ryder

I'm writing reports for Tann and just need a distraction. What are you up to? I'd talk to Pyjak... I've decided to name him Shep after the woman who inspired me and Scott. I don't even know if Shep is a she but oh well... she is now... but she's fast asleep anyway.

Sara =)

also I just realised you probably don't know what that is... it's a smiley face emoji. Just roll with it.

Jaal can't help his smile as he stares at her message. Her last sentence has him squinting at the strange characters on the screen. In some strange, bizarre way, he can see what she means. It does look like a smiling face.

He doesn't really care for them, however, and decides to ignore it as he lies back, typing out his message in reply.

re: Hey =)

to: Ryder

from: Jaal

I was actually just getting ready for bed. I would be asleep had you not messaged — I fall over quite easily. Shep is a good name, especially if it means so much to you. I believe this "Shep" would be honoured.

Yours

Jaal

He stares at the screen, trying to imagine what she is like. Does she smile when her omni-tool dings with his message? He almost hopes she does. It's a strange feeling that rises up his chest the longer he stares at the screen, the seconds ticking on and on, her reply coming mere minutes later but what felt like hours.

re: re: Hey =)

to: Jaal

from: Ryder

Shit! Did I wake you up? Or keeping you awake, I suppose. I'll just shut my omni-tool off and get back to work. Sorry.

Sara

He bolts upright, typing out his reply as fast as he can, hoping that he reaches her before she
manages to shut it down.

re: re: re: Hey =)

to: Ryder

from: Jaal

No! It's okay! I enjoy talking to you Ryder — Sara... please feel free to continue messaging.

His heart is in his throat as he hits send, his eyes wide as he stares at the screen again. He doesn't want to miss her, he doesn't want her to feel like she can't message him whenever.

He may be tired tomorrow but he knows it'll be more than worth it.

Clenching his teeth, Jaal holds his breath, giving himself five minutes before he gives up on her getting his message.

When the beep comes, he lets out a long gust and smiles, unable to stop himself. It almost makes his face hurt but his heart his soaring as he reopens the messages.

re: re: re: re: Hey =)

to: Jaal

from: Ryder

...all right... if you're sure... =)

How did you spend your day?

Sara

He can almost sense the hesitancy in her reply, as if she's not sure whether he is being genuine or not. He knows his next message will remove all her doubts but all he can do in that moment is stare at it, so happy that she's replied.

His heart leaps and soars in his chest as he lies back onto his bed, already typing out his reply.
Chapter 18

She leaves Vetra's little den with a slightly heavy heart. It's not that the conversation was bad per se, or that the turian made things uncomfortable... just the conversation was one she hadn't been expecting. She had just expected a usual "everything is fine, Ryder!" but she had walked in on her talking to her sister. That had led to them talking about family and no here she is. A heavy heart and realising that she's all alone right now, without Dad or Mom or Scott.

She says that the Tempest crew are like family — and they are — but it's somehow not the same. Ryder family gatherings were few and far between, that didn't mean she didn't cherish every single one. Even more so when Mom got sick and things started looking bleak for them.

Family meant everything to her, even if it hadn't meant everything to Mom and Dad. It was the whole damn reason she had crossed to Andromeda. She couldn't let her dad leave and not know what became of him.

It almost makes her laugh. If she had stayed home, he would never had to give up his mask for her. He'd still be alive right now. And she'd be none the wiser, because she'd be six-hundred-years dead. And that makes her head hurt, thinking about it that way.

What if she and Scott had stayed home? Not bothered falling for their dad's strange experiments and speeches. What if they had decided their lives mattered more and they were doing good things and didn't want to leave? Would Alec Ryder have gone anyway? Sara wasn't exactly sure about that — deep down, he cared about his family. Deep, deep down, yes, but it was still there.

She can remember the look on his face as he told them about the Initiative. He had looked so pleading; so guarded as if he didn't want to think about his children rejecting him. She wonders if, if they had been adamant, he would have stayed behind with them.

'You can't fucking think like that,' she hisses to herself as she rubs a hand over her face. The truth is, she's here now. There's no going back and no use wasting time on "what-if's". Things had been ruined long before they arrived in Andromeda. There really was no life to stay behind for — Ryder Snr had seen to that.

'Think like what?' a voice questions, pulling her from her thoughts. She gives a yelp as she whips her head around, finding Jaal just standing by the Tech Lab. He has his head cocked to the side, studying her. Damn, maybe talking to yourself wasn't a universal thing.

She knows some salarians do it... she's pretty sure they're the only species from the Milky Way who do. No wonder he's looking at her like she's suddenly turned green.

'Sara waves her hand, stepping over to him and smiling. Her mind immediately brings up the messages from last night, remembering how he had told her to keep messaging, even though it was keeping him from his sleep. Her heart had felt powerful enough to break free from her chest in that moment — when he admitted to wanting to talk to her rather than sleep.

'My mind is just... spiralling as usual,' she admits, crossing her arms over her chest. 'Just wondering what would have been... that's what I can't think like. It just ends in pain.'

'It is strange... to see you dwell so much on the past and things that might have happened. Angara thirst for now. We don't even consider the future. Everything we do is for the moment.'

'Then I'm afraid I'm going to be a bit of a disappointment — humanity as a whole has a habit of
planning ahead and dwelling on the past and I'm even worse than the norm.'

She gives a nervous laugh, hoping to stop things from getting awkward after her statement, but when she realises that probably won't work with Jaal, she changes tactics.

'I just realised,' she starts, just as he opens his mouth to say something. 'I never let you feel my hair dry to feel the difference.'

It works. At her words, Jaal's entire face lights up. He's still hesitant, however, as his eyes dart between her face and her hair. She realises that he's asking for permission and it brings a smile to her face, the way he respects her boundaries so much.

'You can touch it now, if you want,' she says, knowing that it'll be enough to spur him into action.

He takes his glove off once more, and Sara gets another chance to study the strange build of his hand. So similar but foreign as well. She still can't get over how huge they are, and she wonders just how much of her body one hand would cover... she startles, just as Jaal sinks his hand into her hair.

'I'm sorry, I didn't—' Jaal starts to apologise, jerking his hand back.

Before he can put his glove back on, Sara grabs his hand and shakes his head. 'No, no, not your fault at all. All mine. My mind was...' She shakes her head again and lifts his hand back to her hair, setting it on top of her scalp then giving him an encouraging smile to start moving and exploring.

He still looks rather hesitant but proceeds.

Sara stares at him, wondering just what the hell her mind was playing at. She has no idea what spurred those thoughts. All she knows is that she can feel her damn face betraying her, warming up as the images start to play once more.

She wonders what the hell Jaal must think of her, this strange creature who is blushing like mad and jerking at every touch as he's burning her alive. Even though he's not.

Well, not in the way he probably thinks.

Goddamn, what was up with all these thoughts?

This had never happened to her before. She swallows, desperately trying to push every sordid though from her mind. She just stares at him, taking in his strange, unique form. She's mostly entranced by his eyes — they're focused on his hands wound in her hair, but his pupils are blown so wide that there's only a small rim of the blue irises. His mouth has fallen open, revealing those small, blunt teeth, and tugging to the side in a small smile.

After a while, of Ryder just watching him in fascination, he eventually pulls his hand free, putting his hand back into his glove without looking at her.

When he raises his head again, his brows pull down. 'I... um... I've never seen it do that before.'

Sara mirrors his mirror, reaching up and feeling her hair. She finds it standing on end, raised high and a slight snap meets her fingers when she finally touches it. She hisses and pulls her arm down, turning to the first reflective surface and finding her hair messy and wild. It reminds her of the time Scott had taken a balloon and rubbed it furiously against her head on their seventh birthday party — he thought it was hilarious.

This brings a smile to her lips and she's laughing when she finally turns back to Jaal. 'Don't worry
about it,' she says as she smooths it down with her hand. 'It's... static. No doubt from your bio-
electricity. I didn't think about that. It's no surprise that it would do that.'

'How so?'

Sara swallows. In truth, she's not that great with biology. The whole "how your eyes work" thing
that happened when she first talked to him was something that she had memorised for an exam and
hadn't truly left her. Just like how the mitochondria is the powerhouse of a cell.

In all honesty, she couldn't tell you what it meant but it had gotten her a B in biology so she wasn't
complaining. Her interests lay in art, history, physics. She cared for languages and sociology.

When she was on site, she wasn't there as a scientist — she was a peace keeper, meant to defend and
protect. Sometimes, her interest crept in and she asked questions but mostly she just stayed with her
fellow Alliance soldiers and had fun. It was great working with people who were always on the
verge of finding something to spur their knowledge even further, but sometimes, it got too smart for
her.

'I..' She thinks about making up some bullshit but in truth, she knows that Jaal could eventually ask
someone and find out she lied. And she doesn't want to lie to this angara. Ever. 'I honestly have no
idea. It's one of things that I know happens but I don't know the reason.'

'When faced with Jaal's electricity, static electrical charges would begin to build in your hair. When
his charge was removed, the two opposite static charges would attract one another and make your
hair stand on end,' SAM's voice chimes in before she's completely finished.

She purses her lips, glancing upwards like she usually does when the AI talks. If she's in her room,
she looks at the small node, but otherwise, she seems to glance at her brain or the ceiling.

'Thanks for that, SAM.' She doesn't attempt to hide the sarcasm in her voice. She rolls her eyes and
turns her gaze back to Jaal. She shrugs. 'I don't really do biology. It definitely wasn't my favourite
subject in school.'

'What was?'

'History. Or art. I didn't really have a favourite, if I were honest. I tolerated those two more than the
others but even then... I didn't do well with the whole "school" thing. It's the reason I joined the
Alliance when I turned eighteen. And even then, that was just to have the ability to travel — see the
galaxy. Scott always wanted to join, do his N7 training like Dad. Be this big hero but... I've never
been sure of my future.' She gives a soft laugh. 'I guess it doesn't matter. I'm here, having to do this
now. Maybe if I had known about what I wanted to do, I wouldn't have left... it's weird, how things
work out.'

He looks at her, a soft smile on his lips. There's something in his gaze that just tells Sara that he's
thinking something, something about her. It makes her stomach churn in such a strange, pleasant
way. It's such a wonderful look to see on his face.

'You're doing it again,' he finally says.

Her brows pull down as she cocks her head to one side. 'What do you mean?'

'Worrying about the past and what could have been. You said you couldn't think like that.'

That startles a laugh from her. She reaches for him, placing a hand over his and giving it a soft
squeeze. 'See? I told you it's such a huge part of me!' she jokes, giving another burst of laughter.
A part of her doesn't want to remove her hand, not that she's finally touching him. It's strange the overwhelming urge to just move closer. She remembers the time on Havarl as she told him about Shasi, resting her head on his shoulder, his arm around her. She longs for something similar again but knows it's not going to happen.

So, she steps back and offers him a smile. 'I best head to the bridge, Kallo was wondering where we were heading next.'

'I will see you later, then, Pathfinder.' He smiles. 'Stay strong and clear.'

She turns and heads for the flight deck, stepping in just as Kallo patches through to Lexi to get Suvi to put the food down. Sara snickers but says nothing as she steps up to the galaxy map, trying to decide whether to go next.
Chapter 19

She finds herself on Voeld, with the intention of going to Kadara as soon as she's settled the planet. She's been putting it off, she knows that much. Running around and fulfilling these little missions has been fun but the longer she waits, the more time the Archon has to prepare. She needs to get to Kadara and interview the angara that betrayed the MoShae.

Still, she pushes the thought to the back of her mind. The last thing she needs is to be distracted as she rushes about, activating monolith after monolith, tracking down the million signals that seem to emit from the Periphona's tracking device and then dealing with all the mini things that pop up as they travel.

So far, she's tracked down the missing supplies that the Roekaar have been stealing from the Resistance, found kett tampering with a bridge, dealt with ungrateful angara who warned her not to stick her nose in where it wasn't wanted... as well as activate all three monoliths, find the wreckage of the Periphona and pick up some RemTech for Peebee's "secret project".

'Ryder,' Cora states as they climb out of the Vault, having just reactivated it and escaped from the death cloud. She's panting and Ryder stops, leaning over to press her hands against her knees. She hums, prompting Cora to continue. 'You and I need to have a talk about the word "no".'

"Just say no," Ryder replies with a grin as she straightens. Her helmet stops Cora from seeing it but she has no doubt it's evident in her voice. 'I've always been a people pleaser. I hate saying no. It's only when I feel really strongly...'

Her mind wanders as its conjurs up images of Shasi again. He had taken her hand in his, pressed her knuckles against his lips. His black eyes had been so open and seductive. When he kissed her, she leaned into the touch and allowed their tongues to dance. She had let her hands wander but then he had pulled back, and asked for her to stay the night; to share that moment with him. And everything had changed.

Temperatures are dropping, Pathfinder, SAM chimes in and she jerks, pulling herself out of the memory. She checks her readings and finds that the temperature is actually fine for her suit. It takes her a moment to realise what SAM did and she smiles, whispering a thanks in reply.

'Come on, I just need to activate the homing beacon for the settling site and then we can go back to the Tempest.' Sara starts to move towards the Nomad, knowing that Jaal and Cora will follow her. She ushers them into the back seats and then climbs into the driver's side, knowing full well that she hates driving this damn thing. But she's Pathfinder, and that means she's the one who needs to find the paths.

She fiddles with the map as she starts the car up, vaguely aware of Cora and Jaal talking away in the background. They seem to have built a strange camaraderie in the short time they've been out in the freezing atmosphere of Voeld.

'This talent that you, Peebee and Ryder have...' Jaal trails off and Ryder's head perks up at the mention of her name. She doesn't want to interrupt, not when he's finally opening up and getting to know the rest of the crew a bit more.

She just listens.

'Biotics?'
'What does it feel like?' Jaal asks after a brief moment of hesitation. 'Does it hurt?'

'When you really let go, it's like a massive, deadly sneeze,' Cora supplies and Sara just manages to hold back her snort of amusement. It's not that inaccurate, if she's completely honest. There was one time she had compared it to an orgasm when her fellow soldiers had asked a similar question — she had been the only one with an implant in their group. One man, Idris, had asked how she could possibly know that, seeing as she wasn't exactly embarrassed or shy about never having had sex.

She had looked him dead in the eye and with a straight face said "I have fingers, don't I?"

He had choked on his beer.

Yet, somehow, the idea of saying that in front of Jaal makes her face warm and she just focuses on keeping the Nomad straight and not driving off any icy cliffs.

'Amazing!' Jaal sighs in wonder. There's a pause. 'What's a sneeze?'

This time, Sara can't hold back her burst of laughter. Apparently, neither can Cora as she soon joins in. She can feel Jaal's eyes boring into the back of her head but she keeps her eyes on the road as Cora explains what a sneeze really is.

Her mind wanders a little, realising that it must mean angara don't sneeze, which in turn means nothing can really go up their nostrils and aggravate their senses in such a way.

She drowns out the conversation in the background, which seems to have reverted back to biotics and how it all works. It almost makes her wish that Mom was here. These were the kind of conversations she lived for. Literally. It was her life work and the thing that killed her in the end. She would have adored sitting down with a new alien like Jaal, and walking him through everything there is to know about biotics.

It brings a sad smile to her lips as she checks the map, finding that they're approaching the spot. She draws the Nomad to a halt and then hops out, not surprised when Jaal and Cora follow her.

She looks around the place, hands on her hips. 'This place is viable for an outpost, Pathfinder,' SAM declares, breaking the silence. 'Would you like me to activate the beacon for the Initiative to send supplies?'

Ryder nods her head. 'Yes, please.'

She waits until SAM confirms that he's done it, that the Initiative are deploying people and it should be set up by the next time she returns to Voeld.

With that in mind, Ryder ushers her team back into the Nomad, starting up and driving back towards the Tempest. She just wants to be home. In a comfortable temperature.

'Scoot over, Jaal. You're taking up my seat. It's too hot in here for that,' Cora says after a bit, the silence had been stretching on as she drove. Ryder's eyebrows shoot up as she fights the urge to glance over her shoulder and see just how close they really are.

Her mind creates all sorts of images — pressed up side by side, close enough that his bioelectricity is vibrating through Cora's armour. Her hair will probably look even cuter as it stands on end because it's shorter.

Sara shakes her head, making the Nomad swerve a little. It almost seems to help the situation as she hears Jaal move, asking, 'Do you mean hot or "hot"?'
Cora gives an amused, exasperated sigh. She pushes him aside. 'Just shove over.' They both share a laugh and Sara needs to let out a long breath through her nose to keep herself calm.

It's ridiculous how she's reacting. Jaal is her friend and nothing more. She maybe has a teeny, tiny crush on him but that's nothing. That'll go away — she's used to finding people rather attractive but it never lasts and the urge to be in a relationship never appears.

Still, it doesn't help when Cora's statement seems to have opened a new conversation. Jaal doesn't even hesitate as he says, 'You are in excellent physical condition, Cora. Better than anyone on the squad.'

Cora lets out a flustered little laugh. 'Thanks! Didn't notice you were paying attention.'

Tears are already stinging at Ryder's eyes. It makes no sense, she keeps telling herself. Nothing between them is serious. It's just flirting and obviously, he enjoys doing that with everyone. She's nothing special. *I'm nothing special.*

The tears threaten to spill and her grasp on the steering wheel becomes tighter and tighter.

'The mind wants... what the mind... wants...' Jaal explains and that seems to be more than enough for the tears to fall. They trail down the curve of her cheek and she's glad that she kept her helmet on — there's no way anyone will be able to tell that she's quietly turning herself into a human fishbowl.

She presses her foot down on the accelerator, ignoring how the conversation between her two companions is still going on. She has no clue what they're saying or whether they're planning their future together.

Her jealousy is strange, new, twisted and unfounded. She knows. She knows it's ridiculous for her to automatically assume that Cora is interested in Jaal, and vice verse. She also knows that she has no claim whatsoever on the angara, and that he's free to date whoever he wants.

If she's the one getting strange new feelings, then that's on her... not on him.

Yet, no matter how hard she tries to reason everything out, her heart doesn't listen. There's a knife in her gut, twisting with every word and laugh shared between the two people in the backseat.

And she's so bloody thankful when they make it back to the Resistance base and back to the *Tempest.* She drives the Nomad up the ramp, parking it into its usual spot before hopping out.

Gil is already there waiting and she tries her best to keep her voice even. 'I dinged her a good few times so she'll probably need some repair.' She cringes as she takes off her helmet, quickly wiping the tears away before Jaal or Cora can see. 'Sorry.'

Gil sees, however, and he steps up to her, hand on her shoulder. 'Everything okay?'

'Yeah,' she replies, her voice just a whisper. She doesn't have the strength to speak any louder now. 'I'll manage. Thanks.'

She quickly strips herself of her armour as Jaal and Cora appear, now talking about how different their families are. Jaal coming from this huge one with eight brothers and sisters, countless cousins and all his mothers, whilst Cora is an only child. It's not that big a surprise to Sara, she's already talked to Jaal about that — heard the same sympathy at having such a tiny family — and it just spurs her to unhook her gear faster, thankful Gil is there to hang them up for her.
'You're a bloody saint,' she says, her voice soft as she places her hand on Gil's shoulder. She gives him a smile which he returns, before she takes off for her quarters.

Jaal watches her go with a strange look on his face. He's not sure what's happened with the Pathfinder, but something tells him that there's something off with her. She's not her usual self. It's almost like when she had her panic attack after seeing Thaldyr's wounds.

He casts his mind back out to their day on Voeld, trying to think if there was anything that stood out to him — anything that could have caused such a reaction but his mind comes up blank. There was nothing outside of the ordinary.

He makes his way to the Tech Lab, knowing that he'll see her at dinner and get to make sure that everything is fine then.

Which is why it surprises him so much when she doesn't appear. He's finally gotten used to the crew and created a strong enough bond with them that he feels comfortable eating with them, even if his food is completely different from theirs.

Mostly, he sits quietly, taking in the happy banter that seems to be shared with the crew, and occasionally joining in if the mood should take — something that's been happening more and more lately. He can't remember the last time he went through a meal, just sitting silently.

'Where's Ryder?' Liam asks, voicing the question that he had been thinking ever since stepping into the galley and finding her absent. She's normally one of the first there, seeing as her quarters are pretty much just next door.

'In her room,' Vetra answers. 'She doesn't want to be disturbed, so let her be, Liam.'

'Is everything all right?' Peebee asks, and it's again another question that has been plaguing his mind. Jaal stares at the tall turian, wondering just what she and Sara have talked about.

'Yes. She just... needs space.'

And before anyone else could ask any more questions, Vetra turns and leaves the galley with a handful of snacks that are apparently poisonous to her, so must be for Ryder.

He frowns, still pondering her words even as the others quickly move on from the topic. They don't notice him slip away, stopping outside of her chambers as if the doors will open to him.

Walking back to his room, he sits down on his makeshift cot and quickly brings up his omni-tool.

**Hope you are well**

_from: Jaal_

to: Ryder

*I hope everything is all right. Vetra said you needed space but I just wanted to let you know that I'm here, should you ever need it.*

_Your friend,_

_Jaal._
For the first time, he doesn't get a reply to his message.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

my Shakarian fic is finally live!! [here is the link](https://archiveofourown.org/works/14368410)

When Ryder woke up the next morning to the knowledge that SAM had fought off a cold, she decided to say goodbye to Voeld and head straight to Kadara. She had no idea what to expect but at least, from what Jaal could tell her, it was warm. She doesn't do well with cold.

The journey took a little longer than she would have thought, which made her decision to avoid both Jaal and Cora harder and harder as time pressed on. Explaining last nights disappearance had been easy enough... now there is really nothing for her to do that should be occupying her so much.

She knows it's utterly ridiculous, trying to avoid them, but knowing that doesn't snap her out of her idea. Right now, she doesn't want to see them and hear their bonding laughter, and God above how shallow and horrible is that? She feels even worse about having ignored Jaal's message. It had been a sweet thing, checking in on her, but when she saw it all the flirting just came back and she couldn't reply to the damn thing.

Ryder shifts her feet.

She's been stood at the galaxy map, looking out over the blurring stars as they travelled from Voeld to Kadara. It's strange, having this view. Whenever she was on ships and they flew at FTL, she was safely tucked in at the back. She never thought in a million years she'd get to stand on the bridge and watch clusters whirl by.

And yet here she is.

'System: Govorkom. Approaching Kadara,' SAM's voice chimes in, breaking the silence. Well, there's not really silence. Kallo and Suvi have been chatting back and forth to each other the whole of the flight, but Sara has drowned them out, too mesmerised by the sight before her.

'All right,' she says, blinking and trying to draw herself back into the present. 'Besides being a haven for Nexus exiles... do we know anything else about this place? It'd be nice to have a rough idea of what we're walking into for a change.'

Vetra's voice comes over the comms. 'A group of exiles called the Outcasts liberated Kadara Port from the kett. Until recently, their power was absolute. But a new gang — the Collective — has been chipping it away. Real shady bastards run by an unknown called the Charlatan.'

Sara snorts. 'With a name like that, they've got to be an asshole.' She lets out a breath. 'But this may work out for us. They may be too busy shooting at each other to notice us.' She gives a laugh. 'Take us in, Kallo.'

'Will do, Ryder,' Kallo's chirpy voice comes in reply.

She watches as they approach the planet, a rush soaring through her veins as the unknown appears before her. There's jaggy mountains and strange trees that look like huge, wooden mushrooms.
There's a cloudy fog that means she can't see the ground, but she can tell it's going to be warm when she sets off the Tempest.

'Incoming call. Patching it through.'

Sara is surprised when Evfra's completely pleasant voice comes through the comms. 'There's been a development regarding Vehn Terev. Rendezvous at Kralla's Song. Your contacts code name is Shena.'

'Shena. Right. Got it.'

She heads from the bridge, moving down to the ramp, surprised to find Vetra and Drack already there waiting. She doesn't say anything as the doors slide open and she steps out into the warmth. It makes her smile. She's always preferred the heat over the cold — she's rather like Vetra that way. And Drack probably.

It feels strange to be leaving the Tempest on a new planet without any weapons, but that feeling of nakedness and panic seems to ease when she sees the kett head impaled on a stick.

'Well, that's a warm welcome,' she says, holding her breath so she doesn't have to deal with the smell of rotting kett flesh.

'Exiles have stepped up their game since the revolt,' Vetra says in reply. Ryder just nods, leading them onwards. She knows that this is a cease fire zone — she should feel safe.

And yet there's just a vibe being giving off about Kadara port that refuses to settle the buzzing under her skin.

When they finally make their way into the heart of the port, she's amazed to see just how thriving the place is. Neon signs flicker, displaying just what kind of venue it is. There are hundreds of people milling about — human, turian, salarian, krogan and angara, all bound together in one place of sordidness.

'Not too shabby for folks who got kicked off the station with nothing to show for it,' Drack says as he steps up beside her at the railing. Vetra leans her arms on the metal railing, looking out over as well.

Somehow, with those two at her side, she doesn't feel as panicked or worried. They'll both have her back, no matter what. It also makes her think just how far they've come already. The people who came to Andromeda came to start again — not bring Milky Way problems with them. They don't care about the hatred between the krogan and the turian, and that's not more evident in Vetra and Drack's relationship.

It makes her smile.

'Maybe we can get them back on our side. Probably won't be easy and they've never forgive the Nexus for how it treated them, but maybe, we can make it work.'

'And we know they can fight kett,' Vetra chimes in, causing Sara to nod. That would definitely help if war comes to a full scale battle at some point. The more fighters they have, the better chance of survival.

'Our supplier's waiting. Come on — we're gonna be late.'

'Do I even wanna know?' Sara asks as they start to move away, the scepticism clear in her voice as
she turns towards them.

'Nope.' They say it in unison, not even bothering to glance back at her.

She can't fight the grin then.

Giving the bar a quick pat, she pushes away and turns in the opposite direction of Drack and Vetra, taking the stairs down to the main area. That feeling of comfort leaves her pretty much as soon as her friends do, and she goes back to wishing she had at least a pistol or even her omni-blade A feeling that grows when she sees a human and a turian kicking the ever loving shit out of someone. The poor man is covered in blood, grunting every time the turian's huge, armoured feet comes down on him.

'What are you doing?' Sara demands as she stops beside them. They're just outside Kralla's Song but she doesn't want to go inside just yet. Not until she feels like she's done something to help.

'Nothing they weren't expecting. Port's got two rules: no guns and pay your protection fees,' the human replies just as the turian hammers the butt of his gun onto the man's side.

'Protection fees? Who the fuck do you think you are? The mob?'

The woman has the audacity to chuckle. 'Other way around. We're the law in Kadara.' The smile drops and she glares at Sara. 'You got a problem with that, you can join these assholes.'

Pathfinder, it will be difficult to spy if you are barred from the city, SAM chimes in through their private channel.

But SAM! Look at what they're doing! How can I just... she takes a deep breath, realising how true SAM's words are. 'Guess you're right,' she sighs aloud without realising it.

'Guess what? What was that?'

Ryder grinds her teeth as she starts to back away. 'Nothing. I'll be on my way.'

'Creep.'

Ryder's hands ball into fists but she forces herself to turn away, walking by them into the seedy bar. She doesn't really know who she's meeting — and she sees no angara — so she heads straight to the bar, guessing that's better place than any to wait for Shena.

'Hey!' The asari's voice was loud and pissed as she calls after the krogan who had started to stumble away.

'Piss off,' was the krogan's reply.

'You order, you pay.'

'I said —' The krogan starts but the asari jams a dagger into the wood of the bar, glaring over at the krogan, who hastily pings the credits from his omni-tool to her.

It brings a smirk to Sara's face that she quickly hides as the asari moves, not wanting her to get the wrong idea. She vaguely notices someone approach the bar but brushes it off, until she hears the words, 'You look like you're waiting for someone,' directed at her.

The man orders two drinks, then promptly hands one out to Sara. She looks down at it, wondering
what he's playing at. She purses her lips and admits, 'I don't drink. Not really.'

He looks a little saddened by that but quickly downs both of the glasses, setting the remains on the table. 'Shena,' he starts and Ryder's eyes widen. 'But you can call me Reyes. I hate codenames.'

When he offers his hand to her, Sara doesn't hesitate in shaking it, even though she admits, 'I was expecting someone more... angaran.'

Reyes just laughs. 'The Resistance pay me to supply information — among other things.'

Sara can see through that easily. 'So you're a smuggler,' she offers, filling the gaps.

He grins at her, sauntering away and beckoning her to follow. The bar doesn't have full walls at this side, and she can see out over the outskirts of Kadara. She sees desert and more of those odd trees. And she's pretty damn sure that's a monolith as well, which fills her with some hope about Kadara's future.

'Your man — Vehn Terev — was arrested by Sloane Kelly, leader of the Outcasts. Word spread about what he did to Moshae Sjefa.' He stops and Sara leans heavily on the short wall. 'The people are calling for his execution. And Sloane... she's a woman of the people.'

Sara grins up at him, turning with him as they both lean their elbows on the railing. 'I like her already.'

'Whether or not you like her, you still work for the Initiative. And Sloane was exiled by the Nexus. She won't give up Vehn Terev easily.'

Ryder shrugs. 'Maybe she'll accept some sort of deal? I mean, everyone has a price, right?'

'That is true,' Reyes replies, but his eyes are distant. 'But there may be another way to get him out. You work Sloane and I'll talk to the Resistance.'

Reyes starts to walk away but Ryder has one last question. 'How do I contact you if things go south?'

The bastard has the audacity to just wink at her, before striding away.

Sara grinds her teeth together. She pushes away from the railing and decides to follow him, ready to speak to Sloane and see if they can get all of this sorted out easily.

'Hey!' the asari barmaid calls after her. 'You gotta pay.'

'But I didn't even—!' She trails off when she sees the glare and remembers how even the krogan quaked before her. Grinding her teeth together, Ryder quickly sends the money from her omni-tool. 'Keep the change,' she says sarcastically as she starts walking again.

The asari's 'I always do,' follows her out of the bar.

'SAM, tell me about Sloane Kelly,' Ryder asks as she starts to walk down to the Outcast headquarters. She has no idea what to expect, having only heard rumours about the woman. She'd rather have facts, knowing what she's walking into.

*Before joining the Initiative as the head of Nexus security, Ms. Kelly served in the Alliance with an almost spotless record,* SAM's voice filtered in through her mind. It's probably strange, how much she's gotten used to having another voice in her head.

'Almost?' she prompts, still preferring to talk to him aloud, even though it gets her some strange looks
from the people she walks by. Though the looks definitely seem to be few and far between in Kadara — maybe they're just used to the strange and weird.

*She was involved in multiple altercations with other officers.*

Sara groans. 'A hot-head? That's just fucking great,' she sighs as she steps up to the doors, trying to ignore the guard who stands to the side, gun already aimed and just ready to be shot.

She follows SAM's directions as he tells her the readings are coming from one room in particular, which just so happens to be guarded by two heavily armed krogan. Sara bites back another groan, really starting to hate Kadara and Sloane Kelly before even meeting her.

'Move along,' a krogan grunts.

'I'm here to see Sloane Kelly. I'm Pathfinder of the Initiative,' she says, wondering just a bit too late if admitting that aloud was a mistake. The krogans share a look before one disappears through the doors.

'So... you like it out here?' Ryder asks, trying to break the tense silence but the krogan just glares at her. 'Not one for small chat. Got it.'

Thankfully, the other krogan returns soon and admits her into the room. They stand on either side of her, guns cocked at her, ready to shoot should she try anything. She has no idea what the big deal is — she's complied with the rules. No weapons on the port.

What could she do to Sloane? Well, her biotics could probably do a bit of damage but there's no way she could take them all out. Not when there's two krogan, a turian and the woman herself, sat atop some sort of throne as she looks over a holo-map of Kadara.

'What?' Kelly grunts as if she hadn't just allowed Sara to walk into her room and know exactly who she is.

Sara purses her lips. 'That is an *impressive* throne. Should I bow? Kiss your rings, maybe?'

'Very funny,' Sloane replies. She glares down at Sara, before leaning back in her chair. 'So, what brings a Pathfinder to our humble port?'

'Vehn Terev. Name ring a bell?'

'What's he to you? And don't lie to me.'

For a second, Sara considers lying. Of holding all her cards close to her chest but just one look in this woman's mismatched eyes tells her that wouldn't go down well.

'I need him to infiltrate a kett flagship,' she answers. She doesn't mention being sent by the Resistance. That may just be too much information. 'You've got no love for the kett, either. I'm doing you a favour.'

Sloane's lips twitch a little. 'Kadara is an angaran port. They want Vehn dead. And I want to keep them happy.'

'This is bigger than local politics.'

'You don't need Vehn. You need his intel. You can talk to him before I put his head on a spike.' Sloane leans forward and her eyes sharp, as if she expects Ryder to take this offer.
But all Ryder can think of is Evfra's words. They want Vehn alive and she needs to keep good ties with the Resistance. She's not going to ruin things by taking the "easy" road.

'That isn't your call to make. Vehn should be judged by the Resistance — it was them he betrayed. It's not up to you.'

Sloane's lips twist in a sneer. 'I don't have time for a morality debate.' She raises her fingers to her forehead and mockingly salutes Sara. 'Dismissed.'

Sara snorts, hating that this woman thinks she's somehow better than her. Hating that this woman can be so cruel and bring such behaviour with her across a galaxy. They were here to start again — not just repeat the mistakes of the Milky Way.

She lowers herself slightly, flourishing her hands. 'Your Highness.'

The sight of Sloane's lip curling even more just makes Sara grin as she turns and strides away, once more followed by the krogan who go back to their posts.

Ryder quickly leaves the headquarters and is surprised when she finds Reyes standing just a few feet away. He looks at her and beckons her with a nod of his head as she mutters, 'That could have gone better.'

'Have a nice chat?' Reyes asks as he crosses his arms over his chest, leaning back with a smirk on his face.

'I think she likes me,' Sara replies with an equally cocky grin.

Reyes mere laughs before informing Ryder that he's worked out another way for her to get to Vehn. She's not exactly pleased with it, knowing that agreeing to anything with this man means agreeing to help him back some day, but she'll take what she can get.

Accepting the device that will free Vehn's restraints, Ryder offers him a smile.

'I guess I'll see you around,' she says, though a part of her really hopes she won't. There's just something about the man that seems... off to her.

'Come and meet me in Tartarus when you have a free moment. I'll buy you a drink. I promise.'

Sara merely rolls her eyes before heading round the back to break Vehn Terev out of prison.
Chapter 21

Ryder has decided one thing. She hates Kadara. It is the most god awful place that she's ever discovered since waking up in Andromeda, and that is seriously saying something. She still understands how important it is and there are times that she feels sorry for the exiles and wants to show them that things are changing on the Nexus… but after the hell of a day she's had, she just can't be fucked with anything else.

There's still a list as long as her issues to be done, but she doesn't care. She tells Kallo to haul ass from Kadara Port and get them back to the Nexus. There's a strange yearning for some familiarity, and that only comes with Scott. She knows that he's still in his coma — she would have heard something if he had been woken up — but she doesn't care. He's familiar and comfort and the Nexus is stable. The problems there… well… at least she doesn't have to scan bodies of murder victims that have been dumped in lakes of acid.

Not that that should be happening for much longer. She's activated all three monoliths and reset the vault with Vetra and Drack's help. As well as fight what seemed like a million camps from either Outcasts or Collectives. They hadn't been kidding when they said that outside of Kadara Port, it's every man for themselves.

In the end, however, she got what she had come to Kadara for. She got the kett transponder that'll get her the location of the kett flagship. She has no idea what will happen to Vehn Terev, though she knows that he managed to get away. It'll be up to Evfra to judge him.

Ryder considers asking Jaal about it, to see if he has any idea what will happen. She always talks herself out of it, however, still feeling too damn weird to even consider talking to him. It feels odd, though, which doesn't make things any easier. She's gotten so used to spending time with him — of considering him a close friend that this sudden silence is torturing her.

And when the idea of talking to him also tortures her, she just feels like banging her head into a wall.

'Pathfinder,' Lexi's voice comes in over the comms. Sara stops in her stretches and straightens. 'Can you meet me in the med-bay?'

She has no idea what Lexi wants her for, but when she arrives and find a dead kett on one of the beds, being scanned by various computers as well as Lexi's own omni-tool, she starts to wonder if it was wise answering the asari's summons.

'Who's your friend?' she asks as a joke, stepping up beside the doctor. She hates looking at the kett. Ever since she found out that they’re stealing angaran lives; turning them into monsters who fight their families. She just can't look at them unless it's down the barrel of her gun.

'Ryder,' Lexi smiles at her. 'I'm sorry about the mess. It's an exalted kett. I called Jaal to show him — ah there he is.'
Sara doesn't even get a chance to grimace. She hates that, had she known Jaal would have been here, she would have avoided the damn med bay. She feels horrible for thinking it but she does.

Still, she puts a brave face on it and turns, finding Jaal strolling into the medbay. He pauses as his gaze flickers over the kett on the bed and Sara, standing there, unable to meet his eye.

She's saved from having to say anything when Lexi says, 'Jaal. Look at this. There's nothing angara inside.'

'The physical can be deceiving,' he replies. Sara looks at him briefly, before turning her attention back to the readings on the screen. She has no clue what she's looking at but she takes Lexi's word for it that there's nothing angaran about these readings.

'I've run hundreds of tests,' Lexi continues. 'Only traces of the angara genome remain. The exalted are kett.'

'There must be a way to fix them.' There's such agony in his voice. He's desperately looking for a way to help these people. They could be friends or family. Hell, she thinks that maybe one of them could be Allia.

'I don't think there is,' Lexi says when Ryder still remains silent, gnawing on her lower lip and trying to find the right words to say to him. Nothing seems to work and so she keeps still, looking at the kett's body and wondering who it was before. 'Exaltation is permanent, Jaal.'

Jaal shakes his head. 'No. There must be a way.' He turns on his heel and strides away.

Lexi sighs, bringing Ryder's attention back to the present. 'I don't want to give him false hope. He's never going to get over his grief if he doesn't realise that there's no way back for these kett.'

Sara licks her lips. 'I'll go and talk to him. I... I think I know what to say to make him see sense.'

'Thank you, Ryder. He is part of this crew. His welfare is my responsibility... I just don't know what else to do in this moment.'

Sara had been inching towards the door but at that, she stops. She turns back to Lexi, who's got a frown on her face. Sara gives her a soft smile. 'I know you didn't expect this, that it was all thrust on you, but you're doing great, Lexi. You've stepped up and look! You've got your kett sample! That's got to feel pretty damn awesome.'

'Their bodies are unlike anything I've ever seen. Centuries of gene stealing, crafted evolution. It's horrible, of course, but also fascinating.'

'I wish I could be that enthusiastic about biology,' Sara jokes. 'I'm glad you're settling in, though. I don't think we could do this without you.'

Lexi gives her a crooked grin. 'Sink or swim, right?' She heaves a deep sigh. 'I should probably clean this up before it starts to smell.'

'And I should get to Jaal before I lose my nerve.'

She sees Lexi give her a questioning look but she ignores it. She leaves the medbay, heading straight for the Tech Lab where she knows Jaal will be. The doors slide open and she steps into the room, managing to put her silly feelings to the back of her mind as she strides over to Jaal at his workbench.

'Ahn, Ryder,' he greets, hesitation in his voice. Ryder knows why. He's not a fool. He's probably
noticed how she's been avoiding him. 'What brings you here.'

'I wanted to talk to you... about the kett... about what Lexi said.' She sits down and gestures for him to follow. They're sat on his bunk. 'I know it feels better to cling to hope, Jaal, to believe that things are going to get better, that there's some magical cure for this... but I think you need to start realising that there's probably not going to be. The way Lexi was talking, there's nothing there of the angara they used to be. Perhaps, maybe we'll be able to remove the mind control, but even then, I don't know if they'll ever remember who they were. Perhaps the best outcome is a kett race that doesn't just blindly kill.'

'But there may be a way...' Jaal starts and even though she had hoped she wouldn't have to, Ryder realises that she needs to share her experience with him. To make him understand.

'Jaal,' she cuts him off. 'I'm... I'm not just saying this because I need you in a right state of mind for this. I'm saying it because I know what it's like to live with false hope and see that it was impossible. It destroys a part of you. When my mom was diagnosed with her illness, I believed that there would be a cure. Right up until she died, I kept expecting a miracle that would save the only real parent I had. It didn't happen. And all it got me was a lot of pain when she died and I hadn't had time to come to grips with it. My brother, he had. He had been trying to tell me for months that Mom was going to die and we needed to start preparing for it... but I didn't. I couldn't. She's my mom and I wasn't going to lose her so soon. Not before she saw me settle down; have kids; figure out my life. I was too much like my dad. Clinging to this hope that something would come up. Then when it didn't, we fell apart.'

There's tears stinging her eyes and she has no idea if it's because she's with Jaal, but she lets them fall. They trail a path down her cheeks, disappearing into the line of her mouth until she can taste the salt of them.

She hates crying. Yet, she can't seem to stop herself in that moment.

Ryder reaches up and scrubs them away with the back of her palm. She turns her reddened eyes, lifting her gaze to meet Jaal's, who's staring at her with eyes wide with a strange sort of wonder.

'We're not doing this because we're giving up before we even started. We're doing this because, all the evidence in front of us show that there's not much hope. I don't want you feeling as lost as I was when my dad called and said my mother had died. When I watched her coffin get lowered into the ground and I knew I'd never see her again. I felt empty. I felt lost. I felt... like the only relief was taking a razor to my skin, she doesn't add. Not even Scott knows about the scars on her body. The ones she put there. 'I don't want you feeling like that, Jaal. Not if I can help it.'

He stares at her for a long moment. His strange, wide, cat-like eyes scanning her face as if he's trying to figure something out. The look that he gives her makes her want to apologise for ignoring him, for acting like a child, but then that would mean admitting what upset her. And she's not ready for that yet.

So, she just offers him a smile, which he slowly returns, his hand reaching out to grab her own. He gives it a soft squeeze. 'Thank you, Ryder. I... I don't want to give up hope but I won't let my hope destroy me.' He takes another breath. 'I'm sorry you had to go through that.'

'All the evidence was there. Scott could see it. Mom could see it. Just me and Dad couldn't. Or didn't want to, I suppose. I wish things had been different... again, I can't change the past.'

They fall into a comfortable silence and all Ryder wants to do in that moment is rest her head against his shoulder, close her eyes and fall asleep. She's so damn tired, even though she knows she's got a shitload of paperwork to do. It doesn't matter. Today has been a hell of a day, she's done more than
she normally does and it's taking its toll.

She gives his hand a squeeze, then pulls her own free, standing up. He follows her, a look in his gaze... almost as if he doesn't want her to go either. She shakes her head. She's reading too much into it. As always. What has she just been talking about? False hope. She's giving herself false hope in thinking that Jaal feels something for her... something that he only feels for her which isn't the case when he's also flirting with Cora and Peebee.

_No more false hope, Sara_, she hisses to herself, forcing a smile on her face.

'I'll talk to you later, Jaal. I need to sleep otherwise I'm going to pass out.'

He nods his head, saying nothing in return as she steps out of the Tech Lab and makes her way to her quarters.
Ryder wakes up to more messages than she knows what to do with. She brings them up on her omni-tool, too damn cold and tired to get out bed for the actual message terminal. It's one of the benefits of having an AI in your head, she supposes. Silly whims like that are easier done.

There's three from Drack, two in which he talks about these "Matriarch Credits" which sound fishy to Ryder from the second she reads them, and is only confirmed in the next. In the final, he talks to her about how bad things are looking with the krogan colony with Morda. Ryder sends back a message saying that they'll head to Elaaden soon and see how things are, maybe even put things at ease.

She finds one from Lexi, saying that Jaal seems to be doing better. The asari doctor thanks her, saying that whatever she said must've helped Jaal. He was much more understanding when Lexi went to talk to him. She smiles at that, feeling a warmth in her chest knowing that she helped him. It's half the reason she keeps accepting these silly little side quests. She loves that feeling of helping too damn much.

There's two that deal with the "official" side of being Pathfinder, asking her to attend diplomatic meetings on the Nexus which she so isn't looking forward to. She knows it comes with the job and if she's going to do this, she's going to do it right, but she's always hated politicians. Soldiers, she can understand. She can respect fighters but those that fight with bribes and blackmail and anything else... she can't trust them.

The one from Vetra is just a basic outline of things she's already discovered from her brief stay on Kadara. There's one from Captain Dunn, asking for help the next time she's on the Nexus — another reason Ryder is glad she decided to go there instead of another planet, as well as the email from Vetra's sister, Sid, who seems to have some suspicions about some working inside the Nexus.

One from the turian Pathfinder about the turian ark, and one from Cora about the asari ark makes her happy, knowing that they're getting closer and closer to finding the lost ships. She's still not sure about the salarians... and it's rather worrying no-one mentions the quarian one... she's not going to give up on anyone, though.

And then the final is from Moshae Sjefa, saying that she's finally set up a meeting with Akksul. Ryder feels her throat tighten as she thinks about the angara who seems determined to kill all of her people. She wonders how that makes them any different than the kett. Yes, the Initiative came to Andromeda where the angara had already made their home but they aren't trying to cause trouble. They are stuck here. There is no turning back.

'I am sure you will find a way to deal with the situation, Pathfinder,' SAM chimes in, his voice
coming from the small, glowing node on her table rather than inside her head.

She smiles softly as she finally pulls herself out of bed, moving over to her wardrobe. She pulls on some standard Initiative trousers and a hoodie, in the mood for comfort rather than style. 'Is everyone up?' she asks as she slips from her room, turning into the galley.

'Yes, Pathfinder,' SAM replies, just as the doors open and reveal the krogan onboard. Drack stands in the middle of the galley, looking through all the cupboards.

He turns when he hears Ryder enter. 'Kid, I've been meaning to talk to you! You got a sec?'

Ryder nods as she shoves by him, reaching for a few of her protein bars to munch on. 'Yeah, I was going to do the rounds. See how everyone is doing anyway. What you wanna talk about?' She rips a bar open and takes a bite, sliding into a seat.

Drack continues to stand, no doubt there's no seat that could support him. They'll need to fix that. 'It's about Spender.'

Ryder frowns as she chews. When she's swallowed, she asks, 'Who's Spender?'

'Addison's assistant. The ass that led to us krogan being screwed over after we dealt with the Nexus uprising. He promised us more power, more say and then refused to deliver. Pretended that he didn't say a single thing and Tann, being the slimy salarian he is, chose to believe him.'

'He sounds like a bastard,' Ryder declares around a mouthful.

Drack snorts. His lips turning up in the strange grimace-like smile that she's grown used to. 'You can say that again. I know Spender had something to do with the uprising — tried telling Tann but because I didn't have proof, he didn't listen.'

Immediately, it clicks and Ryder gives a grin. 'And you want me to help you find the dirt on him?'

'You catch on quick, kid.' He gives a chuckle. 'Anything you find out would help. I hate that Kesh is stuck on that damn station by herself. Having to deal with him.'

Ryder nods. 'I understand that. I'll do what I can, Drack. It'll be the first thing I do when we dock, all right?'

'Thanks, kid.'

She shoves the other two bars into her back pocket. 'No problem, old man.'

His chuckle follows her as she leaves the galley and strides down the ramp.

She's halfway down the ramp, almost at the research centre when Liam dives out of the crew quarters. 'Pathfinder, got a minute?'

She draws to a halt and smiles at him. 'Yeah, was just coming to check on you. What's up?'

'I've got these plans — research plans — if you wouldn't mind signing off on them and ordering it, it'd be great.'

Ryder frowns. 'What sort of research plans?'

'Nothing dangerous! I promise it'll all be worth it, I just need the official stamp. Would you mind doing that for me?'
Ryder sighs. 'Sure, but if this ends in disaster, I'm not saving your ass from Tann.'

'Wouldn't expect anything less, Ryder,' he says with a chuckle before stepping back into the quarters. The doors whoosh shut behind him and so Ryder resumes her walk. There's no-one else visible, so she heads over to Jaal's room and gives the door a quick knock, entering when he doesn't call out. She briefly wonders if he's somewhere else on the ship but she finds him crouched down, working on something.

'Hey, Jaal?' He startles. Full on jumps at the sound of her voice, the tool he'd been holding flying from his grasp and clattering to the ground. He turns. 'I didn't mean to scare you!'

'What?' He shakes his head, standing upright and coming around to face her. 'I'm not scared. Just one second.'

'You look busy, Jaal. What's going on?'

'Yes, well, if I'm busy it means that my mind is occupied with what I'm working on... rather than worrying.'

Ryder nods. 'I understand. Sometimes, I'd draw just to keep my mind empty of worry. Lexi keeps telling me I should do pick it up again.' She flexes her fist which still bears the scars of "the mirror incident". 'Is everything all right?'

'I'm making gifts for everyone. I was wondering if turians like poetry. I was going to write one for Vetra and engrave it on... I'm not sure yet. Maybe I could just recite it for her?' He cocks his head, looking as if he wants her advice but before she can answer, he ploughs on. 'Liam seems to like my Rofjinn. I might sew him one. As for Drack, I was wondering if a ceremonial angaran dagger would suffice. It is mostly decorative but...'

Ryder holds up her hands, having heard enough. She knows when something is wrong. She had expected a better Jaal, after the email she received from Lexi but... she knows herself how quickly emotions can come up on you. Perfectly fine one minute, then the next you're punching mirrors and trashing armour.

'Jaal, this sounds like an awful lot of work. Especially when it's not needed. What is really going on?'

There's a beat before he answers. He turns away from her slightly. 'I'm sure I seem confident and skilled to you... I'm not sure yet. Maybe I could just recite it for her?' He looks as if he wants her advice but before she can answer, he ploughs on. 'But I'm not. At least I don't feel like I am.'

All this time she's just assumed that no-one else would understand what it's like to have a fucked up brain and perception of yourself. And to hear that this strange alien who's grown to mean so much to her is experiencing it...

She's never been good with words. Especially when it comes to her feelings. So, she's not that surprised when all she can think of is, 'Well, I think you're great.'

'That's so...'

She's not sure what he means by that, but she affirms, 'It's true.'

He gives a soft laugh. 'You're making me blush.'

That makes her grin. 'Really? I couldn't tell.'
Jaal clears his throat. 'My family is well known. Our lineage is respected. And many of my kin have achieved great things. I've never been one of them. So many older siblings and cousins who have succeeded at everything — I stopped trying to keep up.'

'I know that all too well. Back home, I had to work extra hard to move past my name. Everyone just heard Ryder and thought I was as crazy as my dad. Now, out here, I'm still in his shadow. Am I doing as good a job as he would have?' She shakes her head. 'But you're not in anyone's shadow here, Jaal. I believe in you and I think you're going to do great things. You helped bring back the Moshae. You've helped me reset vaults and make planets more habitable. You're going to bring peace between the Initiative and the Roekaar. I can feel it. You're amazing, Jaal, and one day you're going to see that.'

She trails off, realising a little too late that her passion is probably a bit too much for just a friend. She glances away, reaching up to scratch the back of her head.

'Thank you, Ryder,' Jaal replies. 'For that and for... listening.'

Ryder nods, swallowing hard. 'No problem. And forget the gifts, okay? You don't need to give the crew anything to earn their respect because they already respect you.'

With that, she turns and leaves, feeling his gaze follow her all of the way out of the room. Even after the doors slide shut, she can still feel it burning into her back. She swallows and moves over to the Bio Lab, hoping that's where Cora is.

'We've got it, Ryder!'

It takes Ryder a moment to realise what she means. 'Wait, you fixed the asari flight recorder?'

She shrugs with one shoulder. 'Some old access code. A little data recover from SAM. We have the asari arks last heading. The NavPoints are set. We can go whenever you're ready.'

The happiness and excitement that rushes through Ryder's veins is rather short lived as she remembers the state they found the Periphona in. She draws in a breath. 'Remember what happened to the survey ship? This might not be pretty, Cora, are you sure you're...?'

'Handling tough stuff is my job,' Cora cuts her off. 'We need the asari ark and Sarissa more than ever. I trust you to find them before the kett do.'

She walks past Ryder then, stepping out of the Bio Lab and making her way down to the cargo bay. Ryder knows she sometimes works on the Nomad so she's not surprised that's where she's going.

'No pressure on me or anything,' Ryder mutters, rolling her shoulders before she turns, going to follow her. She quickly makes her way to Vetra's little room, ticking off the list of her crew in her head. She's seen Drack, Liam, Cora and Jaal. Just Vetra and Gil left. She knows there's also Peebee, but she's still working on her "secret project" and struggling with laying down her roots, so until she gets a message from the asari, she's not going to bother her.

'Hey, Ryder, got an encrypted message from Sid. You mind talking to her?' Vetra says the second she walks through the door.

Ryder nods her head. 'Sure.'

'All right. Thanks. Just connecting the call now.' Vetra pulls up her omni-tool, typing away at it until Sid's voice fills the room. Ryder's never met her, something that'll change when she heads back to the Nexus, but she likes the other turian already.
'Finally! I've been waiting for *hours*!'

Ryder snorts. 'That's my bad. I've just woke up.'

'You wanna tell us what this is all about?' Vetra asks, cutting Sid off before she has a chance to reply to Ryder's comment.

'I was listening to outpost updates and caught a message about settlers going missing?'

'What?' Ryder nearly shouts, stepping forward. The smile falls off her face and a huge frown eats away at her face. 'What the hell does that mean? Going missing?'

'They didn't leave voluntarily. No work assignments. No mining expeditions. Kidnapped.'

'Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit,' Ryder groans, a hand rising to rub her forehead. She can feel a headache coming on. She's just out of bed and she feels like she'll need to go back to it to get rid of the damn thing.

'But I dug around! And I think I know where they've been taken!' Sid cuts in, her news lifting a little bit of weight from Ryder's shoulders. 'A cave on a moon in the Remav System. Originally an angaran mine, I think, but they abandoned it.'

'I don't think the planet you're referring to is a moon,' SAM chimes in.

Ryder mutters, 'No-one likes a know-it-all, SAM,' at the same time Sid mutters, 'Whatever.'

'What did I tell you about getting involved?' Vetra hisses, seemingly ignoring just how helpful her baby sister is being. Not that Ryder can blame her. She's protective. She understands that.

'I couldn't just do nothing.'

'How do we know you're intel is even reliable?'

'It's reliable!' Sid bites back, indignation in her voice.

'I trust your sister, Vetra. There's no sense wasting time, especially with the kett's history.'

'See? That's a Pathfinder!'

'Sid...' Vetra seems to hold back a sigh. She glances briefly at Ryder, but then looks back down at her omni-tool. 'Just give us everything you have on this.'

'Already done.' Ryder can hear the smirk in Sid's voice. There's a pause, and Ryder can almost sense Sid trying to gather her courage as she asks, 'Can I come along? I want to help.'

This time Vetra does sigh. 'You know the answer to that.'


'You did good. I just want you to be safe, okay?'

'Yeah, yeah.'

The line goes dead and Vetra raises her head. 'I appreciate you helping, Ryder. I'm sorry she's so...'

'Don't apologise,' Ryder cuts her off. 'She's got a good head on her shoulder. Good initiative. I know
you want to keep her safe but she's too damn smart to be locked away doing message monitoring.'

Vetra heaves a sigh. She leans against the wall and folds her arms over her chest. 'I know, I know. I just... she's all I have left, y'know?'

Ryder nods. 'Trust me, I do. Scott is all I have left. And he's in a coma he might not wake up from.' She shakes her head. 'If... when... he wakes up and he tells me he wants to get out on the field, I'm not going to hold him back because it's where he belongs. Sid... Sid doesn't know where she belongs because she hasn't a chance to experience it. Who knows? She may see what we do and hate it. Not all turians are made to be soldiers, though your people sure act like they are. We're miles away from Palavan.'

Slowly, Vetra nods. 'Thanks, Ryder. I know it was shitty circumstances that got you in this position, but I couldn't imagine anyone else doing it.'

With that said, Vetra turns her attention back to her console and Ryder, her chest swelling with pride, heads off to the engine room to see Gil.
'Any luck with the kett transponder?' Ryder asks the second she's through the doors to engineering and sees Gil. She had dropped it off with him the second she had gotten back on the ship. She now hopes he's managed to have a little bit of luck in getting a heading.

'Uh, yeah, some,' Gil replies as he straightens, letting Ryder see that's what he's been working on. 'What do we need from it, exactly?'

'Well, hopefully the location it points to,' Ryder replies as she moves over to stand beside him, leaning her arms on the table. 'That should gives us a fix on the Archon's ship so we know where we're heading.'

Gil draws a deep breath in. Out. 'Right.'

Ryder grins at him. 'There's not much riding on this, Gil, don't worry. It's just our best chance to find Meridian. You're fine.'

He barks out a laugh. 'Pressure. I like that.' He starts tinkering away at the device. 'Luckily, no matter where you go in the universe, physics still applies. There's only so many ways of communicating across space.'

Ryder watches as Gil tinkers for a few more minutes, before he straightens. Ryder straightens with him, amazed that it didn't take him that long. He wears a proud smile on his face. 'There. Give it a shot.'

He hands it to Ryder, who takes it in her hands. She looks down at it as she accepts it. 'Did you connect the—?'

She doesn't get a chance to finish. Not as the strange, guttural tones of the kett language filters in through the trandsponder. Ryder jumps at the same time Gil does. Her fingers are working even as Gil curses and tells her to turn it off.

Heaving a sigh when the click sounds, Ryder relaxes. She raises her gaze to Gil's, who is staring at her with wide eyes. 'Careful. That is a direct line to people who want to murder everyone on this ship.'

Ryder only shrugs her shoulder with a grin. 'You think we can use it to sign them up for a lot of porn?' Gil gives a snort of amusement. 'SAM, any luck?'

'I have the co-ordinates, Pathfinder. The signal points to the Tafeno System.'

'Ver sure we wanna do this?' Gil says, looking at her dubiously. She gnaws on her lower lip because no, she doesn't really but it's the only way to make Heleus a home.

'I don't see another choice,' Ryder finally says as she puts the transponder back onto the table. 'But I'll wait a bit — I want more shit settled before we do this.'

'I knew running off to Andromeda would be dangerous but shit... this is dangerous.'

Ryder shrugs with a shoulder, that same shit-eating grin on her face. 'Only if we die.'

Gil snorts. 'That's reassuring.' She goes to turn and walk away, leaving him to his work, when he
continues. 'Hey, I've actually been hoping you'd come down here.'

She frowns, turning back to him. 'Oh, really? How come?'

'I want to talk to you. Make sure you're all right. No doubt Lexi's been hounding you but I'm doing this as a friend, rather than a doctor. I don't like seeing you so... whatever that's been. If you need someone to talk to...'

Ryder leans back against the table. It seems that everyone is offering her a shoulder. She has no idea how to truly accept their offer though. Most of the time, it just feels like they're doing it because it's the right thing to do. You think someone is in trouble, you offer to help them, all the while knowing they won't accept.

Somehow, with Gil, she feels more like he wants to listen. She has no idea if he's just filling that Scott-shaped hole in her heart. They are pretty similiar. Joking. Never taking anything seriously. Going with the flow.

She gnaws on her lower lip. 'How about I tell you all my troubles over a beer and a game of poker?' she counters, because she has far too much to focus on in this moment to open up that can of worms.

But talking to Gil doesn't seem so far fetched.

Especially when he grins and holds out his hand. 'It's a deal, Ryder.'

Ryder steps into the Vortex with a sore head. The pounding music doesn't make it any easier but the promise of alcohol does. She wonders if there will ever be a day in her life when she'll have peace; when it seems like everyone the Nexus isn't relying on her.

The second she had stepped off the *Tempest*, she found herself watching an argument between Spender and Del Jasin. She already had a dislike for Spender after everything Kesh and Drack had told her about, but after seeing that? She full on hates the man. She had made a note to talk to Kesh more about the douche, and had started to move on to join Gil for their poker game when she had been called over by a group of angara, telling her their diplomat was in the Cultural Exchange which came with its own problems of the angara being wary of giving up their weapons. Then she had been accosted by a civilian who seemed weary of trusting the angara — Sara had only one answer for her: talk to them and see for yourself.

And to top it all off, there were now protestors in hydroponics. She had promised she would talk to Tann but she didn't say when. She reckons she's earned herself a drink.

She sees Gil waiting for her and moves over, plopping into the seat with a loud groan. She buries her head in her hands, lifting her hand to give the ass the finger when he laughs at her.

'Rough day?' he questions as he starts to shuffle his deck.

'Groaning, Ryder lifts her head. 'I hate being Pathfinder, sometimes. So much to do. Everyone wants your help.' She groans again and lets her head collapse back onto the table with a loud thunk.

She doesn't even realise that Gil has gone and gotten her a drink until it's pushed in front of her. 'I had no idea what to get you, so I just got you a whisky. Hope that's not too bad.'

Ryder shakes her head. 'Nah. I'm fine with whisky.' She licks her lips and downs it in one.

'Damn, must have been a rough day.' He starts to deal out the cards. 'You know the basic rules,
right?'

Ryder nods her head. She takes her cards in hand, readjusting the layout and trying to keep her face straight. Especially as SAM chimes in through their private channel. *I can read Gil's vital signs and give you an advantage during the game, if you like.*

She almost grins. *Sneaky SAM. Do it.*

'So, I believe we agreed to a conversation.'

'And I believe I'm still not drunk enough for that yet,' Ryder replies as she bets 50 creds. 'I'll do it if you do.'

'What? A sort of "you talk, I talk" game?' He raises 50 creds as Ryder nods. 'All right. I can deal with that. But like you said, we need a few more drinks.' He lowers his cards and stands, giving her a warning look as he takes off to the bar.

Ryder fidgets with her cards, trying to ignore the slight tremble of her hands at the thought that she's going to admit this to someone. Aloud. For the first time.

When Gil returns, it's with a tray of drinks. Ryder barks out a laugh, about to ask what he's thinking when he already explains. 'I just thought it'd stop us going back and forth to the bar.' He grins at her, getting comfortable in his seat again. 'So, spill it.'

Without saying anything, Ryder reaches over and takes another glass. She glances inside, seeing that it's whisky once again. She swallows a mouthful and focuses her attention on her cards. 'I've... kind of... umm...'

*He doesn't seem to be bluffing, Pathfinder.*

Ryder shakes her head and folds. She picks up the stack of cards and starts to shuffle, dealing them out again. She can feel his gaze on her but she refuses to meet it. She wants to tell him. She feels like he'd understand... it's just getting the words out.

'Okay, ask me questions instead.'

'All right.' He ponders his cards before placing a 100 cred bet. 'What got you so upset that time you came back with Jaal and Cora?'

She swallows. 'They were flirting,' she admits, her voice barely above a whisper. She wonders if he's able to hear her over the bass of the music, but judging from how wide his eyes go... Ryder guesses he does.

'And that upset you because...?'

*He is bluffing.* 'I bet 50.' She shrugs her shoulder. 'I... have... I don't even know what I have. A crush maybe? It's stupid. Sometimes, I feel like we're flirting and then there's times where that happens and I'm left thinking I'm not special or significant. It's weird.'

There's silence, only broken as Gil throws his cards down and the credits are transferred into Ryder's account.

'Is this Cora? Because I'm pretty damn sure she's as straight as they come and...'

'What?' Ryder pretty much drops the deck of cards she had been holding, organising to pass back
over to Gil. She clenches her teeth as she hastily gathers them together. 'No. Not Cora. I mean I'm bi... but Cora is just my friend.'

'Jaal?' He purses his lips and gives a slow nod of his head. 'Huh. Didn't think he'd be your type. Then again I know you did have a drell boy—' He stops, catching himself just before Ryder freezes completely. He coughs, shaking his head. 'Fuck. Sorry. Anyway. You like Jaal, huh?'

She takes the distraction for what it is, shoving thoughts of Shasi deep to the back of her mind. 'I think so. I don't really know what I'm feeling exactly. Like I said, sometimes I think he likes me, then he's out there flirting with Cora and Peebee and even Vetra and ugh! I call.'

He frowns, looks down at his cards then spreads them out on the table. Ryder isn't surprised when she finds out she's got the better hand. She gives him a grin.

'Damn, have you been holding out on me? You're pretty good at this.' She's almost thankful when he doesn't bring up her previous words. He's just acknowledged them and that's it. 'Poker's lost me a few friends over the years... the only one who still plays me is my friend Jill. I know, I know, Gil and Jill...'

Ryder just giggles as she dishes out another round. 'She sounds like fun.'

'Ooh she is. You should meet her some time. She's the fertility expert; heads the CRC. My only real friend from back home.'

The last thing Ryder wants to think about is eventually having to have kids. She's never been certain if she wants them. Maybe with the right person but when she was certain she would never find the right person, well, she resigned herself to never having any children.

'She's always teasing that I'm making her job harder. Says that if I'm not making babies, I'm part of the problem.' He gives a single laugh. 'We have that kind of relationship.'

Ryder frowns down at her cards. She knows she shouldn't say anything. After all, he didn't say anything about her problems. They were just supposed to share, not talk things through.

Yet, she can't seem to hold back her thoughts. 'The hurtful kind? That hardly seems fair.'

'Nah, she's like family.'

'Family doesn't make it okay.' She draws a deep breath and closes her eyes. I can't make this about me. She lets her breath out. 'But if you're happy, then that's all I need to hear.'

'Yeah, she supports me unconditionally. We just ride each other like that. You'll see when you meet her, she's amazing.' He looks down at his cards. 'Another hundred.'

Ryder calls with SAM's advice ringing in her head. She grins when he groans and sets his cards down.

'Damn. The winning streak is over.' He sighs. 'Guess I still need to keep searching for my purpose in life. Maybe an agony aunt?' He chuckles and leans forward. 'Look, Ryder, I don't really know Jaal that well. I haven't really come out of engineering since we first left the Nexus. All I know is that none of you are mind readers. He may be flirting with the others because he doesn't think you like him. It may just be an angara thing too. They're open with their emotions. What we think as flirting, it could just be basic conversation with them. All I'm saying is, don't start worrying or stressing or feeling down without talking to the guy first.'
By the time he's finished talking, Ryder's mouth is dry. She stares at him for a long time, her mouth hanging slightly ajar as she tries to think of something to say.

All that comes out is, 'I cheated.'

He blinks at her.

'Uh, I used SAM. In the poker game.'

Gil leans back with a chuckle. 'Yeah, I kind of figured. It's pretty obvious, actually. Don't worry about it, though, the day I defeat you with SAM in your head is the day I become the all-powerful.'

His joking tone is enough to make Ryder relax. She loosens, letting her shoulders drop as she returns his easy smile.

'Jill predicted you'd be my downfall, by the way,' he says as Ryder starts getting herself ready to leave. She has no idea what time it is, all she knows it she's grown tired and wants to get back to the Tempest to sleep. A quick look at her omni-tool tells her she's been playing poker for three hours.

Ryder quirks an eyebrow. 'Oh?'

'Yeah. Wait till I tell her you're a cheat.'

Pretending to cringe, Ryder stands. 'Ouch.' She chuckles. 'Thanks for everything, Gil. We should do this again, sometime.'

He raises his glass. 'Any time, Pathfinder.'
'Okay, I'm finally uploading those equations from Dr. Aridana, SAM,' Ryder declares, already starting the transfer. 'Have fun, my man.'

She glances up the second her omni-tool tells her the transfer is complete, expecting a reply from SAM about her teasing. Her eyes widen when she finds the usually blue-ish toned room now red. She takes a step forward. 'What the hell? SAM? Are you all right?'

It takes a long, painful second before the AI replies. 'Malicious code detected. Please stand by.' She shakes her head. She can't just do nothing. Stepping backwards, she brings up her scanners and begins to scan every piece of equipment in SAM node, but finds that all she gets is a bunch of numbers and a warning telling her that her scanner can't connect to SAM node.

'Attempting to countermand malicious code. Please stand by.'

'Damn it, SAM. What can I do?' she hisses, her head already beginning to ache. There's a tightness in her chest as she stares on helplessly. So much depends on SAM — what on earth would they do if they lost him? She's already so damn tired. She had planned on coming here under the pretence of giving SAM the codes, and just having a few minutes to herself.

She'd talked to Sid about the information she'd discovered, had talked to Kesh about Spender (as well as been asked to pick up some hard liquor for the krogan by her assistant). She had then moved on to talk to Kandros about a million things — the protestors, Spender, the "first murderer" in Andromeda. Her eyes still ached from all the security footage she had to watch.

Then there had been the movie list for Liam. An interview with Keri. Tann about the murderer. Sellers about getting people out of cyro. She had just confronted Spender before she had come down to SAM node for some peace and quiet, ready to watch one of her dad's memories that had somehow become unlocked when she had remembered the equations.

Now here she was.

'SAM, talk to me! Is there anything I can do?' she repeats because just standing about is something she can't do. Not as everything looks hopeless.

Ryder turns her head and sees a projection. It's a human, tinkering at one of the consoles. She frowns at it. 'Is this another malfunction?' Then an idea occurs to her. Her eyes widen as she steps forward. 'SAM, are you trying to tell me something?'

The AI doesn't answer so Ryder goes with her gut. It'd be a strange malfunction if it were one, and if the code needed someone on the outside, they would have found a way to admit it themselves.

Taking a deep breath, Ryder moves to the first console, her fingers working tirelessly on her omni-tool as she tries to reset the thing. When the static disappears and replaces with the usual image of a planet, she breathes a sigh of relief.

The hologram moves and Ryder follows it to each console, working and working until the consoles reset and SAM's voice reappears. 'Hello, Pathfinder. Please initialise the console to restore normal operations.'

Swallowing, Ryder does as she's bid, breathing another sigh of relief when the room returns to its normal colour — the red warning gone, hopefully for good.
She leans heavily on the console and glances up at the SAM node. Seriously. Can she never have a nice, relaxing moment? 'What the fuck was that?'

'The equations contained a Trojan horse program. A virus,' SAM declares. 'Specifically targeted to sever our connection and render me helpless. Reconnecting would be impossible.'

Sara licks her lips and stands upright. 'How do you feel? Are you okay?' She feels like its a stupid ass question but it's her first instinct. When something goes wrong, you make sure the other people involved are okay.

'I cannot feel pain,' SAM reminds her, but before she can dismiss the question he goes on. 'However, I would avoid repeating the experience which is the purpose of pain in organic life.'

Giving a crooked grin, Sara nods. 'All right. Unlock the door. I'll confront Dr. Aridana after I watch this memory.' She takes a deep breath. 'Go ahead, SAM.'

The water falls on Sara's head, a steady stream and pressure as she rests her head against the wall. Her entire body feels heavy and weak. She's surprised she's still standing, if she's completely honest with herself. She draws a deep breath in and opens her eye, watching as the water swirls around the plug, draining away. It's tinted blue from her hair dye and she gives a small smile at the sight.

She had been red once, a bright vibrant thing, and every time she showered, it was like she was washing off a shitload of blood. It had made her feel like a warrior queen.

A knock comes at the door and she startles, pulling back and glancing.

'Come on, Ryder, you're not the only one who needs to shower!' Peebee's voice comes through the door, followed by another knock.

Sara sighs and nods, shutting off the shower. She grabs her towel and wraps it around her body, unlocking the door and stepping out. Peebee's eyes dance up and down her body before she meets her gaze. She winks, then saunters by her, stepping into the room and locking the door.

Giving a snort, Ryder shakes her head and steps into her bedroom. She throws herself down onto the bed, not caring that she's probably soaking the sheets and making it so she'll need to change them before she sleeps. She just doesn't have the energy to stand up anymore.

She had planned on staying on the Nexus for a good few days. Give herself and her crew a chance to refuel. She had wanted to spend time with Scott, keeping him updated on what was going on, even if he couldn't truly hear.

Of course, she should have known better.

After SAM's malfunction, she had gone to see Captain Dunn only to find out that someone had been broken out of cyro with a contagious disease called TH-314. She'd had to run about the Nexus like a fool trying to find traces of the woman, Ruth Bekker, down. And when she found out that she had stolen a shuttle, well, she knew that her time at the Nexus had been hastily cut off.

She had told her crew to get back to the Tempest, and whilst she waited, she had gone to confront Dr. Aridana, only to find out she had no idea about the virus. On the way back to her ship, she noticed that the VI Avina was red instead of purple and saying odd things. So, she had started talking to it, only to discover that it had been hacked by the same people who had tried to disconnect her from SAM — something they thought had been successful.
She hadn't bothered to correct them and had been told to wait for a email from the leader.

Ryder still didn't have it but hey, it was early days.

'Any luck with the shuttle, Suvi?'

'Still following the radiation, Ryder. We've been to Anasa. Following it to Solminae right now.' Suvi's voice comes over the comms. 'Will keep you updated.'

'Okay. I may be sleeping but wake me up as soon as we've got a location.'

'Will do.'

The gush of smoke comes rushing towards them, too fast for either of them to try and duck out of its path. She makes a move to the side but the mist engulfs her entire body, sending her hurtling through the air with its force. Ryder just manages to catch onto the edge of the platform with the tip of her finger but the stream of air is still coming towards her, and her grip starts to loosen.

Then something bangs into her, destroying any hope of climbing to safety as she falls down, down, down.

She thinks she screams but she's not sure. She can't be sure of anything at that moment. There's ringing in her ears, a whooshing noise as she falls, and then a crack as she lands on solid ground once more.

Her entire body aches. It aches so much but that's not Ryder's top priority. No. All she can focus on is the burning in her lungs. She opens her mouth to fill them, to give herself some sort of relief from all the agonising pain, but nothing happens. The burning just intensifies.

Ryder opens her eyes a slither, and then she grimaces at the sight of her broken helmet. Her omni-tool had been able to fix the tiny crack when she fell from the shuttle at the beginning of the mission, but this? There was no way in hell she could fix this.

I'm going to die, a voice whispers in the back of her head as she struggles to her knees, coughing now as she tries harder and harder to take in more air. Her body is fighting her, trying its hardest to keep going but the air around her isn't good enough. She is choking, slowly, painfully. Dying. Alone.

A figure limps towards her through the smoke cloud in front her, and she knows who it is the second she sees him. They were never close but that doesn't mean she doesn't know her father. The bright orange light of his omni-tool is all Ryder can focus on as her father appears before her. He's snapping something, demanding a shuttle, she thinks, but it's hard to tell. The world around her is blackening at the edges and the sounds around her are growing blurry as the ringing noise intensifies.

It's okay, she wants to tell him, I'll get to see Mom again, but it doesn't come out. Of course it doesn't. She has no breath to pump blood through her body, she has no chance of speaking now.

She glances up and meets her father's eyes for the last time as he yanks her broken helmet off her head. She thinks she frowns because surely that is a pointless action, but then she sees him removing his own helmet. Ryder's eyes widen and she tries to stop him but everything is far too heavy that she can't even lift a finger in protest as he secures his helmet to her suit.

Immediately, oxygen floods her lungs, almost making the ache worse. 'What are you...?' she manages to get out before dissolving into a fit of coughing. She sees her father's lips moving but she
can't hear a single thing he's saying. The last words he'll ever say to her and she's missing them. All she knows is that the world is growing blurrier and darker, even with the intact helmet on her head.

Her father must surely be in agony.

Why is he doing this?

Ryder takes another breath before she feels her body slump as the world around her goes black.

Startling with a jolt, Ryder wakes. Her lungs ache, much like they had in the dream — like they had back on Habitat 7. She hastily fills them, panting as she tries to get her heartbeat back to normal.

Before she even knows what's happening, Lexi is there, hovering in front of her. She realises that SAM must have sent out a warning. It warms her heart a little, knowing the AI is so concerned but she's also a little annoyed because the last thing she wants is to have someone else worrying about her.

Well. Lexi already worries about her. Having her worry about her more than usual then.

'Are you all right? Sara? Deep breaths.' She begins to breathe in and out and Ryder follows her guidance. She feels her heart slow and the tightness in her chest ease, and she finally nods.

'I'm all right. Just... dreaming of Habitat 7 again.'

Lexi frowns down at her. 'Didn't you take your medication? I thought those were helping with the nightmares.'

Ryder shakes her head. 'Didn't even realise I had fallen asleep. I am still in a towel, Lexi.'

'Oh. Right.' She looks just a little embarrassed before it fades. 'Well, I'm glad there's a good reason. I was worrying that the medication had stopped working. Good to know that's not the case. Do you need anything else or are you all right?'

Ryder stands, her hand on the top of her towel to keep it in place. 'No, I'm good now. Just gonna get changed then head up to the bridge.'

Lexi looks like she wants to say more, probably tell her to take her duties easy but she knows she can't. So, the asari doctor just sighs then turns away. Sara watches her go before heading over to her wardrobe. She doesn't bother calling SAM out for alerting the doctor, knowing the AI was only doing its job.

'Do I have any new email?'

'Yes, Pathfinder.'

'Can you read them out to me?'

Ryder dresses she listens to SAM read the emails. One from the woman she had met on the Nexus, who was worried about the angara, admitting that she had been right. That talking to them had been the best way forward. There was another one from Keri, asking for an interview on camera. One from someone called "Knight" — the genius behind trying to disconnect her and SAM — sending a NavPoint to their "sanctuary" on Kadara.

'And a final one from Jaal Ama Darav,' SAM concludes as she pulls on her t-shirt. 'It is entitled
"Non-Work-Related Email from Jaal". It says:

Ryder,

I told Liam and Peebee and Lexi a children's story that the mothers used to tell us when we were small. It's from our oral history of the time before the Scourge. The crew said I should write it down so that it can be added to the cultural centre on the Nexus.

The Wayward Child

Long ago, there was a child who was very stubborn and wouldn't listen to any wisdom—not from her father, nor her many mothers. One day, seeking adventure, she snuck aboard a spaceship with an unknown destination. That child was brave to seek adventure; however, she ended up getting spaced with a load of garbage. Deservedly, she froze in the cold vacuum of space and died. The End.

I don't know why the crew enjoyed it; it's a terrible story meant to scare youngsters into obedience. Is this a novelty to your people? If so, how do you humans keep children from hurting themselves?

Jaal.'

As soon as SAM is finished, Ryder lets out a loud bark of laughter. She shakes her head as she rounds on SAM's small node, almost as if expecting it to be Jaal.

'Anything else I need to know about, SAM?'

'Liam's project is now ready, Pathfinder, you may wish to alert him.'

Giving a nod, Ryder finishes dressing and starts to head to the small room where Liam's set up shop. She's certain he sleeps in the crew quarters but he's set up his couch and TV in that room that it's pretty much his.

'Hey, Liam, I signed off on that project and it's ready...' she trails off as she finally raises her gaze and finds Liam, standing only in his trousers. He's tinkering with armour.

He straightens. 'That's great, Pathfinder.' His eyes go over her shoulder. 'Jaal Ama Darav, we have our gear.'

Before Ryder can turn, Jaal is there. Completely naked. She turns away from him immediately, but the direction she turns is the direction he walks in and before she knows it, he's in her line of sight again.

Jaal greets both her and Liam. Not that she hears much. She's too damn busy looking him over. She can only see from his waist up thanks to the table, but it's enough for her. There's protruding chest pieces, sort of like an advanced ribcage.

It's strange to look at. Yet, the more she stares, the more normal it seems. Beside that, he's just pure muscle. Varying tones of purple. She knew his shoulders were broad but seeing them bare and naked almost makes her mouth water... which never happens to her. Especially when paired with the narrowing waist, that looks pure and utter muscle.

'Um.' Ryder blinks rapidly. 'I know we don't technically have uniforms, but this is a little casual.'
Liam snorts out a laugh. 'Just convenience. We're swapping armour.' He turns to Jaal. 'Ready to go?''

Jaal shifts just a little. 'Go.'

Ryder is left standing there, unable to find a safe place to look. Her gaze keeps darting back to Jaal, desperate to see what his back looks like. She catches herself every time it shifts, however.

'Right. The pattern on your pauldron.'

'Family honorific.'

'Can I wear the poncho?'

'It's a Rofjinn. And no.'

'Why? Is it religious?'

Ryder shakes her head. 'Wait, what?' she cuts in, clamping her teeth together when they just ignore her.

'It's personal. You're not allowed.'

'Because of status or species?'

'Maybe it's both.'

'Do all humans look alike?'

'Some of you sound alike.'

And just like that, it's getting into territory that Ryder knows will end in a fistfight. She throws her hands in the air. 'Woah, woah, woah, both of you just stop.'

They glance at her. Thankfully, they don't just plunder on as if she's not there.

'I know how this goes, trust me. Someone is going to get offended and then someone is going to get punched.'

'That's why we're doing it here?' Jaal offers, as if that makes all the sense. For the first time, Ryder meets his gaze, trying to ignore the unbearable heat on her cheeks. She narrows them in warning.

'It's an armour swap for answers,' Liam explains, with Jaal offering that his turn had been earlier. He leaves a moment later with a remark about it "not being sanctioned" that has Liam calling him an adhi. Ryder keeps her eyes locked on Liam's so she's not tempted to turn and watch Jaal leave. To see his back. His ass. His legs.

Damn.

'Look, I understand what you're trying to do but Jaal is technically an emissary. There's no way these kind of questions would fly with his superiors.'

Listening to his reasoning, Ryder lets him off the hook, agreeing that she understands what he's trying to do. She just wishes he hadn't kept her in the dark. She wouldn't have been too damn worried about it then. She hands him the Nexus vid library, something she remembers she has at the last moment, then turns and leaves him to it.
The doors slide shut behind her and she leans her back, wondering if Jaal walked all the way back to the Tech Lab in the nude. If he had walked from there. It almost makes her smile until she remembers just how he had looked — all those damn muscles.

Her fingers itch, longing to touch.

Ryder hesitates for only a second before she moves to the next room.

'Hey, Vetra,' she starts when the doors slide open. 'Any luck getting some sketching stuff?'

'Yeah. A contact tracked some down and I picked them up when we were at Kadara.' Vetra moves and digs out an A4 sized sketchpad with a small tin of pencils of varying lead heaviness.

'You're a saint,' Ryder smiles as she bundles them in her arms. 'I think I finally have something to draw.'
Chapter 25

'Looks like Ruth Bekker crash landed on Kadara, Pathfinder,' Suvi states as soon as Ryder is through the door. 'We're in orbit now, just waiting for your order to land.'

Ryder nods. 'Take her in, Kallo. I hate this place but hey-ho. Needs must.'

They land in no time at all and Ryder watches as her crew — except Lexi, Suvi and Kallo — leave the ship to enjoy themselves. She hears Jaal grumbling all the way, and it brings a smile to her lips. Even as her mind keeps conjuring the images of him naked — not helped by all the sketches she had been doing as she ate breakfast in her quarters.

'Hey, Ryder, wait up!' Peebee calls, jogging just behind Ryder as she starts to make her way through to the market, hoping to find some sign of the alcohol Kesh's assistant was looking for.

Ryder halts, waiting until Peebee is by her side. 'Uh, I was wondering. You know how I'm working on something? Well, I need a final piece. My scanner says it's on Voeld. I was wondering, could we pick it up, the next time we stop there?'

Smiling, Ryder gives a small nod. 'Yeah, I don't see why not. I can't make any promises on when we'll get there but yeah. I'll add it to the list.'

'Good, good.' Peebee falls into step with her. 'So, what are we doing in Kadara again? We just left.'

'I know, I know but Ark Hyperion has some issues that I need to sort out. Might as well look into the murder of that angara and whatever else comes up along the way. Wanna come out with me?'

'Uh, hell yeah.'

Ryder's grin grows. 'Good. Go and find Vetra, suit up and I'll meet you at the lift to the slums in a minute.'

She watches as Peebee practically skips off, a laugh breaking free from her mouth, even as the outlaws and exiles give her strange looks. She wanders around the market, having no idea where to look.

In truth, she's a little confused why the assistant asked her instead of asking Vetra. Maybe Ryder just showed up at the right time. Whatever the reason, Sara has no idea where to look.

'That datapad may be of some interest,' SAM offers and Sara follows his suggestion, finding an ad for some bootlegger liquor and a navpoint for where to get it.

'Awesome. Thanks, SAM.'

Licking her lips, Ryder turns, ready to head back to the lifts when a frantic looking angara catches her attention. She's standing not too far from Sloane's headquarters, wringing her hands nervously.

Too curious for her own damn good, Sara moves over.

'Is everything all right?'

'It's none of your business, enhaad.'

She's almost too used to it by this point. 'I just wanted to help.'
'Your kind never just wants to help. There's always a price.'

And that is something she's also used to, yet this one never ceases to sting. 'I'm not like that. Tell me what's wrong. I'll try to help however I can.'

'You do look... cleaner.' She sighs. 'It can't hurt to tell. My sister, Morga, works the pipes. Makes sure the port has filtered water. But she's been missing for three days.'

Swallowing, Ryder does her best to keep her face neutral. She knows the chances of finding her alive are slim — especially in Kadara. The port may be a cease-fire zone but shit happens. Like she's seen with the murdered angara.

'I'll try and find out what happened,' Sara replies, offering a reassuring smile and trying not to feel like she's opened the door for a shit-tonne more simple requests.

Ryder lets her head fall hard against the table. She feels Vetra and Peebee slide into the seats beside her. Liam, Jaal and Drack were already sat at the table, their conversation halting the second Ryder had throw herself into the empty seat.

'I. Hate. My. Life.' Each word is punctuated with a sharp bang against the table, causing the glasses to rattle.

'Isn't that a bit dramatic, Ryder?' Liam questions, causing Ryder to finally lift her head. She narrows her blue eyes at him, reaching up to tuck a strand of blue hair behind her ear. It's then she notices just how much her hair has grown — before she left the Milky Way, she could never do that. Not in such a way that it stayed behind her ear.

'Oh really?' She reaches out and snatches his glass, which is still half-full and downs it in one. 'I came here for one reason. One reason. I thought I'd do that then move on with other things but no... I had to meet up with people who hate the AI in my head that'll kill me if it's ever removed; get a drug back from a bitchy asari; find out exiles killed a bunch of angara who refused to give them their filtration system — then had to kill said exiles 'cause they put up a fight.'

'Don't forget the weird Salarian who asked us to find his scout,' Vetra chimes in. 'Or the guy that was killed by the crazy ex that kidnapped him and left him in the slums.'

'We did solve the recent murders of angara in Kadara lately — the Roekaar was behind it all,' Peebee adds, her voice far too cheery for Ryder, who reaches for Drack's drink this time, not even caring if it's ryncol and will probably kill her.

Judging from the fact he doesn't try to get it back, it's nothing that strong. She downs that in one again, hissing at the strength of it. Maybe not ryncol but still hella strong.

'Hence,' Ryder starts, her voice breaking a little from the strain of the alcohol she's just swallowed. 'I hate my life.' She sighs, plonking Drack's glass back onto the table. 'And tomorrow, I get to do the whole damn thing all over again.'

'You mean... we're staying in Kadara another day?' Jaal asks and the dread is evident in his voice. She knows he hates this place, hell, so does she, but he seems to hate it with a burning passion that she can't understand.

'Affraid so.'

Heaving another sigh, Ryder pushes herself out of the seat, stumbling just a little as she does so.
Vetra catches her arm to rebalance her, and she shrugs free after she's sure she's got her footing.

'Right, enjoy yourself. I'm heading back to the Tempest. Drack, Vetra, don't stay out too late 'cause I want you with me tomorrow. Might as well track down Spender's ties to the exiles whilst we're here, eh?'

Drack chuckles. 'I look forward to nailing that bastard once and for all.'

'Same here.' Ryder waves. 'Anyway, I need a shower and food and sleep and the familiar smell of the Tempest. See y'all later.'

She starts to head out of Kralla's Song when she hears her name. She stops and turns, finding Jaal running up to her.

'I thought I'd walk back with you. I'm sick of this place.' His voice is so loud and several people glance over at them.

She says nothing, nodding and turning, desperate to just get them away from the exiles and pirates before they end up in a fight over Jaal's openness.

They walk in silence, Sara having to speed herself up to match Jaal's natural pace. She's so relieved to see the Tempest that she lets out a sigh, just happy to be one step closer to comfort. Thankfully, she's already out of her armour — Gil having brought them to and from the ship for her — so she doesn't have to worry about the time it'll take to remove that. She can just hop into the shower.

'Do you... truly hate your life?' he asks as they step up the ramp.

The question catches her so off guard that she halts. She turns her wide eyes on him, her mouth falling open a little. What a loaded question, she thinks, not that surprised. He's an angara. He said so himself that people air their emotions, get upset and deal with it and move on.

Swallowing is difficult with her mouth suddenly dry, but she manages. 'Uh... no. Not really. It's an idiom. We exaggerate a lot.'

Ryder expect that to be the end of it, so she's surprised when his hand finds her arm and makes her turn to look at him. '"Not really"?' he prompts and she winces. What had she been thinking? Of course he'd pick up on that!

She licks her lips. 'No-one really has an easy life. You know the shit I've been through. Losing my mom, dad, Shasi... sometimes, yeah, I kind of hate how things turned out.' She shrugs. 'I still push on though. That's how I am.'

At least, it's how she is now. She doesn't want Scott to wake up and have no-one. She has the entire Milky Way species counting on her. The last thing she wants is to let them down. She has a purpose and that makes her get up every morning.

Before... well... she didn't have that.

Pushing on was easier said than done.

She doesn't say any of this aloud, just offering Jaal a reassuring smile. 'Thanks. I'll see you tomorrow, all right? I'm shattered. Also you don't need to worry about coming back out to port tomorrow.'

He doesn't say anything as she walks away to get herself organised for the night.
Chapter 26

When he wakes up and sees the outlines of Kadara, Jaal is sorely tempted to take Ryder's advice. Staying on the ship and pretending that he's somewhere else — even amongst the stars would be a better than suffering in this hell.

Still, despite the fact that his skin itches every time he steps out of the Tempest and he has to be around the Initiative exiles and angaran traitors... he doesn't want to miss anything.

Ryder always seems to invite intrigue wherever she goes and he doesn't want to be the last to find things out.

So, he makes his way to Kralla's Song, knowing that Ryder, Drack and Vetra had already made their way out from Kadara Port at first sun. He finds a small table by the balcony, finding that, despite the people who live here, Kadara is a rather beautiful place. Though he'll never admit that aloud to anyone.

He tries to ignore the crawling under his skin, that makes him want to take a nice long swim in the Scourge. It doesn't work, especially as he feels people look at him and no doubt they're lumping him in with the other angara who have forgotten their people.

Jaal starts to bring up his omni-tool, trying to distract himself, when he sees the familiar sight of Ryder striding into the bar. She doesn't look around herself, taking in her surroundings. It amazes him — always has — how open she is. The only time she analyses her surroundings is when she's in a fight; she never seems to worry about someone jumping her from the inside.

He opens his mouth, ready to shout to get her attention, when she pulls up behind a man who's stood at the bar.

'You look like you're waiting for someone,' she says and her voice holds just a hint of humour.

Jaal frowns, watching as the man turns with a smirk on his lips. There's a strange lilt to his voice. 'That's supposed to be my line,' he replies and it dawns on Jaal in that moment that they know each other.

The asari at the bar huffs as Ryder moves to stand beside the man. It doesn't take Jaal long to realise that this must be the Reyes Vidal that he's heard so much about. There is something about him that makes Jaal feel even stranger than usual.

'Do you want a drink or a room?' the asari groans and Jaal understands just what that means. Things aren't quite as different between them as people seem to think. There's a look in Vidal's eyes that translates across the species. It doesn't normally bother Jaal, he's lived in such close confines with brothers and sisters and cousins that it's hard to avoid some things.

Yet, he's surprised by the strange feeling in his chest that rumbles at such a sight being directed at Ryder. It distracts him, the pressure, the emotions running through his veins that he's not felt in... well... ever.

When he lost Allia to his brother, it happened so quickly there was nothing but sadness. There's a swelling of anger that is so odd he has to curl his fingers into fists. He can feel the familiar tingle of his bio-electricity reacting to his emotions, and so he takes a deep breath in order to calm himself before it ends up exploding.
By the time Jaal comes back to himself and focuses on the conversation again, he realises that they're nearing the end of their conversation. 'If you check the meeting spot, I'll follow the Collective lead.'

Ryder pushes away from the bar and nods. 'Sounds like a plan. I'll let you know what I find.' She turns then, glancing around the room for the first time. Her eyes flicker over Jaal, then double back, widened in surprise.

It makes Jaal's electricity start to hum as she smiles softly and walks over to him, not bothering to say another word to Vidal. The human watches after the Pathfinder with that same look in his eyes.

Jaal can almost understand. Ryder is rather amazing. He knows everyone is in awe of her — or at least, they should be. It's just there's more than simple awe at her achievements and strength in that gaze.

Not that Ryder seems to notice or care.

She pulls out the seat across from Jaal and sits down. 'I didn't expect to see you here. I expected you to stay on the ship with how much you hate this place.'

He doesn't even hesitate when he replies, 'I'm afraid of missing out.'

His statement breaks a large bark of laughter from her lips. It's such an intriguing sound. As he listens, he wonders why she doesn't do it more. He almost says so but she smiles, and it's another thing that she doesn't do as often as she should.

'I needed that laugh,' she says as she leans forward, resting her elbows on the table. 'Today has been hell already and I've got to go back out after having some food.'

'What have you been up to?'

'I found Remi Tomayo, who was kicked out of Kadara Port by accident. Turns out there are extra fucked up exiles out there who've started cannibalism.' She shivers and Jaal can't help but agree. The thought of eating your own species? He wonders how these people can be the same as Ryder... then again, no doubt she wonders the same about him and the Roekaar. 'I then found weirdos trying to control minds and screwed the lives of three people. The only good thing is we found a hideout that's given us a clue on how to nail Spender — there should be a scrambler in his room that I'll look for when we get back to the Nexus.'

She stretches her arms above her head and the movement causes her shirt to creep up, revealing a slither of stomach. It's a sight that draws Jaal's attention. Her skin is all one tone, something he's unfamiliar with — a creamy pink that looks soft, even though he knows how strong she is.

'Anyway, I'm heading to find some food whilst I wait for this cybernetic device to be developed. Hopefully, it shouldn't take too long. I think it'll help this Knight see that AI aren't all bad.' She stands and her shirt falls, hiding her skin from Jaal's view.

His attention snaps up to her face, hoping she hadn't noticed his perusal. He's not too certain what's appropriate or not when it comes to humans, but her reaction when he had walked in naked with Liam had given him the impression that nudity was a rather taboo thing — something Liam had confirmed in a way.

'Stay strong and clear, Pathfinder.'

She smiles, raising her hand in a small wave before she turns and leaves the bar without looking back.
Jaal can only watch her until she disappears as if trapped in a spell.

'Lexi!' the shout pulls him from his tinkering, the kett gun almost reassembled. He had been adding another mod to it, trying to get more damage for his shots. His head whips up, moving towards the door. It's Vetra's voice and there's panic in her subharmonics.

He's on his feet before he realises, striding towards the glass walkway. Peebee, Liam and Cora appear behind him, also drawn by the shouts. They see Drack and Vetra carrying the small body of Ryder. Her feet are moving and he can hear her muttering, so he knows it can't be as serious as his heart thought initially.

Cora pushes past him, moving towards the ladders to take her down to the med-bay. It's enough to jog himself, following shortly behind her until they're standing on the threshold of the door, watching as Ryder is placed on the bed.

Vetra and Drack step back to let Lexi work her.

'What happened?' Cora asks the question they're all thinking. She doesn't step closer but he can see the worry in her gaze.

'Uh, I was bit by an ahdi,' Ryder croaks, removing the crafted Remnant helmet and letting it fall to the ground. Vetra catches it before it does. 'I was too damn busy fighting a shitload of exiles, I didn't see the sneaky bastard until it had my fucking arm in its maw.'

'Yeah and the best part is she didn't let us take her back here after it was done. We had to go back to the wind farm to deliver messages to some exiles,' Drack chimes in, rolling his eyes. 'Too nice for her own good.'

Ryder huffs out a laugh. 'I'll take that as a compliment, old man.'

The krogan laughs again. All Jaal can do is stare at them, watching as Lexi removes Ryder's arm gauntlets and reveals the wound. Red blood pours from at least ten holes in her arm.

'It was all the damn thing's bottom teeth. My armour isn't as strong underneath.'

'I hope the ahdi looks worse,' Liam says as he steps up beside Jaal and Cora.

'Should do. I put four rounds in its head.' Ryder trails off with a hiss as Lexi applies something to the wound. Jaal can only watch in wonder as the blood appears to stop flowing.

'I asked you to be careful, Ryder,' Lexi hisses, as she starts to wrap it up with some sort of bandage. 'How is this being careful?'

Ryder snorts. Jaal notices just a hint of pain behind the expression. There's a heaviness in her gaze that belies the cheeriness she's pushing into her voice. 'I could hardly help this! They're sneaky bastards. Anyway, I'm fine. SAM's made sure there's no infection, you've bandaged me up and I'll be good as new! We're done in Kadara anyway. I was thinking we could head to Aya — give it time to heal even more.' She raises her head and meets Lexi's gaze head on. 'See? I'm a responsible Pathfinder!'

The asari doctor gives a long groan. She doesn't say anything, turning her attention to her omni-tool which is scanning Ryder.

Ryder finally turns her attention to the crowd gathered at the door, her lips tilting up at the corner.
'Aww, look at you all concerned about me.'

And just like that, she manages to dispel the tense and worried atmosphere they had found themselves in. Peebee lets out a puff of air and Jaal turns to glance at her, seeing a flippant smirk on her face but a tenseness in her shoulders.

'I was just here because that's where the crowd was!'

'Glad to see nothing's changed, Ryder,' Cora mutters with a smirk. They all turn and walk away, back to doing whatever they were doing before Vetra's call disturbed them.

Jaal steps forward instead, moving over to the space that Vetra and Drack depart from. He glances down at Ryder, his hand moving to cover her free, uninjured one. 'I'm glad you're okay, Ryder.'

Pink starts to spatter across Ryder's cheeks, her eyes not truly meeting his, though she does smile in his direction. He's seen her act like this before... has started to realise it means she's bashful. It makes his current hum, thinking that perhaps Ryder finds him attractive... that sometimes, she feels the same emotions in her chest whenever she looks at him.

'Thanks, Jaal,' she replies, her voice a soft whisper. She turns her hand over and gives his a gentle squeeze before withdrawing. 'Can I go now, Lexi?'

The doctor stares at the Pathfinder for a long moment before she heaves a sigh. 'Fine. But you better head straight for Aya. If we dock anywhere else I will strap you to this ship, do you understand?'

Raising her good arm, she salutes Lexi. 'Yes, ma'am.'

The asari just rolls her eyes and walks away, turning her attention to something else. Ryder walks out of the med-bay with Jaal at her heels. She stops when the doors slide shut behind her, turning to him with that same smile on her face.

'I bet you're glad to be leaving Kadara.'

Jaal returns her smile. 'Deliriously so.'

'I'm gonna go for a lie down. Lexi gave me some pretty strong pain killers and I don't want to be upright when they kick in.' She turns, stepping up to the doors to her quarters. 'Do you... want to meet for a drink on Aya? There's actually something I wanna talk to you about.'

Immediately intrigued, Jaal nods. 'Whenever you wish, Pathfinder.'

Her answering smile in breathtaking. She turns, stepping into her room and the doors are shut before his mouth words and he mumbles out his reply.

'Stay strong.'
Call me

To: Ryder

From: Reyes Vidal

Ryder,

Something interesting just fell into my lap. Call me when you have a minute.

Reyes

Ryder stares at the message for a long moment. She purses her lips, tilting her head to the side in a desperate attempt to decipher the message. "Something interesting" could mean anything — especially when it comes to Andromeda and Kadara and Reyes Vidal.

'This man is a pain in my ass,' she hisses as she runs a hand over her face. It's the last email in her inbox, the others of which included receipt for the booze she bought for Kesh, a thank you for discovering what happened to the kidnapped Sanjiv, an email from Suvi about snacks for movie night and another from Reyes about how her reputation in Kadara is spreading.

'What man is that?' Peebee calls, popping her head out of her room. Ryder steps away from the console and moves over to her, still rubbing her forehead in an attempt to stop a headache from developing.

'Reyes Vidal.' Ryder rolls her eyes. 'How is everything coming along?'

'Ah, ah, ah!' Peebee pushes her shoulder just as she's about to step into the room. 'No peeking! I'm putting the finishing touches. The next time we dock on the Nexus, it should be done! Pop by my apartment for the big reveal.' Peebee gives her another shove. 'Now, shoo.'

Before Ryder can say another word, the doors slide shut and she's locked out. Ryder snorts, shaking her head as she makes her way across the catwalk and starts to head up to the comm room.

When Reyes' figure fills the room, Ryder crosses her arms over her chest and cocks an eyebrow.

'Ryder.' He smiles but Ryder just rolls her eyes. 'Ouch. What did I do?'

'Never mind, Reyes, what's so important?' She knows she's being extra short with him but she can't help it. There's just something, when she looks at him, that makes her skin crawl. Her father always had a good instinct for people — something she inherited.

He looks at her with a frown for just a second before it disappears into his usual carefree expression. 'Sloane's holding a get together for the locals. I managed to snag an invite. Care to be my plus one?'

Ryder has no idea how to react to that. On one hand, she almost can't wait to get off the ship and just have a night to herself. She just hates the fact that it's Reyes Vidal asking her to join him. She's been so busy with being Pathfinder that's she's not had a single second to herself.

But she is Pathfinder.
Right now, she's the only Pathfinder.

She sighs, uncrossing her arms. 'Sorry, Reyes, I'm... I'm too busy for anything like that. Otherwise I would have.'

He doesn't try to persuade her. He just nods. 'Understood, Ryder. I'll see you soon.'

Then the comm link dies.

Her shoulders are heavy as she makes her way to the galley where everyone has already gathered.

It's Liam who notices the look on her face when she enters. 'What is wrong with you?'

'Is it Reyes Vidal again?' Peebee questions, bringing up their earlier conversation.

Ryder collapses on the nearest seat, perched between Vetra and Cora. She nods, glancing around the room and finding her eyes dart straight to Jaal. There's a slight frown on his face but it disappears when he realises Ryder is looking at him, replaced with a smile.

'Yeah, he invited me to a party on Kadara.'

'And that pissed you off because...?' Vetra asks.

Ryder shakes her head. 'I can't go. Even though I'm not sure I want to spend a second with that man but no matter what, I'm Pathfinder. Finding paths comes first. We've still got the Archon's ship. I've still got the other arks. The krogan and outposts and a bunch of other shit. I can't take a night off just for—'

'Oh yes you can,' Lexi's voice cuts her off. 'Ryder, this is precisely what we've been talking about. You have a lot of responsibility, yes, but you can't let it drown you. If it's all you have, it's going to destroy you and my job is to prevent that.'

Turning, Ryder raises her eyebrow at the asari doctor. 'So, what? You're ordering me to go the party?'

Lexi tilts her head to the side for a second. Then she nods. 'Pretty much. I think it's just what you need.'

The rest of the group mutter in agreement, causing Ryder to turn and glare at them. 'Traitors.'

'And what about my arm?' She waves her still bandaged arm in front of Lexi. 'You said Aya was the best thing for it — not a party in Kadara.'

'You're not going out to the badlands, and if a fight starts, you are to leave as soon as possible. That's it. Otherwise, I think it'll be the perfect part of recovery.'

When she turns back to Lexi, she heaves a sigh when she sees the determination set in her doctor's gaze.

'Fine!' She pulls herself out of the seat. 'I'll go and message and see if the invite is still open.'

Without waiting to hear what her friends have to say about that, she makes her way to her quarters, bringing up the email terminal. She finds the one Reyes sent her and after taking a deep breath, types out a reply.

_re: Call me_
To: Reyes Vidal

From: Ryder

I've been told to come to the party, if the offer is still open? According to my support group, I need to let off some steam.

Ryder

It's not exactly flattering or enthusiastic but hey, she's neither of those things right now. She's doing this purely because she knows if she doesn't, Lexi will never forgive her and will never give her a moment of peace.

She goes to exit the terminal, thinking that Reyes is a busy man and won't reply for some time when a beep fills the room.

Frowning, she pulls up the message, her frown only deepening when she sees that it is from Reyes.

re: re: Call me

To: Ryder

From: Reyes Vidal

You don't exactly sound happy about it but I hope it'll prove a good night. I'll get you at Sloane's headquarters tonight.

Reyes

Well, I've passed the point of no return now, Ryder thinks as she shuts off the terminal and takes a step back. She brings up her omni-tool and opens the comm link for the bridge.

'We're still in orbit of Kadara, right, Kallo?'

'Yes, Ryder, you didn't say for certain we were heading to Aya and I didn't want to presume.'

Ryder nodded. 'Good. Takes us back down. We won't be long but apparently there's a party tonight and everyone has told me to go.'

'Sounds exciting!' Suvi chimes in and Ryder can just hear the smile in her voice.

Ryder sighs. 'Yeah. Exciting.'
He's stood by the Nomad, tinkering away at it even though his mind is a million miles away. It normally works, this working away on something and ignoring his thoughts, but this time, it's almost impossible for his thoughts to quiet.

Jaal doesn't know what time it is, he hasn't been paying attention to the cycle on the *Tempest*. All he knows is that everyone else has gone to bed and Ryder still hasn't returned from her "party" with Reyes Vidal.

It's all he can think about. Every time he hears a sound, he thinks it's her coming back. He stops whatever he's doing, looks over his shoulder and is always greeted by the empty cargo bay.

Heaving a sigh, he drops the wrench and runs a hand over his face, shaking his head.

'Oh,' a voice fills the silence and he turns as fast as he possibly can. Ryder smiles back at him. 'I didn't think you'd still be up. It's late.'

She shoves her hands into her pockets and takes a step towards him. There's a wideness to her pupils... she's definitely been drinking alcohol, but she isn't swaying or looking unsteady. There's just a beautiful flush to her cheeks.

He can't seem to lie as he raises his gaze to hers. 'I wanted to make sure you got back safely.'

A sound breaks free from her lips as they spread into a wide smile. She takes another step towards him. 'You are too sweet. Thank you, Jaal.'

Jaal can't seem to do anything else but shrug his shoulder. 'I... Did you enjoy yourself?'

Ryder makes her way over to stand beside him, resting her back against the Nomad. She crosses her arms over her chest, resting her head against his shoulder when he steps up beside her. The contact makes his heart leap and he's eager for more.

Instead, he keeps himself still.

'It wasn't horrible. He was just using me as a diversion, cheeky bastard. Wanted some whiskey. I did get to punch him in the stomach so no-one would suspect anything.' She lifts her head from Jaal's shoulder, shaking it before running fingers through her strange blue hair. 'And he did share the whiskey, but ugh... I just wanted a quiet night, Jaal. I didn't want any drama or being used.'

Jaal takes her hand in his after only a moment of hesitation. She glances up at him with wide eyes, pupils blown and he can't tell if it's just from the alcohol or something else.

'He is a fool if he just used you as a distraction, rather than relishing your company.'

She swallows and clears her throat three times for reasons Jaal can't really understand. She licks her lips and Jaal tracks the movement with wide eyes.

'Really?'

He nods, almost unable to say anything else.

She stares at him, those small eyes staring at him, flickering over his face as if she's trying to figure
him out. It's a feeling he knows all too well — it's how he's spent most of his life, yet it's strange to have that look directed at him. To see someone look at him as if they want to know every little detail about him.

'Thank you, Jaal,' she whispers, her voice soft and she tilts forward, moving closer and he almost seems to know what's happening. It's just not the right time. She deserves better than when she's slightly drunk. She deserves better than a hasty kiss in the cargo bay up against the Nomad.

He pulls back. Clears his throat.

She blinks rapidly as if clearing her head from some sort of spell. The colour on her cheeks darken until her face is almost vivid.

'Uh, night, Jaal,' she murmurs, turning away and striding off before he has a chance to reply.

Ryder descends down to the Moshae's office with a heavy weight on her shoulder. Some of it comes from the errands she's already run that day, even though she had hoped for a day of nothingness.

Thankfully, it was nothing serious. Just picking up some supplies for the outposts on Eos and Voeld, and finding out why a salarian scientist had been threatened by an angara — which led to the ambassador agreeing to host the angara who're giving up their tickets for Aya on the Nexus. She also spoke to Avela, giving her the artefacts she's found over the course of her exploration.

But mostly, the heavy weight stems from seeing Jaal for the first time since the night before. When she had returned from the party with Reyes. When she had almost kissed him and he had pulled back.

'Evfra should have come to me,' she hears Akksul's deep voice fill the room as she approaches.

'Shh, Akksul, I'm all right.'

'You almost died—'

Whatever he was going to say is cut off as Ryder steps into the room. She makes her way over to the two angara, edging just a little closer to the Moshae without realising it.

'What is she doing here?'

Taking a deep breath, Ryder tries to keep her feelings in check. She notices that Jaal isn't there and she realises she had been an idiot to expect him to be. Akksul had always hated Jaal. It would've been obvious had he been there.

'I asked the Moshae to set up a meeting.' She swallows and raises her gaze to Akksul. 'I don't want us to be enemies.'

'Is this true?' Akksul's voice is accusatory as he turns to the Moshae.

'Akksul, Ryder rescued me from the kett. She risked her life to—'

'Sloane Kelly saved Kadara. Looked how that went.'

Ryder shakes her head. Fucking Sloane Kelly, always make shit harder for her. Did the exiles not give a single fuck about first contact? They were all to live here, they couldn't just come onto the planets after being kicked off the Nexus and act like they owned everything.
'I want to be allies. *Equal* allies.' She takes a deep breath. 'I'm nothing like Sloane—'

Akksul chuckles. 'You don't even treat your own equally. Isn't that why the krogan left?'

A frown etches it way between Ryder's brows. 'How did you...?'

'I've been watching you. You're invaders. Just like the kett. Except less cautious.'

Ryder takes a step closer, able to sense a threat for what it is. 'What is that supposed to mean?' She glares up at him, almost finding it hard to feel sympathy for this man.

He glares down at her, eyes narrowed and lips a thin line. 'You'll know soon enough.' He pushes by her, barging into her shoulder and sending her stumbling away. 'Do not trust them, shovaan.'

'Akksul...' There's sorrow in the Moshae's voice as she turns her attention back to Ryder. 'He didn't used to be like this. He was... curious. Brilliant. But the kett.' Her voice turns harsh. 'Even without exaltation they change us.'

'There may still be a chance to bring him around.'

She doesn't really believe her words, but she knows how much the Moshae cares for him and doesn't want her to worry. She doesn't want to show that she's given up already, even though a tiny part of her has. She's extended the olive branch countless times and he's shoved it away every time.

'I want to believe that... but his hatred towards aliens...'

Ryder swallows, starting to turn away. 'I'll prove that we can be trusted.'

'I hope so,' the Moshae sighs, just as Suvi's voice comes through the comms on her omni-tool, saying there's an emergency recording from Eos, waiting for her on the *Tempest* comms room.

'Sorry, Moshae Sjefa, I've got to...'

'Look after your people, Pathfinder. Stay strong.'

Ryder gives her a smile before she turns on her heel and starts making her way out of the museum. She brings up her omni-tool, connecting to all her crew.

'Vacation's over. I need you back on the *Tempest* — just got an SOS from Eos.'

'Ryder you're arm—' Lexi starts.

She glances down. It's still bandaged but there's no blood and as far as she can tell, it's fine. There's no pain either.

'It's fine. It'll need to be. This is more important.' She knows Lexi is going to start complaining so she wraps it up. 'I've got to drop some stuff off with Meriaxes then I'll be back. See you then.'

Ryder clicks off the comms, taking a deep breath and trying not to think about how nothing ever seems to go according to plan for her.
'This is the Initiative outpost Podromos on Eos. We're in need of assistance.' August Bradley's voice fills the comms room. Ryder crosses her arms and swallows, trying to ignore the churning of her stomach. 'Tempest, this one's for you. We've got hostiles inbound. No ground activity but there soon will be. Pathfinder, we need you. Going dark until it's resolved. We're not giving up Eos again. Out.'

'God damnit.' She runs a hand over her face, hand curling into fists. 'Kallo, get us to Eos. Now. Jaal, Liam, get suited up. I want to be ready to go the second we land.'

Ryder turns and makes her way to the armoury, already shrugging out of her leather jacket to get changed into her under-armour. She throws her clothes into a pile in the corner, stripping down to her underwear and then pulling the under-armour on. She's just fastened it when Liam and Jaal step into the room — she's maybe seen them half naked, that doesn't mean they get the privilege of seeing her in a similar state.

'What's up?' Liam asks as he enters.

'Podromos is in danger,' she mutters as she pulls her Remnant armour from her lock up and starts clipping it onto her body. 'No idea what the threat is but it's a threat. I'm not going to let it be another failure like Site 1 and 2.'

Her voice feels like iron as she talks. She's not going to let Podromos fall. It's a symbol of hope — their first real outpost that's thrived for so long. The starting point for the one on Voeld and any others that follow.

She fastens her gauntlets and gathers her chest piece, turning when Liam offers to strap it in place for her. She then turns to her weapons, deliberating what to take. The Isharay sniper rifle calls to her, as does her Scorpion pistol. She also takes her Asari sword, just in case, feeling it's much better than her omni-blade.

'Nearing the LZ, Ryder,' Kallo's voice comes over the comms and Ryder sighs in relief. She swallows, offering a smile to Jaal and Liam before she makes her way to the cargo bay, ready to leave the ship the second it lands.

'Sorry to keep you in the dark, Pathfinder,' Bradley admits over the comms, just as Ryder loads her pistol and holsters it to her hip. 'But there are eyes on this planet.'

That causes Ryder to frown as she steps off the ship, down the ramp and starts to make her way to where Bradley is waiting for her.

'We didn't see much traffic from orbit,' Suvi chimes in. Ryder had no idea whether that was truth or not — she spent all the FTL journey preparing.

'It's there. But hopefully you can get ahead of this before it turns into something bad.' There'a pause. 'See you soon.'

The comm link goes dead. Ryder swallows. She's desperate to run to him, to find out what's happening as soon as possible. But running would draw attention and the last thing she wants is to freak everyone out. She has no idea if Bradley's informed everyone in the outpost and so she's not going to give anything away until she finds out.

The walk is almost excruciating in its slowness.
By the time she reaches August Bradley, her skin is itching, desperate to do something more. Her arm aches just a little from where the adhi bit her. She's thankful that Gil managed to repair her arm gauntlets otherwise she'd be screwed.

'Thanks for coming. Knew you'd be up for it.'

'Anything to protect my baby,' Ryder admits with a soft smile. It disappears after only a second. 'You said there were hostiles inbound?'

Hearing that there have been raids due to all the scientific equipment makes Ryder feel even worse. She had no idea. Even though Bradley says it had been expected. She still can't quite believe it.

He pulls up his omni-tool. '...four, five, repeat. Stockpile complete, waiting for beacon. Launch on detection. Repeat one, two, three...' It's an angaran voice, Ryder can tell that much, the distinct rumbling that no other species she knows has.

Ryder isn't really sure what to say, so she says nothing.

Thankfully, Bradley continues as if he hadn't been expecting her to answer. 'Here's my worry: maybe the raids we've seen were just a decoy, so someone could do a slow tactical buildup in the Blackrock.'

'Tactical?'

'That was an angaran voice,' Jaal confirms, taking a step forward. 'That means Roekaar. That's why he called us.'

'An attack on our first outpost? Can you imagine how the Nexus would react?' Bradley voices the thought that had came to Ryder the second Jaal had finished speaking.

'Exactly the response that Akksul would want.'

'God fucking damnit,' Ryder hisses, closing her eyes and taking in a breath to try and calm herself. 'Eos has been through enough. We're going to stop whatever Akksul has planned.'

'I knew you would.' Bradley sighs. 'I didn't want to bring this kind of thing to Andromeda, Pathfinder. I almost hope I'm wrong and just being paranoid.'

Ryder offers him a smile of reassurance before making her way to the Nomad. Her shoulders are heavy as she walks and she almost feels like she can't keep up with Jaal and Liam, even though they walk at the same pace as her.

'Everything all right, Ryder?' Jaal asks.

She raises her head and swallows. 'Yeah. Fine.' She straightens her spine. 'Come on, let's go.'

'Almost there.'

'That is definitely a Roekaar signal.'

It's not what Ryder wants to hear. She sighs. 'Noted. Keep your eyes open.'

She steers the Nomad over the crest, frowning towards the distance when she sees equipment scattered around some RemiTech. Even before Jaal announces that they're Roekaar, she somehow knows.
Ryder slams the brakes and exits the Nomad, readying her sniper rifle as she goes. The enemy angara have already noticed them and are moving into position, so Ryder breaks into a run, stopping behind a nearby truck and bringing up her gun.

She shoots quickly, stopping only to reload. A group of three come at her from the side and she drops her gun to the ground, summoning her biotics as she punches out a powerful nova. They go flying away, stunned by the force and she quickly unhooks her pistol to stop them from ever getting back up.

By the time the last body drops, her sore arm is starting to ache. She grits her teeth and powers through. She'll just take more painkillers from Lexi when she gets back to the *Tempest*. Nothing to worry about.

'You think we're clear, Jaal?'

'Yes. And we still have Bradley's signal.'

Ryder holsters her weapons. 'All right. Then let's see what they were protecting.' She brings up her scanner, trying to figure out where the source of the signal is.

'This worries me. The Roekaar are not pirates.'

'Yeah.' Ryder glances up from her scanner, even as she continues to walk. 'I don't understand why they'd be so—' She stops when the scanner beeps, telling her she's found the location.

It's a console. She stares at it before she scans it, letting SAM analyse whatever information it receives.

'This signal can call drop-ships to a precise location.'

'That's a Roekaar strategy. The scout would've placed a beacon in the centre of Podromos.'

'Which tells Akksul exactly where to strike. Son of a bitch.'

She realises she needs to inform Bradley about this, but before she can bring up her omni-tool, Liam is already on it. She listens as Bradley thanks them for putting an end to it, but it's not over. She knows Akksul's type. So, his plan didn't work this time... he won't stop until it does.

Ryder shakes her head. 'No. This is my house. We're not just walking away.'

'Not sure what you're asking, Pathfinder. We can't risk our first outpost.'

'I know that. Even if it were a military outpost, I wouldn't ask it. But we need to do something. We can't just let Akksul get away with this.'

'And technically, this isn't the first. It's the third,' Liam states.

'Promise and Resilience.'

'What are you planning?' Jaal asks and it almost makes her laugh, how well he knows her. How she can just say something so simple and he knows that it's sparked an idea.

She turns to face him, a crooked grin on her lips. 'Well, Akksul wanted an outpost, right? Let's give him one. We'll use his beacon to lure him in and then finish this.'

After hearing that the comm array from Site 2 is still functioning, Ryder knows that her plan is going
to work. For the first time since she landed on the planet, the tension in her shoulders starts to ease a little.

'Right, let's go plan our Roekaar welcoming party!'

The drive to Site 2 doesn't take as long as she expected. Mostly because she guns the Nomad to its top speed, barely managing to steer it in the right direction. There were several close calls and she ran over her fair share of Kaerkyn as she drove to the abandoned outpost.

'SAM, do you have a location to deploy this beacon?'

'Yes, the communication array.'

Ryder nods as she finally draws the Nomad to a halt, letting Liam and Jaal exit first before she follows. She takes a moment just to survey the forgotten outpost. She remembers labelling the bodies of those that had fallen, so the Nexus could retrieve them and give them a proper burial.

She draws a deep breath.

Then starts moving. The satellite is on the roof of a building, so she uses her jump jets to get there. She's more than a little in love with those things, how it makes her much more agile than normal. Humans aren't exactly meant to leap great heights, but with her jump-jets, she almost feels like she's flying.

'Okay, now or never. We know this site and they don't.'

'And they can't have it, no matter what,' Liam says as he steps up beside Ryder. He offers her a smile. She returns it before she keys in the signal, letting SAM do the rest of the work.

'Starting Roekaar signal upload.'

'Are they heading towards us?' Jaal asks as he pulls his rifle from his back, making sure that it's loaded before he lifts his gaze to Ryder's. She tries to ignore the little thud-thud that her heart does in response.

'The Roekaar have altered course,' SAM confirms.

Ryder follows Jaal's example to takes her rifle from its holster. 'Right. Now might be the best time to take some cover.'

Just as she ducks behind a piece of equipment still on the roof (a better vantage point), her comms crackle. 'Human,' Akksul's voice growls out from her omni-tool. 'I told you, you'd know soon enough. The beacon is live. You couldn't stop our scouts!'

The line goes dead and Ryder snorts in amusement. She raises her head and notices two angaran shuttles coming towards them, using the landing pad to drop off their soldiers.

'Well, he bought it. Hold until they're on the ground.'

Jaal and Liam mutter in assent. They don't shoot until Ryder does, her first shot taking a poor angara's head clean off. She almost feels bad, knowing that most of these people have just been brainwashed by Akksul and his hatred. Most of them probably haven't even had a single interaction with any of her kind. Or the other species that came from the Milky Way.

And those that have were tainted by the worst of the worst.
Though even that isn't fair. They were desperate people who had made a decision there was no turning back from and it was nothing like they had been promised. She couldn't even blame most of the exiles.

Ryder sighs again as she takes another shot. She's trying not to think about this. It just gets messy. They're shooting at her. They want to kill her. It's either them or her and her team. And she knows who'll she pick, time and time again.

'This site is a decoy! Rally at these coordinates!' Akksul's voice comes over the comms again. Ryder pauses, glancing around to see that most of the angara are dead. The others are starting to flee thanks to their master's orders.

'Shit, they know! Where are they going?'

'I'll tell you, Pathfinder,' Bradley says and his voice has never been a more welcome sound. 'Site 1! We overcharged the power relay to draw them in.'

Ryder snorts, even as Jaal admits that this will no doubt piss Akksul off even more.

'Promise, here we come,' Ryder says as she shoulders her weapon and starts running towards the Nomad again.

The two sites are rather close together, so the drive takes no more than five minutes. She hears some Roekaar warn Akksul that she's coming, something that brings a dangerous grin to her lips. That's right Akksul, I'm not giving up that easy. You're not getting to win.

They start firing at the Nomad. She slams her foot on the brake, briefly apologising as Liam shouts in protest. She throws open the door, using it as a shield as she readies her weapon and starts firing back. Every ding that the bullet makes against the Nomad makes her cringe, thinking about the cursing Gil is going to do when he sees the state of it.

'Stay in cover, don't get shot, and make this quick,' she orders before she takes a breath, channeling her biotics into a powerful barrier. Ryder then takes off sprinting, feeling every bullet that hits off her shield.

She uses her pistol this time around, a better weapon for these close quarters that she's found herself in. They come at her from all angles, and she fires as many bullets as it takes to get them to drop to the ground.

She deploys her assault turret as she dives behind a huge rock, trying to gather her breath as her barrier finally wears off and reverts back to her standard shield.

Ryder changes her pistol for her sniper rifle, bringing down two more angara in quick succession. She ducks behind the rock again, reloading.

Just as she's about to pop up again, Jaal's voice comes over the comms. 'That's the last of them.'

She takes a deep breath and stands, doing a quick survey just to ensure that no-one was hiding. There's no sign of anyone else, and so she deactivates her assault turret and holsters her weapons, telling Liam and Jaal to meet her.

When he appears, there's a huge smile on Jaal's face. 'We did it, Ryder!'

She makes a fist and presents her arm to him, watching as his eyes light up at the gesture. He presses his forearm against hers, their fists at each other's shoulders.
'Damn right we did.' She smiles even wider, even as she wishes she could just hug him. That's all she wants to do right now. She pushes that thought away.

'Pathfinder, Akksul's shuttle is leaving orbit,' SAM informs.

'I'll remember this,' Akksul growls over the comms. 'We're not finished.'

Ryder can't help but roll her eyes. She's thankful that Bradley replies to him because all she can think to say in that moment is "fuck you, Akksul".

'Come on, let's get back to Bradley,' she says, patting both Liam and Jaal's shoulders as she leads them back to the Nomad.

Ryder stares at the Architect Husk orbiting Eos. She's been staring at it almost as long as it's been there, almost unable to believe that when she had interfaced with it, she had sent it to orbit the damn planet.

At least it won't be a bother for anyone else, even though it had made her shit herself after placing the third hammer. And her decision to drill for water, pretty much ruining the Advent settlement. But Eos was the first planet she had ever healed; her first outpost, the first success as Pathfinder. She wasn't going to risk all of that by drilling for natural gas that would fuck with Eos' atmosphere — which was just starting to get back to normal.

Ryder blinks, straightening. 'Okay, takes us out of orbit. I'm going to go and shower, then I'll be back to decide where to go.'

'Right you are, Ryder.'

She turns to leave when Kallo exclaims, 'What the—?'

Ryder immediately turns back to her pilot, eyebrow raised. 'What? Did you find something?'

'No, Ryder, something pinged us. And the Tempest auto-responded.'

'Well that's just weird.' Ryder moves up towards the bridge again. 'Scan the sector and see if you can find anything.'

Kallo makes a sound in understanding as they pull up beside the tracker. The bridge is facing it, and Ryder watches for a second, readying the equipment to do a scan when — BOOM!

She jumps, startled, thankful that she's not the only one. Suvi yelps and Kallo screams. Ryder's first instinct had been to dive behind the bridge, so she has to straighten again to view the rubble floating in space.

'What the hell happened?'
'Anti-track-back measures? Drive system overloaded.' Suvi turns with a proud smile on her face. 'Not fast enough, though. I got a serial that… has triggered an alert?'

'Pathfinder,' SAM's voice fills the room. 'We are to contact Director Addison as soon as possible.'

'Well that can't be a fucking coincidence,' Ryder sighs, running a hand through her hair. She grits her teeth together. 'What is going on?' She takes a deep breath to try and calm herself. It doesn't seem to work.

'Only one way to find out, Pathfinder,' Suvi says, a strange look in her eyes.

'Yeah, you're right.'

Ryder turns, heading for the comm room, desperate for answers.
Chapter 30

'This was supposed to be the new Palavan?' Ryder questions as she steps out of the Nomad, into the mining dome of the Idriya crater on H-047c. She looks around the blown apart planet, trying to remember what it had looked like before the Scourge had gotten to it. She couldn't really remember. She hadn't paid much attention to the other planets — her father had mostly just shown her the planets viable for humanity.

'Apparently. I much prefer Eos, to be honest,' Vetra replies as she looks around herself. Ryder grins at her over her shoulder as she starts to move towards the nearest building. 'I'll buy you a little cottage.'

'Pathfinder,' SAM interrupts, stopping Vetra from replying. 'I detect no life forms in our immediate vicinity.'

'We should head in but stay sharp.' Vetra steps up beside Ryder. 'My sister could have easily missed something during her "investigations".'

Humming in assent, Ryder steps forward, pulling her pistol from her hip holster. 'Seeing as we have no idea what we'll face, Vetra, Jaal, I want you to stay close by. We'll take it step by step, all right?'

'Got it.'

Ryder moves forward, stepping into the abandoned mine. She has her gun up, and she sees Vetra and Jaal follow her actions. She purses her lips, slowly drawing to a halt as she checks the room for any signs of life.

'Looks like no-ones home.'

Vetra shakes her head. 'I swear, if Sid's sent us on a pointless search, I'm going to drill her shin-plates —'

There's a grin and a witty reply on Ryder's lips when she hears the beeping. It's a sound that she knows will spell trouble. A sound of a tripwire and she has no idea what the outcome will be.

'Move! Go!' The words are just out of her mouth when the floor beneath her feet suddenly disappears. She launches herself forward, catching the edge of the trapdoor. Her arms struggle, aching in an attempt to haul herself upwards but her armour slips and slides, and she falls down, a yelp breaking free from her lips. It melds with those of Vetra's and Jaal's.

She lands with a thud, her head cracking against the metal floor. Pain shoots through her scalp, and when she straightens, raising her fingertips to her forehead, she finds her armour coated in blood. 'Oh, for fuck's sake.'

'What's wrong?' Vetra asks as she rights herself.

'Lexi is going to kill me,' Ryder groans as she wipes her forehead, hoping there's no more blood dripping from the wound afterwards. Vetra just snorts, even as Ryder turns and finds Jaal looking at her with a slight worry in his wide eyes. Her stomach flutters and she glances away, a small smile on her lips.

The pain returns for just a flash and it disappears. She glances up at the trap door as it shuts again,
returning it to a normal floor. 'What the hell was that?'

'Ah, Nyx, so good to finally meet you!' a voice comes over the comms. Ryder glances around herself, frowning as her attention is drawn from the fake floor to her friends to the room around her, trying to find the source of the voice. 'And you brought friends! That's even the Pathfinder, if I'm not mistaken. My bait worked better than expected.'

Gritting her teeth together, Ryder realised exactly what she meant. 'The missing settlers.'

'Who are you? Why are you kidnapping innocents?'

After hearing the woman sneer that they're not innocents, that they're criminals who Vetra helped get away from her, Ryder turns with a raised eyebrow. She purses her lips, almost surprised but there's a look of shock on Vetra's face that makes Ryder prompt, 'Case of mistaken identity?'

As Vetra starts to say she's just as confused as Ryder, another voice comes. The three of them turn, finding a group of people emerging from the corner of the room they're trapped in. It doesn't take her long to figure it out that these are the missing settlers that they're here to find. 'It's okay, Vetra, you don't have to cover for us. That was Meriweather, she runs a smuggling run in Kadara. We used to work for her. Vetra helped get us out, we've been living new lives on the outposts.'

Immediately, Ryder felt shock ricochet through her body. Soon followed by awe as she turns to Vetra with wide eyes. Her mouth falls open and then tugs into a wide grin. 'Vetra! There was no need for all that modesty. You've been helping people, that's—'

'It's not modesty! I didn't help anyone!'

Ryder immediately holds her hands up as Vetra pushes past her, saying she'll get them out of the room. She doesn't even seem to listen as the settlers say they haven't had any luck of finding a way out of the room.

'There's always a way out!' Vetra snaps and Ryder has to agree. She waves her hand, letting Vetra go off on her own to try and find something that may help. She immediately brings up her omni-tool, no doubt trying to find answers through her contacts. Ryder watches her for a long moment before sighing. She knows they'll need to talk about this but right now, she needs to get out of this room. She has enough problems — living in a hole cannot be one of them.

'I believe Vetra when she says she has no idea what is going on,' Jaal declares as he steps up beside Ryder, who turns to him almost without realising. 'But it is an honourable thing, regardless of who did it.'

'Yeah, we didn't travel a million miles for six-hundred years to decide that people don't deserve second chances. It would have been nice to know that there were formal criminals in my outposts,' Ryder tilts her head to the side. 'But it's nice to see there are still good people. When I first heard about the exiles, I was worried we had travelled to another galaxy only to repeat the same damn mistakes.'

'Why did your people leave? The Cultural Exchange centre of the Nexus hasn't been completely clear.'

Ryder shrugs with one shoulder. 'We wanted a new beginning. Everyone who signed up…' She remembers the memories SAM had finally been able to unlock after tireless work. Those about the Benefactor and her dad's creation of SAM. She lifts her lips and turns her gaze back to Jaal, her voice dropping. 'But I think there's more to it. More than what we were told.'
'What makes you think that?'

It makes her smile, the fact that he doesn't just write her off completely. Call her paranoid like most people would. Like Tann would if she had to take her concerns to him.

She opens her mouth to answer when she remembers where she is. There's no time for this conversation. She needs to figure a way out and save these people; save her people.

Ryder shakes her head. 'Later. I need to get us out of here.'

Jaal doesn't protest. He nods, following her as she starts to make her way down the ramp. There's a door, so she brings up her scanner, hoping for a some answers. When SAM tells her that there's no access to door controls, she almost feels like there really is no way out of the damn room.

'I can open the doors from my end but they're powered down,' a voice comes over her comms… a voice that sounds a lot like… she turns finding Vetra standing right behind her. Her eyes are wide and her mouth are shut, mandibles clenched tightly to the side of her face. Ryder's eyebrows shoot up, watching the real Vetra even as the voice continues, 'We need to get them going again.'

'Well… that's…' Ryder shakes her head. She can't allow the familiar voice to distract her. She focuses herself. She's the Pathfinder, damnit. '"You're end''? Who the hell are you?'

'I don't like the sound of this, Ryder,' Vetra answers, and it almost makes Ryder snort. You don't like the sound of your own voice?

'Just get those doors some power!' The fake-Vetra snaps and Ryder sighs. She knows it could just be a big trick to get them out of the room, heading straight for whatever Meriweather has planned for them, yet it's the only chance they have.

Heaving a sigh, Ryder glances around the room, finding a generator off to the side. A quick scan confirms it's functional, and so she runs back upstairs, remembering seeing a bunch of cables strewn about the floor. She needs to scan each set, trying to find ones that aren't damaged, and when she does, she gathers them up and takes them back downstairs, connecting them from the generator to the doors with gritted teeth, hoping the damn thing works.

'There you go!' Not-Vetra exclaims over the comms, just as the doors slide open. Ryder grins in relief, making her way out of the room and starting to go down the path. 'Oh crud, opening the door tripped a silent alarm. If the guards see Galloway and the others, they're dead. We gotta hide them. The storage room, go!'

'Of course, because nothing is ever easy for us,' Ryder whispers to herself, drawing her pistol and taking a deep breath. 'All right, everyone, move, move, move! Down to the room, all of you.'

Vetra goes with the crowd, Jaal following after a few of the people are already in the room. Ryder waits until every last person has made it to the storage room before entering herself, kinda amazed when the doors slide shut behind her. The voice comes again, telling her that she now has access to the security footage on the nearest screen.

So she watches. She watches until all the guards have rushed past the storage room, running into the room they had been trapped in. 'You all wait here. My team and I will deal with this.' Ryder glances at Vetra and Jaal. 'Weapons ready. Let's go.'

There's a lot of guards, more than Ryder expected. She deploys her assault turret, letting it distract the guards as she takes them out with her pistol. She's almost amazed that they're so well prepared. When she first saw the abandoned mine, she hadn't expected to stumble into an organisation that
would rival the Collective or Outcasts.

Though, by the time she's through, it won't be a competitor at all.

When the last guard drops, Ryder takes a deep breath and holsters her weapon. Vetra's suggestion of checking on the colonists, sounds like a good one, so they return to the storage room to make sure no-one got hurt whilst they were fighting.

'Everyone okay?' The voice comes over the comms again.

Vetra growls. 'Sidera Nyx, you've been pretending to be me, haven't you?'

'Uhhh, how did you—?'

'Think I don't recognise my own tricks? And stop using my voice!'

The distortion to the comms drop and Sid's own voice is a welcome sound to Ryder's ears. It's much better than making her think she's going mad, hearing two Vetra's talk at the same time.

'Sorry, it was just easier to get things done when people thought I was you.' There's a pause. 'You have contacts and stuff.'

Galloway's eyes widen as he glances at Vetra. 'So you didn't help us. Just like you said. It was—'

'My kid sister. Yeah.'

There's something about Vetra's tone that makes Ryder turn to her. 'Come on, Vetra, give her some credit. This wasn't exactly easy to pull off.'

She's answered by Vetra's narrowed glare. 'Ryder, do not encourage her.'

Grinning, Ryder holds up her hands in mock surrender. She listens as Sid and Vetra bicker about whether Sid should go back to the Nexus. It makes Ryder's grin widen, even as Vetra asks for her opinion and the best she can do is say "hey, she's your sister", which does not seem to be the answer Vetra had been looking for.

When they finally agree to let Sid help, for the colonists to stay put and only follow when safe, Ryder nods her head, removing her sniper rifle from its holster. 'We do this quickly, quietly, and we all get home without anyone — except the bad guys — getting hurt, okay?'

Jaal and Vetra nod in agreement.

'Okay, let's go.'

They step through the door in a tight huddle. Ryder first with Jaal to her left and Vetra to her right. All three have their guns up, stepping slow. They know Sid's near — Vetra traced her signal to this room.

'Think carefully about your next move, Pathfinder,' Meriweather sneers as she steps forward. She has one hand on Sid's back, nudging the turian forward whilst the other holds a… oh holy fucking shit. Ryder's heart skips a beat as she looks at the grenade in the woman's hand. She fucking hates grenades. She never uses them.

'You do know how grenades work, right?' Ryder mutters as she feels Jaal step closer to her. 'That explodes, it takes you out too.'
Meriwether just grins. 'You won't let that happen.'

Sid whispers Vetra's name, who tries to soothe her, telling her that everything will be okay. Ryder honestly hopes she believes that. She doesn't want anything to happen to Sid, or her team. She could say she doesn't want anything to happen to Meriwether but that's a lie. She wants the woman with a bullet hole in her head.

'That's a kid you've got there, Meriweather. She's not a threat. Let her go.'

'She hacked my security,' Meriweather replies, then she scoffs. 'And she's taller than you, Pathfinder. Guns on the ground, now.'

As if on cue, more guards rush into the room, guns drawn.

Glancing to Jaal first, then Vetra, they seem to understand what's in her gaze. That she has a plan. She starts to crouch, glad when they both start to follow her lead. She has only her pistol out, having swapped her rifle for it after the whole fiend-getting-loose incident, and needing something better at close range.

She licks her lips, the gun almost touching the ground when she reacts. She straightens her weapon and squeezes the trigger, her bullet landing in Meriweather's shoulder.

The woman shouts in pain, dropping the grenade on instinct. Her guards start firing, but so do Ryder and Jaal. Vetra rushes forward, grabbing the grenade and hurling it with all her might. It explodes on the balcony, take out at least three of Meriweather's men. Vetra grabs Sid, hauling her back and away from the fight. She shoves her into some cover, ordering her not to move until she's told to.

Ryder wonders, briefly, how she'd react fighting alongside Scott. Even though she knows Scott is just as good a fighter as she is — if not better — she wonders if that sibling protectiveness would rear its head, no matter what.

'Vetra, Jaal and I will focus on Meriweather's thugs,' Ryder orders as she reloads her pistol with some cryo-ammo. 'If you want to go after Meriweather for making this personal.'

Vetra grins at Ryder, eyes lighting up. 'Thanks, Ryder. Look after Sid,' she orders before she takes off. Ryder and Jaal cover her, making sure that no-one gets to touch her. She ducks and dodges, stooping behind shelter to let her shields regenerate then pressing on.

'Want to know what I want?' Ryder asks as both she and Jaal duck down at the same time, needing to reload.

'What's that?'

'A nice soak.' Ryder hops up, taking down a salarian agent with a shot to the gut. 'I want to bathe. It's been six-hundred years since I've had a bath or a swim, and I miss it.' She stops, peeking around the corner and shooting the kneecaps of a raider. 'Just enjoying a float in the water. No having to worry about anything. Just… relaxing.' She puts the poor raider out of his misery with a shot to the heart.

'That sounds… nice,' Jaal admits when he finally crouches down beside her again. 'Maybe… some day soon?'

Ryder snorts. 'I doubt it.' She kills another raider, then scans the room to see if she can see anymore. She can't see anyone and when Vetra reappears, giving a nod to signal that Meriweather is dead and gone, she finally steps out from her cover, Jaal following a second later.
Noticing Vetra and Sid by a shuttle, Ryder holsters her weapon and makes her way towards them, arriving just in time to hear Vetra question if Sid is okay, if she's hurt.

'I… I think I'm okay,' Sid answers, cut off as Galloway announces over the comms that they've got help on the way. That they're going to make it. Ryder smiles, but it disappears into a frown when Vetra sighs and Sid seems to deflate. She collapses to the ground, head hung low. 'I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I'm sorry, okay?'

Vetra steps up beside her, crouches down to her level. 'You can't just mess about with people from Kadara. They're dangerous.'

'I just… these guys wanted to start over. Not be exiles anymore. No-one else was giving them a chance, so I thought… I can do that. I can help.'

Stepping up to Vetra's side, Ryder places a hand on her shoulder. 'These are good people who made bad choices. Your sister did the right thing.'

Vetra sighs. 'Yeah but she still should have talked to me.' She turns her attention back to Sid. 'I don't want you to get hurt. There are ugly sides to what I do, and you shouldn't have to deal with them.'

'You started out at my age, and you were okay!' Sid shoots back and Ryder knows that this is too personal for her ears to hear. She takes a step away, moving up to Jaal's side as Vetra replies that it wasn't her choice to become a merc at such a young age — that she did it only to keep her and Sid alive.

'Family, eh?' Ryder smirks as she steps up beside Jaal, who's leaning against a railing, looking out over the mine. 'I'm telling you, I don't know how you manage with a family your size. It was hard enough when there were just four of us.'

Jaal shrugs with one shoulder. 'If it was what you grew up with, you would manage. Just like I couldn't imagine having only one brother.'

'To be fair, Scott and I are twins. We're pretty much just one person. Shared an egg and everything.' She grins, something that only widens when Jaal tilts his head in confusion. 'Never mind. But you're right, I suppose it is just what you're used to.'

'Whatever!' The loud exclamation distracts Ryder, breaking her from her conversation with Jaal. 'I'm going back to the Nexus, like you wanted.'

Sid walks away, stepping into her shuttle. Before Ryder can even move, the shuttle starts up and she's taking off. Pursing her lips, she offers Jaal a smile before she steps up beside Vetra. 'She just wants to make you proud.' Ryder places her hand on Vetra's shoulder, even though it's a bit of stretch for her small frame. 'Are you okay, though? That was more than a little bit tense.'

Vetra heaves a sigh that sounds just like Ryder feels most of the damn time. 'Yeah. I just need time to think.' Her mandibles loosen in what Ryder knows is the turian equivalent of a smile. 'At least the settlers are safe. Thanks for helping me with this, Ryder. You've no idea what it means to me.'

Ryder turns, taking Vetra with her and signalling Jaal to join them as they start the long walk back to the Nomad. 'Anytime, Vetra, anytime.'
Chapter 31

Ryder wakes up to a message from Sid entitled "thanks for saving my carapace" which makes her smile. She knows the sisters didn't leave things that well and so, as she changes, she decides to visit Vetra down in the cargo hold, just to make sure she's not holding her sister's actions against her for too long. After all, her heart was in the right place, and with Ryder, that's all that matters.

She stops by Gil first, thinking the longer she leaves Vetra, the more time she has to message Sid and get things sorted out.

'Hey,' she says as she steps into engineering, watching as Gil steps away from his console and turns to her. There's something in his gaze that's… different. She tilts her head, almost ready to ask him what's wrong when he starts talking.

'Can I ask you a question?'

'Shoot.'

'When all this is over, think you'll have kids?'

Ryder almost freezes. Her eyes widen and her mouth drops open just a little, as her brain furiously tries to figure out where the hell that question came from. She stares at Gil, waiting and waiting until she realises that he's actually looking for an answer before he explains it more.

She clears her throat. 'Um, I… I can't say I've ever thought about it.' It's a lie. Of course it's a lie. She's thought about kids quite a lot. She's always been torn. On one hand, she does want them but on the other, she only wants them with someone she really loves and cares about. She won't have them just for the sake of having them — if she never finds that one person, it won't break her soul to never have kids. She doesn't want accidental kids like she and Scott were. She has no doubt in her mind that Alec Ryder never truly wanted kids and would have been more content to just have Ellen all to himself.

Ryder shakes her head, trying to clear her thoughts. 'What's brought this on?'

'It's Jill — the friend I mentioned whilst you and SAM were cheating at poker—'

'Ouch—'

'She's starting the Initiatives' first repopulation effort at Podromos. It's all she can think about,' Gil says with a fond smile. And it makes a bit more sense, Ryder thinks, as to why this is on Gil's mind now. 'It got me thinking. At the end of the day, this whole thing, the Andromeda Initiative… we're basically here to spawn.'

Ryder leans against the nearest object, hoping it's not too important as she places her elbow on top of it. She gives Gil a crooked grin. 'It took you this long to figure that out?'

Gil just shrugs. 'I told you, I didn't really think this thing through. But nothing we do here really matters unless we survive. At some point, we've got to get busy making babies.' He then gives a soft chuckle. 'Who knew this whole thing was just a glorified dating service?' A frown then appears on his face as he glances away from Ryder with the corners of his lips slightly downturned. 'The biological imperative is kind of a bummer, though.'

Straightening, Ryder takes a step forward. She tries to soften her face. 'So… do you want to have a
child of your own?’

Gil finally lifts his gaze to meet hers again. ‘I… I don’t know. I’ve never really considered it. You know me. Whatever my gut says in the moment, I do it. And I don’t look back. My mum says that’s how my dad was but I wouldn’t know. His gut moved on before I was born.’

Ryder licks her lips. It’s a familiar feeling. Alec Ryder was never meant to be a dad. She’s always been certain of that. ‘That must have been hard,’ she says instead because the last thing Gil needs is for Ryder to make this about her. She’s already unloaded enough of her problems on him without this.

‘Ah, I turned out all right. He did his part — brought me into the world. Maybe that’s enough.’

She can’t keep quiet at that. ‘I don’t know. Don’t bring a kid into the world if you can’t handle the responsibilities. They’re tiny people who need love and attention, and one parent can be enough, but it’s always gonna fuck the kid up when they learn the other one didn’t really care what happened.’ She draws a deep breath in. ‘I’ve got to get to going, I’ll see you later?’

‘Yeah.’ He looks like he’s really considering Ryder’s words, which makes her feel better. ‘Thanks for talking.’

‘Any time.’

‘You have a new message from Jaal at your terminal, Pathfinder,’ SAM declares as Ryder finally sets aside her tablet, having just sent her recap of Vetra’s mission to Tann. She left quite a lot out, trying not to incriminate Vetra or Sid, or let him know that there are reformed exiles hiding on the outposts. It had been a real effort, trying to make it sound like she wasn’t hiding anything whilst hiding everything.

At SAM’s words, Ryder perks up. She slides off her bed and makes her way over to the terminal. Her mind is still full with her talks with some of the crew — her talk with Gil about kids, her talk about Sid with Vetra (and how the younger Nyx sister had unlocked the genome for cats, which brought a ridiculous smile to Ryder’s face) and her talk with Liam about his old petrol car being sent to Andromeda, in an attempt to remember Earth. She thought it was a little bit of a waste, when there’s no way he’ll ever see it but she could understand the sentiment, which was all that mattered.

Message from Akksul

To: Ryder

From: Jaal

Ryder

I’ve received a message from Akksul.

Forwarding it to the meeting room. You should see this.

Jaal

Her heart skips and then seems to stop. It resumes at a fast pace, hammering against her rib cage as if it were trying to break the bones. She reads the message again and again, knowing that it’s not good
at all because it came from Akksul. Nothing about that man is good news.

Ryder is out of her chair before she realises, striding from her quarters, along the pathway to the research centre and then up to the meeting room. Her fingers work restlessly at the console, bringing up Akksul's message, only pausing it to let Jaal know that she's there.

'I'm right behind you,' Jaal says, appearing behind her. 'I saw you storming up here and somehow knew you had gotten my message. Let's play the message now.'

Ryder hits the controls and then steps back, her shoulder brushing Jaal's huge ones as she does. She doesn't move, finding the strange hum from his bioelectricity rather comforting in that moment.

Akksul's form appears in the hologram. 'Jaal Ama Darav. You always were a shortsighted fool. Helping an outsider, instead of your own people. You're unfit to bear your family's name.'

As he spoke, Ryder's hands clenched into fists, her jaw grinding until her teeth ache. She wished the damn fool was in the room with her, just so she could smash his face. She turn to Jaal, finding him staring at her instead of the message. Maybe he's wondering about her reaction — she doesn't really care.

'This guy is really starting to piss me off,' she hisses, dismissing the message so she doesn't have to look at his hologram self. If it stayed there any longer, she'd have ended up swinging for it, and that really would make her look like a fool.

'He always was a vehshaanan.'

Her translator glitches. It's a word that doesn't have an English equivalent. But she's curious. She wants to know what it means, even though she know it's not going to be a positive one. 'Vesh-ah-what-now?'

'Someone pleased with his own shit.'

It startles a laugh from Ryder's mouth, and all that anger from before just seems to disappear as she stares at him, laughing back at her because she's laughing too.

When her laughter ebbs, Jaal continues, 'We've never gotten along.'

Ryder steps up in front of him. 'If you ask me, he's jealous.'

'Of what?' Jaal looks genuinely confused and it makes her heart ache that this glorious alien doesn't know his worth. How amazing and strong and valuable he is.

Ryder places her hand on his arm, giving his biceps a squeeze (and she tries not to think about just how huge and muscled they are) as she smiles. 'You're the better man, Jaal.'

He chuckles. 'Well, I am better looking.' You can say that again, Ryder thinks. Before she can say the words aloud, Jaal, thankfully, continues, 'Akksul wants us to do something reckless. Let's not give him the satisfaction.'

'You got it.' She removes her hand from his arm, still feeling the tingle in her fingertips. She honestly has no idea if that's just from touching him or his bioelectricity lingering. 'And I mean it, Jaal. You're better in every single way. Please don't let this message get to you.'

He smiles at her. 'Knowing you believe that is… enough for me.' He stares at her, unblinking, for such a long time that her lungs start to hurt. She feels constricted and free all at once, and when he
clears his throat and looks away, she somehow feels lost in the abyss. 'I… best get going. See you later, Ryder.'

Jaal walks away without another word, leaving Ryder in the message room wondering what the hell she's supposed to make of all these feelings.

As the Tempest starts to dock, the comms click. 'Ryder, this is Kandros. SAM warned us about Knight's attack. Unfortunately, one device triggered already, we lost a chunk of hydroponics.'

'Shit!' Ryder bashes her hand against the console for the galaxy map, gritting her teeth. She feels tears stinging her eyes but she forces them back. 'No-one was hurt, were they?'

'No, thank the Spirits. They're a little shook up and a little pissed that such a valuable area was attacked, but no casualties. We're not entirely sure where the other EMP devices are, though we reckon they'll be spread about the Nexus where most damage can be done.'

'Right, I'll be there in a minute, Kandros. You just keep looking for Knight.'

She storms off the ship the second it's docked, using SAM to help her find the first EMP device near Vortex. She scans it, then quickly disables it, ignoring Knight's voice in her ear chirping about how Ryder played her, and that she's not going to stop this. She can't let herself get distracted.

SAM does a sweep of the common area, announcing that there's no more devices so Ryder heads to the tram, taking a guess that the best place to place more bombs would be Operations, seeing as how busy it is, and all the important equipment that's located there.

Her hunch turns out to be right, and SAM helps her locate the last two EMP devices, quickly disabling them before they can do any real damage. It's just as she's complete that she receives a message from Kandros saying they have Knight cornered in the docking bay, a sniper ready just in case but that the woman wants to talk to Ryder first. It's a strange request but she accepts, anything for a chance to end this peacefully.

Kandros says the sniper is ready if necessary, SAM admits through their private channel, something which she's glad about. She doesn't want Knight to know that the back-up plan is to kill her and take her from her son.

'Got it, SAM,' she replies, realising her mistake just a second too late. She really needs to start getting better at answering him in her head.

"'Sam". Such a human name. No-one ever listens. You father built his human AI implant. Overlord went on despite my...' Knight trails off, looking away almost in ashame.

'You're trying to bury something, and I think that's what this is really about.'

'I thought Overlord might help my son. They made him a candidate for their butchery. So I sabotaged it. I faked rogue code and ripped him out of there. Alain was... hurt... terribly.' She takes a shuddering breath in, almost as if trying to steel herself. 'But he was alive and himself. Not some...'
She shakes her head. 'First Overlord, then SAM. Horrors forced on children. It has to end, even if I must do the unforgiveable.'

Ryder can't take it anymore. She takes a step forward. 'Knight, listen to me. SAM and I helped Alain together. He's going to be all right.'

Knight looks positively confused. 'No... no th-the code I made... no-one could fix...'
Ryder takes another step forward. 'SAM did. Stand down and you can see for yourself.'

Knight hesitates, glancing around herself. She doesn't seem to know what to do and when Kandros buzzes in Ryder's ear, asking if he should give the order, Ryder almost feels like there's never going to be a happy ending to this story.

Then Knight sighs and hands over the last EMP device. 'Here, the last one.' Ryder takes it and quickly disarms it, even as Knight continues to talk. 'No matter what sentence they give me, I hope Alain will forgive me one day. And if SAM really is what you say it is, perhaps it can forgive me too.'

Ryder places her hand on Knight's shoulder. 'You've been through a lot. I don't blame you for any of this and I'm sure Alain will see the same. He'll know you just wanted to do right by him and that you stopped when you did. That's the victory here. And SAM is... SAM isn't like the geth, Knight, it doesn't have a body and so it needs me to experience everything. We have a... mutual benefactory agreement.'

She grins at Knight, but the other woman doesn't return it. Ryder sighs and removes her hand as Kandros appears with three guards. He thanks Ryder, then cuffs Knight and leads her off.

'Thank you for defending me, Sara.'

Ryder just smiles. 'We've been through too much to start distrusting each other now. Come on, I'm tired and need a nap.'
Ryder heads to Peebee's apartment, hoping that the asari doesn't have anything planned to break Ryder's already thin patience. Addison had chewed her out for coming back to the Nexus when Dr. Kennedy was still out there — and still pregnant. Even though Ryder had said, repeatedly, that there was nothing for them to do until another ZK tracker appeared, Addison seemed pissed that she wasn't out trying to *lure* a ZK tracker out into the world.

She then had to confront Nilken about how, whilst he *hadn't* murdered Reynolds, he had planned on it. In the end, she had told Tann to just let the turian go free. Things got tense during battle and as long as Nilken kept his hands clean, there would be no more problems.

Peebee tells her to enter, so Ryder does, feeling more than a little strange when she notices a Remnant Observer hovering just behind the asari's shoulder. 'Ta-da! My project, she is complete!'

'She?'

Peebee shrugs. 'Looks like a "she" to me.' She then smiles, placing her hands on her hips. 'Just a proof of concept. I stripped out all its Remnant command prompts to see if I could power it up myself. It worked! Now I can build a field model with combat protocols that fights for you!'

Ryder cannot believe the words she's hearing and so she just stares at Peebee, her gaze sometimes flickering over her shoulder to the VI behind her. She honest to God cannot believe that she has her own Remnant Observer to fight for her! She feels giddy at the prospect, almost wishing she could pick a fight just to try it out.

'So, uh, what do you think?' Peebee prompts, pulling Ryder from her thoughts.

She steps forward, a wide grin on her lips. 'I love it! It's amazing. Honestly, Peebee, you've outdone yourself. You'll need to let Suvi and Gil eyeball it, otherwise they'll never shut up, but fast track the combat model for me. I can't wait to get this baby out to play.'

Peebee laughs. 'I'd hoped you'd be happy.' The sound of the doors sliding open distracts her. 'Oh crap, I forgot to lock the—shit!'

Before she can finish, another asari is striding into Peebee's flat. She's dressed in her armour, something that makes Ryder frown because even she doesn't saunter around the Nexus dressed in her armour.

'My, my, Pelessaria. I didn't know you were still using this hole. Who's your friend?'

She stops in front of them, white markings on her face that stand out against her purple skin. She has grey eyes that are locked firmly on Peebee, who just sighs. 'Kalinda, this is Ryder—'

Kalinda cuts her off. 'Oh please, everyone knows the human Pathfinder. I meant your *Remnant* friend?'

'None of your business, Kalinda,' spits Peebee.

'Of course it isn't... that's what makes it so interesting. Don't be so hostile, babe.'

Ryder's officially heard enough. 'Don't be so condescending. Babe.' She shifts her weight just a little, enough to be threatening even though Kalinda is fully decked out in armour and Ryder's only
wearing her civvies. 'This is Peebee's place. And you're trespassing. I think that warrants a little hostility.'

After hearing some bullshit about how Kalinda was just "worried" about her friend, Ryder shakes her head and finally steps forward. She gives Kalinda a gentle push, shoving her in the direction of the door and letting her know that she's overstayed her welcome.

By the time she's returned, Peebee is pacing around the room.

'Want to talk about it?' Ryder offers as she leans against the sofa, arms crossed over her chest and watching the asari move back and forth.

'Oh, Kalinda and I go way back; we joined the Initiative together. For a long time we were like family. Now we're not. When you live a thousand years, Ryder, people come and people go. Entanglements are silly. Just like places. Time to pack this one up. I'm done with it.'

'Are you serious?' Ryder pushes herself off the couch. 'This place is incredible? You just want to give that up?'

Peebee finally stops pacing and turns to her. 'The past is the past, Ryder. I'm fine. I'll see you back on the Tempest. I'll be good to go.'

A part of her wants to keep talking, but she knows the dismissal for what it is. She doesn't want to push and pry when Peebee clearly doesn't want it. So, she gives a smile and turns, walking out and only stopping when the doors whoosh shut behind her.

Pathfinder, SAM's voice fills her thoughts, William Spender's room is directly across. No-one is home. I suggest we take this opportunity to look for his connections to Kadara.

Ryder throws back her shoulders, putting the whole interaction with Peebee to the back of her mind for the moment. 'Right, SAM, let's get this bastard.'

When she steps into the Cultural Centre, she's not entirely sure what she's looking for. Maybe she's just looking for a distraction, trying to forget about the scrambler she had handed over to the comm officer for deciphering, without telling him that she had found it in Spender's room. After all, she already knows most of the history of the Milky Way species — after all, the centre isn't for her. It's for the angara and future generations to come, so they never forget where they came from and everything they went through to get to Andromeda.

Yet, she's curious. She's heard a lot of people talk about it and applaud it, and she just wants to see whether it lives up to all the praise. She's not surprised when she finds a holo of Jien Garson, the founder of the Initiative. Nor is she surprised of the various home-worlds that have their own little display, as well as the various First Contacts between many of the species, as she makes her way down the ramp.

What she is surprised with is Jaal, standing off to the side. He's tinkering with his omni-tool, and Ryder is almost tempted to just leave him be. That is, until he lifts his head and spots her and calls her over with a wide smile on his face.

'I want to thank you again, for getting me access to this place, Ryder,' he starts as she finally steps up in front of him. 'It's so very interesting to see your history — so in depth. As you know, angara lost a lot of our history due to the Scourge. It's… strange to see such a vivid account of so many species'
history. I can't wait to learn more.'

Ryder grins. 'That sounds like a dream. Grab some snacks, curl up in a corner and get to learning.'

Jaal hums in agreement. 'I think I'm going to start with the asari…'

He starts explaining his reasoning but Ryder stopped listening after that first statement. She's not sure why. The asari are an interesting people, a mono-gendered species who can mate with every species to make their future generations stronger? Ryder always found their history interesting when she was at school… she had just suspected Jaal would want to learn about humanity first. For her.

Still, she puts a brave face on when he frowns at her when she doesn't reply straight away. 'Oh, yeah! I get that.' She swallows. 'But when you get to elcor Shakespeare, you gotta let me know!'

Ryder glances around herself, unable to look him in the eye. She hates that something so silly can upset her. She hates these new emotions coursing through her. 'Uh, I need to get going. I'll see you back on the ship.'

Before Jaal can bid her farewell, she's turning away and striding towards the exit. Then another angara catches her eye. She frowns, feeling her cheeks warm when he catches her gaze and grins at her, beckoning her towards him with a tilt of his head.

'Interesting place, isn't it? Full of smiles and handshakes. Not many soldiers. Even when politicians make peace, it's we soldiers who keep it.'

Ryder grins. 'Politicians get nervous when you hold anything more explosive than a rotten egg.'

The angara chuckles at her words. 'You've seen this too? The military life echoes everywhere.' He shakes his head. 'But names. I know you, Pathfinder. I am Andraknor, a Heskaarl with the Resistance.'

Without even thinking, Ryder greets him with what she's dubbed the "angaran-handshake". The word doesn't translate so she can only assume that there's no equivalent. 'A "Heskaarl"? She repeats, the word foreign on her lips.

Ryder listens as he describes how important the Heskaarl were centuries ago, before the Scourge, when the angara were stronger. She feels sad for them when he admits that there are few who remember that they exist.

As he speaks, she can't help but think of the N7 programme for the Alliance. Her dad had been one. Something that Andraknor seems to know via the various displays found in the Cultural Centre.

'He was. One of the first to make it through all of the N7 training. He was always proud of that, even when he didn't stay in service. I think that's why he taught me and my brother a few tricks.' And also because he didn't want to seem like a fake or failure in our eyes. The great Alec Ryder, thrown out of the Alliance because he wouldn't shut up about AIs. 'It's a shame you couldn't meet my brother. He had made it through to being an N4 before we left. It was always his dream to be another N7 Ryder.'

'But you carry a little of that knowledge with you. As well as your Pathfinder skills.' Andraknor studies her for a second. 'N7 training would benefit my people. Heskaarl would benefit yours.' He purses his lips before they spread into a slow grin. 'Perhaps… a few war games?'

After listening to Andraknor explain it a little further, Ryder can't help the wide smile that stretches across her face. 'A chance to work with the angaran best of the best? Count me in.'

Andraknor says he'll activate the training beacons, they walks away, leaving her alone. She feels
giddy about the chance of having a challenge, a little bit of fun and friendly competition, with nothing serious counting on it.

Ryder glances over her shoulder, feeling as if someone is watching her. She finds Jaal staring at her, eyes hooded and… she frowns to herself. No, that cannot be. She's just reading far too much into it. She waves, offering him a smile as she pretends that she did not see hurt and jealousy hidden in his gaze.

After wrapping up the interview with Keri about the angara, Ryder decides to head back to the Tempest. She quickly tells Suvi and Kallo that she's planning on leaving soon, and leaves them with the duty of informing the crew about the upcoming departure.

She's halfway down to the landing pad when Suvi's voice comes over the comms again. 'Ryder, Lexi left the ship after we docked and hasn't been back since. And she's not answering her comms. I'm a bit worried.'

Suvi doesn't have to say anything else. Ryder turns and starts heading back towards the docking bay, asking for more information as she goes. She's surprised when SAM informs her that there had been an email from the asari bartender from the Vortex, Anan T'Mari, saying that Lexi's been in there on more than one occasion, alone, and just asking for drink after drink.

So, Ryder heads to the Vortex without another thought. She sees the asari as soon as she enters, looking down at a bottle of whiskey without really touching it. Ryder slides into the seat across from her, waiting until Lexi raises her head to speak, 'Looking for the meaning of life?'

Lexi's lips quirk. 'At the bottom of a bottle?'

Ryder shrugs, leaning back a little. 'It is a popular place to look. And you wouldn't be the first to try.'

Lexi shakes her head. 'Alcohol rarely provides answers.'

'Then why are you here, Lexi?'

It seems to be the wrong thing to say. 'What? I can't kick back? Have fun?'

'No, no, you totally can, it's just…'

'Just what?' Lexi prompts.

'You don't look like you're having much fun.' Ryder leans forward, resting her elbows on the table. 'What's really up, Lexi?'

The asari doctor sighs. 'I grew up on Omega. You'd think I'd know how to drink.' She shakes her head. 'Peebee thinks I don't care about the crew. That I just see you all as experiments. Do you… is that how you think I see you?'

There's a vulnerability in Lexi's eyes that makes Ryder want to just hug the asari, as if that would somehow make all the difference. She doesn't, knowing Lexi probably won't want that. She has no idea what to say, though, so distracts Lexi by asking when she started caring what Peebee thought about her.

'She wouldn't be the first to tell me that. In fact, every single one of my exes said something similar.
It's why I'm taking a break from relationships.' She sighs again, shaking her head and raising her steeled eyes to Ryder's. 'You didn't answer my question — is that how you see me?'

'Of course not. You wouldn't be moping in this bar if you only saw me as an experiment,' Ryder answers truthfully, finally able to find the right words.

'I don't mope!' Lexi straightens, almost as if getting ready for an argument. She then relaxes, a meek smile on her face. 'But you're right.' She sighs again, this time in relief. Ryder can tell the difference. 'Thank you, Ryder. I should get back.'

'And what about your whiskey?'

Lexi grins, sliding out of the booth. She grabs the bottle. 'I'll save it for another day. See you on the ship.'
When Ryder wakes up the next morning, it's with the realisation that she put off the asari ark for far too long. The navpoints have been blinking at her every time she opens the galaxy map, and Cora has been side-eyeing her for so long. She knows that there's no more time to delay.

The second she's conscious and able to form words, she comms Cora and tells her the good news. She knows that Peebee doesn't seem to care about the asari ark, but they're still here people, despite acting like she's a lone-wolf, Ryder knows better, so she messages the asari and lets her know she's coming along.

The next thing she does is head to the bridge, letting Kallo know to steer them towards the navpoints. She thinks that'll be it, until Suvi catches her attention. 'We might have a brought. I was running some numbers, mass balances and such and the *Tempest* is carrying seventy kilos of extra mass. I think... something's aboard that doesn't belong.'

'That's enough mass for another person,' Ryder states, thinking aloud. She's relieved when Suvi says that the scanners haven't picked up anything that would agree with that.

Still, Suvi asks her to take a look so heads into the first room she's closest to, finding the airlocks empty. She laments that, thinking it would have been so simple to just press a button and have the problem dealt with. She does a quick scan of Peebee's room next, thankful that the asari moved to prep her equipment for the upcoming missions. Nothing.

Ryder makes quick work of Cora's room, Jaal's room and even Liam's room and engineering, having no idea where the hell she's supposed to find anything else. She steps into Vetra's room, feeling annoyed that even her ship seems to be rebelling against her, until she raises her scanner and finds the anomaly.

'That extra mass is behind the storage room bulkhead, Suvi.'

'Behind it?'

'It looks like... a reconstruction mech, welded right into the hull.'

'Scanning the parts has triggered an audio log,' SAM informs.

'I... think I know what that is. Ryder, come up to the bridge?' Kallo joins in and Ryder only hums, making her way back up to the bridge, glad that there's going to be a mission after this. And hopefully something to shoot. She could do with something to shoot.

'Those parts you found welded into the storage room — I recognise them.'

'From where?'

'They belonged to the ship's designer, Lucille Diawara. She... broke her back during construction. But Lucille wouldn't abandon her ship. She converted a construction mech into a rig that she could wear. She must have welded it into the hull. Her artist's signature.'

'That's amazing.' Ryder has no other words.

'SAM, didn't you find an audio log?' Suvi steps up beside Ryder. 'Can you play it?"
An unfamiliar voice comes out of Suvi's omni-tool. 'A SAM found my construction gear, then. Well done. One of you Pathfinders got the *Tempest*, Macen Barro, Zevin Raeka, Matriarch Ishara, Alec Ryder. You were the best of us.'

'She's only saying that because she never met me.'

'Take care of my ship, and each other. Whatever's in Andromeda, you're the Milky Way to them. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on. And our little life is rounded with a sleep."'

When the log clicks off, Kallo is hanging his head. He looks so desperately sad. 'I never thought I'd hear Lucille's voice again.'

'She really cared about the Pathfinders, enough to give them her rig... for luck?'

'Lucille cared enough to make it part of the Tempest. Let's keep it that way.'

'I'll take care of it, Ryder.'

'Thanks. Now let's go and make her proud.'

The kett doesn't seem to stop coming. Whenever there is a lull for Ryder to disconnect the wires, they just appear five seconds later. She tries her best to hold it all together, ordering Cora and Peebee to either side of the deck, whilst trying her best to protect Vederia as she works on the console.

Her shoulders ache from having her gun up so long, and her ears ache from the strange hum that comes from the mass effect device. She just wants it to be over with, thinking that so many kett couldn't have gotten aboard the ark.

Of course, they had but it made her wonder how many had been there before they arrived?

She thanks Vederia for all her work, telling her to be proud of everything she accomplished on her first serious mission, before letting the asari head back to the bridge to see if there's anything else for her to do. Ryder looks around her little group, smiling at Cora and Peebee as she feels pride swell in her chest, glad that they're going to be bringing at least one other ark home.

Even if it does have a shitload of holes in its hull.

'Pathfinder, restoring power has freed up a data cache. It includes the succession log from Matriarch Ishara.'

Ryder frowns. 'Can you access it?'

SAM doesn't reply. Instead, an unfamiliar voice starts coming out of her omni-tool and Ryder can only assume that it's the famous Matriarch who is speaking. 'Forget the data! I need you — the barrier is collapsing!'

'Ishara they'll tear the ark apart, I—' It's Sarissa's voice. Ryder recognises that much, even if it is slightly dampened from coming over the comms. 'That data is the only thing that might buy us some time.'

'Kett reinforcements approaching Pathfinder Ishara,' the asari SAM announces, and its tone makes Ryder frown. She expected something more... feminine sounding coming from the asari AI.
'Sarissa! My SAM can't— Tiamna, please!' 

'I have to save them! Even if I can't save—' There's nothing but pain in Sarissa's voice. 'Forgive me.' 

Cora walks away and all Ryder can do is stare at her back, wondering what the hell is going through her mind after hearing that. Even Ryder can't truly process what she's feeling and she doesn't have the same respect for Sarissa. 

"'Tiamna" used to mean "guardians of the temple". A champion who remained faithful even when all was lost.' Cora turns back to her, there's a thin film of tears covering her eyes. 'Sarissa left her to die.' 

Ryder licks her lips, not knowing what to say. She swallows, glancing briefly to Peebee who holds her hands up and then backs away. She almost envies the asari in that moment for her aloofness. Ryder takes a deep breath, knowing Cora may end up hating her after what she's about to say. 

'Sarissa was forced to choose between her Pathfinder and her ark. She made the right call.' 

'Look around! Does this look like a right call? I—' Cora takes a deep breath, then raises her brown eyes to Ryder's. 'Damn it all, Ryder. What do I do?' 

Offering her a kind smile, Ryder takes a step forward. 'First we—' 

Before she can even finish, the captain's voice comes over the comms announcing that the kett are boarding at the hull breach. She's a little relieved and worried when she hears Sarissa is coming down to help, but she can't be a beggar at this moment. If it means saving the ark and killing the bastards, she won't complain. 

Without another word, she makes her way to the new deck. SAM tells her about the mass effect field still being in effect, and when she reaches the controls, she waits and waits until there's a neat line of kett and then deactivates it, watching as they go flying off the edge and into space. 

More arrive shortly afterwards, giving Ryder no time to rejoice. She just deploys her assault turret, remaining close enough to keep the omni-link available. She then deploys Zap, hoping that it'll give them a good enough edge. 

Something she doubly hopes when the Valiant himself appears, glowing orb and shield intact. Ryder grits her teeth, having to sacrifice the omni-link in order to evade the powerful rays that the annoying ass kett sends her way. 

It takes three rounds of destroying the orb and shooting at the Valiant before they manage to make him drop for good, unable to get back up. Ryder can feel the sweat dripping down her back but she doesn't care as she straightens, rolling her shoulders to work out the ache. 

'Forget capture! Launch everything! Kill the ark! Kill—' the Valiant keeps going, cut off only when a ball of biotics hits him square in the face. Before Ryder can say anything, Sarissa is storming past her, using a biotic Lift to launch the Valiant out into dark space, something Ryder can't fault her for. 

Yet his order has obviously gone through for the signs of fire coming towards the ark is clear as day. She barks out a warning, having no idea what to do because what can you do against that amount of fire? 

'Like the Battle of Kerkis... there's still a chance!' Sarissa says, her voice like iron before she steps up and builds a shield. It's one of the most powerful Ryder has ever seen, and she wonders if that's due to Andromeda — maybe biotics and eezo react differently here... she'll need to remember to mention
that to some scientists if she lives through this. 'Lieutenant! Please!'

Cora hesitates for only a moment before she rushes forward. She applies her help to Sarissa's shield, but Ryder somehow knows it won't be enough. She grits her teeth and holsters her rifle. 'Come on, Peebee! We've got to help!'

Without waiting to see if the other asari will follow her orders, Ryder runs up to Cora's side, adding her biotics to the shield. She sees Peebee flank Sarissa, but then focuses only on her biotics — on putting every single piece of energy she has into the shield.

It takes its toll on them all; Sarissa grunts and groans, Cora falls to her knees, Ryder feels a scream building in her throat. She just keeps going, letting it exploding and sending the energy out, turning the missiles back towards the kett ship the second they hit the barrier.

It's such a pleasant sight, seeing the kett ship light up from their own fire.

Sarissa grabs Cora and hauls her to her feet, pushing them into a run as they make their way away from the deck. 'Captain, get us out of here!'

The jolt to FTL has never been more welcome. Ryder breathes a sigh of relief, leaning against the wall for just a split second before she knows she needs to head back to the bridge.

The crew are too immersed, proud of themselves — as it should be — to notice Ryder and Cora standing in the middle. 'A skeleton crew, but enough to patch up the ark. She'll make it to the Nexus.' Cora admits. 'Whatever it cost.'

Ryder only just manages to stop herself from rolling her eyes, realising it won't help the situation at all. 'You need to talk to Sarissa about Ishara's message.'

At that moment, Sarissa appears. 'I wanted to thank you both. That was exemplary work. I'm proud to—'

Taking a step back, Ryder lets Sarissa and Cora argue it out, not wanting to intervene in... whatever this is. It's Cora who has got to deal with it, and she plans on keeping it that way.

Until they turn to her, seemingly wanting her to have the final word about what to do. She hates that it falls to her. Lie to the asari so that they feel like they can go on, or admit their Pathfinder was abandoned by her second and set them back. She doesn't feel bad for what Sarissa did — hell, her father picked his daughter over... everything. She's not one to judge people's priorities.

But she does hate that Sarissa lied, wanting to make herself out to be there hero... still... the asari have been through enough without losing the trust of their Pathfinder.

Cora doesn't seem pleased but when the captain appears, she doesn't give Sarissa away. Instead saying there'll be a hell of a party waiting for them when they dock on the Nexus.

Giving her a thankful smile, Sarissa turns and leaves.

'They're safe. That's all that matters. Come on.' Cora turns and Ryder, after only a second of hesitation, follows her.

There's a billion emails waiting for her after she's stepped out of the shower and gotten dressed into
her pyjamas. She had planned to check before leaving to board the asari ark but things had kept coming up. There's one from Lexi thanking her for talking her out of her binge; one from Kesh's assistance thanking her for the booze; one from Sloane that makes Ryder's hairs stand up at the mere thought and one from Keri asking for another interview. The final two are from Peebee, asking Ryder to meet her at the museum on Aya next time they dock and one from Drack about a heist at the krogan colony on Elaadan.

She's pretty sure that's what makes her radio Kallo and tell him to set course for Elaadan. She's put off the krogan colony for too damn long. She brings up her private vid channel and calls Drack, asking him a million questions about the transport, feeling dread when she finds out just how important the seeds and nutrients are for the krogan survival.

'We'll get it back, Drack. Whatever you need, I'm there.'

'I'll hold you to that, Ryder. I owe you one.'

Ryder waves her hand, looking up from her datapad. 'Don't be silly. That's what friends are for. Now, I gotta get this finished or I'll have Tann breathing down my neck. Talk to you later, grandpa.'

Drack only gives a hefty chuckle before it clicks off.

After clicking send on the report, Ryder sets the datapad aside and flops back onto her bed. Her back aches and she stretches, pushing her back up as if someone had hooked her from the ceiling. She then slumps back against the mattress the second she feels like her spine is stretched out enough, and pushes herself out of her bed.

She leaves her quarters, making her way down towards the research room. She has plans to check in on Cora, but as she stands outside the Bio Lab, she can't quite bring herself to do it. She wonders if Cora will still be pissed at her, for taking Sarissa's side in the argument. For refusing to let the asari know what happened to Ishara.

'Ryder, is everything all right?'

Ryder spins, turning around to face Jaal, who's standing outside the Tech Lab. His eyes are locked on hers and he gives her a smile when she steps over to him.

'I'm trying to think about what to say to Cora,' Ryder sighs. 'If she even wants to hear it.'

'Yes, Peebee told us what happened at dinner.'

'I wish you had been there,' Ryder admits before she realises it. Her eyes widen slightly, feeling her cheeks warm as his gaze lingers on hers. He smiles, and it makes her stomach go all warm and fuzzy. She clears her throat and looks away. 'Y'know, to see the kett being thrown into space when we deactivated the mass effect field. It was hilarious.'

The brightness in Jaal's gaze dampens just a little, which makes Ryder's hand clench. All she wants to do is bring that back, but then he's smiling and laughing that hearty laugh of his, and the moment to confess all passes.

'That would have been nice to see.' His omni-tool starts to beep. Ryder watches as he glances down at it, frowns and then brings his gaze back up to meet her gaze. 'It is my mother. I must take this.'

Jolting, Ryder nods. 'Yeah, that's fine. I just came to... stretch my legs.' She starts to walk backwards, heading towards her room again. She waves as Jaal steps into the Tech Lab. 'I'll see you tomorrow.'
Chapter 34

Ryder's in the middle of examining the blockage when she feels a nudge on her shoulder. Frowning, she lifts her head, ignoring the droplet of sweat that falls down over her face, and finds Drack looking down at her. He jolts his head to the side and Ryder moves, not needing anymore instruction.

She watches in amazement as Drack puts his shotgun away and lifts the huge piece of metal as if it's nothing. She always forgets how strong he is — how he can bash someone's brains in with his war hammer, mostly because he's such a big softie to her. It always makes her feel so soft and squishy when she sees him in action.

Without a word, she passes by him, signalling for Jaal to follow her. Drack simply changes his stance and then drops the thing back into its original place.

'They are regrouping,' Jaal announces, after a quick scan through his scope.

Ryder smiles at him, nodding her head, even as Drack scoffs. 'Like that's gonna help.'

Before Ryder can reply, there's a new voice coming over her comms. 'Hello? Can you hear me out there?'

'I know that voice! It's our botanist, Vorn,' Drack announces.

'Pathfinder! Drack! It's you! No wonder the pirates said they needed reinforcements.'

She listens as he explains how he ended up kidnapped along with the transport, and how he's currently locked in a container in an effort to keep himself safe. She goes to reply when she hears the familiar sound of engines starting up.

With a deep frown, both she and Drack turn, watching as the transport readies itself to take off.

Drack shakes his head. 'Of course, they're readying themselves for lift off.' He grunts in annoyance and disgust. 'We don't have time for this.'

'Guess they figured why we're here.'

'We can't let them get away. The colony's doomed without the vault on that transport.'

'They are determined to take us down,' Jaal informs, having been keeping watch as Ryder and Drack talked. She thanks him with a small nod of her head, turning her attention back to Drack as she realises just what this means. They've got to make a decision here and it's not hers to make. Something she tells Drack and is only answered by an angered shout as he kicks the nearest container and sends it flying.

Ryder jumps a little which pisses her off all that much more. 'Damn it Drack! Focus! This is your colony we're talking about! What do you want to do?'

'Without Vorn, the seeds in the vault are useless. We get him first.' Drack grabs Ryder's wrist, hauling the omni-tool closer to him. 'Vorn, we're headed your way!'

He then pushes Ryder's arm away and takes off running, shotgun ready. He walks up to some pipes and places a detonator on it, stepping back just in time as it explodes. He then turns to Ryder, giving
the lead back to her. She takes it with a grin.

They make their way over the grating, even though Ryder worries that it's never going to be steady enough for her — let alone a krogan. She's so busy concentrating that when Vorn's voice comes again, she can't really reply.

'Pathfinder? If you don't make it in time... could you give Kesh my love, please?'

Ryder activates her jumpjets, letting herself have a moment as she makes it to another platform. She hears Drack follow and he turns his attention to the comm link. 'Don't be stupid, of course we're going to make it—' He falls silent, frowning down at Ryder's arm. 'Wait. What did you just say?'

Snorting, Ryder hangs back until Jaal is by her side, sharing a small grin with him as Vorn starts mumbling, 'Uh. Oh! Oooh. I said "love", didn't I?'

Drack growls, pushing on, almost forgetting that Ryder and Jaal were there. 'I'm gonna rescue him! And then I'm gonna kill him!'

Ryder snorts as she follows. 'Old Grandpa Drack.'

'What is wrong with this krogan admitting his love for another?'

Ryder drops her voice to a soft whisper, knowing that Drack will still here but it's the thought. 'The other in this instant is Drack's granddaughter, Kesh. He raised her. Protectiveness in male relatives a big thing for... pretty much every Milky Way species, but krogan's deal with it the krogan way. By hitting things.'

'I see... so... your father would have...?' Jaal clears his throat, looking firmly ahead.

Ryder tries not to read too much into it. 'Uh, yeah. When he pulled himself away from his work to notice things, he could be protective. He was... furious with Shasi for what he put me through. Pretty sure if he hadn't already died, he would have killed him. He never liked any of my partners. Neither did Scott. He was like this step-in dad, even though he's younger. It'll be worse now that Dad isn't here to do it right.'

Jaal doesn't say anything for a long moment. He then hums. 'I see. I shall remember that.'

Before she can ask why he would want to, gunfire distracts her and she has to focus on not getting shot. She deploys Zap, deciding against her assault turret and knowing they'll need to move a lot and it'll just be pointless.

SAM informs them that Vorn's signal is close. Just as he's finished Aroane's voice comes over the loudspeaker, making promises about a reward for anyone who kills "the krogan" — Ryder can only assume he means Drack and not Vorn. Especially for 10,000 creds.

After the pirates drop dead, they start making their way to where Vorn is hiding out.

'Back in my day, krogan asked permission before they went in and started courting. They didn't just hop in, without the proper clan traditions. Kids these days. No damn manners.'

'Listen old man,' Ryder says as she finds a container and rakes through it to see if there's anything interesting. 'Back in your day, I'd have been married off without a second thought to a man I didn't love because he liked the price of my dowry. And if I was caught with an opinion other than his, he could have beat me and it'd have been all right. Things change for a reason.' She turns to him, throwing him more ammo. 'Roll with it.'
Ryder doesn't wait for him to reply. She shoves by him and follows the signal.

The second the door opens, she's greeted by a shot to her shields. She ducks behind the nearest container, checking to make sure Jaal and Drack made it as well.

'Aroane! Get over here so we can talk!' Drack calls.

'I don't think so, krogan! Stealing your transport was only the beginning. We're going to destroy everything you care about.'

'Oh, wrong thing to say,' Ryder says, smirking when Drack grunts.

'There's only one thing getting destroyed here today... and that's you! And this place. And also your boss. And probably your entire crew.'

Ryder raises an eyebrow at him. 'Smooth.'

Drack just continues. 'So a lot of things are getting destroyed today, actually! And all of them are yours!'

Before Ryder can make a comment on that, Drack dives from his hiding spot, firing round after round. She gives Jaal a signal to follow, then goes out herself. She asks about Vorn, amused to hear Drack speak fondly of him whilst also saying it's surprising he made it to adulthood. She keeps her comments to herself, and just keeps shooting, tuning Aroane's voice out as he keeps upping the reward for their deaths.

They make it to the shipping container, enjoying the sight of two pirates shooting at the door and barely making a dent, before they quickly move forward and take them out.

As soon as the shooting stops, she hears Vorn ask if anyone is out there, followed by banging. He can't seem to get the door open and so Ryder walks over, followed by Drack, who merely hits the door once and causes them to open.

Vorn falls out, landing on his face. He flips himself over. 'Hi, guys!'

Drack and Ryder look down at him, share a look, then hold their hands out to help him up.

It all happens too fast after that. Ryder's about to make a wisecrack when Vorn tells them to watch out and launches himself in front of Drack. A shot sounds and Ryder finds one of the raiders still alive.

Not for long as Drack fires a round at him, as Ryder lowers herself to Vorn's side and makes sure he's okay.

'What were you thinking? Why would you do something like that?' Drack hisses, fury in his voice keeping it low.

'He... he was going to shoot you.'

'The colony can survive just fine without me! But without you, and what's in your fool head, there's no future for our people.'

Her mouth is dry as she watches Drack turn away, his words echoing around her head. She looks at Vorn, who shakes his head and pushes himself to his feet, a look of determination in his eyes.

'You're always talking like you're expendable! But you're not. We need you. You're not just some
old soldier. We know what we lost because you lived it.' Vorn stares at Drack's back, the scoffs. He turns. 'I need to get some stuff before we go. You talk to him.'

Ryder takes the order easily. She steps up to Drack's side.

'You do get reckless when things get personal, Drack.'

'I won't let anything happen to my clan, Ryder.'

'That's all good. I respect that, Drack, but what good will you be to your clan when you're dead? You're the one here, doing this important thing for your colony. I don't think they'd trust it to anyone else. What would they do without you?'

Drack turns to her, his yellow eyes meeting her blue ones. They then narrow and he shakes his head. 'Quads. Not you, too. I don't have time for this. We have to get the transport.'

Vorn returns with... one weird looking fruit-type-thing in his hand. Ryder cocks her head, studying it as Drack tells him he's not going anywhere. Drack then moves away, examines the wall and before Ryder can ask what he means with "this'll do", he's charging at it with a shout of "incoming!"

He chuckles down at the guards, greeting them just before Ryder rolls her eyes and pulls her pistol free. She sends Zap towards the two guards, then moves to the hole in the wall, ready to join the fight.

'Someone is getting desperate,' Ryder calls over to Drack as Aroane barks out over the loudspeaker about the reward now being 30,000 credits. She grins as Drack chuckles again, stepping out to shoot at another pirate.

There seems to be one behind every container, but they haven't improved much from when they first arrived. It doesn't take long for them to push their way through to elevator for the launching pad.

'40,000 credits! Seriously! Please! Why aren't they dead yet?'

The desperation in his voice makes Ryder cackle loudly. She shakes her head, trying to calm herself as she orders Vorn to override the controls to keep the docking clamps shut.

The stay away from Vorn, making sure the unarmed krogan doesn't gather attention. They work as a team, the three of them spread out around the area. Drack does most of his fighting up close, whilst Jaal and Ryder care to work with their sniper rifles.

'I think they're letting up,' Ryder announces, seeing the number of bodies still moving start to dwindle.

'That or we killed them all.'

Before Ryder can reply to that, a shuttle comes in. She grits her teeth together. 'Looks like I spoke too soon.'

A group of six or seven hop of the shuttle, and just as Ryder thinks everything is starting to even out, she sees two mechs start up. Her eyes widen. 'Fucking hell. I hate mechs. Jaal, Drack, take one each. I'll deal with the pirates then come back to help you, all right?'

The plan seems to work rather well. She moves quick, using her pistol mostly and then her asari blade whenever one gets too closer for her liking. She finally deploys her assault turret as well, letting it focus on the mechs as she picks off the seven pirates that had joined their little game.
By the time she returns, it's to the sight of one mech exploding. She grins, turning her attention to the final one. It doesn't take long before it too goes up in smoke, and they can make their way over to Vorn, letting him know that they're done.

Just as she turns away, she hears a click.

When she turns back, Aroane is there, a pistol held to the back of Vorn's head.

'Don't move!'

The three of them immediately raise their weapons.

'You...' Drack growls.

'I'm taking this transport.'

'Mate, it's four against one, what makes you think you're getting out of this alive?'

'I'm dead either way, as soon as that crazy, old krogan gets his hands on me.'

Ryder notices Vorn remove that odd vegetable/fruit thing from his pocket. He holds it in his hand.

'I'm not the one you need to worry about right now.'

Vorn's talons pierce the skin, and a greenish smoke comes from it, something that makes Ryder's frown deepen even further.

'I...' Jaal turns to her. '...have a bad feeling.'

'Same,' Ryder whispers, even as Aroane starts to cough, trying to get his words out. He can't. He collapses to the ground and Ryder can't hold her curiosity in. She steps forward, followed by Jaal, but then Drack's arm is there, stopping her from stepping forward.

'Wait, don't! Don't come any closer! It'll affect anyone who isn't krogan. It's pretty strong stuff.'

'Is that what you make ryncol from?' Ryder mutters as she holsters her weapon, covering her face just to be sure it doesn't affect her.

She watches as Drack takes Aroane by his foot, drags him across the platform and then dangles him over the edge. He stays there, waiting until the odd smoke from the even odder fruit is gone and Ryder can step up next to him.

When Aroane finally wakes up, it's to Ryder staring down at him. He gasps and squirms in Drack's grasp, but the krogan is strong enough to withstand it.

'You—you wouldn't dare! You're just bluffing!'

'Did you really just say that?'

'No, no, no, wait! Don't let me go!'

Ryder stares at him, dangling there. She wants to feel pity for him. Some form of sympathy. She wants to feel like she's doing the right thing, that her gut tells her to let him live. But she can't. All she can see is a man willing to put the entire krogan population in Andromeda at risk.

Without those seeds, they would never have repopulated. It would take a long time, but it'd be like
another genophage. She didn't come all the way to Andromeda just to see things go back to the same shitty ways of the Milky Way.

'It's up to you,' she finally admits. 'We can get to Spender on our own.'

'I—I know things! You can't do this.'

He swings back and forth, and Ryder watches him like a pendulum on a clock. She wonders if she'll change her mind — object before Drack loosens his grip. She finds herself wondering just what her father would do in this situation. Would he have let the man go or let him fall to his death? He was a soldier, but a soldier dishonourably discharged for not following the rules.

Maybe he did have information, but it was information they didn't need. Not now. And who was to say this fool would just put his grudge aside?

'I can do what I want.'

Drack lets him go and Ryder sees him drop, almost in slow motion. Down, down, down until she can't see him anymore. She draws in a shaky breath and stands from her crouched position.

'Well, that's that.'

Drack only chuckles and turns, ready to take the transport back home.
Chapter 35

She finds herself in the comm room. She asks SAM to set up some soothing music, an old playlist that she made before she left for Andromeda. It's soft tones fill the room as she lowers herself to the floor, a mat spread out to stop it being so sore on her limbs. She crosses her legs and closes her eyes, trying to think of those yoga poses that Lexi sent her.

She works her way through them, incorporating the ones Lexi suggested and the ones she knows best. It's more than an attempt to stretch her muscles and open everything up, ensuring she's not at risk of injury. It's more than unwinding after a hell of a long day fighting outlaws and activating monoliths and resetting vaults and hunting down drive cores stolen from huge Remnant ships by Strux in an attempt to create civil war between the krogans. And the Architect. She could never forget the Remnant Architect.

There had also been little errands run on behalf of some outlaws, because she was Sara Ryder and had no way of ever saying no to people.

Ryder heaved a sigh as she lowered herself down from her Cobra position. She opened her eyes and gave a start, finding Cora beside her, doing the same position. 'How long have you been there?'

Cora shrugs, then lowers herself to the ground too. She straightens, pushing herself into a sitting position. 'Not too long. I saw you and thought it had been too long since I had done yoga. I didn't want to disturb you so I just joined in. Hope you don't mind.'

Still a little shocked, Ryder shook her head. 'Of course not. I didn't know you did yoga, to be honest, otherwise I'd have asked you.' And she would have because it was an exercise that didn't require communication. They could have just worked beside each other, lost in their own worlds and thoughts. 'Though it makes sense, being a huntress.'

'Right. It keeps me flexible. I haven't done any since the ark…' Cora trails off for just a second, seemingly reliving when her hero had crashed to the ground from her pedestal. 'But I used to do it daily, every morning before breakfast and every night before I went to bed.'

Ryder purses her lips. 'I… do not have that discipline.' She laughs, moving to stand so she could start doing Downward Facing Dog. 'This is the first time since Andromeda. And mostly because my mind is a riot, right now.'

It wasn't even the stress of all her excursions that day. It was still Aroane's death that haunted her. Or really, the fact that it didn't haunt her, haunted her. She didn't want to ever feel like she didn't have a heart; that she was a cold and fearless as the rebels were. She thought that the day would go on, and the guilt would appear… but nothing.

She hadn't let any other deaths haunt her, mostly because it had always been an "us or them" circumstance. But Aroane? Aroane had been at her mercy and she had chosen not to give him any. It had been easy. That was what scared her.

How was she really any different from the kett when she did things like that?

'Ryder? Ryder! Sara!' She comes back to herself just as Cora shakes her shoulders, a violent jolt that has her blinking rapidly and having to catch herself from falling over.

She shakes her head. 'Sorry. Come on, let's get back to it.'
Before Cora can say anything else, Ryder asks SAM to turn the music up again and starts going through the moves. She sees Cora stare at her for a second, before she shrugs and joins in. The both of them work through various yoga poses, surprised when they find the crew coming to join them.

Vetra is the first. She doesn't want to join in to begin with, but Ryder can't help but tease her until she relents. She doesn't bother with a mat, only starts working through the moves as best she can. She grunts a lot, grumbling in subharmonics and Ryder can't help but bark out a laugh every time she stumbles a little.

Drack comes next. He doesn't even bother trying to join in. He just wants the company and to have a good laugh. He sits to the side, jeering at them whenever they pause for a breath or one of them slips up. He's like a coach, in some ways, and Ryder just lets him sit there and judge.

Peebee then arrives, jokingly joining in for a pose or two then moving over to sit by Drack's side, unable to keep up the pretence. Especially when the other three are so focused they don't laugh as much as she wished. She takes turns with Drack, spurring them on with shouts and cheers.

The last to join is Liam and Jaal, who come together, more drawn by the noise than anything else. They stand at the top of the ramp, staring at the little yoga class with wide eyes before Liam asks, 'What the hell is going on?'

'They're starting a yoga club,' Peebee announces. 'They're meeting every second day, sign up is free.'

Ryder rolls her eyes as she stands, feeling her cheeks warm a little more when she feels Jaal's eyes peruse over her body. She's just wearing a crop top and some leggings, and it's the barest she's ever been in front of him... wait, no, she's just been in a towel in front of him. The thought makes her cheeks deepen, and she hopes it will just be put down to the exercise. She has a thin layer of sweat covering her body, and she wonders what Jaal is making of it all.

Then his gaze flickers over to Cora and Ryder feels her heart stutter. She stumbles, losing her balance as she had moved herself into a Tree pose. She clears her throat and turns away, heaving a sigh.

'Well, you do you.' Liam moves over to the bench and sits beside Peebee, leaving Jaal still at the entrance. His gaze has returned to Ryder by the time she turns around again. The feeling rising in her chest is strange, all she wants to do is hold his attention so it doesn't drift back to Cora again.

She offers him a soft smile, then turns her gaze away, taking a deep breath as she raises her leg behind her, arching herself into a Standing Bow pose. Her back aches from the stretch but it's such a pleasant one that she pulls her leg further, nudging it closer and closer until her toes are touching the top of her head.

Finally satisfied, Ryder raises her gaze to Jaal's once more, a pleasant hum shooting through her body when she notices that his pupils are blown wide. They trail all over her, drinking everything in and she smiles, almost preening under his perusal.

She lowers her leg and the moves on to the next, giving it the exact same treatment. She feels the muscles in her hips open up, and she almost wants to groan at how good it feels. Lexi had been right — she needs to start doing this often. She hadn't even realised how tight and tense she had been.

'So what's the next stop?' Liam asks.

Ryder sighs as she lowers her leg again. She can still feel Jaal's gaze on her and it makes her stand just a little bit taller. 'Kadara. I got a weird message from Sloane. I wanna see what she's up to.'
'And don't forget my popcorn this time,' Vetra chimes in as she stands, leaning against the comm table. 'I'm telling you, if we eat that stuff Suvi's making, we'll all die.'

Ryder lets out a laugh. 'I'll take your word for it.' She claps her hands together. 'I'll see you all when you land. I've got some crap I need to deal with.'

She brushes past Jaal, watching as he's still staring at her with wide eyes. She can't stop herself from letting her hand caress his arm, gently following the length and smirking when she feels his electricity spark in return.

'Took your sweet time,' Sloane says in greeting. Ryder rolls her eyes, drawing to a halt in front of the lead exile. 'Come on, let's get this over with.'

'Okay.' Ryder turns, signalling Drack and Vetra to follow behind, weapons still holstered. She has to agree with Sloane's sentiment. She just wants this to be over with. The only reason she's here is because of Kaetus. She had taken a liking to the turian, and hearing that he had been beaten to an inch of his life by this Charlatan. It pissed her off.

They step into the caves and Ryder feels her throat tighten. She has a bad feeling about all of this. Why on earth would the Charlatan reveal their identity now? They would only do this if they felt they couldn't lose. And right now, it was looking very much like the trap Sloane was worried about.

'You look like you're waiting for someone,' a familiar voice declares, causing Ryder's eyes to widen. 'Reyes?'

It all clicks. In that moment, she realises just how he's managed to have so many connections, to know so much, to be working so close with her. He hides in plain sight, no doubt spreading rumour after rumour about the Charlatan's true identity whilst running it all.

Her blood starts to boil. She had known there had been something off with the guy — something that he was hiding. And this was it? He was the man who was causing civil war in Kadara? Causing tension between the exiles? The one who payed the Outcasts to beat up their own chief? Kateus' blood was on his hands.

She felt her hands tighten into fists.

'I'm here for the Charlatan. Not some third-rate smuggler.'

Ryder scoffs. 'They're one and the same.'

'Surprise.' He's got a smug, arrogant grin on his lips and Ryder just wants to punch it off.

'You son of a bitch. You've been lying to be all this fucking time.'

'Ryder, I—' 

'You said you wanted to settle things,' Sloane cuts him off and Ryder has never been happier with the woman's snark. 'How?'

Reyes jumps down from his higher ground. 'A duel. You and me. Right now. Winner takes Kadara Port.'

'You want to avoid war by shooting at each other?' Vetra questions. 'Ryder, you okay with this?'
Ryder raises her hands and takes a step back. 'They can blow each other's heads of for all I fucking care. I'm done with them both.' Her tone is quiet enough to just be heard between her crew, and so when neither Reyes or Sloane say anything to her words, she's not surprised.

Sloane accepts the duel and Ryder watches as they start to circle each other, their hands hovering just over their pistols at their sides. She rolls her eyes, then something catches her gaze.

Her eyes narrow, trying to look into the distance but SAM confirms what she suspects. 'Sniper. His sights are set on Sloane.'

'That shady bastard.' Ryder takes only a second to make up her mind. 'Sniper! Look out!' She tackles Sloane to the ground, hearing the whizz of the bullet go overhead and hit the rock behind them.

Sloane raises her head and shoots and Reyes, knocking the pistol from his hands. He curses and asks the sniper to cover him as he takes off. Sloane focuses on the sniper and orders Ryder to shoot him as she stands and takes off after him.

Ryder stops and raises her gun when the shuttle comes down. His back is right there. It's and open sight and to be fair, what difference is it from what he planned to do to Sloane?

But she can't make herself squeeze the trigger. She lets him go, regretting the decision when he turns and winks at her as the shuttle takes off.

'What the fuck was that?'

'He was unarmed, Sloane. I'm not going to shoot an unarmed man in the back. No matter how shitty they are.'

Sloane only groans, bringing up her omni-tool. 'He has nowhere to hide. My people will find him, and then his head goes on a spike.'

Ryder holsters her weapon. 'Whatever. I'm done with him.'

A shuttle appears and Ryder realises that's what she must have been doing with her omni-tool. Sloane takes off towards it. 'I'll never trust Tann or the Initiative. But you're out of the doghouse.'

Despite herself, the words make Ryder smile.

Tann didn't like the idea of the outpost on Kadara. That's what Addison had said. She had replied with "it's hard to calculate how few fucks I give about Tann". But it had still stung. She had went to all this trouble with Kadara, dealing with so much shit, and that's how Tann reacts? Fuck him.

She also wanted to scream because she still felt betrayed by Reyes. Even though she hadn't let him close enough to betray her. She just thought he was a better person that winning Kadara Port by deceit. By shooting someone in the back.

So, when Drack said about drinks, she didn't say no. She steps into Kralla's Song, finding him already there with a man slumped beside him.

'Do I even want to know?'

'Oh? Eh, his buddies talked him into a head-butting competition.' He nudges the guy away with his foot, creating a space for Ryder.

'Some buddies,' Ryder snorts, leaning against the bar just as a nudge comes to her shoulder. It sends
her careening into the wood and her ribs ache. She grits her teeth and turns, finding a shabby looking dude behind her, glaring at her.

'Hey you, I know you. You're Nexus. Your people hurt my friends. Now we're going to hurt you.'

Ryder grits her teeth and turns her head, meeting Drack's gaze. The old krogan chuckles. 'Seems like someone wants a fight. You up for it, Ryder?'

Normally, she would try to take the peaceful route. She would try to represent the Initiative as best she could, being the Pathfinder that had to focus on settling these worlds. She wanted to make it seem like she could be trusted — that she was like the others that had exiled them.

But everything was too fucking fresh in her mind. There was anger rushing through her veins and all she wanted to do was make someone bleed.

She doesn't say anything to Drack, only stepping up to the jerk until there's only a breath between them. She glares up at him, knowing he's thinking he's got the edge because he's taller. But she's Sara Ryder and her father was N7. She knows better than this jumped-up criminal ever could.

'You start this, I'm gonna finish it.'

Jerk-Face moves closer. Trying to be intimidating. 'Yeah? You and what army?'

Ryder snorts. 'I don't need an army. I've got a krogan.'

Drack turns, pulling himself up to his huge height and towering over him. 'Just what do you think you're doing?'

The jerk smirks, turning away as if he's scared or giving up. Ryder almost wants to roll her eyes. She knows what's coming before he's even moving. When he swings, she ducks, steps forward and uses the leverage to throw the fucker over her shoulder and into the bar. He's knocked unconscious, head smacking against the bar and then the floor as he falls.

When she turns, there's someone else there, swinging at her, but she blocks with her arm and sends her other hand careening into the side of his face.

Someone smashes a glass over Drack's face but he only grins then head-butts the bastard, sending him stumbling back into a table. The salarian at that table stands, glares at Drack but does nothing.

An angara manages to punch Ryder, she's too busy watching Drack to block him. She recovers and kicks him in the chest, a powerful thing that has him crashing into a table. He takes a while to right himself, and when he does, Ryder blocks another one of his punches, hits his elbow and then twists his arm behind his back, smashing him into the bar. Umi appears a second later, smashing a glass bottle of his head and knocking him out.

Drack takes out a human and a turian, then hauls the salarian that had tackled Ryder to the ground (whilst slapping at her like a fool) and throws him away. He helps her up and they turn, watching the group of people they had thrown aside and had gotten back up come towards them.

They share a look then start running. Ryder takes the asari out, smashing her fist into her face and then sending her smashing into a table. The turian takes a little longer, until she remembers that they're sensitive around their stomach and sends the turian staggering back, giving her enough time smash a chair over her back and knock her out.

In the time it takes for her to deal with those two, Drack's managed to round off the others. They
glance around themselves, finding it empty except for Umi who's glaring at them but somehow knows better than then mess with them.

'Whiskey,' Drack grunts, making his way back over to the bar. Ryder follows as the bottle appears, followed by two glasses. 'Vaul's almighty quads, I'm getting too old for this shit.' He pushes a glass into Ryder's hand after pouring the whiskey out. 'Ryder, do me a favour? Don't tell Kesh about this.' Ryder snorts and takes a drink. 'I got you covered, old man.'

'I know you do.' He turns back, resting against the bar again. 'I just don't want her to worry.'

'I know that. Now let's get out of here before they wake up and want round two.' Ryder snorts, lifting the bottle and following Drack out of the bar.
Chapter 36

When Suvi had told her that she had found another ZK Tracker after the outpost on Kadara was settled, and that she managed to trace it back to Voeld with the kett and Roekaar on Dr. Kennedy's heels, Ryder knew she couldn't put it off. She had ordered Kallo to head straight for the frozen planet, all the whilst grumbling because who the fuck picks the coldest planet to land on when they're ready to pop out their baby?

She groans and complains the whole drive to the NavPoint, pretty sure she's driving Jaal and Cora up the wall but she doesn't care. How irresponsible and ridiculous is that? Though, what did she expect from two twits who reversed their blockers because they wanted to have kids and just couldn't wait for things to be settled? What if Ryder hadn't been as successful? That poor fucking kid would be on the line and they would no doubt have to watch it slowly die.

Fucking idiots.

Still, Ryder fights ever last kett and Roekaar that are at their little bunker, trying to drown out the sound of Dr. Kennedy's screams as she gives birth to the baby. Her only moment of relief is when she asks for the gun when the comms go dead and Jaal shouts at her, always give the mother the gun!

'Tell them to hurry,' Kennedy says as she trails off in another pained moan.

'Hang on, doctor,' Ryder replies between gritted teeth.

'I'm on someone else's schedule.'

Yeah, so am I. And mine have guns so I fucking win. She doesn't say it aloud. She only channels her anger and annoyance at the kett and Roekaar, shooting and shooting, not even bothering to deploy Zap or her assault drone. If her enemies weren't so heavily armed, she'd be tempted to go at it with her bare hands, just to get some anger and stress out.

Why does nothing ever go her fucking way? She had been joking before on Elaaden, when the driver core had gone missing and she had said that she was genetically unlucky. Now, she's not so sure. She's pretty damn positive that there's something in the Ryder blood that just makes everything they touch and hold dear and set their minds to fuck up in painful ways.

Hell, the thing her mother and father lived for was the thing that killed them. If that doesn't say bad luck, she doesn't know what does.

They end up taking off before Ryder has destroyed the Roekaar Hydra — and where the fuck did they Roekaar get a hydra mech from? — and she almost wants to scream. She's half tempted to shoot the damn thing down herself until she hears the sounds of a baby crying fill her comms.

'We're safe. He's safe,' Dr. Kennedy announces and Ryder lets out a sigh of relief, falling down into a sitting position behind the boulder she had been using as a shield.

'Congratulations,' Jaal exclaims with a huge, joyous laugh and she wish she could feel that joy. She wishes she could be happy in that moment and almost feels like there's something wrong with her. That she'll never know happiness again thanks to the weight that will constantly be on her shoulders.

She slumps, letting her rifle fall from her grasp and slide to the ground. It skitters away on the ice but she doesn't care. In that moment, she doesn't care about anything.
She hears Cora take control, telling the family to get clear but that they'll need to wrap it up with Addison. Kennedy doesn't ask why the Pathfinder has suddenly gone quiet, and Ryder is thankful about that. She would have snapped if she had asked.

Jaal finally seems to notice that there's something wrong, his laugh trails off as he approaches Ryder. He glances down at her, starting to ask what's wrong but Ryder shakes her head and stands.

'Fuck them. Actually fuck them. Fuck everything.' She kicks a block of ice. 'I am sick and fucking tired. What was my dad fucking thinking? Putting me in charge? Putting this stupid, broken girl in charge of the galaxy? I just want it to end. I just…'

Ryder turns, stopping herself from saying anymore. She feels a scream building in her throat and refuses to stopper it. Her biotics rush to the front and when she finally releases, she sends her fist crashing into a iceberg with a scream loud enough to attract the attention from the kett base. It cracks and shatters, leaving behind a huge hole into the lake beneath.

And for one solid minute, she's tempted to leap in. Freezing water, rushing over her, pulling her into a darkness there's no escaping from. It sounds almost too good to be true.

Then she feels a hand on her shoulder. She doesn't need to look to see that it's Jaal. She can tell by the size and shape.

The desire rushes from her and she's left feeling heavy and worn. 'Let's head back to the Tempest. We'll do everything else tomorrow.'

Without waiting for either of them to say a word, Ryder shrugs out from under Jaal's hand and turns, heading to the Nomad with no energy left in her heart.

The next day, Ryder throws herself into her work. She feels a little groggy from the sleeping pills she swallowed the second she got back to the Tempest, but she still feels functional. She takes Jaal and Liam this time, thinking that the little friendship they've struck up will keep them distracted enough to not bother talking to her.

She just drives from place to place, going wherever she's needed. She goes to a kett facility where a bunch of research is found on every Milky Way species. She follows the hints of the missing science crew from the Voeld outpost, finding a Remnant Architect at the end. She rescues angara from a kett holding site, delivers the data drive to Buxil, and then brings down the kett base with help from the angara. It's the only time she feels alive, killing kett after kett, knowing that she's crippling their efforts on Voeld and making it nearly impossible to recover.

After that, she goes to the dig site where the kett had been, finding an ancient angaran AI. She shoots the damn thing when it tries to kill an angara, and walks away without any regrets.

The last thing she does before she realises she needs to leave Voeld and focus on other things, is find the hunters who are killing the precious yevara. She's furious when she finds an angara behind it all, stating that it's going to help develop a weapon to defeat the kett. She asks Ryder to let her research continue, but Ryder, the pain and anger that's been rumbling in her chest explodes.

'No! They are all you have left of your history, and you're wanting to fucking kill them all on the off chance it'll help defeat the kett? They're vulnerable to a bullet to the head. Train snipers. Don't butcher your native creatures. SAM, send the information on to the Resistance and tell them what she's been up to. You better get off Voeld before they get that info.'

The angara shakes her head. 'You're making a huge mistake.'
'No, you're making the mistake. There are creatures on earth, hunted to extinction, all because people thought they had medicinal value. They used to walk the world in thousands, and now all that's left of them is in the history books. So fuck off. If I catch you doing this again, I'll show you the kett aren't the only ones to worry about. Now go!' 

Without another word, Ryder turns. She walks off, moving to the huge lake and staring out at it. That same urge from yesterday appears, the urge to just jump in and be taken.

With a huff, Ryder falls to the ground, crossing her legs and burying her face in her hands. She hears Liam ordering the angara to get a move on, supervising her as she packs up all her equipment.

So, she's not surprised when Jaal comes to sit beside her. 'It's beautiful, isn't it?'

Ryder removes her hands and glances out at the lake. 'Yeah. Yeah it is.'

She can feel Jaal study the side of her face. She knows that he's no doubt trying to work her out. And when he asks, 'What's wrong, Sara?' she's not that surprised.

Ryder considers lying. She considers just saying that there's nothing wrong. But she can't. Not as she turns and meets Jaal's gaze and sees nothing but concern there. 'I don't know, Jaal. I'm... I feel so... I don't know who I am anymore. I hate this anger and frustration that's in my soul. Jaal, I just...' She turns towards him again, wide eyed and feeling tears gathering. 'I don't know what I'm doing.'

Without hesitation, Jaal reaches out and places his hand on top of hers. It dwarves hers, covering it entirely. He curls his fingers around it, holding it. 'Sara,' and gods, if that doesn't sound wonderful, coming from his mouth, 'you are doing wonders. You have changed planets. You are making peace and changing everyone's perspective on your people. Today, you have helped destroy the kett, give us back Voeld, as well as do the smallest tasks. You are strong and brave and kind... and beautiful. Inside and out. Please don't ever doubt that.'

Ryder's throat is tight. She feels lightheaded as she stares at him, wondering how he can believe that. How he can say those things so easily. She wonders how different life would be had she grown up like the angara... saying her feelings and emotions without any fear of judgement.

'Jaal, I...' She can't think of the words to say. Not that it seems to matter. He smiles at her, a warm thing that melts her soul. She's pretty sure that the heat in her body could melt the entirety of Voeld.

'That's her away,' Liam declares, plopping down on the other side of Ryder. 'Grumbled the entire way but she's gone now. What's happening?'

Ryder turns her head. She clears her throat and pushes herself to her feet, feeling her face warm even further at the thought of being caught out. She shakes her head. 'Nothing. Come on, still got stuff to do.'

She sees Liam raise an eyebrow to Jaal, and is thankful when the angara changes the subject and draws Liam's attention away completely.
Chapter 37

She walks into the museum and finds Peebee staggering around in front of some RemTech. It's clear, even without talking to her, that's she hammered. It almost makes her grin, looking at her... makes her seem more "human" and less like the unknown she tries to act like.

'Getting to know our new neighbours?' Ryder says in greeting, stepping up behind Peebee.

The asari stumbles, turning around to face her with wide eyes. 'Maybe. All this stuff. The angara sure do have a rich culture and blah blah blah.'

Ryder can only chuckle. 'You're sauced, aren't you? What's your poison?'

Peebee makes this weird noise that sounds kind of like an exhale of air and a "yeah". It makes Ryder's grin grow wider, even as Peebee starts to rattle on again. 'I visited that cafe the angara call a bar. Asked for their hardest stuff. It was weird, which I like, but it held no,' she hiccups, 'punch. Lightweights! She stumbles, arms flailing in a desperate attempt to right herself. 'Woah.'

Ryder reaches out, trying to keep her from falling over. 'Steady now.'

'That stuff must have a slow absorption rate. Whoops!' She sighs, looking down and away. 'Oh, Ryder. It's just—this museum reminds me of being on Hyetiana during my indentured service as a student. They even have a whole section on the Remnant! I didn't come to Andromeda to follow in someone else's footsteps.'

Taking another step towards her, Ryder places a hand on Peebee's arm. 'Don't worry, Peebee. The angara barely have a foothold. Sure, they live among the ruins. But they haven't seen what we've already seen.'

Peebee hums. 'You might have a point there. Bet nobody here has ever outrun an ancient vault purification field, huh?' She hiccups. Ryder grins. 'Or spat in that ugly Archon's mug and lived to tell the tale! That was nice work, by the way.'

That startles a laugh from Ryder's lips. 'Thanks.'

'Ah, you're right. Not sure why, but ever since I packed up my apartment on the Nexus, something's crawled under my skin. But whatever it is, I promise I'll get over it lickety-split!'

Ryder shakes her head. 'You're fine, Peebee. We all need to cut loose once in a while.'

'You're very understanding! And attractive! Nice combination, by the way.' She hiccups again, stumbling to her left. 'I think I'll stay in your operation a little while longer.'

'Glad to hear it.' Ryder grins. 'Can I trust you to get back to the Tempest by yourself?'

Peebee raises her hand in a salute. 'No problem at all! You can trust me!'

Her grin stretching, Ryder turns and leaves Peebee to herself, feeling like she's already in a better mood and believing that she'll be able to find her way back to the ship without getting into any trouble.

She heads to the Resistance HQ, going down to the small medbay that's there, following her lead that's where Ljeta is, the angara that a krogan she met on Eladaan wanted her to track down. She
manages to convince the woman to contact Rorik again, because he's really worried about her.

She also picks up more supplies for the Elaaden and Kadara outpost for Merixus to take back. And whilst on her way back into the city, she sees Sohkaa Esof and finally gives him the news of her trader, telling him that his cargo is waiting for him to collect.

Afterwards, she considers going back into the city but decides against it. All of her crew adore Aya and she knows that she'll have the ship to herself. Something that she's looking forward to. Especially after her recent breakdowns. She just wants to walk around without seeing anyone.

So, she heads back to the *Tempest*, making her way to the research centre. There's bound to be some things she can research — new weapons or upgrades to her armour. It's been a while since she last looked.

Before she can even boot up the console, she hears a noise from Jaal's room. Ryder frowns, turning towards the door and asking SAM via their private channel if Jaal is inside.

When he confirms it, Ryder steps away, all previous thoughts of researching and developing new armour gone from her mind. The door unlocks after she swipes in the code, and she enters silently, hearing an unfamiliar yet feminine voice come over comms.

'You more than anyone know how dangerous Akksul is.'

Jaal inhales deeply. 'Why were they allowed to speak with him?'

A different female voice answers this time. 'They aren't children anymore. We can't control their every move. You remember how you were.'

Jaal bows his head, and just that comment makes a small smile tug at Ryder's lips, even though she can tell the severity of the situation. She can just imagine a teenage Jaal, running around and ignoring any advice from his mothers.

'Please, Jaal!' The first woman implores, and even before Jaal answers, Ryder can tell what it's going to be.

He sighs again. 'I'll bring them home.'

The comm link goes dead and Ryder feels like this is something she shouldn't be apart of. She swallows, trying to figure out what to say; whether to announce her presence or even attempt to slip out without letting him know she had ever heard.

Somehow, she knows she can't do that. It just doesn't seem right when it comes to her relationship with Jaal. Whatever her relationship is. 'This is obviously a bad time,' she says, even though she hadn't really visited him for any reason. She had just heard noises, discovered he was inside and wanted to see him. Maybe that's what the bad time is... just wanting to see him.

'No—please stay!' The desperation in his voice makes her heart ache. She walks over to his side before she can even realise what she's doing. 'My being alone won't help anything.'

She wonders if it's her company he craves or if he would have said the same thing to anyone... before she shakes her head and decides against that train of thought. It'll do her no good. And she needs to focus on Jaal more than anything else.

'What's wrong, Jaal?' she asks, sitting down on the small bench next to him. She's tempted to take his hand but decides against it, opting instead of pressing her shoulder against his.
'Three of my brothers and sisters have joined the Roekaar.' *Shit,* Ryder curses, but stays silent as Jaal continues, 'Akksul has poisoned them with his hatred of aliens.' 

He pushes himself to his feet and storms off, but Ryder stays where she is, watching him with wide eyes. 'And your mothers want you to bring them back?' she guessed, not really needing his confirmation. She had heard enough of their conversation to pick that much up.

'The Roekaar have made camp at the Forge,' Jaal informs as he turns back to her. There's a determination in his eyes that makes Ryder's spine tingle. 'Many consider it to be the birthplace of our civilisation. Akksul likely believes this bold move will create more fanatics for his cause.' He takes a deep breath, looking down. 'Ryder, he has my family... but I don't think I can do this alone.' 

Ryder steps forward with a kind, reassuring smile on her face as she takes his hand in hers. She can feel his bioelectricity running haywire. She rubs a thumb over his large knuckles. 'Jaal, you don't have to. Just give me a time and a place and I'm there.' 

He sighs heavily, taking another step forward. Jaal takes her other hand, raising them to his chest and Ryder's throat constricts. 'No hesitation. That is what I love about you.' Ryder's heart skips a beat but before she can dwell on it, Jaal's pushing on. 'I have a contact who's been monitoring the Roekaar. I'll set up a rendezvous with her.' 

Ryder nods. She gives his hand a squeeze as he goes to take a step backwards. 'Jaal, we'll get them back. I promise.'
'Jaal, are you sure you want me here? Bringing an outsider—'

'—Will give the Roekaar a different perspective,' Jaal promptly cuts her off, looking up from his gun and giving her a smile. 'Just follow my lead. We'll get my family back.'

Ryder nods, trusting him. No matter what. She doesn't say anything as the shuttle sets them down and they hop out. She had picked Liam to come along with them, mostly because she knew how much he and Jaal got along. It seemed like the only choice.

She pulls her gun from its holster, her previous experience with the Roekaar setting her on edge. Jaal comes up beside her. 'Move quietly. We don't want to alert the Roekaar.'

She sighs. 'It would be nice if we knew where to look for your family.'

'The Moshae brings all her students to the Forge. I know my way around. The govataan — a welcome centre — is up ahead.'

Ryder pushes on, her mind filled with thoughts of what Jaal had been like before he joined the Resistance. When he was a student of the Moshae, trying to learn about the Remnant but just didn't seem to pick things up. What had it been like, coming to this place for the first time? Did he feel the same wonder that coursed through Sara's veins as she glanced around the place — the strange monuments and glowing plants that were native to Havaral.

She almost asks but doesn't, deciding to save it for later. Jaal had told her to be quiet and she was going to show that she could listen to him — for his family's sake. Who knows what would happen if their arrival got out before they found his brothers and sisters. Perhaps they would be accused of letting Jaal, and the alien Pathfinder, in on the secret.

And Ryder knew what happened to traitors, no matter the species.

When she reaches a cliff with a trail down into a small village, she stops. A frown appears on her face when she sees not a single person. She turns back to Jaal, watching as he approaches the edge too and gazes down into the govataan.

'It's... deserted. The govataan is usually filled with travellers.'

'Avka did say there was no traffic in or out,' Ryder replies, trying to keep things cheery. She knows where Jaal's mind is going to head and that's the last thing she wants. She doesn't want this amazing person in any more pain.

'Yeah, but you'd still expect to see someone,' Liam declares as he steps up on Jaal's other side.

Jaal hums in agreement. 'Yes, exactly. Where are the Roekaar?'
'Maybe at lunch?' Ryder quips, feeling her heart swell when Jaal's lips twitch just a little. His mind directs him back to the tense moment at hand, but in that split second, she had distracted him.

Clearing her throat, Ryder starts to move again. 'We'll check the buildings. Take one each and share through the comms if you find anything. We'll work our way up forward and meet there, okay?'

Jaal and Liam make noises of affirmation, before they split up. Ryder heads into one of the buildings, doing a quick scan to make sure nothing stands out, then checking the containers. She finds a few things that she could send back to the *Tempest*, but her main concern is a datapad with what looks like days and numbers.

After SAM translates what he can, she realises that they're visitor logs. She patches into the comms. 'Found something. It looks like there was steady arrivals until about a week ago.'

As Jaal fills her in about how most angara visit the Forge at some point, she checks the terminal, finding a few messages that seem to state when Akksul arrived. She considers re-establishing the commlink but decides against it, knowing that it could easily trigger the Roekaar as to their appearance.

Ryder leaves the building and makes her way along, finding Jaal and Liam standing outside the final building.

'Nothing special, Pathfinder,' Liam reports and Ryder nods. She had expected as much. 'But it does look like everyone left in a hurry. Things are just... left. It's weird.'

'Even weird... Jaal... what's so special about this place, anyway? You said every angara visits... what makes it such an important place?'

'It's one of the few places that predates the Scourge. We don't have many of those left, so we cling to those that we do. It's used as a way for us to reconnect with our pasts — what we have lost and what we might have had were it not for the Scourge.'

In that moment, Ryder just wants to hug him. She wants to wrap her arms around his huge frame in an attempt to shield him from any further pain. She knows it's utterly ridiculous — especially with how tiny she is next to him — but she can't help it.

She settles for placing a hand on his arm and smiling softly at him. It's as much as her mind will allow her to do with Liam standing right there, working on opening the door.

When the whoosh fills the silence, Ryder steps away from Jaal and into the room, stopping the second she sees blue blood on the floor. She brings up her scanner on reflex, scanning it to find out who it belongs to. She knows of only two species that bleed blue blood — angara and turians. And either one of those does not bode well.

The scanner dings with the result and Ryder swallows. 'It's angaran.'

Jaal steps up beside her. He shakes his head. 'Akksul doesn't kill angara.'

'The amount of blood and the back-spatter suggests a non-lethal blow,' SAM informs and so Ryder lets out a breath. It doesn't explain why he's hurting angara, maybe this one didn't believe all the hatred he spews and fought back?

Swallowing, Ryder steps over to the terminal, finding an audio-log. She clicks play. 'Akksul pulled us out of the lab today. He talked to us about the "Milky Way Menace". Sheva says he's a radical, but he's only saying what everyone else is thinking!'
'Well, sounds like the Roekaar has one new member,' Liam says.

There's a heaviness in the room that Sara can't have. She turns. "The Milky Way Menace"? I rather like that. Think I can get Tann to change my title from Pathfinder to that?"

It works. Both Liam and Jaal let out a chuckle as she hits delete on the recording. She doesn't want another reminder of how many angaras distrust her without even speaking to her.

She shakes her head. 'Come on, let's move forward.'

Without waiting for a reply, she steps out the other door, following the path that leads her to a tunnel. The closer she gets, the easier it is to hear something echoing over the grounds. She frowns, thinking it sounds familiar, but it isn't until Jaal points out that it's Akksul that she realises it. His voice comes over the loudspeaker, a recording, warning the angara listening that she and her kind are not to be trusted — no matter what they say or do or act like.

It makes her grit her teeth. She steps forward and goes to unlock the door when a hand lands on her arm. She turns and finds Jaal staring at her. He glances up at the door for a second.

'We have made it this far without running into the Roekaar. I do not trust Akksul to have left it unguarded for so long. Allow me to go first.'

It's not really a question but Ryder nods her head anyway. She sees Jaal's eyes light up a little and her trust in him, how she didn't even try to protest or get any reasoning out of him. She merely acquiesced.

Liam and Ryder hide out of sight as Jaal holsters his weapon again. He quickly unlocks the door and steps forward, his head bowed. He looks so powerful as he takes a step backwards.

'I thought you said you'd got them all?!' a voice demands.

'I did! He must've—' another voice goes to answer but Jaal gave the signal, saying that there's only the two of them, so Ryder and Liam step out. She grins, even as the Roekaar member orders her to be killed. She's got her gun up, her shields ready and a strange fire running through her veins.

The three of them make quick work of the two guards but Ryder can only hope that no-one heard their gunshots. Jaal step up beside her as she stares down at their bodies for a long moment.

'They shot first. We had to defend ourselves.'

Ryder swallows. Nods her head. 'Yeah. Yeah, I know. Come on.'

She walks up to the door, not bothering to check the datapad, almost knowing that it'll either be something about how much the Roekaar hate her or how the Roekaar are treating the scientists at the forge. Either way, she doesn't want to read them.

The doors open and before she can say a word to Jaal and Liam, giving them their orders, she sees bodies and a shot hits her shield. She falls to her knees without thinking, crawling forward to the fence on the edge of the platform. She reloads her gun, activates Zap and then when she's finally ready to resurface, she throws her assault turret over the edge before starting to shoot.

Jaal and Liam quickly join her, moving further out into the area because that's how they prefer to work.

She ducks back down to catch her breath, thinking that the numbers are dwindling when she hears
the unmistakable sound of a shuttle coming in.

Peeking back over the edge, Ryder sees a group of seven or eight angara jump out. She groans and starts firing her weapon again, hoping and praying that the entire thing will be over soon. There's no way Akksul doesn't know they've arrived now.

He knows they're coming and if they don't move, he could get away.

Ryder wants to put an end to this, once and for all.

When the final Roekaar drops, Ryder's chest is heaving. She asks Jaal if he sees any sign of his family, almost thankful when he says no. She really doesn't want him to finally find his family after the bloodshed has stopped.

In no mood to talk or explore, Ryder just follows the trail until she comes upon a locked door. At SAM's suggesting, she follows the electrical wiring underground to a nearby generator.

When she turns that on, she goes back and finds the door unlocked. She's filled with relief that it was only something as simple as that. Jaal fills her in on the bridge that will take them across to the ruins, which is where he reckons his family will be, when a large explosion cuts him off.

Her previous relief evaporates as she watches the bridge collapse into a million pieces, falling into the chasm below. She stops short. 'How do we get across now?'

Jaal groans. 'We'll have to jump down.'

He leads the way this time at Sara's signalling. He knows this place better than she does, after all. It doesn't take long to make their way across, thanks to the ledges of the cliffs and their jumpjets, but just before Ryder can feel relief again, she sees more bodies running towards them.

'Of course, because nothing is ever easy for us,' she groans as she pulls her gun free. She goes for her pistol this time and brings up a biotic barrier, choosing to push on through and take them out as she goes. She's got less time now. Akksul knows she's here and she's got no doubt that he's getting desperate, especially as another shuttle arrives with even more reinforcements.

By the time they've defeated them all, they're near the top of the mountain again. She turns and looks out, finding strange monuments amidst a pink-red sky. It's one of the most breathtaking sights she's ever seen and she admits as much as Jaal steps up beside her.

'Wait until we get inside.'

Ryder turns to him, eyes wide. 'Inside?'

He nods, turning and pointing roughly in the direction they still have to go. 'There's a cave. That's where the Forge is.' He looks back out towards the horizon and sighs. 'And hopefully where my family is.'

Ryder can't stop herself this time. She takes ahold of his hand. 'We'll get them, Jaal, don't worry.'

'You are... incredible and strong. I will always be in awe of you.'

Ryder's throat goes dry. Her entire face seems to warm until its temperature could give Eladaan a run for its money. She can think of nothing to say, only opening her mouth and sputtering like a goddamn fool.
The only thing that comes to her mind is, 'The stones are massive.'

Jaal blinks at her, seemingly confused, then seems to catch up. He chuckles and there's a glint in his eyes that makes Ryder wonder if he knows just how much of a mess he's made of her. 'Yes. They were shaped from the very bedrock of Havarl using extreme heat. That's why we call it "the Forge".'

Finally able to have something to reply to, Ryder asks, 'Do you still use that technique?'

A sad look overcomes Jaal's face. He shakes his head. 'No. It was lost to us.'

She opens her mouth, wanting to comfort him more but nothing she can think of will suffice. So instead, she just squeezes his hand, hoping that he understands — that the small gesture of comfort is universal.

Judging by the look on his face, it is. He offers her a small smile then starts to turn. 'Come, it is just over the ledge.'

The second she sees Liam, she pulls her hand free, almost forgetting that he was there and that they were there for Jaal's family, not on some private venture or date. She takes a few deep breaths and then jumps up the ledge with help from her jumpjet.

The second she lands, shots start coming at her and she ducks behind the stone wall. She goes straight for her weapon but Jaal stops her. 'I know those voices.'

Before Ryder can ask, Jaal stands, hands in the air. 'Lathoul!' he shouts, turning to face the three angara that are stopping them from going any further forward. 'Wait! Stop!'

One angara stands, then immediately holsters his weapon. 'It's Jaal! Jaal, what are you doing here?' he asks as he jumps over and starts walking towards what Ryder presumes is his brother.

Ryder watches as Jaal speeds up, the other laughing and opening his arms for an embrace. Jaal looks like he's going to accept until he punches his brother in the face. Ryder winces, even more so when Jaal then punches him with his other hand. As the brother goes to respond, Jaal ducks and wraps his arms around him.

Ryder almost laughs. It's rather like the relationship she has with Scott. It makes her heart ache, knowing he's still on the Hyperion. In a coma. And missing all of this.

'Baranj. Our mothers sent me.'

'All of them?'

Ryder, finally feeling safe when the sister holsters her weapon, steps out from behind her stone. She starts to walk up to Jaal, put is stopped in her tracks as the sister storms over to her. 'Did our mothers send this human, too?'

There's an icy tone to her voice that Sara knows her father would have been proud of. And a glare that would make even a turian quake as the sister only hisses in reply, 'I should kill you right now.'

Try it, is on the tip of Ryder's tongue.
Until Jaal calls out, 'Teviint. Please.'

She turns, pushing the third brother out of the way as she returns to Jaal. Ryder takes a breath to try and calm herself.

'Why did they send you?' the blue-toned angara asks.

'We've lost enough to the kett. They don't want to lose you to this ridiculous cause.'

'But, Jaal—'

Before Ryder even realises it, Jaal has hooked her arm and is dragging her forward. 'I want you to meet my friend, Sara.' There's a soft fondness to her name as he says it that makes her heart skip a beat. 'I want you to see that Akksul is wrong.'

Shit, this all comes down to me? she thinks, swallowing as she tries to think of the right thing to say. 'I want us to work together against the kett. Me and my people have no way back. We're here to stay and I want us all to get along.'

The blue one steps forward. 'Who cares?'

'The angara don't want anything you have,' the sister growls.

'We don't need you.'

'Jaal, our mothers want us to live truthfully.'

'It is because I love my mother that I would die for this cause.'

Well, this has went fucking swimmingly, Ryder thinks, just as the third brother pushes forward. 'Akksul is going to blow up the Forge.'

Ryder's entire mind goes blank. There's a long stretch of silence that seems to last forever, yet only goes on for a second.

'That's why he sent the researchers away—'

'Lathoul—'

'—He has bombs—'

'—stop talking—'

'—stolen from your people.'

'If those bombs go off it will look like the Initiative did it. And then no-one will trust us.'

Jaal nods in agreement. 'We have to disarm them.'

Lathoul steps forward. 'I'll take you—' a gunshot cuts him off as he lurches forward into Jaal and Sara's arms. She's wide-eyed as she gently lowers him to the ground, finding Teviint behind him with the pistol in her hand.

There's shame and shock in her eyes as she drops the gun, slowly backing away. Jaal tries to shout at her as she runs away, but Lathoul pulls his attention back to the most important thing — the bombs.
Ryder wants to go and disable those bombs, but before she can... 'Are you all right? You going to make it?'

The angara nods. 'I hate Akksul. Do not let him win.'

She smiles down at him. 'Don't worry, I won't.'

She then stands with Jaal following her. They start running towards the Forge. She reassures Jaal that she'll follow his lead should Akksul show up. He knows him better than she does, after all. There's no way she could predict his thoughts.

'I'll focus on disarming the bombs,' Ryder declares as they approach the ledge to the Forge. 'You two, take out the Roekaar. Got it?'

When they inform that they do, she jumps off the edge and lands next to the first bomb. Jaal and Liam follow her orders, standing on either side of her as she crouches down next to the bomb and starts to disarm it via her omni-tool. It's almost a good thing that Akksul stole it from the Initiative — all the codes and frequencies are already uploaded for her.

It doesn't take long for the first one to be disarmed and so she quickly boosts her shields and run to the next, having Jaal and Liam follow her. They repeat that for the remaining three bombs, Ryder joining in at the end when another shuttle arrives and all that's left to do is take out the remaining Roekaar.

She almost wants to drop to the ground the second the Forge is clear. Jaal comes to her side and throws his arms around her, so happy that this special place isn't going to be blown up for Akksul's cause.

Her cheeks are flushed when he lets her go and she swallows, turning to survey the surroundings.

'Jaal! Jaal!'

Ryder turns along with Jaal, finding Teviint and Baranjj running up to them. She rests her hands on Jaal's chest, bowing her head over. 'I killed Lathoul. I killed him! I'm so sorry!'

'He's not dead,' Jaal informs. He stays still and tall, not moving his hands to touch his sister. 'You're lucky.'

She raises her head and the relief in her eyes is palpable. 'I lost my mind, Jaal! I want to go home!'

Baranjj takes a step forward. 'But the cause! I only joined because of you!'

Teviint narrows her eyes. 'I shot our brother.'

Baranjj starts to appeal again, asking her not to leave him when another voice cuts over him. 'Let her go. I only want soldiers who are committed to our cause—'

It's a voice Ryder could recognise anywhere. Akksul. He comes sauntering out of the darkness like some messiah. It makes Ryder's hands clench into fists, especially as he continues to talk.

'—Not weaklings who stand by and watch the destruction of our people — at the hands of aliens.'

He stops then and Ryder looks up, seeing a group of angara on the ledge. All of them are armed. All of them ready to kill her on Akksul's order.

*I'm not the one trying to blow up a sacred place,* she wants to hiss but holds her tongue. Jaal told her
to let him take the lead if Akksul arrived. She wasn't going to betray him.

'I speak for our people! And I say, you're done in Heleus.' He makes a move to his hip and Ryder has her gun up before she even realises that there's nothing in his hand as he points it at her.

She feels like a goddamn fool, especially as Jaal's calls out for her, telling her to stop.

Akksul only laughs. He steps up, staring into her with eyes much like Jaal's. Except where Jaal's make her think of the universe and endless possibilities, Akksul's just seem to be lost and dark and dull.

'Martyr me. Please. I dare you.'

Ryder takes a deep breath and lowers her gun. 'I don't shoot unarmed, crazy people.'

He stares at her for a long moment, glaring at her as if she had just destroyed his plans. It makes her frown, even as he turns away and addresses the angara on the ledge. 'They move onto our planets. Steal our resources. Make us weak.'

'I've watched Ryder make planets habitable,' Jaal declares, not a hint of doubt in his voice.

'Exactly. And they'll never let us forget it.'

'She rescued our beloved Moshae.'

'I know...'

'Saved her life.'

'I know! Stop defending them!'

'The Moshae trusts Ryder and—'

Before Ryder can hear what he was going to say, Akksul moves. He draws a gun, pointing it straight at Jaal. 'Stop! We've been fighting the wrong enemy. Perhaps the real enemy is this traitor!'

Ryder can't seem to move or even breath. Not as that gun is pointed at Jaal. His hands are raised, trying to placate Akksul but Ryder has no idea if that's enough. If it'll even work. All she can concentrate on is that gun and how it's so close to Jaal's face.

'Jaal?' she asks, bringing her gun up to Akksul. If it were up to her, she would have blown his head off as soon as that gun had appeared, but she had told Jaal to listen to him. To follow his lead. She was going to see that through, no matter what.

'Don't! Jaal orders and with a deep breath, Ryder nods and lowers the gun. He turns his attention back to Akksul then, almost pleased with Ryder. 'The Moshae trusts Ryder,' he repeats. 'You have become a danger to your own people. Walk away.'

'Or... I kill you and reveal the Resistance for the traitors they are!'

The gun goes off.

There's a second. A split second where Ryder considers bringing her own gun up and shooting Akksul. But that fades as she watches the energy leave the gun, heading straight for Jaal. It all seems to happen in slow motion, and she almost wants to scream at him because it's going to hit him and if it hits him, it'll kill him and she can't lose him. She can't. She's already lost her dad and Scott and
Mom and she can't lose Jaal either.

But the beam of energy misses, only grazing Jaal's cheek, slicing open a small wound that looks sore, yes, but definitely non-fatal. It slams into the rock of the cave and silence surrounds them.

The angara on the ledge slowly back away, shock in their eyes. Jaal's earlier words come back to her. Akksul doesn't kill angara, but he had tried to kill Jaal. It had shown everyone just how low he had sunk... the angara didn't turn on their own.

'The alien is not the monster here,' Jaal declares, still standing strong and tall that Sara wonders how he does it. Her entire body is quivering from the mere stress of nearly losing him.

'I love my people,' Akksul states, but no-one replies. Jaal only turns to his brother and sister, turning them back around with plans to get them home.

Ryder falls back, letting the family reunite. Liam steps up to her side but for once stays quiet. It's almost as if he can tell that her mind is elsewhere.

When they reach the shuttle, Sara sits as far away from everyone as she can. Jaal is more focused on his family, though she does catch his gaze flickering over to her every once in a while.

As they land, Ryder still isn't feeling any better. In fact, there's a pressure in her skull that she knows is a symptom of tears. She's almost on the verge of crying and she just needs to get back to the Tempest as soon as possible to cry into her pillow.

She should have known better, of course.

As Teviint, Baranjj, Lathoul and their mothers get reacquainted, Jaal slowly leads Ryder off to the side. She looks out over the wilds of Havarl, not trusting herself to look at him.

'Thank you for trusting me. Killing Akksul would have made the Roekaar stronger.'

And that's when she snaps because that's all he cares about? That if Akksul had died, the Roekaar would be stronger? 'He shot you!' She rounds on him, eyes blazing and the tears starting to gather.

'I'm glad he did. It exposed how far he's fallen.'

Sara shakes her head and steps back. 'That's all you've got to say? I was really fucking worried. I thought you were going to die. I thought—'

'It will heal. All scars do.' He steps forward and his huge hand comes up, cupping her cheek. It pretty much spans the entirety of her head, and she's thrown when she repeats the action almost on impulse and finds her hand barely spans have his head.

He lowers his head, resting his forehead against hers. She can feel the gentle hum of his bioelectricity. It's steady. Reassuring. It almost makes her relax... until her fingertips graze his new wound and all the emotion comes rushing back to the surface.

She shakes her head and pushes back. 'You should say goodbye to your family. I've got to... I've got to go.'

Without looking back, Ryder makes her way to the Tempest.
Chapter 39

When Sara arrives back at the ship, she doesn't even bother to remove her armour this time. She just heads straight to her room and throws herself onto the bed, gritting her teeth as she tries and tries to stop the rising emotions.

But it's uncomfortable, the heavy metal and so she stands again, a grunt on her lips. She starts snapping every piece off, throwing it to the ground or hurling it at the walls. Gil can fix them later if she does any damage, she just doesn't care in that moment.

Her mind just keeps replaying that whole fucking scene in her mind. The sound of the shot as it headed straight for Jaal, scraping his face and leaving a wound that will scar over. It will always be there — a constant reminder for her on how he nearly lost his life; how she had just stood there and nearly lost him... before she even had a chance to tell him, well, anything.

She's left in her underarmour but even that feels too fucking tight, so she pulls that off until she's only in her underwear. Her civvies are still on the bed from where she left them earlier, and so she quickly pulls them on, thankful that they're all loose; loose sweatpants and a loose, light jumper, both of them marked with the N7 training. They had been her dad's. Her final comfort whenever she almost feels ready to relapse.

Before she can fully try to calm down, there's a knock at the door and somehow she knows, within the deepest pits of her soul, that it's Jaal on the other side. Sara briefly considers ignoring him, just letting him stand there until he gives up and goes away but that is just too rude and evil for her, no matter how she feels.

She tells SAM to unlock and open the door, then to lock it again after Jaal has stepped inside. She stares at him, eyes wide and unable to look anywhere else but that damn wound on his face.

'Something is wrong,' he states in that husky voice of his. 'What is it? Have I... done something?'

Sara almost cackles. She shakes her head and the tears finally seem to fall free. Jaal gasps and steps forward, but she raises her hand to stop him from coming any closer. 'You nearly died, Jaal.'

'But I—'

'I know you didn't!' Ryder cuts him off, her voice louder and more stern that she intended. 'I know you didn't die but you could have! Do you know how much I've lost since coming to this fucking place? How much I've lost in my life? My mum, my best friend, my dad, my brother in his coma. You're one of the most important people to me, Jaal, and I nearly lost you...'

She makes herself stop talking, realising that she's already said too much. There's no way in hell she can pretend any different now. Bringing her hands up to cover her face, Ryder tries to bring her emotions back into check. This kind of outburst was unbecoming of the daughter of Alec Ryder, human robot.

That's why she doesn't see Jaal approach until she feels his arms wrap around her. 'Darling, Sara,' and he says no more. It's almost as if he knows he doesn't need to; that they'd fall on deaf ears in that moment. He just tightens his hold as Sara wraps her arms around him, relishing the feeling of his body against hers. It's warm and strong and there's the hum of his bioelectricity, and, most importantly, he's alive.

So, she clings on for dear life, not daring to move until her mind has quieted down and the shock of
almost losing him disappears to the back of her mind.

When she pulls back, she offers him a watery smile, realising that his rofjinn is soaked with her tears. She hopes that's not some sign of disrespect as she wipes her face.

'I'm sorry.'

Jaal smiles in return, shaking his head as his hand plays with a strand of her hair. 'Never apologise for your emotions, Sara.'

She tries to accept that. She tries to believe that her feelings are nothing to be ashamed of, but it's hard when she's spent all of her life believing they were. It was a classic human trait, but her father made it worse — he never spoke about anything, and it was something that had rubbed off onto both of his kids.

'I'm getting there,' she whispers, gazing up at him with wonder. In all her imagination of Andromeda, she never could have come up with Jaal. She had always suspected it to be an adventure, but one she hadn't been truly excited about or that something special would come from it.

Now, she can't imagine her life without this strange alien. And one day, she hopes he understands that. Just how deep her feelings go. She's just got so much to do and now, when her emotions are still raw from nearly losing him, isn't the right time.

'What do you have planned for us next?' Jaal asks, as if he seems to know that she needs the distraction.

She wipes her face with her sleeve, her body humming from the realisation that he's still playing with her hair. 'We're going after the Archon. I need to deal with that bastard sooner or later, and I need the map to Meridian. After that, we can plan on when and how to get there.'

Jaal looks at her for a long moment and she somehow knows that he's trying to figure out whether he can say something or not. She encourages him with a smile and a gentle nudge to his shoulder.

'May I make one request?'

'Of course.'

'Will you... take me with you on the Archon's ship?'

She can understand that. So much of his life has been disturbed by this fucker. Thanks to him, Jaal has never known a moment of peace. She can understand the desire for him to face his enemy.

It just makes her smile that he believed he had to even ask.

'Jaal, I wouldn't have it any other way. There's no-one I'd trust to have my back more than you.' She reaches up, her fingers trembling and touches his wound. This time, even though she's still shaken to the core from the events, she doesn't focus on what she nearly lost — she focuses on what she still has. 'If I'm walking into hell, I want you there beside me.'

There's a fire in her stomach as he stares back at her. His thin lips part and she swears his gaze flickers to her own. She wonders what it'd be like to kiss him. He's not too different from a human and hell, she's kissed a drell before. She could find out, just by tilting forward; somehow, she knows that Jaal wouldn't refuse or pull away.

'Pathfinder, we need a heading,' Kallo's voice comes over the comms and Sara pulls back, dropping
her hand from Jaal's face and clenching it into a fist. One of these days, she was going to disconnect all her comms and finally see where things go with Jaal.

Jaal clears his throat, and he looks just as disappointed as she felt. 'I will leave you to it... Sara.'

Before she can reply, he's leaving her quarters and the realisation that he only ever called her by her first name is ringing in her mind — even as she heads to the bridge to break the news of the new mission to Kallo and Suvi.
'Take is slow,' Ryder says as Raeka stirs, starting to wake up. She can remember what it was like, coming out of cyro. It wasn't pleasant at all, and so she doesn't want the salarian pathfinder to move before her body was ready.

It had been odd, seeing the salarian ark attached to the Archon's ship, but in a weird way it was also rather good. It gave her a way into the flagship without being detected, it meant she had found the salarians and now she only had the turian and quarian ark to worry about — and she knew that Avitus was still out there, looking.

Raeka shakes her head. 'No need. I'm fine. Salarian stasis recovery is almost immediate.'

That almost makes Ryder scoff. *Must be nice.*

'Who are you?'

Giving a warm, hopefully reassuring smile, she answers, 'Sara Ryder. Pathfinder for the human ark.'

Then Raeka asks the question that Ryder hadn't been prepared for. 'Where's Alec?'

'I...' Sara raises her head, finding Jaal's gaze. He's looking at her with warm eyes, as if he knows just what that question means to her. As if he can sense the lump rising in her throat. Just looking at him gives her the strength swallow and turn her attention back to the salarian pathfinder. 'He didn't make it. It was a kinda me or him option and well, he chose me.'

Raeka doesn't say anything to her, which she's glad about. No condolences or pity. She can just move on with her mission as Raeka pushes herself off the table and wanders over to a console, muttering about how going into stasis was a mistake. Sara can only listen to how the kett attacked and the crew convinced Raeka to go back into stasis to keep her safe.

'We're heading into the kett vessel to gather intelligence. Wake up a flight crew and ready the ark for escape on my signal.'

'That'll be no problem. And then I'll work on freeing the ark so you can focus on your objective.'

After thanking Raeka and patching her into their comms, Ryder, Jaal and Cora make their way across the tether into the Archon's flagship, relieved when Kallo informs that the kett don't know they're there.

The second they land, they walk straight into a group of kett, immediately having to fight and kill the fuckers to stop any alarms going off.

After patching SAM into the terminal, and finding out that Raeka had came across with some other salarians to find out what happened to their people, they set off towards the Archon's chambers.
When Ryder sees Raeka asking for help with the door, she's almost thankful. It seemed to have been non-stop fighting, even though their plan was to be unnoticed. The first room had been hard enough, and then they had found kett workers with salarian stasis pods. She had managed to kill one but the others had quickly ran away. She didn't want to think what they were doing — she just knew if she ran into them again, they wouldn't be so lucky.

But the main problem had been the gun battery. It had been so quiet, yet she hadn't even thought about that until the door had locked. A fucking ambush. She should have known better — should have seen that coming. There seemed to be an endless supply of them, and if Raeka and her squad hadn't come along, Ryder's pretty sure her team would be dead by now.

They eventually had to leave, but it had been enough for them to turn the tables. With the help of Zap and her assault turret, they had killed the Ascendant, and managed to find another route out of the damn room.

Now, here they were, with Raeka, trying to get a door open for the salarians who were still searching for their people.

'A moment whilst I override security,' SAM offers and Ryder slumps against the terminal, taking a moment to catch her breath.

'Raeka, we've got a big problem. Did you see those guns back there?'

Raeka nods. 'I know. They'll destroy the ark before we can even power up the engines.' She tilts her head. 'Unless...'

That makes Ryder perk up. She straightens and fixes the salarian with wide eyes. 'If you've got an idea, let's here it.'

'Venro here used to repair FTL drives on private cruisers.' She turns to another salarian. 'Venro — an EMP device?'

The other salarian nods. 'It might work! If we rig one to detonate near those guns, they'd lose power.'

'And the ark would be out of harms way.'

It all sounds like a good idea, but there's just one thing nagging at Sara. 'What about your missing people?'

'I'll keep looking. Captain Hayjer and Venro will focus on the EMP.'

'Everyone be careful.' She smiles at the salarian pathfinder. 'And good luck.'

'The door is now open,' SAM informs as Ryder pulls herself together. She quickly reloads her gun and turns her attention back to the previous path that SAM had given her.

She thinks things are going fine until the doors start locking and SAM can't get through them. She scans the panel on request, finding out that it's voice activated. With SAM's help, her voice is changed to mimic a kett as she speaks, unlocking the door with the lie that she's here to secure the area.

'Impressive. But also disturbing,' Jaal says, stepping up beside her as the door slides open.

'Tell me about it. I don't want to hear my voice like that ever again.'
They find themselves in a lab, and she sees even more scientists, managing to take down two as they run away and are defended by Destined, Anointed and Chosen kett. The sight of all the salarian pods makes her blood boil until she's screaming, her gun firing non-stop at whatever kett she can reach. She just wants to end everything — bomb the entire ship if she could. She knows she needs the relic, but right now, that doesn't seem to matter as she watches the final kett drop.

It takes her a long second to get herself calm enough to ask SAM how things are going, discovering that they need to go through a new path as the doors are locked.

She's just crossed the threshold when SAM's warning comes, but it's too late. The three of them are frozen in place, guns dropped to the ground and a strange laser holding their wrists. She can't move, no matter how hard she tries.

'Is some sort of immobilising field.'

'It's useless to struggle,' a voice declare. A voice that she recognises from all that time ago, when she had first arrived in Heleus and was looking for Aya's vault — before she even knew Aya was a place and the angara existed.

Sara turns to him, glaring.

'I've been in this forsaken cluster for decades, surrounded by amoeba.' He looks at Jaal, dismissing him as he turns away. 'Then you arrive. A human. Able to do the unthinkable. You even evaded me. Such an unlikely rival. It was almost invigorating to have one. And yet, it's a fitting end.'

'It's not over until I can use your fucking head as a basketball hoop,' Sara spits out, eyes narrowing and trying to surge forward, even though she knows it won't achieve anything. 'I've seen your experiments. I'm going to end you.'

'It is progress,' the Archon sneers and then his hand is around her throat. Sara gasps, the pressure almost enough to stop her breathing. There's a crushing to her windpipe, but she keeps her face straight, refusing to let this fucker see how much he's affecting her.

'Hands off her!' Jaal orders and it's almost enough to make her smile, even as the Archon starts tilting her head this way and that, as if she's some show pup ready to be judged.

Then there's a pressure on her neck, a stabbing pain that only seems to grow. She needs to clench her jaw to stop herself from crying out — she won't give this bastard the satisfaction.

'A first sample. Your testing begins now. I will learn your secret soon enough.'

The Archon is distracted for a second, something coming over a private comm channel. Ryder wonders briefly if it's about Raeka, and finds herself panicking. She can't have them getting caught. They were here to rescue the ark, not get it blown up.

With a warning to "save her strength" the Archon leaves the room and Sara can finally ask SAM what he knows.

'I am sensing a biological transmitter in your bloodstream now. Attempting to neutralise it.'

'Okay, yeah, that's priority two for sure. You have any idea how to break out of this damn thing?'

'The containment field only interacts with living matter. If you expire, the field around you will extinguish until manually reset.' Sara's eyes widen but before she can get a word out, SAM continues, 'As you know, my access to your physiology allows me to enhance your vital signals
when required... I can also do the opposite.'

'Whoa, whoa, whoa. Back up buddy. I really don't wanna die today, SAM. The whole idea was to make it through this mission.'

'AFTER STOPPING YOUR HEART, I WOULD ATTEMPT TO RESUSCITATE, OF COURSE.'

Of course. It's said almost so nonchalantly that it startles a laugh from Ryder's throat. She wonders what Jaal and Cora are thinking in that second, but it quickly drifts away as she realises time is marching on. She has to make a decision — she needs to get out of this field and go and see what's happening. She needs to get the relic, save the ark and get off this damn ship.

'There's... no other options?'

'None that I can determine.'

Taking a deep breath, Ryder allows herself a moment to gather herself. She thinks of her mother, her father, already gone through this. She thinks of Scott, back on the Hyperion. She thinks of the crew, waiting on the Tempest, and Cora and Jaal with her now.

And then the countless people depending on this. She needs to try.

'All right. Do it.'

Cora sighs. 'Not again.'

Jaal says nothing, which makes her frown.

'Stopping your heart... now.'

The world goes dark.

Her body goes limp and falls to the ground. He can't bare the sight. There's not even a rise and fall to her chest, a sign that she's alive. Because he knows that she's not. She lies prone, eyes shut, arms and legs askew and for the life of him, he knows he'll never get the sight out of his mind.

He's not sure how long passes. It may just be seconds yet it seems to drag on for years. It's his whole eternity in that moment.

'SAM?' Cora prompts, pulling him from his thoughts and he realises it couldn't have been too long.

The mechanical voice of the AI comes back to them. 'Stimulating the cardiovascular core... zero activity.'

His heart aches. He wants to carve it out and give it to her, anything that will help her wake up again.

And suddenly it hits him. He had been confused when she had been so upset at Akksul nearly shooting him. On one hand, he understood the panic but he had survived so why keep worrying? Now, he knows. He stares at her body and knows the fear that must have been coursing through her veins as she had watched Akksul pull the trigger — as the beam narrowly missed doing any real damage.

'SAM!' he finds himself shouting, desperate to get the AI to do its job and bring her back.

'Stimulating the cardiovascular core.'
And just when he's certain he's going to collapse, when his own heart is going to stop, there's a gasp filling the room and she bolts upright. He closes his eyes and exhales, allowing the sound of her breathing to fill his mind, his heart, his soul.

'That's twice now I've come back from the dead,' her sweet voice fills the room as she slowly staggers to her feet. 'Can't say the experience is improving.'

He finally reopens his eyes, pleased to see her standing before him — there's a flush to her cheeks again, a brightness to her eyes and she's breathing and alive. He wants to hold her in his arms, but he's still locked in this damn trap of the Archon's.

And when she grins at him, her lips tilting in that cute and beautiful way of hers, he feels his heart skip a beat. 'Well, you two look comfortable.'

He laughs, despite the fact he's still trapped; despite the fact he's been greeted by her mortality and he's still not said a single word to her about how he feels. He just laughs because right now, she's there and alive.

'So did you, while you were playing dead,' Cora quips as Sara makes her way over to the console, quickly working to remove the immobilising field. He falls to the ground, just managing to stop himself from landing on his back.

When they're down, she walks over to them. 'Let's find a way out of this cage, huh?'

He can't help but agree.

Getting to the Archon's chamber doesn't take that long. She puts everything to the back of her mind, ready to deal with it later, when their lives aren't at stake. She needs to get this map of Meridian and she needs to get it now. She can worry about SAM being able to kill her later.

The sight of an exalted krogan scares her shitless and only makes her more determined. That's what the Archon would do with the knowledge that lies in Meridian. And she's not going to let the fucker do that to the entire galaxy.

When they reach the back of the room, SAM informs them that the relic in front of her is the one the Moshae described. And that it does seem to be a map.

She swallows, staring at it, before she reaches out with her hand, allowing SAM to interface with it. The whole thing starts to hover, and SAM overlays the map they found in the vault in Eos. That's all it seems to need for the relic to start working — it powers up, revealing the location of Meridian.

She can't stop the smile as she turns to Jaal, and he seems just as overjoyed as she is. She laughs, aware of SAM saying that he's logged the coordinates.

'So that's what you're after,' that voice growls again. She turns, Jaal and Cora raising their guns at the Archon's figure. Yet, she knows he's not really there, so she doesn't bother reaching for her own. 'There's more to Meridian than you know. Changing the weather is a fraction of its power — and I will not allow you to defile it.'

'Who's the one that knows how to work it, meathead?'

He snorts. 'Because of the artificial intelligence inside your head.' His lips tug into what Ryder can only believe is the closest a kett could ever get to a smile. 'I've seen what transpired in the laboratory, and now I know what makes you... special.'
Ryder grits her teeth and glares at the hologram of the ugly bastard before her.

'Meridian is mine,' he sneers. 'I've tolerated you long enough. Once your vessels are destroyed, you will be stranded here.'

'Captain, fire the EMP!' Ryder screams down at her omni-tool, knowing better than to waste a single second after that threat.

'Done!'

The second it's detonated, the Archon's figure disappears with it.

Only to be filled with a sound that doesn't bode well for any of them.

'That can't be good.'

'You can say that again,' Ryder replies, finally reaching for her rifle. She has just brought it up when the exalted krogan appears. Her eyes widen, even more disgusted and scared from seeing it up close and personal.

'Oh shit,' Cora mutters and Ryder snorts.

'Run!'

'It's a good thing Drack isn't seeing this!' Jaal declares and Ryder can't help but agree. She can't imagine how the old krogan would react, seeing one of his scouts like this. She hates the fact that she'll need to tell him about it.

'I don't know, we could use his temper right about now,' Cora chimes, as they all dash in opposite directions.

Ryder decides to treat it like a big bad krogan. She knows that they like to fight up-close, so if they constantly move, not giving it a change to charge, they should be fine. The armour is thick but it's nothing a shitload of bullets won't pierce eventually.

She quickly relays her plans to her team, only to curse when more kett show up to help the big beast. She tries to be nice to Hayjer when the salarian talks to her, but if she's focused on a conversation, she's not focused on that fucking behemoth and that's all that matters.

What she does focus on is Jaal and the encouragement he shouts. It's almost as if every single word is directed at her and she uses them all to steel herself, to strengthen her resolve and focus on the beast coming towards her.

With a scream, she gives it everything it's got, even as it starts to charge her. She stands her ground, somehow knowing that it won't be long before it drops. The tension rises and rises, growing with every step the krogan takes towards her but she refuses to stop firing.

And just when she's certain she's made a mistake, that she needs to dive to the side otherwise she's a goner, the damn thing finally stumbles and falls to the ground. The bang echoes throughout the room, and she can only watch it for a long second before the sight is too much.

Ryder turns, heading for the door and ordering her crew to follow her.

Just as she crosses the threshold, SAM perks up. 'Pathfinder, a moment, I am picking up krogan life signs aboard the ship. Several captives are being held not far from your location.'
Her heart plummets.

Drack's scouts.

'They are awaiting exaltation.'

Sara doesn't even hesitate. 'Do we have time to get there before the kett restore power?'

'If you act quickly.'

Ryder nods and takes a step forward. Her comms beep. 'Ryder, it's Raeka. I'm pinned down. Don't think I'm gonna make it.'

'Where are you?' Sara asks, her mind working overtime.

'Near holding cells where they're keeping several of my people. They're still alive. I ordered Captain Hayjer back to the ark.'

Ryder grits her teeth. 'You should be with him!'

'I couldn't leave my people — I had to try. And now, I think it's over. From one Pathfinder to another... farewell. Raeka out.' The comms go dead and Ryder lets out a scream of frustration because she knows what this means. Even when SAM confirms it a second later, she knows that she needs to choose — that there'll be no time to rescue both the krogan and Raeka.

'This is the last chance for Drack's scouts! The Archon will turn them into monsters!' Jaal declares and somehow, Ryder knows he's right. As much as she liked Raeka, as much as she wants to help her, she made her choice. She knows it's the end of the line for her — she didn't ask Ryder for help. But the scouts. She cannot risk anymore of those damn creatures roaming the world.

She takes a deep breath and nods. 'Reload. We've got to save those krogan from exaltation.'

Without waiting, she grabs her gun and runs forward. They find a krogan, Birtak, who managed to escape when the power went down. She manages to convince him that they're there for a rescue and start to power through the kett block their path.

They never seem to stop coming: chosen, anointed, destined, wraiths. They never seem to end.

As she fights, she patches through to Kallo, asking him to keep her updated if anything changes with the kett guns pointed at the ark. When he ducks out, she focuses on the fight, shooting at anything kett-like and just hoping that her team are okay.

They move through each section, her throat getting tighter and tighter as they keep pouring out from nowhere. And when she sees the familiar shine of an Ascendant, she almost wants to cry because isn't it hard enough already with all these fuckers trying to kill her, never mind the mighty dude with the weird protective orb?

That's when she finally deploys Zap and her assault turret, knowing that they'll need all the help they can get.

And when the fucker finally falls, she can't stop the cry of joy that breaks free.

It's still on her lips as she quickly releases the krogan, letting the Tempest know that they're making their escape and ready for extraction. But it falls away when she tries to patch through to Raeka and is greeted only by silence.
She sighs. 'I'm sorry.'

They all take off running, moving topside and rushing up the ramp of the *Tempest*. She watches as the salarian ark takes off, finally breaking free from its chains of the Archon's flagship.

When she's certain they're safe and clear, she finally stumbles into the ship, making her way through to the bridge without even bothering to take her armour off.

She hears everyone follow her, but she doesn't focus on that — all she can stare at is the ark and when it finally moves to FTL, she lets out a loud laugh and collapses onto the navigation console in front of her.
Chapter 41

Ryder decides to escort Ark Paarchero home. She's been meaning to go back to the Nexus for some time and decides this is the perfect chance. She's spent most of her time locked in her chambers, trying to get some rest or up in the comm room, talking to Tann about her success. She leaves out any information about Meridian, somehow knowing the uptight salarian won't agree — she's just happy he's over the moon about the salarian ark being found that he doesn't give her much grief.

By the time they make it back, it's to a huge welcoming party. It contains the asari, who haven't been back for too long it seems, and the salarians. Tann makes a big deal about it — which she can't fault him for — but she hates that he pulls her up and makes her out to be some sort of hero.

The first thing she does is check on Scott, finding out that there's not been much change. She quickly updates him on everything that's been happening, then makes her way to the SAM node to see more of her father's memories, feeling like she's been kicked in the gut when she needs to sit through her mother's death again.

Though things do get strange with this benefactor and after a quick chat with Tann, she decides to investigate Jien Garson's death further — when she discovers that the head of the Initiative was killed just after getting out of Cyro, Ryder knows something is wrong.

She's about to do more, but then Drack messages her through the comms, asking her if she's ready to deal with Spender — that they've already got him in a room, just waiting for her to arrive.

So, she leaves the murder mystery behind for now, making her way to the location Drack sent.

When she gets there, the first thing she hears is Spender's voice. 'I didn't have a choice! Aroane said they'd kill me!'

That almost makes Ryder snort. Funny how he talks about Aroane now, after Drack dropped him off the top of the warehouse and so is unable to contradict him.

'You helped the mutineers, Spender. That's a choice, right there,' Addison replies and Sara is surprised she's actually standing up to Spender for once.

'All you had to do was ask for help. Instead, you put everyone else at risk to save yourself,' Kandros adds and Ryder's almost pleased to hear the turian is there.

Then again, it does make sense for the Nexus head of security to be there dealing with this mess.

When she finally walks into the room, she steps up to Spender and sneers down at him. 'People died, all because of you, Spender. Don't play innocent.'

'They said no-one would get hurt! I didn't hurt anyone! It's not my fault!'

Drack chuckles. 'You're done now, buddy, and with any luck, they'll give you to me.'

Ryder cracks a smile at the old krogan, even as the Nexus Control guy she handed the scrambler over to steps forward and backs up her word. She's glad that he didn't talk before now. She'll need to do something in return, as a favour for him.

'A scrambler packed with logs — and credit transfers to exiles,' Drack informs as Addison takes the scrambler in her hands.
Ryder rounds on her, hands on her hips. 'This has been going on since the mutiny. He's been altering files, stealing supplies, communicating with exiles.'

'This is a massive security breach,' Kandros says with a shake of his head. 'I can't even begin to fathom the damage he's responsible for.'

Spender leans forward. 'Like your hands are clean, Kandros? We all wanted the krogan gone. I just made it easier. The exiles think I work for them, just like you think I work for you. That's what real politics looks like.'

'Bullshit,' Sara sneers, stepping forward with her eyes narrow. 'We didn't travel this far to repeat the same mistakes of only ever thinking about ourselves. You don't get to sit there and pretend that you're actions are defendable.'

He glares at her for a moment before looking away, no doubt seeing the fury in her eyes and knowing that she's one second away from clocking him on the nose.

'Goddamn it, Spender! Right under our noses!' Addison hisses, shaking her head and running a hand through her short hair.

Ryder straightens, turning towards the woman. Her glare is still in place as she faces this woman who never trusted her, even though she's never done anything. 'The krogan are gone. Spender forced their hand. And you let him do it, Addison.'

'I...' For one second, Ryder wonders if she's going to try and reason her way out of this, like Spender had. Then Addison's eyes screw shut. 'Damn it! Damn it! You brought it to me, Pathfinder, and I should have acted then... but Tann wouldn't shut up about the krogan.'

Ryder raises her head and looks over at Drack, wanting to know what he thinks before she goes any further. When the old man nods, she smiles briefly and then turns back to Addison. 'You're getting a chance to fix this now.'

Drack steps forward. 'Let's try by taking our side when my clan tries to negotiate a better deal with Tann. You need us.' He glances over to Ryder for just a second. 'And frankly, we need you.'

Addison sighs and finally agrees to help the krogan. Ryder feels as if a weight has been lifted off her shoulders. Addison leaves and when Kandros prompts about Spender, she doesn't even hesitate. She turns to him and with a small smile says, 'Kick him off the station. Let his friends deal with him.'

As he tries to plead, she turns and walks away, only stopping when his cries fade. She turns and finds Drack walking up to her. 'Thanks, Ryder, you have no idea how glad I am that this business is settled.'

She smiles and extends her hand. He places his in and gives her a shake that rattles the bones in her body. 'Any time, old man, any time.'

---

**Meet My True Mother**

**To:** Ryder

**From:** Jaal

Sara,
I've been telling my family about you and my time on the Tempest. I'd love for you to meet them and see where I grew up.

My true mother, Sahuna, is especially interested in meeting you. Next time we're on Havarl, let's stop by.

Jaal

Ryder stares at the email. She can't seem to look away from it. It's just so... her heart flutters every time she reads it. Meeting someone's parents — seeing where they grew up — that is a big thing. At least, it is for humans. She can only assume it is for angara... then again, they are so open and in touch with their feelings that maybe it's not.

And god, this is going to be her, the entire trip to Havarl isn't it?

She had given the order to Kallo pretty much the second she had gotten the message. It was desperate and needy, she knew that much, but she didn't really care. She told herself they needed to go to Havarl anyway, seeing as Peebee needed to pick up some RemTech that was there. She told herself that it was simply killing two birds with one stone.

She knows it's an utter lie but hey, she'll keep saying it.

After reading the message for the millionth time, Ryder pushes herself away from the terminal and decides to leave her room. She knows to steer clear from the bridge, because there's a terminal there too and she'll just end up reading it again and again.

So, she takes a quick stroll up to the cargo bay, thinking she'll find something in there... until she passes the med-bay and she hears voices coming from within.

Frowning, Ryder knows she should just keep walking but one of those voices sounds like Drack and all she can think about is the message she got from Kesh, saying how worried she was about her grandfather.

'Move your arm again,' she hears Lexi say.

'Readings won't change, doc,' comes Drack's reply.

'Your prosthetics are syncing properly. Your neuropathy-induced pain levels are... consistent.'

'Hey, I'm used to it. It's okay.'

'No! It is not okay!' Lexi sighs. 'You keep fighting smart, you hear me? You don't have much left in terms of organ redundancies.'

That's when Sara enters. She's heard enough to know that this is definitely the kind of thing Kesh was talking about. She steps into the medbay, clearing her throat.

Lexi must have given Drack a look for he says, 'Nah, it's fine. I don't mind.'

Sara smiles warmly and takes a step closer to the krogan. 'Everything okay? That looks... like a lot.'

'It is a lot. Just nothing he didn't know already.'

That makes Sara frown. 'What do you mean?'
Lexi just shakes her head, throwing her hands up a little before she stalks away. Ryder raises an eyebrow at Drack, wondering if he'll tell her what's going on.

'He's just... old. And missing too many parts.' Lexi turns to Drack again and narrows her eyes. 'And too damn stubborn for his own good.'

'You love me just the way I am, Doc.'

Ryder turns then, pretty certain she sees a faint blush on Lexi's face. She gives a growl instead, turning and warning Drack to not move from the table. She strides from the room, leaving Drack alone with Ryder.

'Can I ask what happened?'

As she listens to him rattle off everything that's happened to him over the years, all the pieces he's lost, the parts of him that are just synthetics, she can see why Kesh is so damn worried about him. It makes her feel guilty for all those fights she's taken him along on, not knowing this information. But she also hates that she feels like it's a big thing... she knows Drack would hate it if she let this change her view on him or if she started to baby him.

She's just worried about the old man. In the same way she had been when Akksul had fired at Jaal... well, not the exact same way but she couldn't stand the thought of losing Drack, either.

'Raising Kesh taught me an important lesson.'

'What was that?'

'Took me a while to figure it out, but it's important.' He turns to face her. 'Parents aren't meant to be the goal or finishing line. We're the starting line. Where you go from there? It's all you.' He offers her a smile that makes her heart warm and if he were the kind, she'd have given him a hug. 'Remember that.'

Before she can say anything more, Lexi appears and dismisses Drack with a warning to just be careful. Ryder grins and goes to follow him, when Lexi stops her. 'We need to talk,' she says, her voice so strict that Ryder swallows.

She hears Drack chuckle. 'Looks like it's your turn, kid.'

'What about?' Sara asks as she turns and faces the asari doctor.

'Dr. T'Perro does not approve of how we escaped the kett confinement shield on the Archon's flagship,' SAM answers for her.

'By stopping the Pathfinder's heart? No, I do not approve.'

Ryder swallows. Damn, she hadn't really given much time to think about that. She had pushed it to the back of her mind to get out of the Archon ship, then had spent so long doing business things that it had left her mind completely.

She wasn't sure how she felt, either. It was scary, knowing that SAM could do that, at any moment. But she knew that he relied on her. They had already had this discussion before, so long ago when she had first become Pathfinder — when she had been scared about what it meant to have an AI in her head, able to take control.

The thing is, whilst she had died, it had been the only way out. And he had managed to bring her
back. Wasn't that the most important thing? She knew he wouldn't do it again. Not unless he needed to... which hopefully, he would never need to again.

She says nothing, still too lost in her thoughts so Lexi just storms on. 'Dying — even temporarily — is never okay.' She raises her hand, covering her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose. 'Ryder, SAM killed you. Yes, he brought you back but what if he didn't?'

'I cannot learn without the Pathfinder. That would be akin to killing a part of myself.'

'You're lines of code. You can't die!' Lexi shoots back, glancing up at the ceiling, where most people tend to look when SAM is talking to them through the ship.

Sara steps forward. 'Lexi, I understand... but I trust SAM. I know he'd never hurt me.'

'Thank you, Sara,' SAM's voice comes and it makes Ryder smile.

Lexi sighs. 'Look, I'm not against SAM.' She turns her gaze upwards again. 'I'm not against you SAM!' She turns her attention back to Ryder and there's a heaviness to her gaze. 'But my job's hard enough without an AI stopping your heart. Even to save your life.'

Sara sighs melodramatically. 'All right, all right! I'll find a new party trick!'

Her words have their intended effect. A smile spreads across Lexi's lips. 'Have Gil teach you Three-Card Monte or something.'

SAM apologises after that, making Sara smile. She raises her brows at the doctor, somehow knowing that this just shows what kind of AI SAM is. And when Lexi apologises in return, Sara leaves with a smile on her face, somehow having worked through her worries without much thought.
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

double update cos y'all have waited for this moment long enough

Ryder tries not to wring her hands nervously as she walks just slightly behind Jaal, following him without saying a word. She's still in her armour, having just said goodbye to Peebee after picking up the RemTech and sending her back to the *Tempest*. She had winked at Ryder, a huge, conspicuous thing that made her cheeks flush.

She knew it was ridiculous to get this stressed and worried... but then again... she had never met parents before. She had never done this part of a relationship before. The only time she had met Shasi's parents was at his funeral. They hadn't really looked at her, which she was thankful about.

Ryder swallows and shakes her head. No. She's not going to think of things like that and let it ruin a nice night. Even if this means nothing to Jaal, it means something to her and she's going to relish it.

'Jaal! Jaal!' a voice comes, then Sara can see a female angara running towards them. A smile spread across Jaal's face as he jogs, meeting the woman halfway. He wraps his arms around her and she laughs, so loud and carefree it makes Ryder smile without realising.

They pull apart. 'Wait. Is there bad news?'

Jaal shakes his head. 'No. The Pathfinder is interested in where I grew up.'

And then he steps aside. Somehow, she knows that this is his mother. It's really the only thing that makes sense. She stands before Sara, hands clasped and looking a little meek — as if she's not certain how to be around Sara.

'Ryder, this is my true mother, Sahuna Ama Darav,' Jaal introduces, and before Ryder knows what she's doing, she's stepping forward and wrapping her arms around the smaller angara. She can almost sense the surprise coming from Jaal's mother, but then she quickly returns the embrace and Sara knows she's made the right decision.

After all, she knows how much the anagara like their hugging.

She pulls back and Sahuna beams at her. 'Jaal has told me how much he admires you!'

Sara turns to Jaal, a teasing grin on her lips, even though her heart is going a million miles an hour — especially when paired with that bashful look on his face. 'Really?

'He's my favourite! Smart. Loyal. Kind. A great shot. Writes poetry... sews,' Sahuna continues and every single word she says is something Ryder can only agree with. The last two are rather new to her, and it just warms her heart all the more. He's so soft and gentle and god, her heart is going to burst out of her chest at any moment.

'Mother,' Jaal cuts her off, clearing his throat in such a universal, embarrassament move that Sara truly feels at home.
Sahuna merely laughs. 'I am late for a Resistance meeting.' She places a hand on their shoulders. 'Stay clear.' She then presses past them and disappears.

Sara turns to Jaal. 'Your mom is in the Resistance?'

'Yes.' He leans towards her, almost conspiratory. 'And every child is her favourite.'

He smiles and beckons her onwards, and she goes without the same feeling of worry that had been there earlier.

When the doors slide open, however, it all comes rushing back because there's so many of them. She actually tries to count but they're moving so fast and Jaal tries to introduce them but it's all just a blur. She follows him into the room, through the crowd and she notices a few familiar faces, mostly the three that they had rescued from Akksul... she can feel everyone's eyes on her, no doubt wondering what she's doing here and she's almost relieved when Jaal leads her into a small room and the door whizzes shut behind them, leaving them alone.

'And here's my room. My tiny sanctuary,' Jaal says and she turns her attention back to him, giving him a smile. She hopes her panic doesn't show on her face. She doesn't want him to worry about her or feel like she can't cope. This is who he is — this is how his people like to live, he said as much himself.

She needs to get used to that.

As the Pathfinder. Of course. Nothing more. Right?

Damn.

'We have a saying that I like: "home is where the heart is".'

Jaal smiles at her. 'I like that.' He starts tidying things up, moving things from one place to another and when he spots one piece in particular, it seems to draw his interest. 'Oh no, who put this here?'

He sits down on his bed and Sara moves over, too curious for her own good. It's a chest, she knows that much and when he opens it, she can see a few items inside. She frowns. 'Schematics? Of...?'

'When I was seven, my aunt stole a kett weapon for me. So I took it apart. To learn.'

Her cheeks are starting to ache from how often she's smiled. She had known that Jaal enjoyed tinkering with things, always trying to learn and improve, but to hear that it started at such a young age makes her heart leap. She's almost curious to see a tiny Jaal, working away on things.

She leans forward once more, trying to see what else is in the box. Her frown deepens when she sees it. 'And that is... was... a kaerkyn.'

'Pet kaerkyn. Alfit. He died, so I took him apart.'

'To learn?' she guesses because somehow, it just makes sense.

'Why not?'

She smiles and nods her head, feeling lightheaded and wonderful. She feels like she's floating, especially as he sets the box aside and turns towards her. Those beautiful eyes gaze down at her, bearing into her soul. She feels laid bare and for once in her life, she doesn't feel afraid or ashamed.

'You make my heart sing,' he says, his voice low. Her heart stammers and stutters and she wonders if
that's her own heart trying to sing. It's so beautiful and poetic and everything she'd longed to hear. 'I want us to be together.'

And just like that, she feels radiant. She feels like a supernova. The smile that breaks across her face hurts but she can't seem to stop herself. Not as she stares at him, replaying those words over and over because it doesn't seem real. How long had her feelings been bubbling below the surface and she had been unwilling to act or even think about them, because she thought this would never happen?

Her voice is just a whisper when she says, 'Yeah. I'd like that.'

And then he's laughing. A loud, joyous thing that she can't help but join in with.

'Yes!' And there's nothing but happiness and bliss in that one word — utter jubilation that makes Ryder feel as if she's soaring. His hand comes up and cups her cheek, and it's huge and still gloved and she can feel the hum of his bioelectricity. And he stares at her with such passion in his eyes that she seems to melt before him. 'I adore you.'

Then he's tugging at her, and she's going willingly, meeting him halfway as their lips press together. Her eyes fall shut and she feels like she's exploding. It's not too different from a human kiss; lips still soft, still sure in their movement.

But it's unlike any other kiss she's ever experienced. Her entire body feels alight and she just wants more, more, more. She presses back against him, her heart hammering against her chest as her entire body tingles. She has no idea if it's just from these feelings or if his electricity is doing something to her.

She just knows that this is perfect and she wants nothing more than to stay like this.

But he pulls away.

She can't really blame him. This is still his family home and their first kiss and she needs to be resonable here.

He quickly darts to his feet. 'Let me show you one more thing you might like.' He holds out his hands, letting Sara place her own on top of them. He tugs her off the bed, gazing down at her for a long moment, eyes burning, before he clears his throat and pulls back. 'Lie down.'

She does so without question, lowering onto the floor as Jaal moves off to fiddle with something. Before she can question what he's going to show her, stars fill the room. It's the most beautiful thing she's ever seen — countless clusters, beautiful colours, all spread across the ceiling.

She stares at it, wide-eyed in wonder, until Jaal appears at her side, lying beside her. 'It's beautiful. Did you make it?'

He hums. 'Long ago. It's not accurate. More of a dream, really. Just one more thing I want to take apart and figure out.'

'Ah, Jaal.' She reaches for his hand, entwining their fingers as best as they can. She then rolls onto her side, scoothing over until her head is resting against his chest. She can still see the ceiling, can still see the constellations he put on display for her.

She feels his free hand come up and play with her hair. 'And now I have someone to do it with.' She beams up at him. 'My mother is going to love you... I am sorry.'

Ryder can't help but giggle, turning so her chin rests against his sternum. She stares up at him
through hooded eyes. She shakes her head in bemusement. 'I can't believe this is happening. So long I worried I was being a fool for feeling like I do — thinking it'd never happen.' She shakes her head again and inches herself upwards, moving closer and closer to his face. 'If I had known you were starting to feel the same way, I would have said something long ago.'

'I understand that completely,' Jaal replies as his fingers start to play with her hair. She wonders if that will always be his go to; if he'll always be amazed by it or if they'll reach a point where it's so familiar he doesn't bother. 'There were times I felt like you did feel the same... times when I felt sure I could lay myself bare and you would accept me. But I was afraid. I wasn't sure I could ever tell you, even as I wrote to my mother and she tried to convince me. But after the Archon's ship, after watching you die, I finally understood what you meant; I knew life was too short to continue going on as if my feelings weren't there. It was worth the risk, even if you said no.'

His eyes gaze down at her and they're hooded and warm and she can read a million different emotions in them. It makes her head swim but she almost relishes the feeling. She can't think of a time **anyone** looked at her like that — not even Shasi...

'The fact that you do feel the same, that you want to be with me, it is more than I could have imagined.'

She's not sure who moves first. She doesn't know if only one moved or if they both surged forward, bringing their lips together again in a gentle kiss.

It starts slow at first, a gentle press of lips, then another and another. Soon, the fire is burning in her veins as she's growing drunk with the taste of him. She pressed back against him, firmer this time, and she hesitantly darts the tip of her tongue out to graze his lip. And she feels his electricity jolt from the contact.

Sara grins, repeating the movement, pleased when one large hand lands on her hip. It's just to the side, not moving any closer to her backside, but it's firm and his grip is sure. The other is still tangled in her blue locks, rubbing the strands between his fingers in a desperate attempt to feel it beneath his gloves.

One of her own hands presses against his chest, grasping a fistful of his rofjinn as the other sneaks up towards those odd flaps at the back of his neck. She brushes her fingers against them, feeling the surge of his bioelectricity shooting through her body. It tears a groan from her lips, her mouth falling open just slightly and that's when his own tongue comes out to taste her lips. It's rougher than her own. She thinks of sandpaper but quickly dismisses it. It's nothing like that. She remembers her pet dog and thinks, perhaps it's like that. Or like her mom's cat.

Before she can come to any true conclusion, it's grazing her own and she's lost. She groans, her hand tightening in his cape as she teases back, her entire body aflame. There's passion and lust coursing through her veins and it's unlike anything she's ever experienced — in fact, she's pretty certain she's never experienced this before. Not whilst making out with someone. She just wants to relish in the touch, to lose herself to him.

Without even realising it, she slides her leg over his lap, straddling him as she continues to kiss him. She can just imagine the stars from his homemade projector shining above them, providing the perfect background for this moment. He had called it a dream, and if this wasn't a dream right now, she didn't know what was. It was everything she had ever imagined and she didn't want to wake up from this moment.

She didn't want to ever stop.
'Jaal, does the Pathfinder wish to stay for—'

They don't hear the voice until it's too late. Shauna is already through the door and frozen in shock by the time Sara realises that she's there; that she saw. She hops off Jaal's lap and scurries away, putting a foot between them as her cheeks burn unbearably. She can't even lift her head to meet Sahuna's gaze, afraid of what she'll see — she knows some aliens don't like inter-species dating. She has no idea how the angara would take to it, especially when some of them had been easily convinced by Akksul that they were evil and a threat.

'Mother, I—' Jaal starts but he can't seem to say anymore. Sara can't look at him either, but notices from the corner of her eye that he quickly fixes his clothes.

'Stars and skies! Is this what I think it is? Pathfinder, you must stay for dinner now! We have so much to talk about! My son has spoken of his feelings for you for so long — to see them reciprocated!'

Sara lifts her head then, a frown on her face because that was unexpected. She meets Sahuna's gaze and before she can say another word, the angara is striding over to her, throwing herself to the floor and wrapping her arms around Sara's shoulders. 'Welcome to the family, my dear! You have no idea how happy this makes me! We must call everyone to dinner!'

Before either Sara or Jaal can get a word out, Sahuna is dashing away. The door slides shut behind her automatically, leaving the two in complete silence.

Sara coughs, her face still burning in a way that's almost uncomfortable. That brings Jaal's gaze to her and she finally raises her head, offering him a faint smile. She's pleased to see that there's a similar flush of blue under his skin.

'So, I guess I understand why you apologised about your mom,' she says, her voice soft. She gives a giggle when Jaal gives a hesitant cough, muttering a "yes" in reply.

'It, uh...' He looks nervous and Sara slides closer to him, wondering what's going on inside that head to leave him looking like that. 'It hasn't put you off?'

Sara frowns for just a second, wondering why the hell he would think that. She stares at him for a long moment before realising that she doesn't need an answer. Not right now. She just needs to set his mind at ease.

She reaches up and cups his cheek, her fingers tracing those flaps at the side of his head. 'Jaal, I'm not that easily scared. I thought you would have known that by now. Granted, meeting your mother is a bit more scarier than fighting the Archon, but she likes me. That's half the battle. I'm afraid I'm going nowhere, sweetie.'

And he seems to preen under that. She's not sure if it's her words or the petname. All she sees is his smile grow and his eyes light up with adoration that feels like she's drowning in it.

'Truly, you are the most wonderful woman I have ever met,' he says, his voice low and then he's leaning towards her again. His lips are soft, his tongue sure as it reaches for her lips. The fire is still simmering below the surface, ready to erupt, and she's pretty certain that if Sahuna hadn't just interrupted them, she'd be letting it engulf her.

But she refuses to have a repeat. Getting caught making out by Jaal's mother once is bad enough, getting caught a second time, five seconds after the first time, is just too much. She would die of embarrassment.
So, she pulls away. He gives a groan, leaning his forehead against her own.

'Come on, you, your mother has no doubt screamed about this from the rooftops. We best get out there.' Sara stands first, reaching down and tugging him up. He towers over her and it sends a thrill through her. She had drawn him so often, mesmerising what it'd be like to touch him — to be able to do it has her feeling drunk.

'You sure you want to do this? I know you don't come from a big family...'

Sara gives him a quick peck on the lips before she turns. 'Honey, I've outran Remnant Vault Purification Fields. I can manage your family,' she calls over her shoulder as she steps up to the door and allows it to slide open.

It seems like the number of angara has doubled. And they're all standing there, looking at the door. Eyes light up as they finally see Sara, and she can only stand there in shock and surprise as they start to rush towards her.

Before she can run away, Jaal is at her back, a reassuring presence, and Sahuna's voice carries out through the throng. 'Stand back and let her breathe!' They all do as ordered, a few grumbling as Sahuna pushes through to stand in front of her. She wraps an arm around Sara's shoulders and starts leading her through the house. 'Come, my dear, I sent Yerehaaf to the marketplace to pick some food up for you. Ever since the embassy has been set up, we've had access to Milky Way supplies. I know Jaal has mentioned before that you do not find the taste of our paste enjoyable.'

She glances over her shoulder, briefly seeing Jaal being accosted by some of his relatives. She has no doubt they decided that if they couldn't get to her, they'd interrogate Jaal instead.

'Uh, yeah. It's just not really what we're used to. It wasn't bad or...'"}

Sahuna laughs. 'You do not have to worry about upsetting me, Pathfinder. I understand species are different. Ever since you arrived, we've been learning about all the species that came. We know that even amongst your own there are differences.'

Sara nods. 'It's a difference in... acids. I don't know. I didn't really do well with biology.' She smiles as she meets Sahuna's gaze. 'And please, call me Sara. Pathfinder is so formal.'

At that, Sahuna's eyes seem sparkle. Somehow, Ryder knows she's said the right thing and that she couldn't have done any better. She allows Sahuna to lead her to a dining table, ushering her into a seat and then pushing Jaal into the one to her right.

She settles down, trying her to best to seem calm even as her hand reaches out under the table and grasps Jaal's. She glances up at him, finding his eyes staring at her, searching, and so she offers him another smile to let him know that she has no regrets.

He beams in return before Yerehaaf comes back, announcing she has the "human food" and dinners officially starts.
The food was basic, something that Ryder had expected. After all, she was surprised she was getting anything human on Havarl. She would have probably eaten the paste, had that been all there was, just to be polite and make a good first impression on Jaal's mother... but the fact that they went out of their way to get her something familiar... it warms her heart in a way she had forgotten it could be.

*It's a mother's love,* she thinks, gazing down at the rehydrated food. It's just ship rations, nothing she's not used to. Yet the thought brings tears to her eyes. *That's what's so different. The feeling of a mother's love. It's been so long since I felt that.*

Almost as if sensing her sudden change in thought, Jaal reaches across and grabs her hand under the table. She lifts her head up, offering him a smile. He sees the tears, because he's Jaal and he notices everything, so he leans closer, his voice dipping low. *Is everything all right?*

Sara nods. 'Yeah. They're happy tears, in a way. I'll explain later. I don't want to ruin the meal.'

He studies her, almost as if wondering whether to press or let it go. He settles on letting it go, trusting that she will explain it after things have calmed down. She offers him another smile, threading their fingers together as best as they can and giving him a gentle squeeze in thanks.

She starts eating her meal, but their lack of both hands doesn't go unnoticed for long. Sahuna lets out a soft noise. 'I'm just so happy to see you both like this,' she declares, drawing the entire table's attention to them. Sara feels her cheeks burning again, something she's a little furious about because they'd only just calmed down about a minute ago.

'Mother,' Jaal tries to say in warning, but Ryder knows what it's like trying to tell a parent off. There's a slight growl in his voice but it's not strong enough for Sahuna to take seriously.

She waves her hand. 'I just know how long you have pined for her, Jaal! It just brings me such joy!'

Despite her embarrassment, that piques Sara's interest. She raises her head and glances across at Sahuna, cocking an eyebrow. 'Oh really? Care to tell me how long he's been pining over me?' She shoots Jaal a look — one that says *if I need to die of embarrassment, then so the hell do you.*

'Well, I noticed a change when you rescued the Moshae,' Sahuna starts as she takes a bite from her paste. 'He had always been distrustful of you but seeing you in action changed something. And when you chose to save the angara rather than blow up the facility? I think that just inspired him more. I noticed a real change the first time you were seriously injured.'

Ryder flinches, thinking back to the time she had stupidly smashed her hand into the mirror. She feels her throat grow thick, thinking that Jaal had shared that with his mother. She knows that angara are different, but it's still... she thought only the the crew knew.

'You were bitten by an adhi, I believe?' Sahuna states and Ryder's eyes widen. She turns to Jaal who smiles softly at her, his fingers tightening around her own in a reassuring squeeze. She feels her heart grow double in size, soaring at the knowledge that even then, this man was keeping her private secrets. 'He was frantic. And then you ended up going out with some other man? Vidal? It was then that I knew my son... I mentioned what his feelings might have been turning into then, and it's been working away ever since it seems.'

Sara can't stop the smile spreading across her face. It's huge and it's almost painful but she doesn't care. She turns to Jaal and in that moment, all she wants to do is kiss him. And the knowledge that
she can now doesn't make it any easier.

But she keeps to herself. She has no idea if angara are open with public displays of affection but humans aren't... and she's still human.

'Are we just going to pretend that this is normal?' someone snarls, breaking the little bubble Sara and Jaal had found themselves in.

She turns and finds a familiar face glaring down the table at her. Teviint.

Someone hisses her name but Teviint doesn't pay them any attention. Her entire focus is on Sara, who removes her hand from Jaal's immediately, as if the contact burns her. She swallows, not knowing what to say. What can she say? She had been so happy about Jaal's declaration that she hadn't given it much thought to how others would react.

It had been easier for her — back home, in the Milky Way, it happened. It wasn't common, but interspecies relationships did happen. Hell, look at her and Shasi.

But the angara... all they had were angara and kett. It seemed only normal that most of them wouldn't be so open about it. Just like humanity hadn't been when they first discovered aliens. The First Contact War was proof enough of that.

'I...' she murmurs, the roaring in her ears only growing and growing because no-one — not even Jaal — is leaping to her defence.

At least, that's what she thinks. It feels like hours had stretched on in painful silence, but it was only seconds. Seconds for Jaal to compose himself.

'You do not know Sara like I do, Teviint. But you must remember that she saved the Moshae; helped me bring you, Baranj and Lathoul home; showed Akksul for the monster he is, all because she trusted me not to do anything without my say so. She is strong and loyal and always puts others first. If you had to spend five minutes with her, you would see that... but if you do not wish to put in the effort, then that is on you. And I have to admit, that I feel sorry — for she truly is a light in these dark times.'

And after that speech, he just turns his attention back to his paste, taking a small bite out of it. There's silence once more but Teviint just stares at her plate, and when Sahuna applauds Jaal for his words, the spell seems to be broken and conversation returns once more.

Sara can only stare. Her stomach is doing flips; backwards, forwards, round and round and round.

She can only watch Jaal as he finishes his little square of nutritional paste and then turns to her.

She's just so overjoyed. She feels so utterly loved in that moment, even though her mind is screaming that it's too early for that, but she does. She has never had anyone care for her like that before — who'd say such things and she almost wants to cry.

Unable to get her throat to work, she just reaches for his hand again and squeezes as hard as she can, shifting in her seat so she can rest her head on his shoulder. Her cheeks burn at the obvious display of affection but she doesn't care. Jaal had said angara are very open with their emotions. She can only assume that stems to displays of it as well.

'Thank you,' she whispers, her voice as low as she can manage. She feels his hum in reply, but his bioelectricity shoots through her in such a way that she knows he meant every single word.

Just as she's losing herself to the sensation, allowing the mindless chatter of the others to drown out
and just focus on her and Jaal, Sahuna calls her name. She straightens, raising an eyebrow. 'Yes?'

'Ofraah and I were just discussing this and we thought we might as well ask you whilst your here.'

Sara shoots Jaal a look that says why doesn't that fill me with confidence?

'What is human childbirth like?'

She almost feels like one of those old vids. Where the actor takes a drink and someone then says something shocking, so they just spit the drink out all over the place in astonishment. She almost wishes that was her, because then she'd have something to distract herself from the situation.

Instead, she has nothing but the reminder and they're all looking at her now. Jaal tries to tell his mother off again but she waves a hand dismissing him.

'Um, well, I've never experienced it myself, so I can't really say? I know there's probably vids on the extranet and I can send you the address for my ship's doctor, Dr. T'Perro, no doubt she'd loved that...'

Sahuna hums, looking a little bit disappointed as she turns to the angara sitting to her left. 'That would be helpful, yes! We shall try to find these vids later. You say you have never experienced it?'

Sara shakes her head, unsure what to say to that. She's never had sex, never mind popped out a kid... but she's not going to tell her boyfriend's mom that.

'Do you wish to have children at some point?'

Oh my God! Sara feels like her face is going to explode from the direction of these questions. She quickly glances at Jaal, who tries once more. This time finally seems to get through to Sahuna, and she glances between Jaal and Sara with wide, confused eyes.

'Ooh, I'm sorry, is this not usual for your people?'

'Not...' Sara clears her throat. 'Not the day they've gotten together, no. That tends to wait a few months. Years, sometimes.'

'Goodness!' Sahuna clears her throat, managing to dampen the surprise. 'I see. I shall... remember that, my dear.' She offers Sara a smile. 'Though I should warn you that nothing ever embarrasses me.'

Sara has no idea what to say to that and she's almost thankful when Sahuna just smiles wider and then turns back to the woman on her side, who Sara can only assume is Ofraah that she mentioned earlier.

Jaal clears his throat and then pushes himself out of his chair. He offers his hand towards Sara, who takes it, raising out of her own chair. She wonders if he'll pull his hand away, but instead his grip tightens and he pulls her closer to his side. 'Ryder and I must return to the Tempest.'

'Already?' Sahuna sounds disappointed as she too rises. There's a chorus of goodbyes as the others then go on to continue their conversations.

Sahuna rounds the table, standing in front of them. She embraces Jaal in a fierce hug. 'Be careful, my son. And try not to leave it so long until you come home next time.'

'I promise, mother.'

They break apart and Sara prepares herself for the embrace that she knows is coming. It's not that she hates physical affection — she rather enjoys it, if she's honest — it's just harder when she's facing
strangers.

Still, she rests her chin on Sahuna's shoulder and wraps her arms around the angara's thin frame. 'Look after him,' Sahuna whispers in her ear and Sara can't help the soft smile that tugs at her lips. 'Please?'

Ryder pulls back. 'Always.'

A few others of his family appear then, wanting to say goodbye to them. Ryder just grins and bears it, trying not to think about how many of them there are. The last time she had a family gathering was... god, it was just after Mom's diagnosis. And there was four of them. That was all their family was.

Now it's even less.

She's not used to being enveloped in so many arms and by the time Jaal leads her back to the wilds of Havarl towards the Tempest, she can't help but breathe a sigh of relief.

She hopes Jaal didn't hear it, but she should have known better. 'Are you well, darling?'

The pet name sends a thrill through Sara's body, a tingle up and down her spine, and she smiles up at him. She almost wants to say nothing so he doesn't feel bad, but she knows better. But lying to him will only upset him in the long run, especially when he can read her like a book and knows there is something up.

'It's just... a lot. I didn't expect there to be so many of them,' she answers with a soft smile. 'I've just been used to Mom, Dad and Scott. Even the Tempest seems crowded to me at times. It's... strange to see a family so huge.'

He reaches for her, wrapping his huge arm around her shoulder and pulling her into his side. 'I understand completely, darling one. If it helps you feel any better, you didn't look uncomfortable at all. I'm so proud of how well you handled it all.'

Ryder beams up at him, before she leans her head against his huge shoulder. They make their way slowly through the wilds, one hand always resting on their guns, just in case, but before long, they find themselves back at the research centre and with the Tempest in view.

It's only when she sees it that her mind catches up with her. She pulls herself out of Jaal's embrace, stepping around into his path to stop him short. She gazes up at him, eyes wide and desperate. 'What are we going to do about the others?'

Jaal frowns, that strong brow falling down over his eyes. 'What do you mean?' He reaches for her hands, pulling them up to his chest, much like he did when he declared his feelings for the first time mere hours ago.

'Do you... the team! Do you think it'll upset them? I know some people don't like it when team members get together. And we should tell them, regardless of that anyway, so we're not sneaking around. But what if they don't like it? I don't want to hurt them... but I also don't want to give you up. Not tonight, anyway, and I don't really want to do it tomorrow either, but I don't want to leave it too late and...'

Jaal's hands leave hers and cup her face. He tilts her head upwards until their foreheads are pressed together. She trails off, closing her eyes as she feels his soothing hum pass through her. She sighs and leans into his embrace, her hands gripping his elbows and holding her tight to him.
'I do not believe anyone of them will be upset. Surprised, perhaps, but they shall get used to it. As for when to tell them, my dear, it's entirely up to you. What do you have planned next, anyway?'

Sara shrugs with one shoulder, reopening her eyes. 'Probably Eos. I don't have anything else here on Havarl… but I know Peebee has more RemTech to pick up on Eos, and Cora has asked me to meet her there. There's also some kett activity that I want to take care of too.'

He nods his head, the motion causing friction between them and she can't help but giggle at the feeling. She pulls back, blinking up at him with a soft smile on her face. She can't stop herself from just tilting her head and pressing their lips together. She's almost thankful that they're stuck somewhere between the research centre and the ship, so no-one can really see them. She just holds on tight, his lips soft against hers and she just presses forward.

'I don't think I'm ever going to get tired of doing that,' she whispers when they pull apart.

Her grin widens when he chuckles. 'Nor will I. The amount of times I have imagined this… it's even better than I had thought.'

'Oh?' She grins up at him. 'One day I hope to hear more of these daydreams.' She winks, amused when he give a startled little cough.

Sara takes a step backwards. She feels the determination grow in her stomach, somehow knowing that his words were true — the crew isn't going to be upset or disgusted. They may be a little thrown but that's all… they'll get used to it eventually and it's not like she and Jaal will be making out right in front of them. The mission is still paramount and she'll be sure to focus on it first and foremost.

It won't create a divide amongst them.

'After Eos, we'll tell them. Do you mind keeping it private until then? I don't want you to think that I'm embarrassed or ashamed but…'

'My darling one,' he cuts her off and Sara doesn't mind, not with that tone and those words and that look in his eyes. 'I will do whatever you need. We have told my family; it is entirely up to you on when you tell yours. I can continue to act as if my feelings are my own whilst in front of them all.'

Ryder reaches up, pressing another quick peck to his lips. 'You're the sweetest. Thank you so much. And don't worry, it's not like we'll be forced to keep ten feet between us at all times until then.' She swallows, realising a little too late just how that could be interpreted. She looks away, clearing her throat because yes, maybe for the first time she's feeling things she's never felt before but that still doesn't mean she's ready for it.

Thankfully, Jaal doesn't make a single comment about it. He just presses a kiss to her forehead and then leads them back to the Tempest.
'So, where's your mystery project?' Ryder asks as she follows Cora towards the edge of the lake. Vetra hangs back, somehow knowing that this is a little private moment between the two of them. Ryder still feels weird, not telling either of them about what happened between her and Jaal yesterday but she's not going to tell them all individually — that's just too much work. They'll be told as a group and then they can deal with it.

'Not far,' Cora answers as they finally stop by the edge of the lake. Cora crouches down beside a piece of equipment. 'Soil convertor. It's no Remnant terra-former but it makes sandy dirt into something useful. Eventually.' She stands once more and Ryder makes her way to her side. 'Add seeds. Some rain...'

Ryder smiles. 'And you've got your garden.'

Cora shrugs with one shoulder. 'It'll take years. I might not even see it,' there's a sadness in her voice but a determination in her eyes. 'That's okay. Asari think in centuries — lay a foundation and then step away. Let it grow into something you might never expect. Pathfinder training was my foundation. It gave me a whole galaxy of directions I could go... I don't need someone else's plan. Just a beginning; the first seeds of a garden.'

Cora leans down and scoops up a handful of dirt along with some seeds. She turns to Ryder with a grin on her face. 'One I started with my friend.'

She passes the seeds into Sara's hands, explaining the different combinations of flowers and grasses she's brought with her. Sara can only hope that they are around to see it come to fruition — the image it paints in her head is so beautiful she wants to see it in person.

They step forward together and on the count of three, throw the seeds in the air, letting them drift away on the wind and take root wherever they want.

By the time they make it back to Podromos, Ryder is sweating and dusty and all she wants is a shower and some food. Of course, she had forgotten all about agreeing to meet up with Jill — right until she sees Gil standing by one of the buildings and waving at her with a huge grin on his lips.

'You two head back, I won't be long,' she says to Cora and Vetra, thinking they deserve it after everything they've achieved today. They managed to take down the huge kett base that was still hovering over Eos as well as picking up Peebee's RemTech piece and a few other little missions here and there.

Neither of them complain and quickly head back to the Tempest as Ryder heads over to Gil.

'Good, you're here!' Gil crosses his arms over his chest as Ryder just nods. 'Okay, so listen, she's only got a minute or two and she's in rare form today, just to warn you.' He starts leading them forward and Sara follows with a raised eyebrow. 'She's here kickstarting repopulation protocols — reversing the chemical procreation blockers for colonists. Calls it "boosting the batter." He stops and fixes Ryder with a serious stare. 'She's going to try to get you to do it.'

Ryder scoffs. 'Wouldn't be the first one,' she mutters, thinking back to Sahuna asking about child labour and if she wanted kids, only realising too late that she's given herself away when Gil raises an eyebrow. She clears her throat and shakes her head, trying to change the subject. 'To be fair, it is her
job. And by the sounds of things, she takes it seriously.'

Before he can reply, another voice comes in reply, 'Am I interrupting something?'

As Gil goes to introduce her, Jill just laughs, waving him off, reminding the engineer that she had asked them both to stop by. Ryder watches the two banter back and forth, surprised when Jill's question isn't about popping a baby out of her but instead what she did to Gil that made him act like a grown-up. She tries to confirm that it's all Gil but she's sees through that, joking some more with her best friend before glancing at her watch and cursing.

'I need to head, it was good meeting you, Ryder.'

'Likewise,' Sara replies, honestly pleased that it didn't last as long. She knows Gil said she only had a minute, but some people stay that and still stay for an hour.

She turns and strides back to the Tempest, leaving Gil behind as he follows Jill back to her building. She hastily removes her armour, setting aside to clean later and strides through to the shower in her under armour. She doesn't even bother to take the time to get clothes organised or anything. She just hops in and quickly showers, wrapping a towel around her body and making her way to her quarters all in a matter of minutes.

By the time she's dressed and quickly pinged Kallo to tell him to leave Eos if everyone was aboard, the entire crew has descended to the galley.

She steps inside, deeply inhaling the smell of food that causes her stomach to rumble. It's nothing delicious — what can she expect? — but she's so hungry she'd willingly eat a pyjak.

She feels Jaal's eyes on her and licks her lips as she steps into the room, offering him a smile and hoping the others don't read too much into it. She just wants to kiss him again and again, seeing as it had been so long since she had done so last.

Okay, yes, it was only a day but still, that was too long for her!

Sara clears her throat as she glances back to Jaal, raising an eyebrow to ensure that he's ready for this. He nods his head and offers her a reassuring smile, shifting from his seat to come and stand by her side.

That seems to gather everyone's attention and she feels her cheeks redden but refuses to back down.

'Okay, um, before we start eating and since we're all in one room, I want to... say something...'

They're all quiet, staring at her with wide eyes. She swallows again and glances briefly at Jaal, who just stares back at her with such belief and care that she feels her resolve harden. She reaches for his hand, entwining their fingers as best as she can.

'Jaal and I are together. I'm not going to let this affect the mission, nor does this mean any favouritism is going to be allowed. If it weren't for the fact that we're looking to be in tight quarters for a good while still, I probably wouldn't have told you but we will be so yeah. You deserve to know. If you've got problems with that well... this is my ship, I'm still Pathfinder and you can kindly fuck off. If not, I hope you're happy for us and don't worry, we won't be shoving it in your face. We'll be professional. But yeah, you deserve to know either way.'

She cuts herself off, knowing that she'll just keep rambling if she doesn't. Her grip on Jaal's hand tightens and he squeezes back reassuringly, as the crew continues to stare in silence. She feels like she's going to suffocate because she honestly hadn't expected this.
A little bit of shock and surprise, yes, but not full out silence that seemed to drag on for hours.

Just as she's about to prompt them into replying, Peebee suddenly bangs the table. 'Knew it! You owe me one hundred credits, Kosta.'

'Wait, we don't even know if that's when they got together!'

'Both of you owe me five hundred,' Drack chimes in with a chuckle. 'For them finally growing a quad.'

Vetra fixes them with her icy stare. 'You couldn't have held off for another few months? Then I would've been getting that money!'

Ryder can only stare in open mouthed shock as they all start debating and arguing and transferring credits from their omnitools. She glances up at Jaal, who looks just as baffled as she does, before back to her group of friends who have moved passed the gambling and are now lamenting that they have nothing else to bet on.

'Wait, wait, wait, wait,' Ryder calls out, pulling her hand free from Jaal's as she steps up next to them. 'You've known this entire time?'

'Kid, neither of you were subtle,' Drack answers with a shrug of his shoulder.

'Yeah, we've had bets going on when you'd finally get together for months now. We added a new one when you both headed off to meet Jaal's family about whether things would come about then,' Peebee informs with a teasing grin. 'I thought it would. As did Drack. Liam and Vetra still thought you would dance around it. Just shows what they know.'

'All evidence pointed to them still being total wusses,' Kosta replies with a shake of his head.

Ryder purses her lips, glancing up at Jaal again and feeling a smile spread across her lips. She squeezes his hand and then turns back to the little band she's picked up over time. 'So... you don't mind about it?'

'Asari mate with whoever,' Peebee shrugs with one shoulder. 'No big deal to me.'

'Nor me,' Drack and Vetra echo, followed shortly by Suvi, Kallo and Gil.

Ryder realises that just leaves the two humans -- Cora and Liam -- to give their opinion. She feels her heart thump against her ribs, somehow worrying what Cora would say, seeing as, in some ways, she was closer to Alex Ryder than Sara herself was.

'If it means he'll shut up about you from now on, I'm great,' Liam teases with a grin. "'You should have seen the Pathfinder on our last mission, Kosta, she was magnificent"; "Ryder didn't pick me to go out on this mission... do you, think I upset her?"' He grins at Jaal who is glancing down at the floor with a faint blue tinge to his cheeks. 'It got tiring, bud.'

Sara grins up at Jaal, once again overwhelmed by the knowledge that he had been pining over her as long as she'd been over him.

Before she turns away from him, the smile still on her lips, Cora finally speaks, 'Seeing you smile like that is evidence enough for me to be all right with it.' She smiles when Sara finally turns to her. 'You need some happiness, Pathfinder, I wouldn't want to stop that.' Cora laughs. 'And I also think your dad would come back to life just to kick my ass if I tried to.'
Sara's breath catches in her throat at those final words. She hadn't really given herself much thought to how her father would react. Mostly because he wasn't around to either prove or disprove her theories, and because sometimes, she wasn't entirely sure.

Her father was an explorer at heart. Before he was a husband, a father, a soldier even... he wanted to explore, to discover, to create. Hell, it was half the reason he jumped into the Andromeda Initiative -- it meant doing things people had never done before.

So, maybe he would have been proud that his daughter was the first to enter a romantic relationship with one of these new aliens. Maybe it would have been a little strange for him, but more in a classic "parent never thinking their children's partners are good enough" way.

Finally able to swallow, Ryder blinks back tears and nods her head. 'Thanks, all of you, I mean it.' She clears her throat to stop any awkwardness descending over the group. 'Right, so let's eat. I'm fucking starving -- killing kett really takes it out of you.'

They talk about the missions and the plans ahead whilst they eat, Ryder not once feeling odd or wrong whenever Jaal touches her hand or rests his huge hand on her thigh.

Nor when she kisses him goodbye as she heads to her cabin to do some more reports for Tann. She just grins at the taunting sounds that follow her from the galley.
A groan breaks free from her lips as she finishes her stretches, a final round of "cat and cows" to help ease her back after sitting at her terminal for hours on end, typing report after report, and responding to messages -- the recent one from Macen, reminding her about the turian ark, had her ordering Kallo to set course to the NavPoints attached to it.

Yet, when she finally stands and glances around her room, she realises that she's not tired. She knows that the medication from Lexi still sits in her bedside table but she doesn't really want to use it, mostly because she knows it's not her anxiety keeping her awake.

She's just... not tired.

Probably because of her excitement at this newfound relationship with her and Jaal. Every five seconds, the reminder would appear in her mind and she'd just start feeling giddy. It's half the reason it took her so long to get all her paperwork finished.

'SAM?' she murmurs as she rolls her neck and then her shoulders.

'Yes, Ryder?'

'Is Jaal still awake?'

There's a pause, one that she knows is longer than it should be for the AI to check for signs in the Tech Lab but she tries not to read too much into that. Especially when the mechanical voice replies, 'Yes, Sara, shall I tell him you plan to visit?'

A blush creeps up her cheeks but she shakes her head. 'No... I think I'll surprise him.'

Another brief pause as Ryder decides to remove her father's old N7 hoodie, leaving her in her sweatpants and a vest top, one she quickly tugs down so it reveals more cleavage, even though a part of her realises that Jaal probably isn't as turned on by breasts as human males are, seeing as female angara don't have them.

Still, it makes her feel sexier and she decides that's all that matters.

'I shall... remove my surveillance of the room until you return to your quarters, Sara, so you have some privacy...'

Despite the heat of embarrassment clawing up Sara's neck, she clears her throat and murmurs a thanks, feeling her heart warm from the considerate act from the AI.

Before she can talk herself out of her decision, Ryder leaves her room and quickly makes her way down to the Tech Lab, afraid that someone will pop out at any second and see her.

It's not until the door slides shut behind her that Jaal finally raises his head from his kett rifle. She wonders if he'll ever be finished tinkering with it, or if he'll always find something to improve.

'Sara!' He sounds surprised, but not like it's an unwelcome one which makes her confidence grow a little. She pushes off the door and walks over to him, sitting down beside him on the bench.

'The crew took it well, didn't they?' she says, easing into conversation as she glances over his weapon. She's always been amazed by it, mostly because she knows just what kind of damage it can
do when in Jaal's hands.

He frowns at her, just a little. 'Did you... think they wouldn't?'

She shrugs with one shoulder and finally raises her gaze to meet his, getting lost in those galaxies of his -- like always. 'I don't know. I hoped they wouldn't be fine but it's hard to know for sure. Assholes don't look any different from anyone else until faced with such a situation. But I am relieved none of them turned out to be assholes.'

She offers him a smile then, not really sure what else to say. It's amazing how she can be so comfortable around him, yet still feel... so tongue-tied. She knows that she'd be able to say anything to him and it would be all right, but she still worries about saying the wrong thing. It's strange, how caring so much suddenly makes her so aware — afraid that one wrong word or move will send him running; make him wake up and realise that it's a mistake to get involved with this mess of a human.

'What are you thinking?' he asks, reaching up and cupping her cheek. He studies her and she has no doubt that he saw the change come over her — managed to pinpoint the exact moment her thoughts went from happy to sad.

She reaches up and folds her own hand over his, swallowing as she traces her fingertips over the back of his hand. It's amazing how huge and strong he is. It awes her so much... and she can't lie that now the attraction has awoken in her, it turns her on more than a little.

'I suppose I'm still just amazed that this has happened — I worry you'll realise that I'm not that amazing and call it off.'

He stares at her. Stares and stares until her breath starts to feel shallow. She can so easily lose herself in those eyes that by the time he speaks again, she'd almost forgotten the reason for her worry and stress.

'You are the most amazing person I know, Sara. I fear that the circumstances will, in fact, be reversed. That it is you who shall one day wake up and... realise I am not good enough.'

Sara shakes her head, unable to believe that this man can truly believe that he's not good enough. She guesses it comes from his first love leaving him for his brother. No doubt that's got to fuck you up — much like Shasi's death fucked her up.

But she can't have him believing that she's just staying with him until something better comes along. She needs him to know that the feelings in her soul are deep and settled and that she won't be going anywhere until he tells her to.

Taking his hands, Sara leads him over to the small cot that he's set up to sleep on. She gently guides him around, pushing him on his shoulders until he sits down. She swallows hard, taking a deep breath before she follows, sitting on his lap with her knees pressed on either side of his hips.

She's so close to him and it sends fire through her body, especially when his huge hands land on her hips as his eyes dart to meet hers, pupils blown wide.

'You are the most amazing person I've known, Jaal,' she whispers as she wraps her arms around him, her fingers splaying along the back of his head, gently caressing the smooth skin there. 'I've never met anyone as kind, sweet, considerate, fierce, loyal, protective, handsome, sexy as you... when you said you wanted us to be together, I honestly thought my heart was going to explode. I have truly never been this happy. You can bet I'm never going to wake up and think you're not good enough, because you, my handsome man, are the epitome of amazing.'
Jaal stares at her, and there's tears in his eyes but she knows they are ones of joy as his lips stretch into a wide grin. There's so much being said in that look and she's overwhelmed by it, but not in a scary way. It just makes her heart float and her chest swell until all she can do is lean forward and press her lips to his.

It's a soft, sensual kiss. She loses herself to the sensation, the caress of his lips against her own; the occasional tease of his tongue along the seam of her mouth. Sara presses herself closer to Jaal, feeling those protruding chest bones press against her. It's strange — the first time she saw them, she thought perhaps they'd be uncomfortable pressed against her, but it's pleasant. The perfect height to send a trill of pleasure through her whenever she shifts against him.

Just like that, the kiss descends. It evolves from a soft thing to something wild as she presses against him harder, desperate to feel more of him. The passion and lust coursing through her veins is so foreign she almost feels dizzy. Each stroke of his tongue against her own, the weight of his hands on her hips as they squeeze her encouragingly; the fact that there's only a few articles of clothing separating them.

By the time they pull apart, she's panting, her hands anchored on his broad shoulders as she slowly reopens her eyes. His pupils are so wide it makes her shiver, just knowing that he's as gripped by lust as she is making her preen a little.

'Y'know, I said I wouldn't let our relationship get in the way of the mission,' she starts as she leans forward, pressing her forehead to his. 'But I honestly can't think of anything better than doing this all the damn time. I don't know how I'm going to focus anymore.'

Jaal chuckles, his hands moving from her hips up her back to entangle in her hair. She smiles, feeling his fingers begin to tease the strands. No doubt he wishes he didn't have his gloves on so he could feel it against his skin.

'Darling one, I understand completely.'

That tears a chuckle from her lips and she pulls back, glancing down at him and just smiling. One hand comes around, cupping his cheek, her thumb trailing across the wound from Akksul. She swallows. 'Does it still hurt?'

'Not much now. If I smile too long or such, it aches a little, but nothing serious. I've had worse.' At his words, Sara's attention is drawn to the huge scar on the opposite side of his head. It has caught her attention for some time, the fact that a part of him is missing and she's wondered what caused it — wonders again as her fingers finally trace the old wound, feeling it just that little bit rougher, the way scars usually are.

'What happened?'

He swallows. 'Rather similar circumstances, but instead the attacker was a kett anointed. It was one of my first missions with the Resistance. I was young and cocky — I had just lost Allia to my brother. I felt like I needed to prove myself. That I could win her back if I was a bit braver. I thought I could face it and... this is the result. I learnt my lesson after that -- never sacrifice safety for vanity.'

Unable to think of words to say in reply all Sara can do is lean forward, pressing a kiss to the old wound first, before moving across the press a kiss to the still healing wound from Akksul.

He smiles at her and holds her close, her head finding a perfect place on his chest and she can't help but feel like she was made to be there -- as strange as that sounds. It's just too damn perfect a fit.
She closes her eyes, just losing herself in the sensation of being his arms, of finally having a dream like this come true. She had always wanted to find someone she could just... be with. Someone who she didn't feel like she needed to put on an act. She could just be herself with.

She's not sure how much time passes, but she knows it's got to be a good twenty minutes at least for her hips start to ache and her knees are sore and she can't feel the lower part of her legs anymore due to the position.

Sighing, Sara straightens. 'I should head back to my cabin. We're going to find the turian ark soon and I'm not sure what we'll find. I best have a straight head for it.'

Jaal cups her cheek again. 'Then sleep well, darling one.' He kisses her, a quick, gentle thing and she knows why. Anything more and she'll never leave the damn room. She hadn't been joking earlier when she said she had no idea how she was supposed to focus anymore, knowing that she can kiss him whenever the urge arose.

Sara stands, gasping as the blood rushes back to her legs. She keeps the cry clenched between her teeth, not wanting to worry Jaal or make him feel bad for keeping her there -- even though she wouldn't have left. She just knows him well enough to know that would be something he'd take blame for.

With a final kiss and a last glance backwards, Sara makes her way back to her quarters, her heart giddy and her steps light.
Chapter 46

As they make their way to the turian ark's NavPoints, Sara finds herself focusing on mod'ing her Isharay sniper rifle. She and Jaal sit side by side, working alongside each other. She can't seem to stop smiling, glancing at him from the corner of her eye whenever she gets the reminder that hey, they are together and this is something that they could have from now on.

It's after the fifth time — yes, she's counted — that he finally gives a laugh. She feels her cheeks burn as he says her name, almost in prompt.

'I'm sorry,' she says with a soft smile. 'I just... it still doesn't feel real.' She reaches for his hand which has stopped tinkering with his own rifle. She grips it tight and then lifts it to her lips, pressing a kiss to the leather clad knuckles. 'It's... nice... this, isn't it?'

He repeats her motion, moving their joined hands so he can press a kiss to her knuckles. A shiver courses through her body and her grin widens.

'It is rather perfect,' he agrees with a soft smile of his own as he releases her hand and picks up a new scope that Ryder had found on one of her missions and had sent back to the Tempest. He had recovered it, declaring it his own as the both of them had looked through all their equipment to decide what they wanted for their upgrades.

'I could definitely get used to—'

Before she can finish, the sound of shouting seeps in through the closed doors. She frowns, glancing over Jaal's shoulder as if she can see through the metal and see who the fight was between and what was happening. The previous calm and quiet that had settled over her as she and Jaal worked seems to just evaporate.

Sara stands, placing her hand briefly on Jaal's shoulder in apology, before she strides from the Tech Lab to the Research Room to see what all the fuss is about.

'You don't give a damn about what my team and I went through to build this ship!' Kallo's voice filters into focus as the doors whoosh open. Sara finds the tall salarian glaring down at Gil, even as he paces back and forth in front of the engineer.

Gil shrugs one shoulder. 'No. I don't,' he says, uncaring and Ryder frowns. She hears Jaal come up behind her, his hand landing briefly on her waist. It's a reassuring weight that speaks of the support he'll give her should she need it. Or, more accurately, when she needs it. 'I care about us surviving out here and if that means redesigning—'

Gritting her teeth, she pushes away from him into the room and, unsurprisingly, finds the others standing around watching the confrontation. She sees Drack by one of the consoles and notices that Jaal moves to stand beside him, arms crossed over his chest. Vetra and Liam stand by the door to the cargo bay with Peebee coming down the walkway leading to the bridge. And Cora just rests by the Bio Lab.

'You don't have the right!' Kallo snaps, taking a step forward.

'Knock it off,' Ryder snaps as she steps between them, a hand on either of their chests and shoving them back a few feet. They both tower over her slight frame but she glares up at them anyway, knowing she could kick their asses if it came to it — she'd taken down krogan mercs; these two would be easy. 'Both of you!'
'Sure,' Gil grinds out. 'Once he gets off my back about how I work on the Tempest!' 'You weren't here!' Kallo replies, exasperation clear in his voice. 'We had to get all kinds of new tech working in a single starship. Fifty-hour shifts. Epiphanies. Accidents... Humans can forget. Salarians can't. To me, it's all still happening! My team is still here! Stripping down the Tempest like some broken radio risks everything they suffered to build! Their legacy!' Sara couldn't imagine living like that. Her memories always on the forefront of her mind as if they were still occurring. Hell, her nightmares, the haunting from Shasi's ghost is still enough to set her on edge — she couldn't imagine reliving it. She's more the certain she would have followed in his footsteps if that were the case. 'I... can see how you'd feel that way,' she says, her voice thick and soft. 'Are you kidding me?' Gil narrows his eyes. He shakes his head and turns to Kallo. 'Look, Kallo, your people did a great job. But they're dead.' His tone is so sharp that even Sara flinches from that. 'And they couldn't have anticipated half the problems in Heleus. Like the Scourge. If we don't adapt, we'll die too. Is that what you want their "legacy" to be?' 'Gutting a complex ship out in space isn't adapting. It's irresponsible... and disrespectful!' Gil looks like he's going to reply but Ryder grits her teeth. 'Okay, just shut it, both of you,' she snaps, her tone fierce. The calm that had settled over her in Jaal's presence has evaporated so quickly and she's more than a little annoyed that it's been ruined by something so... small. 'Look, Gil, you can't just change things up on the fucking fly. Kallo knows this ship better than anyone, if you have concerns or ideas, talk to him and work something out together. Kallo, you've got to understand that Gil also has a point because we need to adapt to new things. You just need to fucking work together. I need this ship working to do this fucking job, that means having a pilot and engineer who aren't at each others throats. So work it out or get the fuck off my ship.' She then turns to the audience. 'Now the show is over. Get back to work. Vetra, Drack, I want you suited, ready for the turian ark as soon as we land. Kallo, do you mind getting back to the helm so we get there?' Gil turns and storms away without another word. Kallo stares at her, those dark eyes studying her for a long moment. 'Ryder, I'm sorry but... also... thank you.' Taking a deep breath, Sara tries to calm herself. 'I know. I understand completely, Kallo, honestly. You just need to work out your differences because we all need the Tempest at her best. That includes her crew.' He looks as if he's going to say more but then seems to realise that it's the last thing she wants in that moment. He nods and walks by her, heading back to the bridge. Ryder pinches the bridge of her nose as she hears the shuffling of the others returning to their previous places. She closes her eyes, only knowing that no-one must be about when strong arms wrap around her waist and pull her against a firm chest. Without opening her eyes, she turns and leans into Jaal's body, resting herself comfortably between those protruding sternum bones of his. She takes a deep, shuddering breath and finally opens her eyes. He gazes down at her adoringly, and she finally feels some sort of calm wash over her once more as she reaches up, wrapping her arms around his neck. She rocks forward onto her tiptoes and presses her forehead against his.
'Thank you.' She pulls back slightly. 'I probably shouldn't have snapped so much but... I just wanted some peace and quiet with you before I left for the turian ark. I was just so happy and content for once since waking up and it didn't last long. I'm tired, Jaal.'

It's the first time she's admitted such a thing aloud, and she supposes it just shows how much Jaal means to her; that she can say such things and know that he won't judge her.

Case in point, he merely reaches up, one huge hand on the back of her hand and gently coaxes her back against his chest. He cards his fingers through her blue locks and she feels the pressure of his lips on her scalp.

'Just remember that you are the strongest person I have ever met. I have never seen anyone accomplish what you have. And despite how it may seem, know that we all want what is best for you. This won't be forever.'

Sara rocks back and leans up, pressing her lips to his in a gentle kiss as her arms snake around his neck. She pushes herself up to him, not caring that they're standing right in the middle of the Research Centre.

'Ryder, approaching the turian ark,' Kallo's voice break in through the silence and she reluctantly pulls away.

She leans her forehead against his and offers him a small smile. 'Business calls. Hopefully won't be too long and we can pick up where we left of.' His eyes widen just a little and she instantly realises her words. She stumbles back a little. 'I meant, um, with the mods on weapons. My Isharay isn't done yet so I'll need to take another one for this mission, but she needs to be finished and I was just thinking we could do that later and—'

He cuts her rambling off short when he grasps her flailing hands, bringing them to his lips to press a kiss to her knuckles. He chuckles. 'I understand what you meant, Sara. Drack and Vetra are no doubt waiting on you — I'll be in the Tech Lab for when you return.'

Her face is no doubt burning but she doesn't really care. Not as she presses one final kiss to his lips and then heads to the armoury.

By the time she returns from the ark, gets her armour off and hops in a quick shower, she almost wants to crawl into bed for a quick hour or two. Her sleeping pattern and gone off kilter ever since waking up. The Citadel and Earth had obvious cycles but on a ship, it wasn't that clear cut. And with her constant hopping from planet to planet, it was near impossible to do anything but catch an hour here and there when things were relatively quiet.

Lexi constantly badgered on at her about it but what else could she do?

Still, she had promised to meet Jaal again and so she heads to the Tech Lab, constantly yawning and scrubbing her knuckles into her eyes in an attempt to keep herself awake.

Between the fight with Gil and Kallo weighing on her mind, then having to go through the turian ark, seeing the carnage and find out what had happened to the Pathfinder... it had nearly broken her heart watching Avitus keen at the knowledge that Macen was in fact dead, and that his last act was to try and transfer control of SAM to his second.

The turian had promptly said he wouldn't take the job, that he would never be as good a Pathfinder as Macen, but Sara had managed to convince him to honour his lover's final wishes. He had died, trying to do this for Avitus — it didn't seem right to just throw that away. It was also rather similar to
the situations Sara herself had become Pathfinder, and she told Avitus that. She woke up to the knowledge that her father was dead and that she was now in charge of all the Milky Way settlers in Andromeda.

It wasn't easy but she had stepped up and he needed to do the same.

Now they were heading back to the Nexus, finally with all Pathfinders in tow. At least, of the arks that had made it to the new galaxy. Sara still knew that the quarian ark needed to be found, but until they had a lead on that, she had to be thankful that they had found the turians, asari and salarians.

As the doors slide open, she goes to greet Jaal, only for a yawn to overtake her. Jaal studies her for a minute, almost curious, as she gives a groan and finally starts to make her way over to him.

'Sorry. The turian ark was more trying that I thought,' she declares as she settles on the bench next to him. Her fingers reach for the screwdriver, but the second she claps her fingers around it, she yawns once more. She shakes her head and lets it go, letting he head fall onto his huge, rather comfortable shoulder. 'Looks like my poor Isharay is going to have to wait some more.'

'Vetra told us what happened,' Jaal says as his arm snakes around her waist, pulling her even closer to his side. 'I don't blame you for being exhausted.'

Sara hums, unable to form words as she feels his electricity hum through her body. It's so soothing, relaxing her muscles and she wonders, briefly, if it's on purpose but she just loses herself to the sensation.

She hears him rumble a little bit more, apparently speaking still, but she can't focus on any of the words. She just closes her eyes, relaxes into his body and allows sleep to claim her.
Chapter 47

Her entire heart is in her throat as she races through the Nexus, unable to stay still whilst on the ridiculously slow tram, and then back to a run on the *Hyperion*. She can't stop. Not even as figures blur by and people shout at her, telling her to slow down, even though they know who she is and probably know *why she's running*. She just keeps her focus on that, the reminder of why she's rushing to the med-bay.

Scott.

She glides to a halt just at the door, sliding a foot or so thanks to the slippery floor. She stops, her heart rapidly beating as her brother sits on his bed, following Harry's finger and he makes sure everything is fine after finally waking up.

Everything is so utterly familiar. She even sees a little hint of Dad in him, and it makes her heart ache, knowing the last time she talked to her brother, she had to relay the news that Alec Ryder was dead and Andromeda was an utter mess.

She heaves a sigh of relief, almost unable to believe that the moment is finally here. She had hoped and prayed, boy had she, but a part of her had just wondered if her shitty luck would lead to her being totally alone. If Scott would never wake up.

Now, she doesn't have to wonder.

Unable to just stand beside, she pushes forward. 'Scott!'

That gets his attention. His head darts up and he says her name with such relief, she almost wants to cry. She holds her arms out, wrapping them around his shoulders as she feels his snake around her waist. 'Touchy-feely time,' she giggles, squeezing as hard as she can, just relieved that she can feel his laughter echo through his body. She pulls back and cocks an eyebrow. 'Don't you think you slept in long enough?'

'I thought it was Saturday. Then Sunday. Then I figured someone turned off the alarm.'

It makes her heart ache, those words, for some strange reason. She turns to Harry, who moves away as Sara sits down on the bed beside Scott. 'I sure missed having you around. We've hit... a few rough patches along the way.'

'I'm sorry I wasn't there when Dad died,' he says, and Sara tries her hardest not to flinch; tries her hardest not to lose herself to the memories of her lungs failing her, unable to breath, then rush of relief as Dad pulled his mask and fixed it to her, saving her life. Of his face slowly fading away into darkness. Never to be seen again.

She swallows. 'No-one could have saved him, Scott. Med-evac took too long. Habitat 7 was a total bitch.' She shakes her head. 'I wasn't sure I should have told you. I,' she gnaws on her lip, 'I thought about pretending everything was fine, but knew you'd hate me for it.'

He reaches for her hand. He doesn't wind their fingers together, only sits there palm to palm and squeezing tightly. 'I'm glad you did, though. That would have been... hell to wake up to.' He squeezes again. 'I'll miss him. But you know right now, he'd be telling us to stop moaning and just get on with it.'

That brings a strange sound from Sara's lips -- something between a scoff and a laugh. 'Trust me,
there's no shortage of things that need done.'

He pulls his hand free, turning to get a better look as a shit-eating grin crosses his face. 'Yeah. I hear you're the Great and Honourable Madam Pathfinder.'

Despite herself, Sara laughs, shaking her head. 'It's nothing like that. Dad, being Dad, gave it to me instead of respecting the proper chain of command, and we've just had to deal with it since.'

Scott shakes his head. 'That's not what I've heard. Harry was filling me in. Making planets habitable, settling colonies, making nice with friendly aliens…'

Her cheeks redden at that as she thinks of what she had been doing not fifteen minutes before getting the news that brought her here. There had been a meeting with Tann, as she tried -- and failed -- to get him to agree to search for Meridian. Hayjer had declared he had a plan but was interrupted by Tann's assistant informing her that Scott was awake.

Before that, however, she had been locked in her quarters, straddling Jaal's lap as his hands wandered and explored her body. Well, as well as they could have thanks to still being fully clothed. They had only broken apart because of the comm from Tann, telling her to get to his office. Making nice with friendly aliens was rather an understatement… she just wasn't going to tell her brother that.

He must notice her eyes glazing over, for he nudges her shoulder with his and raises a brow. She swallows and shrugs a shoulder, waving off the achievements he had listed. It was either that or allow every single soul who had trusted the Initiative to perish in a universe far from their own.

Scott, ever excellent in knowing how she's feeling and what she needs, chooses to let it go. For now. She knows he's too damn nosey to truly let it slide. 'As soon as I get my gear, we'll…'

He stands and then sways, and Sara needs to dive to her feet and catch him before he stumbles. His weight is solid against her, but she manages to hold him up and keep him from cracking his head and ending up in another coma.

'Jesus Scott, watch it.'

Harry comes rushing back over, a hand firmly on Scott's shoulder as he pushes him back down onto the bed. 'No way are you fit for duty, sir. You need a chance to mend.'

For the first time since seeing him awake, irritation flits across Scott's face as he narrows his eyes at the doctor. He looks so much like their Dad in that moment that Sara can't help but tighten her hand on his shoulder. A reminder that Scott is here and real, but Dad is dead and gone.

'Yeah, says who?'

Sara shakes her head and steps back. She clucks her tongue, staring down at him as she crosses her arms over her chest. 'I know you don't like the reminder, but you are my little brother, meaning I am your next of kin. So just relax, and let me deal with things for now. I've been managing quite well whilst you've been having the best beauty sleep known to man.' Her smile turns from teasing to warm, just to remind him that she's doing this for his sake and health. 'We'll get you on the Tempest the second you're able.'

He studies her for a moment longer, eyes so similar to her own, darting across her face. Then he sighs and nods, slowly shifting back until he's lying down once more. She wonders if the fatigue has hit him already… if being awake and the excitement of that has taken its toll and he's realising it now.
But like any typical Ryder, he can't admit it. He grins. 'If you say so. That just gives me more beauty sleep. You can't be too pretty.' He winks and Sara shakes her head, unable to stop her snort of sarcastic laughter breaking free.

'You can keep talking. Just, please don't arm wrestle.'

'Don't worry, Harry. I'd win anyway,' Sara says as he walks away once more.

'Pfft, only because I've just woken up from a coma.'

'Baby brother, I could beat your ass any day.'

'Fine, let's see, shall we?!

He goes to sit up, already reaching for Sara's hand when Harry shouts, 'What did I just say?'

Biting her lower lip to stop her laugh, Sara pushes him back down onto bed. 'We'll solve this at a later date.' She reaches for a chair, dragging it over until it's directly by his bedside. 'You must have a lot of questions. Ask away. I've got all the time to answer them.'

When she finally returns to the *Tempest* and makes her way to her room, she's not really surprised to see it completely empty. She knows that some have apartments on the Nexus and chose to sleep there, or some like Cora and Liam, like to go back to the Hyperion for most of their visit. It's even late enough that they could all be in the crew quarters, sleeping.

She scrubs a hand over her face, letting her shoulders slump. She wonders if she should feel awful, how drained she is after talking to her brother, but she can't really let herself feel bad. Mostly because she knows it's the seriousness of their conversation that's taken it out of her.

She had to relive everything. Well, all of the serious stuff, which, thanks to her role, was pretty much everything she did. She took him through the planets she had visited, the things they had learned about RemTech and the kett and the angara. She briefly walked him through the crew of the *Tempest*, knowing he'd be joining soon enough, and she was fairly certain she said too many wonderful things about Jaal for it to come across entirely platonic.

Thankfully, Scott hadn't said anything.

They had just kept talking, catching up, reliving old memories, until Scott had effectively passed out. She had spoken to Harry, just to make sure things were as good as they seemed -- they were, thank the Goddess, Spirits, Maker, whatever was out there -- and then returned for some sleep.

She's a little saddened as she remembers how her moment with Jaal had been cut short, but she can't feel bad. Not when she finally has her tiny, broken family back again. She'll make it up to him tomorrow, she thinks, as the doors slide open and the lights flicker on, low enough so she can see but not too bright to daze her.

'Darling one!'

The exclamation startles her, even as her mind catches up a second later. The phrase and voice too familiar to be anyone other than Jaal.

She still jumps, however, her hand flying to her heart after she forces it to relax from the fist it had automatically clenched into.
His brows pull down, looking apologetic. 'I didn't mean to startle you.'

Sara smiles, moving over towards him. It's amazing, how natural it is for her to slide her hands up over his chest to rest on his shoulders. It's like she's been doing this her whole life. 'It's fine. It's a happy surprise. I expected you to be asleep. I didn't stop by because I didn't want to wake you.'

She rocks forward onto her toes and presses a kiss to his lips. It's like she's been doing that her entire life as well.

'I couldn't sleep,' he admits when she finally pulls away. 'I heard about your brother. I wanted to see how you were. It's such amazing news!'

'I... I'm so happy, Jaal. For once, things are looking bright. We have the NavPoints for Meridian, even if Tann is against us going there. I have you. I have this crew. Now Scott...' She shakes her head, trailing off.

'Why don't you sound happy?'

Gnawing on her lip, Sara pulls away and walks over to her bed. She collapses down onto it, sprawling back until she's lying down. She tilts her gaze until she can see the lights from the Nexus. 'I guess I'm cynical. Normally, when things go right for me, it's because something big and bad is coming to destroy it all.' She closes her eyes so the tears can't fall. 'I guess, I'm just waiting for the other shoe to fall.'

'What other... idiom?'

Sara nods, finally opening her eyes when she feels the bed dip. He's there beside her, and his eyes are more appealing than any starry night she's ever witnessed. It reminds her of the time they finally admitted their feelings -- though this time, her bed is much more comfortable than the floor of his old house.

'Darling one. If I could promise you that no more harm would befall you, I would. Believe me, I would do anything to protect you. But pain is a part of life. All I can promise is to be there for you when things do go wrong, and do whatever I can to lessen the blow.'

A tear slips free from Sara's eye, curving over her cheek before falling to the covers below. She smiles up at him, a smile so overwhelming that she wants to share it with him. She pushes upwards until their lips meet, her eyes drifting shut as his hand comes up, brushing the tear away.

When she pulls away, she can't quite believe that's she's lucky enough to have this man in her life.

'You're amazing, do you know that?' she whispers as she lies back down, shifting over in the bed until she's resting on his chest. Her hand comes up and starts to toy with his rofjinn. 'I even told Scott as much.'

'You... mentioned me?'

Frowning, Sara pulls back and looks up at him. 'Of course. Why wouldn't I? I... I didn't say we were dating, mostly because he had so much to adjust to what with things not working out well and Dad being dead... but I walked him through the crew and had only nice things to say about you.'

His entire face lights up at that. She gives a soft giggle as she leans her head back down, tracing the patterns on his cape. She closes her eyes, everything coming crashing down around her.

Jaal doesn't seem to realise, for he stirs a little and says, 'I... best head back to the Tech Lab before
the others—'

Sara snakes her arm over his waist and pins him down, stopping him from going anywhere. She has no strength to open her eyes but she whispers, 'Stay. Please?'

From her place perched on his chest, she can hear his heart rate increase, thundering against his ribcage as he clears his throat. 'Are... are you sure?'

Despite almost being completely asleep, Sara reminds herself that she needs to get changed into more comfortable clothes. And also get under the covers because the ship has a tendency to cold when the engines aren't on.

So, she pushes herself away from him, blinking furiously in an attempt to waken herself up just for the next five minutes to get this out.

'I... I don't mean anything... like that,' she stammers, suddenly wondering if that's what he's concerned about. 'I just meant... sleeping side by side. I just... don't want to be alone? If you're not ready for that, then—'

'No, I,' he cuts her off, then stops abruptly, as if realising his enthusiasm was just a little bit too much. He clears his throat. 'I would like that very much.' He shifts, sliding off the bed. 'I'll go and get ready, then come back.'

He stops in front of her, cupping her face and bestowing a soft, brief kiss on her lips that leaves Sara feeling dizzy. A warmth spreads through her body and she can't quite believe it — it's something she's never experienced, and had started to wonder if she ever would find someone who made her feel like this.

When they pull apart, her face is on fire but she smiles up at him. She wants to say something to him but she can't get her mouth to work. So, she just watches him go in silence, only able to move when the doors slide shut and block him from view.

'Right!' She jolts up and off the bed, rushing over to her wardrobe and rifling through all of her pyjamas. She gnaws on her lip as she pushes them around, muttering under her breath because nothing is that attractive. She doesn't exactly want to dress in lace and give him the wrong idea, but everything she has is old t-shirts and joggers or shorts. They're tattered, torn and covered in paint. She has nothing that will be attractive in a subtle way.

'Damn it all to hell,' she hisses as she slumps, collapsing in front of her wardrobe and glaring at the pile of clothes. It takes her a long minute of staring before she sighs, reaching for a simple pair of black shorts and an N7 tank-top.

She quickly stripped and changed, pushing the dirty clothes into her wardrobe so they don't litter on the floor. Just as she shuts it behind her, the doors slide open again and Jaal strides into the room.

All Sara can do is stare.

He wears trousers, rather similar to those he normally does. There's not as many buckles or pockets, and they look to be a soft material that reminds her of cotton that is much looser. There's nothing on his feet, and she can see those odd, three-toes that somehow make her smile. He wears a short-sleeved shirt that seems to be of the same material of his trousers, and it reveals his huge, muscled arms to her and she can't help but trace over every groove and line.

When she finally raises her gaze to his face, she almost preens when she sees his eyes aren't on her
face, but giving her a once-over as well. His eyes linger on her legs, focusing on her thighs and she bites back her grin, glad that her choice of shorts was a good one.

His gorgeous eyes meet hers and he ducks his head, almost embarrassed at being caught. Sara smiles softly in an attempt to reassure him, before she strides over to the bed, sliding in to the left side and then holding her hand out to him.

It takes him only a second to understand what she's saying. He comes over to the bed, taking her hand in his only momentarily, before he focuses on pulling back the covers and arranging the pillows.

When he sinks down onto the bed, the entire thing seems to move with him. She finds herself rolling towards him, pressed up against his side the second he's finally lying down.

She glances up at him, bashful, sputtering about how it was the momentum that got her in this position, but that she likes it, but not if it's too much, when his hand comes up and cups her cheek, stopping her short. Sara leans into the touch, letting out a content sigh as she closes her eyes.

'I've thought about this for a while, y'know,' she admits, finding it easier now that her eyes are shut and sleep is already starting to claim her. 'Sharing a bed with you in this way.'

She hears his chuckle rumble through his chest. His other hand comes across and starts to rub up and down her arm. It's so soothing, his skin so soft and warm, and she relaxes further into his side.

'I don't want to overwhelm him when he's just awake,' she states, blinking owlishly up at Jaal because she needs him to know how much she means this. 'But the next time we're back on the Nexus, I'd like you to meet Scott... if you want?'

He beams at her. His smile almost as wide as the one he wore when she finally admitted to feeling the same. It lights up his entire face and she can't help herself from leaning up and tasting it.

When she pulls back, she quirks an eyebrow, wondering what his reply was going to be before she got so distracted.

'I would like that a lot, Sara,' he admits, leaning down and pressing his forehead to his. He nuzzles her softly and her eyes fall shut again. It seems almost impossible with his soft leathery skin against her. He's perfect. Even the odd shapes of his bones don't disturb her. His arm is so huge that it's more comfortable sleeping there than his chest, anyway.

'He'll be overprotective at first. But he'll warm up to you. He's a goofy little shit. You're going to love him.' She chuckles, pressing a kiss to his arm. 'Hopefully not too much. I've got to be your favourite Ryder, no matter what.'

That earns her another rumbling laugh. She feels the pressure of his lips on her forehead, but she's already starting to stumble into darkness. It's strange, how quickly she's managing to fall asleep — and without the aid of the meds Lexi gave her.

She'll need to talk to Jaal about making this a regular thing. It's much better for her health it seems.

That brings a smile to her lips.

Before she completely loses herself to the sweet grip of slumber, she hears Jaal whisper, 'You'll always be my favourite person, Darling One.'
Chapter 48

Sara groans at the sound of the incessant beeping filtering in through her sleep and waking her. She reaches for her holo-clock but after swatting at it, the beeping remains. She gives another groan and cracks open an eye, glancing around her quarters to see if she can find the source.

It's at that moment she sees her omni-tool glowing. A voice-call then.

Clearing her throat, she pushes herself into a sitting position, jolting just a little when something tighten around her waist. It takes her a long moment to remember the events of last night -- of sharing the bed with Jaal.

She turns her head, looking down at him with a fond smile on her lips. His brow is furrowed, meaning he's been woken from the noise as well, but his eyes are still closed and his face is buried into the pillow.

It's rather adorable to look at and she can't stop herself from leaning over and pressing a kiss to his cheekbone. He cracks an eye open, but Sara pulls back and finally answers her omni-tool, putting the beeping to rest.

'Ryder here,' she mutters, her voice croaky from sleep.

'Ryder. Didn't mean to wake you. Just wanted to tell you that we've figured out a way to get you to Meridian. Meet me in the Tech Lab. We'll walk you through it and see what you think.'

It's Hayjer. She knows that much from his voice. She barely manages to get a "okay" out before the comm goes dead. She stares at her arm, confused as hell, before shaking her head and collapsing back against the bed.

Jaal's arm tightens around her waist again, pulling her flush to him. Sara smiles, turning in his embrace so she can drape an arm over him.

'Morning,' she beams up at him.

'Good morning, darling one,' he rumbles, leaning forward to press a kiss to her lips.

His tongue sweeps her lip, but she pulls away, shaking her head. 'Morning breath,' she declares, sliding back. She reaches for his hand on her hip, giving it a gentle squeeze before pulling it off and stepping out of bed.

She groans as she stretches her arms above her head, feeling her muscles pop and stretch. It's only when she relaxes once more that a thought occurs to her. 'I slept the entire night,' she declares loudly, standing and turning to him. 'I didn't wake up once... I had to be woken up!' She lets out a breathless laugh. 'We need to make this a regular thing.'

It's out before she realises. She stops, lowering her gaze for a moment before slowly lifting them back to his face. 'I, I mean, only if you--' She stutters relentlessly, and it's unbelievable that she's still a fool around him.

She wonders, briefly, if this is how it will always be. Even years down the line, with so much experience and comfort, if she'll still stammer around him, amazed that he wants to be with her.

'I would like that, Sara.' He smiles before he too slides out of bed. He walks around, reaching for
Sara and pulling her into a tight embrace. She manages to rest her head in the space of his protruding sternum, sighing happily at the feel of his arms around her.

He seems reluctant to pull away from her, and it's even obvious in his eyes as he gazes down at her. 'I must go and get ready. I will see you later?'

Sara nods. 'Yeah. I need to see Hayjer then Scott. And depending on what Hayjer has to say... I'll make plans.' She rocks forward on her tiptoes, pressing a brief kiss to his lips. 'I'll call you later, anyway. I still haven't had a proper kiss.'

Jaal only rumbles a chuckle, before he turns and leaves her to get dressed.

When she walks into the Tech Lab, she's greeted by Hayjer. 'Ryder. Good to see you. We've been working with Dr. Aridana and her team on the problem of getting to Meridian.'

It's then she notices the asari doctor working away at her terminal. Sara turns to her with a raised eyebrow.

'We think we may have the answer.'

Now that is some good news. Ryder leans forward, resting her arms on the surface that separates her from the doctor. 'I'm listening.'

'It's plans for a new technology that we've designated Ghost Storm.'

'As you approach Meridian, our own ships can broadcast fake returns for the Tempest.'

The salarian, Professor Herik, declares, 'The kett won't know which one is genuine. It will confuse their sensors and draw their ships off.'

Dr. Aridana lifts her head. 'It could buy you some time.'

For the first time in a long time, Ryder feels real hope spread through her body. It consumes her until she's smiling, feeling almost lightheaded. This is something. It's maybe not perfect, but it brings them one step closer to finding Meridian -- to making Andromeda stable and a home for them all.

'That's all I need. Anything that gives us an advantage.'

'The rest is on you,' Hayjer declares and it takes all of Sara's restraint not to make some sort of snappy retort. Thanks, Hayjer, just what I need, more pressure. I do all my best work knowing the fate of everyone rests on my shoulders.

She takes a deep breath in and thinks of her crew; of Scott; of Jaal. She knows they'll all be there, waiting and supporting her. She nods her head. 'We can manage it. It means going against the Initiative... we're alone here.' She then realises her mistake and fixes the scientists with a mock-glare. 'You didn't hear that.'

Dr. Aridana gives her a grin. 'Hear what? We've been busy collating gamma charts all day.'

Sara grins at moves away from the scientists, making her way to the door when she sees Hayjer move as well. Somehow knowing that the salarian pathfinder wants to speak with her, she stops and turns, offering him a kind smile.
'I'm learning Pathfinders are often alone. Part of the job.'

She puts a frown on her face, glancing up at the salarian. 'Wait just a minute. You're getting paid?' She snorts at the expression on Hayjer's face, knowing her expression is softening into something fonder when she thinks back to her friends and brother and her boyfriend. 'In truth, it's more secluded than alone. I couldn't have gotten this far without the wonderful crew I have; they're like my family now.'

Shaking her head, Sara knows that if she lingers on this any longer, she'll start going into the little details of why she loves each and every one of them, and she knows Hayjer won't want to hear that. Salarians live short lives — it would be a shame to ramble on for so long.

'The Archon isn't going to wait. I've got one or two little things to tidy up, then we'll install Ghost Storm and get to Meridian.' She gives Hayjer a smile. 'I'll let you know when we're good to go.'

The salarian returns her smile. 'We'll meet you at Meridian, Ryder.'

With that, she leaves them behind, hesitating only a second before getting into the tram that will take her back to the Hyperion. She knows she needs to get off the Nexus before Tann gets wind of her discussion with Hayjer. No doubt he'll know something is up — that damn salarian has an innate ability to sense when people are going against his wishes.

But she can't leave without seeing Scott again.

So long without having him in her life. It had been months. And now she had to leave without him again... she hated it.

'Back so soon?' he quips the second he sees her. He's sitting up, eating some food. It's some of the best she's seen and she's a little offended that he gets the good stuff, but the Pathfinder doesn't?

'Had a meeting with the salarian pathfinder... I'm...' The words are immediately stuck in her throat as she stops in front of him. She glances down at her feet, trying to find the strength and courage to say the words. 'I'm leaving in a bit, so I wanted to just say goodbye. For now.'

It's not at all a surprise, the disappointment in his gaze when she finally feels brave enough to lift her gaze to his. She can almost hear the thoughts going through his head. She's going again. She's putting herself in danger again, and I'm sat here. Doing nothing. Being useless.

She knows because those are the exact same thoughts that would be going through her head should the situations have been reversed. It often amazes her, how easily she could have been in his shoes had the chosen to awaken him first instead.

Swallowing, she sits down beside him and takes his hand. He doesn't pull away and she's glad of that. 'I know it sucks, Scott. The second you're able, you'll be on the ship, I promise. The second Harry even hints that you're fit for duty, I'll pull rank and get you out of here, okay?'

That makes his lips quirk. ' Abuse of power.' He shakes his head and tuts. 'Terrible, Pathfinder.'

The teasing tone just brings back memories of their childhood, moving around so much, living with the Ryder curse and so only having each other to confide in.

Suddenly, she hates that he doesn't know about Jaal.

Sara takes a deep breath, focusing her attention on their joint hands. 'I have something to tell you... a little bit of a secret to help you through this difficult time.'
Scott's eyes widen and her turns his entire attention to her, even turning his body towards her with a shit-eating grin on his lips. 'Oh?'

'You... you remember how I told you about Jaal? That angara, native aliens of Andromeda, that we have onboard?'

He nods. 'Yeah. Still a little... iffy about it, having never met them, but you've survived this long.' He tilts his head. 'What about him?'

Her cheeks are on fire. She knows that much. Yet, she's started now and there's no way she can stop. It wouldn't be fair on Scott. And short on just getting up and running away, there's no way he'll let her change the subject now.

'Well, I, um— that is... we're... I... I'm kind of dating him?'

She keeps her gaze downwards, focusing only on her feet and nowhere else. Their hands are still entwined and she can feel his tense; can sense it as she sits next to him. She honestly had no idea what his reaction would be — he hadn't had a problem with Shasi... well, he did, but none of them stemmed from Shasi being a drell.

Sara closes her eyes, bracing herself for whatever his reaction will be...

...only for them to fly open a second later as his loud guffawing laughter fills the silence.

She turns all her attention to him, blue eyes wide as she watches him convulse in humour. His head is thrown back and his own blue eyes having a thin film of mirth.

'Leave it to you, Sara, to travel to another galaxy and be the first one to bang the native species.'

Her face feels like it's going to explode. She pulls her hand free only to punch him on the arm, suddenly not caring about the fact he's still healing. 'Don't! You! We haven't done anything like that yet! You know I...'

He trails off, chuckling, as he wraps his arm around her shoulder. 'Sara, I know. I didn't mean to... wait... what do you mean yet?'

Her shoulders shot up to her ears, as he chin ducked to her chest. She said nothing, suddenly unable to speak.

'Oh ho ho, this is so more serious than simply dating! Don't I get to meet him? Shouldn't I be vetting him now that Dad's gone? You are going to introduce us right?'

She knows where the fear is coming from. She had never really introduced him to Shasi. The first time they did meet was purely accidental. And he had been so upset that she hadn't trusted him to tell him she was dating someone.

It had been then she had come out as demi... and that she wasn't sure she wanted anything to really happen with Shasi, but she hated the idea of breaking up with him because he really liked her.

It had just been a mess.

Now, though? She doesn't hesitate as she offers him a smile. 'Of course. I already told him I'd bring him to you the next time we land. I can't say exactly when that will be but after the next big secret mission that I can't talk about, we'll come back. You'll meet him then.' She gnaws on her lower lip, taking a deep breath in. 'Please like him.'
Her voice is soft, even to her own hears. She can hear every single fear and worry drip into those three words. She wonders if Scott will understand just how much this means to her — how much Jaal means to her. She's not going to admit anything aloud before she says it to Jaal, but she needs her brother to understand that even if there's initial distrust, he needs to work to get over it... for her.

His hand lands on top of hers again, giving it a reassuring squeeze. 'Of course I will, Sara. Just thinking of how you spoke about him yesterday... he means a lot to you. I can tell. Especially from that "yet" comment.' He winks at her and she has to groan, burying her face in his shoulder. 'Whatever it takes, I'll do my best to make sure that he doesn't run away screaming.'

Ryder snorts, shaking her head and she straightens. 'You are a fucking dork.'

She wants to ask how he's feeling, know how his first night awake went, but before she can beeping fills the room. She sighs, the familiar glow of her omni-tool alerting her that the beeping is for her.

Shooting her brother an apologetic glance, she accepts the voice-call. 'Ryder, here.'

'Ryder,' Suvi's voice comes and she's almost relieved that it's not Tann demanding answers. 'Just got the information for Ghost Storm. It won't install at once. I just wanted to check whether you wanted me to start now, or hold off, depending on what you've got planned next?'

Pursing her lips, Ryder fights her sigh. She had hoped to have a little bit more time to plan the next few missions out but apparently that's not going to happen. She knows Suvi enough to know she'll need answers then and there.

'I want to head to Kadara, get that final piece of RemTech for Peebee. After that... we can hit Meridian. So, yeah, it might be best installing it now and giving it time to adjust to our systems. We'll only get one shot at this so we need to make sure that nothing goes wrong.'

Sara can just picture Suvi's nod. 'Understood. See you in a bit, Ryder.'

'See you, Suvi.' With that, she shuts off her omni-tool and turns back to her brother, knowing that really, she needs to get going. She's spent enough time here with him, when she should have been planning things with her crew.

She heaves a sigh.

Before she can say a word, he raises a hand, 'You need to go. Don't worry.'

Taking a step forward, Sara wraps her arms around him. 'I'm sorry. Just focus on getting better. Who knows? You might be joining me by the time I come back.'

When they pull apart, Scott has a grin on his lips that Sara's so happy to see. She reaches up and wraps her knuckles against his jaw, before she murmurs another goodbye and takes off, hoping it won't be long before he's well enough to join her aboard the ship.
wooo i finally have an update for y'all!! hope you enjoy!!

She feels violated.

And furious.

And deadly.

But mostly violated.

'How the fuck did this happen?' she snarls after calling everyone back onto the Tempest and to the comm room. She hasn't stopped pacing since she and Peebee made it back first, rushing back to the ship almost to make sure that Kallo hadn't been lying.

But no. Poc was gone and the RemTech they had spent the past hour searching for was just sitting there. Completely useless without Poc to assist Peebee in her studies.

When no-one answers her, Sara draws to a halt, turning to study every single one of them. Peebee, looking shameful for having "dragged her into this" (her words, not Ryder's); Drack and Vetra looking as pissed as she felt — in fact, the same could be said for Liam, Cora and Jaal as well, all of who looked ready to just tear all of Kadara apart to find answers. Kallo and Suvi stood off to the side, looking guilty as if it were somehow their fault for deciding to take some time off the ship (even if it was just to do some more work, research wise).

Sara forces herself to take a deep breath, knowing that it's not her crew's fault. It's that bitch Kalinda.

'Fuck Kadara, that's all I've got to say,' she declares after letting out her breath. She stands a little straighter. 'Do we have any sort of security cameras in the ship? I want to know who sneaked on my ship — they get an extra bullet in the head.'

That brought a chuckle from Drack. 'Good one, kid.'

Kallo fiddles with his omni-tool, bringing up some footage. She's not surprised when she sees a krogan sneaking aboard with the piece of RemTech, slipping into Peebee's room and then leaving with Poc.

She grits her teeth and makes sure to imprint his face in her memory. She hadn't been joking about that bullet.

Sara nods as the vid cuts off. 'Right. Okay. Well, there's not much we can do.' She leans her hands on the table. 'Peebee, see what you can find. I wish I could say that this is priority but...'

'I understand, Ryder.'

Licking her lips, Sara decides that, now she has them all in one place, she might as well get things sorted about Meridian. 'Whilst you're all here... I talked to Nexus about Meridian. They think it's a
waste of time. We know they're wrong — we've been out here and seen what we've seen. We know Meridian is the answer. The vaults are working now, but with the heart of the system, we can do so much more. We need to find Meridian.'

Cora is the first to move. She takes a step forward, eyes a little wide. 'Just to clarify: you're defying a direct order?'

Ryder pushes herself away from the table, shrugging with one shoulder. 'Well, we all are defying a direct order from his Holiness Tann. But the way I see it, I'm the Pathfinder. I've been given this title and it's up to me to find a way to make this our home. I'm going to do that. With or without the Nexus' permission.'

Drack gives a loud laugh. 'See, this is why I love you, kid.'

Her heart warms at that and she returns the old krogan's grin.

Then Jaal steps forward from his place beside Drack, and there's so much concern in his gaze that she feels it falter. 'And the kett?' he prompts and she can't exactly fault him for that.

'That's where Ghost Storm comes in. Hayjer, Avitus and Sarissa will distract the kett, make their scanners think that their ship is the Tempest. We'll sneak in through the gap they make.'

Vetra nods. 'They won't fool them all but it should be enough.'

'The Tempest is small and fast, I don't need a big window,' Kallo informs, turning his attention to Ryder. 'We'll drop you off and make our exit before the kett catch on.'

'It'll only be a small team on Meridian. We need to move fast and discover their secrets... as much as I wish I could bring all of you.' Sara grins around at her little group of friends; her family. The second Scott is able, he'll be amongst them and it'll be complete.

She can't wait for that day.

'Right behind enemy lines. Good time to assess their numbers, defenses...' 

'And then we'll pick you up the same way we got you in.'

The plan is coming together, and Sara can't stop her smile from spreading, especially as Liam points out that if they come back successful, the Nexus will be eating their words.

'Sounds like a solid plan. SAM send word to Hayjer that we're heading to the NavPoints. This is it, guys. Let's get moving.'

She pushes away from the table as her crew take the dismissal for what it is, all of them walking away with an extra bounce in their step. It warms her heart, knowing how far they've all come.

She's too busy lost in thought, remembering each of their first meetings, that she doesn't realise Jaal isn't in the line leaving the comm room. Not until arms snake around her waist and pull her back against his odd chest. The protruding chest pieces give her a rather nice place to rest her head as she leans it back.

It's rather amazing, how well they fit together even though, a few months ago, neither knew of the others existence.

'Are you ready for this?' he asks, craning his head so that it's beside hers. He nuzzles at her cheek
Sara beams at the action. 'As ready as I'll ever be. Somehow... it's strange, but it doesn't feel like
we're near the finish line? Is that odd?' She shakes her head because honestly, she doesn't want to
think about it. She turns in his arms, her hands gliding up his chest to rest on his broad shoulders.
'Never mind that... I told Scott about you.'

She senses his surprise more than anything, the way his body tenses just a little bit and his nuzzling
stops for just a second. Then it's like it never happened, his actions resuming as he tightens his hold
on her.

'How did it go?'

She smiles up at him. 'Good. Really good. He's rather excited to meet you. I told him about the
meeting the next time we come back and he's looking forward to it. He may put up a little posturing
at first, but he'll be fine.'

That seems to be more than enough for Jaal as he huffs out a laugh. 'I am excited to meet him.'

Sara sighs and leans forward, pressing her forehead into his chest. 'I'm just so relieved he's awake. I
was started to worry it would never happen.' She buries herself in closer, almost as if willing to just
become a part of him. His touch is so strong and reassuring, it's all she wants for the rest of her days.

'To see you this happy makes my heart soar, darling one.' His voice rumbles in his chest, vibrating
against Sara's face and she smiles at the sensation, pulling back just so she can share it with him.

It's almost too tempting to resist, she thinks, as she leans upwards and presses their lips together. She
had been kissed before, had done so many times, yet there had never been this urge to never part; to
always be joined together so thoroughly. It's glorious.

She feels his fingers flex against her hips, digging in as if to pull her closer, before seemingly
thinking better of it. Not that she can blame him... it is still the meeting room and no doubt the others
are looking up from the research room.

She just doesn't care.

It's too amazing to stop.

The groan of frustration that leaves her lips when Jaal finally finds the strength to pull away is
enough to make him chuckle. She's returning it before she even realises, an automatic reaction to the
sound, but she is still breathless and reeling and it's wonderful.

'I best get to the bridge,' she says, even though it's the last thing she wants to do. And she makes
absolutely no motion to even begin moving away. She sighs, leaning forward and resting her head
against his chest again. 'Even if I really don't wanna.'

Jaal chuckles and it vibrates through her and she holds on tighter. 'Trust me, my darling, I don't want
you to go either.'

It's easier to admit things when she's not looking in his eyes; when she's huddled in his arms and she
can pretend that she's elsewhere. So, it's not really surprising when she finds herself whispering, 'I...
I've never felt anything like this before.' She gnaws on her lip and pulls back, reaching to grab one of
his hands, instead. 'In fact, no, can we go to my cabin and talk first? I... there's things I need to say...
just in case...'
She doesn't say it, too afraid of saying it allowed. *Just in case I don't come back,* because who the fuck knows what Meridian will hold? The Archon has done everything to ensure that it is his first — it's only reasonable to assume that he'll throw every single thing he has at defending it.

He nods and that is all Sara needs for her to start leading him from the comm room and to her quarters. Thankfully, no-one is around to see it and make the wrong assumption.

'SAM, tell Kallo to start heading towards the Civki System and Meridian. Beep me when we're there.' She waits until SAM responds, and then smiles a little, turning back to Jaal as the doors whoosh behind them.

She takes a deep breath, trying to sort her thoughts and get them in order. She feels like a fool for even suggesting this now, wondering what the hell she was thinking... but if they were going to get serious... he deserved to know about her identity.

Or, maybe not deserved, but she wanted to share it with him.

Sara drew in a deep breath. 'I'm... demisexual. You probably don't know what that means, so it basically just means that there needs to be a special bond for me to feel... uh, um, sexual attraction. So... when I say I *like* you; that I've *never* felt anything like this before... I just wanted you to know how big a deal that is for me, okay? It may also be obvious with that knowledge, but that means that I've never done, well, anything, except kiss people. And God above, I'm rambling like fuck, please stop me.'

Jaal, God fucking bless him, steps forward then and cups her face with his huge hands. It's the most glorious thing ever and she's grateful for their differences for taking her last words seriously.

He says nothing to her, only leans forward and presses their foreheads together. Then she feels the gentle hum of his bioelectricity rushing through from his fingertips to her temples, and she sighs, letting her eyes fall shut.

Jaal breathes deeply and she automatically starts to copy him, breathing in sync until she no longer feels the anxiousness that had lead to her verbal throw-up.

She licks her lips and finally pulls back, gazing up and him and wondering if this will be the end. She's known a few who didn't believe her — who thought that her sexuality was her attempt to get rid of them. So they left after she had finished explaining.

Instead of that, however, she finds only understand in Jaal's gaze. He smiles softly. 'We have people like that too. Only we do not use that word. I am... honoured, you felt comfortable enough to tell me that. Even more so that... you feel that way about me, taoshay.'

The last words don't translate and she frowns, cocking her head to the side in wonder. A part of her wants to ask what it means, but there's a certain look in his eyes that seems to answer it all for her. She doesn't want to ask and then be told something different.

'You are the most amazing person I have ever met, Jaal,' Sara whispers, wrapping her arms around his would-be-neck. 'I never expected to find anything like this here in Andromeda. To be honest, none of this is how I expected the Initiative to play out but I don't think I'd have it any other way. It's been... perfect.'
Chapter 50

When Kallo announces that she has to find her own way down to Meridian, she almost laughs. 'I've fallen out of things so many times, I should be a pro. This will be a rather nice way to bookend my journey as Pathfinder.'

Gil, who's securing her armour, snorts. 'Yeah, I heard about your fall on Habitat 7. Liam said he could hear you screaming the whole way down.' She purses her lips but he doesn't seem to notice. 'Keep it buttoned this time, yeah? It's a little embarrassing.'

Jaal and Peebee grin until she shoots them both a glare. She turns to Gil. 'Just remember, I am Pathfinder and I can make it so you're at the bottom of the list for a nice house.'

'You wound me, Ryder,' Gil replies, with a shake of his head as he finishes buckling her armour. 'All right, you know the drill. Watch your rate of descent. Shields should take of the rest.' He turns, walking away back to engineering, only to stop at the door. 'And remember... don't scream.'

Ryder picks up a wrench that had been laying on the workbench, and without thinking, hurtles it at him. It misses him by a good few feet, something she had planned to do, but it had it desired effect of making him yelp and run like hell.

'Little shit,' she mutters before she lifts her sniper rifle, giving it a once over and holstering it on her back. She normally forgoes a shotgun and SMG, mostly because she doesn't use them that often... but with her having no idea just what she's going to face, she's opting for the lot.

They make their way over to the ramp, listening as Kallo informs them that they'll not be hidden to any ground troops.

Sara nods, expecting as much. 'Just keep my ship safe. We'll take care of the rest.'

Kallo manoeuvres the ship expertly, the ramp opening all the sign Sara and the others need to take off running, leaping from the ship. This time is a lot different from Habitat 7... she hadn't been expecting the free-fall there.

Now, all she wants to do is whoop and scream in joy at the exhilarating feeling rushing through her veins. She manages to keep her mouth shut however, not wanting to give the kett even more heads-up than they already have.

By the time she lands, her legs bent and throwing her into a forward roll, she feels a little sad at how quickly the whole thing was over. At this rate, when all is over, she'll need to give parachuting a go.

'Everyone okay?' she asks as she pushes herself onto her feet, looking behind her to find Jaal and Peebee doing the same thing. They nod, letting her know she's fine and she takes a breath, looking forward once more.

It seems surreal.

They're really here.

They really found Meridian.

They make their way forward, Sara using her scanner to follow the power conduits beneath the floor to find consoles to activate.
She's almost amazed when SAM informs her that the control hub for Meridian can be reactivated, just like the vaults and monoliths on the planets. There's two towers and if she manages to get them activated, they'll bring the controls back online.

They make their way down the gravity well, not too surprised when SAM patches them into the kett comm channel, which is a warning that Meridian — Khi Tasira, as they call it — has been infiltrated. There's orders to catch her and she can't help the snort that comes from her mouth.

'One day, I'm going to go somewhere and not have kett act as if I'm the biggest prize to bring back to their overlord.' She reaches for her pistol, quickly activating its inferno ammo, before moving on.

She stays in the middle, with Peebee at her nine and Jaal on her six. She almost wishes she had brought someone else, to cover her three o'clock... even if it has been eerily quiet so far.

'I wish the Moshae could see this,' Jaal says softly, awe in his voice and she has to glance over her shoulder to offer him a smile.

'Maybe one day she will,' she replies, equally as soft. His gaze seems to light up at her words and she knows why... because he can actually believe those words. So long he's worried about a future for his people, never beginning to plan in fear that tomorrow would never come. But now he has hope. And it warms her heart to know she helped him find it.

They push further on, following the conduit under the grounds, even as it leads them into a kett assault. They've got the higher ground, so Sara quickly brings up a barrier, adding that little bit extra protection as they take them, and the reinforcements ushered in on a shuttle, out.

Once she's certain that they're clear for now, she pushes her damp hair out of her face. Even though it's only a light drizzle, it's soaked her thoroughly and she cannot wait to get back on the ship and dry. 'I wonder if it's a broken atmo-console that's causing this rain. If it is... I want to find it and fix it.'

Peebee steps up beside her, a huge grin on her face. 'Or maybe the creators just liked the rain?'

'If that's true, I fucking hate them,' Sara retorts, quickly refilling her ammo clip. 'Come on, we've got to get to these towers before we find the command hub.'

She walks on in front, mildly paying attention as Jaal and Peebee talk back and forth about the plants and the tech and how annoying it is that they can't just linger and look because of the kett.

They only fall silent when SAM announces a hostile shuttle is incoming, quickly rushing back to their original positions. The foliage is thick and overgrown, offering perfect hiding places for them as the kett finally appear.

'Is that a fucking fiend?' she asks with a snarl, the sight of the ugly ass thing striding closer just pissing her off. 'A fucking fiend! Unbelievable!'

Sara quickly deploys Zap, sending the tamed Observer over to deal with the fiend whilst they fight through chosen, wraiths and anointed. As well as hostile Rem-Tech that decide to join in just for the hell of it.

When she can see no more immediate threats, she rushes over to the fiend, joining a worn looking Zap. Sara deploys her assault turret as she shouts at the beast, distracting it long enough to give Zap time to link to her omni-tool and start repairing.

'Right you ugly fucker. Come and get me.' She draws her SMG and opens fire in a continuous stream as it charges towards her. Just as it goes to swipe at her, she drops and rolls, releasing the
thermal clip and putting a new one in as she returns to her feet.

It's a dance they keep up for a few turns, even as Jaal and Peebee come to join, screaming at her to look out. It's only when the damn thing drops that she stops and turns to them, noticing the awe and worry in their gazes.

'I'm not letting big fucking beasts stop us from Meridian. Now, c'mon.' She pushes past them, swapping out her SMG for her pistol once more.

Everything seems to blend into one. Every corridor looks the same, even as SAM tells her which way to go. The first tower is easy to reactivate, even with all the kett and RemTech they need to fight through, and by the time they get to the second one, she's just that little bit extra cranky. Mostly because of how cold and wet she is. Looking at the damn place from the Tempest bridge hadn't prepared her for this. She almost wished she had brought her damn helmet.

'Okay, that's the second tower activated.' She pushes away from the console and starts making her way back to the exit. 'Let's go and get to...’ She trails off as her gaze flickers to the side and finds... an angara... trapped in one of the containers.

Lowering her gun, Ryder brings up her scanner. 'What the hell?'

'Translating,' SAM announces. 'Pattern One-Three. Viability 56.2%. Genetic template transmitted for testing.'

'They were...’ Jaal's voice is like a wrench to her heart. She turns and finds him looking brokenly at the male trapped inside. ‘...doing things to the angara?’

She hates the words that spill between her teeth, but she knows it must be said. 'It... seems like they were doing experiments of some kind.'

'We need to save them! Get them out somehow!'

Sara opens her mouth, ready to agree and plan, but then SAM cuts in, 'Jaal. Pathfinder. They cannot be saved.'

'What?'

'I have analysed the glyphs. These are not the angara we know. They are not even alive.'

Sara can only watch as Jaal steps closer to one, reaching his hand up to rest against the glass. 'I don't understand... they look so...' He sounds so lost and all Sara wants to do is hold him and comfort him, Meridian and kett and Peebee be damned.

'The Remnant language refers to these as genetic templates.'

It dawns on Sara just what SAM means and it makes her stomach churn. 'Like those plants we saw back there? A blueprint of some kind?'

It's only when Jaal's stricken face turns to her that she realises just what this means. She hadn't really thought when she spoke — mostly thinking aloud with SAM.

But Jaal... 'The angara... we came from here? They created us? Why?’

Sara moves over to his side, holstering her pistol so she can cup his face in her hands. 'Jaal, does it matter? Where you came from doesn't change who you are!'
He stares at her but there's a glassy look to his gaze that makes her wonder if he really sees her. 'True. And we still face the same conflicts... but I... feel as if something has shifted.' He pulls away from her, letting her hands fall limply to her side. 'I need to think. I need to speak with the Moshae.' He moves forward, looking out over the vastness of Meridian. 'If Meridian creates life... the Archon could use it to do the opposite! Destroy everything! It's up to us to make sure that doesn't happen.'

Sara isn't a fool. She knows just what he's saying and so she takes out her sniper rifle and leads them to the main command hub.

It hurts, just a little, the way he so easily brushed her off. She tries to focus on the fighting, almost thankful that there's so many of them, as it stops her mind from overreacting too much; for thinking things like he doesn't really care for her if he doesn't want to share his thoughts with her.

It silly and she knows and she tries to get herself to stop.

When they finally reach the control centre, she's glad for another kind of distraction that stops her from glancing at Jaal every five seconds. It doesn't help that he's talking to Peebee — Peebee who offered to listen if he needed to talk, and he replied with a joke that made him laugh.

SAM tells her that repairs are complete, so she reaches out and allows him to do his magic. 'Translating: "Flight control systems online. Welcome, Administrator."

Lights start to come on, and something that looks very much like a purification field before it's triggered starts to come on. She swallows, starting to back away, even as SAM announces that turning on the console has triggered something else.

'Yeah, SAM, I can see that and it doesn't look good.'

Still, Sara stays where she is, watching as... shuttles slowly start to power on. There's awe in Peebee's voice as she points it out to Ryder.

'Translating: "Exploration vessels on standby",' SAM declares, prompting Ryder to take a step forward. 'We have seen Remnant ships, but none in working condition.' The lights go red and Ryder raises a brow. 'It says it cannot receive command from the Meridian Engine.'

She wants to ask more but the sight of kett heading towards the ships, and the sound of Remnant coming to life behind her stops her short. She quickly moves into action, pulling her rifle free and letting loose, cursing whatever Gods there were out there when a fucking Destroyer comes stomping out of the woodwork.

When it finally falls, she runs onwards, her eyes growing wide when she finds the kett already locked in a battle with more RemTech. Her eyes survey the zone, finding Destroyers and fiends and Nullifiers, and it makes her want to scream.

'Why can't nothing ever be fucking easy,' she snarls, loading her rifle and falling into place behind a wall. 'Peebee, Jaal, focus on the kett and little bots. I'll deal with the big bastards.'

'Darli—'

It's strange, how the endearment makes her jaw ache. She knows it's totally selfish and wrong of her, but right now, she's just angry and she can't hear those words right now.

Before he's even finished, she hurls over the small wall and starts running, her scope against her eye and already firing at one of the Destroyer's turrets. It gathers its attention and it starts to turn, aiming at her. She grits her teeth as she feels the energy beam hit against the wall, shuddering the
foundations.

Under normal circumstances, her hope would have been to just stay there, popping up and taking out whoever was in her scope. But with two fiends parading about as well, she had no such luck. Every time she felt like she got a perfect shot at something, she'd feel the ground shake, a clear sign that some huge fucker was approaching her.

So, she had to lower her gun and run.

It happened often. So often. Too often that the anger in veins grew and grew, until it snapped like a rubber band. She threw her gun down as a fiend charged her, and drew her asari blade. She channeled all her biotics into the weapon in her hand, taking off running towards the damn thing.

With a scream, she leapt from the ground, her biotics giving her the push to rise above the damned creature. It never saw her coming, so when she falls to the earth, blade poised over its head, it's too stunned and confused to move.

Her sword embeds in its head, biotics pushing it deeper until it is sheathed to the hilt.

The fiend collapses to the ground, and with an almighty grunt, Sara presses her foot against its head and tugs her sword free.

There's a frenzied sort of fury inside her now, and so she turns, finding Jaal and Peebee facing the Destroyer now.

As she starts running, Sara brings up her comms, 'Get that thing turned around so it's back to me. I've got a plan.'

She clicks off just as they reply, and she sees them moving around, the robot circling with them until it's back is towards her. She starts picking up speed, planning on doing just the same as she had with the fiend.

Her biotics propel her off the ground and with a little help from her jump-jets, she lands right on top of the thing. Its turrets turn, starting to aim at her and so she moves quickly, hoping her shields will last as all her biotics are channelled through the sword as it hacks into one turret, then the other.

As they both explode, the shrapnel clashing off her armour, she flips her sword and then buries it downwards into that glaring red "eye" of the Destroyer.

She knows from experience that they have a tendency to explode, so she launches herself off the thing, not caring when she lands on her side and pain shoots through her entire body.

She stays on the ground, not daring to move until she hears the familiar sound of the bot exploding and then the silence that descends over the room. Her sword lies a foot in front of her, she sees, as she raises her head to look around herself.

Before she can begin to move, there's hands on her, pulling her upwards. She doesn't even need to look to know it's Jaal. His eyes are huge, concerned, as they turn her towards him, his gaze flickering over her face as if looking for any sign of injury.

And she rather relishes that... until she remembers how he reacted earlier, in a situation rather similar.

It's petty, she knows, but she can't help it as she pulls out of his arms and turns to pick up her beloved Isharay sniper rifle again. 'We've got to get to the command centre,' she says, moving on without a glance back.
They find a gravity well that leads them upwards, and when she finds the console, she feels just a little bit of her anger ease.

Until SAM starts to speak. 'Translating: "Connection lost. Meridian Engine not found."

'What the fuck does that mean?' she snarls, because she did not come this far and go through all this hell, just to get an error message. 'Fix it, SAM!'

'I'm sorry, Pathfinder, systems are intact, but they are searching for a component that doesn't appear to exist.'

Sara closes her eyes, even though she feels the familiar tingle of her biotics light up as she clenches her hand into a fist. Her entire body feels weak at her overuse of her powers, but in that moment, she doesn't care. 'What the fuck does that mean?'

SAM plays an audio clip, then translates it. "'Final administrator log. The opposition's weapon may cause widespread damage. All our weapons, our ships, will not be able to protect us — protect my goal. We need to disengage Meridian from command core, which will remain here to draw fire. Meridian contains all the work of the Jardaan. Nothing else matters. I will send it far. We can return one day. Continue the process of renewal. End of log.'

There's tears in her eyes but she tries her hardest to fight them, pushing them back even though the overwhelming urge to just scream and scream until she was out of air was powerful.

For once, she thought she was so close. That she had finally achieved something... and again, she was wrong.

'So, what you're saying is, this isn't really Meridian?'

She hears Peebee make a joke about it being funny because the Archon didn't know either, but she pays no attention. Especially when fire comes and she just knows that the kett are going to just destroy the entire thing.

'Fuck this. Meridian is gone, we're stuck in a kett shitshow and I feel—' Her gaze flickers to Jaal, before she shakes her head. 'Just once, I'd like a fucking break. Come on. We're getting out of here.'

Without another word, Sara dives towards the console and activates all the ships to attack the kett one. She doesn't bother watching as it gets defeated — somehow knowing that it will — before she storms onwards into the throng of kett that are in front of them.

She's too weak to use anymore biotics, and so focuses on deploying her assault turret and Zap, and shooting from shelter. She leaves the fiend to Peebee and Jaal this time, opting instead to focus on the douchebag kett leader, who calls himself the Archon's Sword.

When he finally falls, Sara answers Kallo's comm, ignoring the chatter about everything. Especially when all she can hear is her heartbeat saying fail-ure, fail-ure, fail-ure.

She cuts them off, saying she'll explain it back on the ship and orders them to come and get her.

She feels Jaal's stare on her back as she starts to retract her steps to the extraction zone, but for once, she doesn't turn.
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

things get a little steamy

The debriefing takes about five minutes. Sara almost wishes that she had taken Cora instead. At least that way she could have done the debriefing whilst Sara just slunk away to her bedroom. But no. She hadn't thought Meridian would be so painful that she'd end up in this state.

So instead, she flies through it, holding all questions until the end and then taking off before anyone can get another word in.

She's still in her armour and drenched to the bone but she doesn't care. Not as she brings up her omni-tool and clicks on the call button. She can deal with everything later… first, she has more important problems.

Scott answers on the second ring. He's sitting up and there's lights on around him. It didn't occur to her until she's faced with it that it could be the middle of the night cycle for the Nexus.

He takes one look at her face, then stands, giving Harry some excuse about needing the loo. As soon as he's locked away, he finally turns back to her and raises an eyebrow. 'Spill it.'

So she does. Everything from Meridian — about feeling like a failure, about how she's still no closer to getting everything settled, to Jaal turning away from her as if he didn't want to be with her. She rants and vents, her tears mixing with the droplets of Meridian rain that falls from her hair.

When she finishes, staring at her twin, she hopes he'll have some words for her. Something to make her feel better.

'You're still the same fucking idiot from the Milky Way, do you know that?' He shakes his head, continuing even as she splutters in indignation. 'You were always the same; trying to control everything without ever realising that you can't.

I thought your stint as Pathfinder would have helped you out of that but apparently not.'

Sara can only choke out his name, trying to get him to stop but he's got none of it. His blue eyes, so very much like her own, are narrowed and on fire. 'Sara you've done a bang-up job of Pathfinder since the beginning. I've yet to talk to anyone who doesn't sing your praise. So things didn't work out with Meridian, big whoop! You'll find it eventually or come up with a way to make the best of a bad situation. You've always been the same. Somehow you always make it work but you still feel like shit cause it didn't go as smoothly as you had first planned.'

Scott only stops to take a breath. 'As for Jaal, he's just found out his people were created by some fucked-up aliens with a God-complex who fucked off when things got rough. Give him time to process. Jesus, have you forgotten what you were like when you found out about Shasi? How you obviously felt every time you cut yourself?' At her shocked expression, Scott's face finally grows softer. 'Sara, you were shit at cleaning up after yourself. Mum was never there and Dad didn't notice but I did and your bullshit excuse of being on your period for a month solid never washed.'
Sara can only stare at him, mouth agape and eyes wide. She stares at her brother, who stares back looking just that little sheepish as his outbursts catches up with him.

She clears her throat. 'You, uh, you never said…'

Scott shrugs. 'You clearly didn't want to talk about it and I didn't know what I could say to help. I was worried about making it worse. I just was there for you. And that's what you need to be doing for Jaal, right now. You need to be there for him, Sara. If you really love him, put down your fucking pride and make sure he's okay.'

She has no words to say to him. It's strange, the feeling of shame that runs through her then. Mostly strange because it doesn't really leave her feeling horrible, it just makes her see sense. It's a realisation, the shame, that she's being selfish and petty when she damn well shouldn't be.

Licking her lips, Sara lifts her gaze and offers her brother a small smile. 'I thought the eldest is supposed to be the together one? When did you get so smart, Scotty?'

He scoffs, shaking his head. 'Don't call me that. And you're smart too. A little fucked up emotionally, but who wouldn't be with our family?'

That brings a laugh from Sara's mouth, the first in what feels like weeks. She sighs, running a hand through her hair. 'Right, bro, I need to go and sort things out before I lose him. I'll message you to let you know how it goes. I don't really know when we'll be back but soon, I hope.'

He's just a little bit disappointed that she's hanging up but he quickly masks it with a grin. 'Sara, I'm a big boy, I can manage being away from you for some time. I'll see you whenever.'

'Yeah, yeah. I love you, okay?'

He looks a little hesitant before he repeats the words, giving her a soft smile before he clicks off.

The second he does, Sara lowers her arm and buries her face in her hands. She had phoned her brother, mostly just to rant, she hadn't expected his reaction — his admonishment. But she's glad he gave it to her. She's glad that he gave her a theoretical slap in the face so that she didn't go and throw away the one serious relationship she's ever had — the one person who has truly made her feel anything.

Sara stands and quickly sheds her armour, setting it aside to be cleaned later. She slips out of her underarmour, throwing it into her laundry pile, before reaching for some civvies — mostly a cosy jumper and some leggings. She grabs a towel and starts to dry her hair, not really caring that it's reverted back to its wild frizzy mess as she leaves her room and pads barefoot to the Tech Lab.

The doors whoosh open and she's greeted with Jaal's back to her. He stands, gazing at nothing, and she has to swallow back the sudden emotions that overcome her.

When the doors shut behind her, he finally speaks, 'Hello, Sara. Come to see if I am finally broken?' He turns to her and she feels awful, for pushing him away for something so fucking small. 'To see what discovering that my people were "invented" has done to me?'

Sara swallows and takes a step forward. She just wants to hold him but she keeps herself under control, not knowing whether he'd want to be touched. 'I'm here you for you, Jaal, if you want to talk about it. I... I can't imagine what you must be feeling.'

Jaal turns fully towards her. 'I've been... staring out the window, trying to figure that out.'
That gathers Sara's attention. She takes another step forward and offers him a smile. 'That's rather new. You normally let your emotions fly.'

It brings a small smile to his lips. 'True. Angara are very free with their feelings.'

'I'm not talking about all angara — I'm talking about you.'

'I'm... numb. I'm in awe.' He pauses, just for a moment. 'There's a peace in knowing that, though the universe is beyond your understanding, it doesn't need your understanding to function. That you may even have a hidden destiny.'

'Your people aren't shackled to this new discovery.'

Jaal nods. 'I agree. We don't owe anything to the Jardaan. Our destiny is our own.' A smile finally fully graces his lips. 'I'm not broken, Sara, I'm excited! The angara were created for a purpose. We were given vaults and golden worlds — all these advanced tools. And there is nothing that the kett can do about it. The future holds more for the angara than a never-ending war with the kett. Much more.'

Sara steps forward and finally reaches for his hand, the temptation to touch him too strong. She waits a moment, waiting to see if he will pull away, but he doesn't. He grips her tighter, their hands moulding as best as they can.

She smiles up at him. 'I will never get over this. Just hearing you bear all your thoughts to me. Thank you for trusting me with them.'

His free hand comes up and cups her face. 'You make me feel safe. It doesn't matter if we were created by a god, reborn from our ancestors, or exist as the dream of an AI superpower. This discovery changes nothing — except ourselves.'

He lowers his head until their foreheads are resting together. 'And that's...'

Sara beams up at him. 'Everything?'

He nods, the friction making her giggle. 'Yes. Everything.'

Sara pushes forward until she's resting against his chest, his strong arms around her body. She sighs, content to just be there, to relish in his trust. *You make me feel safe*, he had said. And she had been so worried that he was pushing her away. She feels like an utter idiot for ever thinking that — for acting so petty.

She pulls back. 'I'm sorry.'

Jaal only frowns, so she makes herself say more. 'For being so... bratty and short tempered earlier. My... I have a thing. I push people away when they start getting close. I find tiny, stupid reasons and blow them up until it seems like a valid reason to cut them out from my life. But I don't want to ever do that with you. Ever. But I'm sorry for earlier, because I was starting to. And I don't want you to say there's nothing to forgive, because that's wrong. I was... I was selfish. And I just... I'm sorry, okay?'

Gorgeous eyes study her, flickering back and forth, all over her face. She can see his mind working, taking in her sudden confession. And she can see him fight the urge to say that there's nothing to forgive. No doubt, to him, it sounds like nothing, but it is! She doesn't want him to just wave it away and dismiss it.
'You are forgiven, my darling one,' he says instead and it's just enough to make Sara smile and lean forward, pressing their lips together in a soft kiss, rather surprised when it doesn't stay that way for long.

His fingers tighten on her waist, almost to a point where it's painful and hard enough to bruise. His thumb strokes the soft fabric of her jumper, no doubt briefly amazed by its texture before losing himself further in the kiss.

Jaal gives a long, deep groan that Sara readily swallows, opening her mouth to grant access to his inquisitive tongue. She will never get over this feeling, of having his tongue stroking her own, teasing her lips and teeth; there's a brief part of her mind, amazed by the skill of his tongue and she wonders just what it must be like doing far dirtier things.

The image it creates in her mind — one so utterly foreign to her — sets her blood boiling and a moan is wrenched from her throat.

The sound seems to unlock something in Jaal. His grip tightens on her hips further, until it's almost painful, and he starts pushing her backwards. Sara goes willingly, a tiny grunt escaping when her back collides with a wall. She's not entirely sure if it's a wall or the door or what, all she knows is that she's pressed against something hard and it sends warmth right through her body, pooling between her legs.

'Fuck,' she groans as Jaal pulls away from her. She tilts her head back, letting it land against the wall at a solid thunk. Jaal's chuckle echoes through her as his lips land on her neck, in the crevice where it meets her shoulders. His lips clamp down, kissing and sucking and licking, and when she feels his flat teeth nibble, her moan is so loud she's almost certain that the entire fucking ship heard it. 'Jaal.'

'Sara, I—' He trails off as he lifts his head once more, sealing his lips over hers once more. The heat growing in her stomach is almost unbearable and her hands move, splaying across his shoulders, trailing down his arms and gripping his huge biceps. Her fingers curl, curious about the size of them — she barely makes it halfway around and it makes her grunt.

She tears her mouth away and gazes up at him, her blue eyes hazy with need. 'How... how strong are you?' It probably sounds weird, with what they've just been doing. 'I've... I've always...'

Before she can really finish that thought, she finds herself hefted. Both of his hands pull her up off her feet, but when one returns to cup her face, she's suddenly aware that he's only using one to keep her balanced as she wraps her legs around him.

'I, um, wow,' she breathes before she surges forward once more. The new position grants a perfect angle and she can feel him between her, the hard length of him pressing and it's almost instinct when Sara rolls her hips, trying to alleviate some of the pressure in her lower stomach.

'You are amazing, Sara,' Jaal whispers, and she sees his eyes sparkle in amusement as her cheeks burn.

'You're not so bad yourself, y'know.'

He thrusts forward, a little hesitant, but her groan only seems to encourage him. They're steady, lazy thrusts that Sara returns, pressing forward to capture his lips again.

The feelings coursing through her are so unlike anything she has ever experienced. Even when she touches herself, the passion, the fire, the desire, has never been this strong and it makes her dizzy with wonder.
'Ryder, I just got some information about the Salarian ark,' Kallo's voice comes over the comms, making the couple freeze in their actions. Sara's eyes widen in shock, even though she knows that they weren't caught doing anything.

But now that her mind has caught up with her, now that the proverbial bucket of ice cold water has been dumped over her head, she feels her throat tighten at the situation she's found herself in.

Her back is still pressed against the wall, her legs around Jaal's narrow waist, one of his hands gripping her ass to keep her upright. Her lips are sore and no doubt red from all their kissing, she feels lightheaded and she's a little worried about her legs being able to keep her upright when she gets put back on the ground.

'Ryder? Are you there?'

Clearing her throat, Sara mutters, 'Yeah. Yeah I'm here. I'll… I'll be up on the bridge in a minute.'

'Okay. See you soon.'

The room goes silent as Kallo clicks off.

She's acutely aware of the fact that she's still in his arms. She swallows and lifts her gaze to meet his, a little relieved to see the same lust-filled haze in his eyes. 'So…' she trails off, unable to think of anything else to say.

'That was exquisite,' Jaal gives her a chuckle and it's all she needs to relax, for her muscles to completely unclench. It's not until she does that she realises she had been waiting for him to come back to himself and say he hated it, that he went too far, that he regretted it. It's brings her such relief knowing that he enjoyed it too.

'Yeah, I enjoyed it too,' Sara murmurs in reply, even as she rights herself so she doesn't look too damn dishevelled when she walks out of here. 'A little… sad… it stopped.'

That catches his interest and he raises his brow. 'Are you ready for that? I am more than willing to wait however long you need to…'

Reaching up, Sara cups his face. 'I… I think I am. Especially after just now. I can't pretend that I won't be nervous but…' She gnaws on her lip, lowering her gaze as her cheeks burn even more. She's almost certain that she's a study in contrasts in that moment with her bright blue hair and her bright red face.

'I would want our first time to be special and amazing regardless, but knowing that it will be your first time… I want to make it something you will never forget.' Before she can protest to that, tell him he doesn't need to go to such length, he presses a kiss to her lips, almost as if sensing her protest. 'But soon, my darling one, I promise. I can barely control myself around you. The desire you stir in me…'

Sara can barely catch her breath as she stares into those beautiful eyes, watching as his pupils grow in lust. She licks her lips, feeling a trill of pleasure as he tracks the movement.

'Right back at you, babe,' she murmurs, her voice a quiet whisper.

She can do nothing else but stare, desperately reliving the past few minutes over and over again in her mind. It sets her heart beating rapidly against her chest, and she's still pressed against him and knows he can feel it.

'I…' she clears her throat and finally pushes herself out of his arms. 'I best go before… before we…'
Jaal gives another small laugh, letting her go. 'Yes. We do not need Kallo coming in search of you.' He laughs again as her eyes grow in concern, picturing that mortifying situation. 'And I need to start planning.'

It is with that last comment in her head that Sara leaves the Tech Lab and finally heads to the bridge.
Her stomach groans so loudly that it's impossible to ignore.

Ryder's hands land on her stomach, massaging it as if that would help, even though she knows it's desperately in need of food. She tries to recall the last time she ate, and when she realises it was well before they landed on Meridian, she alters course and heads for the galley.

She had planned on getting some reports done, especially after listening to Kallo say that he thinks the salarian ark was given to the kett, and having a debriefing with Tann about Meridian. She had been a little bit glad that the salarian leader had finally come around, even though Meridian didn't go the way she had planned… but now she's too damn tired and hungry to deal with anything else.

When she arrives, she quickly pours herself some cereal, and sits down at the table, pushing a shotgun out of the way. She shakes her head and fiddles with her omni-tool, bringing up the ship-wide comms. 'Do we need to have a talk about basic house rules? No guns on the table!'

'Sorry about that Ryder,' Peebee's voice quickly comes. 'I was starving but working on a new mod for my pistol.'

Ryder pauses, spoonful of cereal halfway to her mouth. 'It's… it's a shotgun, Peebee.' She frowns, dropping her spoon. 'Wait a minute, are you all mod'ing your weapons on the kitchen table?'

When the few murmurs of agreement filter in through her mind, Sara feels her frown deepen. 'What the hell guys, we have a Tech Lab right there! That's what it's for!'

'Yeah, and we used to use it,' Liam replies and even though Sara can't see him, she can damn well hear the grin on his lips. 'But none of us really wanna walk in on you and Jaal… doing stuff.'

Even though the memory of an hour or so ago is still fresh in her mind, Sara sputters with indignation. 'Look, Jaal and I are not going to be doing stuff in the Tech Lab,' she declares, sending a quick message to Jaal, warning him not to contradict her. 'I mean, I have a perfectly good room right there if we were doing things.' Her words come back to her. 'Not that we are! I mean, damn, just no more guns on the dining table! People eat here!'

A few snickers come as Sara stands, shoving her half-eaten cereal into the sink. She goes to start to washing it when she notices the crumbs. 'And remember, keep this place clean. There's crumbs everywhere.'

'Nah, I think something's eating our stores, Ryder,' Drack's gravelly voice declares. 'I've found them before. Keep cleaning them up even when no-one else is around.'

Pursing her lips, Sara nods. 'Right. Okay. I'll see if I can find something. If you need me, I'll be following the breadcrumbs.'

'Just don't let a witch eat you,' Gil declares. 'We kind of need you.'

'Why… would she be eaten?' Jaal asks, and Sara chuckles, clicking off as Liam and Cora start to explain.

Sara brings up her scanner, deciding that it'll be easier to spot smaller things like crumbs through that than her actual eyesight. She leaves the galley and heads down towards the cargo bay, finding the odd little crumb in her path.
When she finally finds what looks like a nesting area, Sara brings up her comms once more. 'Hey, Suvi, we've got something nesting here. Think you could make a humane trap and then place it here? It seems to like cereal, whatever it is, so that's probably the best thing to use as bait.'

'Right away, Ryder,' Suvi says before clicking off.

Sara glances up and finds Jaal by the railing up above, standing with Liam and Drack. She swallows as their eyes meet, his eyes darkening even from the distance, and she knows that his mind has wandered back to their time in the Tech Lab.

Swallowing, Sara bites back her smile and then turns, making her way back to her quarters. She sets herself down at her terminal and opens her messages, unsurprised when she finds a reply from Jaal.

From Jaal

To Ryder

You are utterly exquisite, even if you are being cheeky asking me to lie to the crew. I understand your desire to keep it quiet, even if I rather wish to scream from the rooftops of how glorious you are. My mind has already started picturing all the ways I can worship you like you deserve to be.

Your darling Jaal.

Ryder can feel her cheeks redden at the words. Her entire body feels tingly and alight, and it makes it very hard for her to focus on Peebee's message, declaring that she has a lead for getting Poc back.

To Peebee

From Ryder

That's good. Can you do me a favour and just nip out and tell Kallo to head to Kadara then? I haven't slept since Meridian and I can feel my body crashing… and Lexi will kill me if I go any longer without resting.

She hits send and glances over her shoulder at her bed. Shep the Pyjak is curled up by one of her pillows, and it makes her snort to think that Jaal will be unable to find a way into it if Shep stays where he is.

Her terminal pings again, distracting her.

To Ryder

From Peebee

Uggggggggggshhhhhhhhh

Finnnnnnneeeeeeereeeeee

Ryder gives a chuckle, archiving the message so it doesn't clog up her inbox. The message from Jaal continues to blink at her and she stares at it, reading it over and over again in amazement in how she managed to get this man's interest and desire.
Gnawing on her lip, Sara brings up the holo-board once more and starts to work out a reply.

To Jaal

From Ryder

You are… I have no words. I’m heading to bed now, though. Peebee has a lead on Poc and you’re not going to like where it’s leading us. If… you wanna join me, you best hurry up for Shep is rather comfortable right now and I’m not about to move him unless I know you’re coming. :p

She doesn't wait for a reply, moving over to her wardrobe for a second before thinking better and deciding to just go to bed in what she's wearing, finding it comfortable enough. She quickly unfastens her bra and pulls it out her sleeve, throwing it aside and sitting on the edge of the bed.

As her hand lands on Shep's back, the doors whoosh open and reveal Jaal. He has his nightclothes in one hand as if he just grabbed them and ran. It brings a smile to her face, the quickness in which he arrived at her quarters.

'Someone is eager,' she jokes, finally sliding beneath the covers and pulling Shep away from the pillow. She manoeuvres the pyjak, until he's sleeping at the bottom of the bed, between her legs.

Jaal merely chuckles, not bothering to try and contradict her words. It makes her heart warm to know how open he is. She knows most men would have made a joke, tried to dismiss it as something else, but he doesn't. He relishes her and he isn't ashamed of it.

Before she can say anything else, however, he places his nightclothes onto the foot of the bed and starts to undress. Her eyes are wide in shock, even though she knows that he's not exactly ashamed of roaming about naked.

It makes her heart speed up, especially when paired with the knowledge that she's already seen him naked. The time she walked in on him and Liam discussing things, not too long after he had first come aboard... it had finally given her something to draw and she tries not to think about the sketchbook sitting beside her terminal, filled with pictures of his naked body — all drawn from her very vivid memory.

By the time she comes back to herself, he's shirtless. His rofjinn and undershirt neatly folded. She had always thought that his clothes was more of a one piece, but looking now, she can see how the two parts are connected through various buckles.

Those protruding sternum bones draw her attention almost immediately. And it's strange the feelings that course through her veins. A combination of lust and just a little bit of revulsion. She feels ashamed at that later thought, but it's always a shock to the system whenever she sees it. She knows it won't be like that forever — that over time, she'll grow used to it.

After all, the longer she stares, the less she feels it and the more she can just admire the utter strength of him. How he's nothing but tightly corded muscle and how his vital organs are protected, so he's less likely to be harmed whilst they're out in the field.

What really floors her, however, is the urge to run her tongue from those protruding bones all the way down over his stomach to the edge of his trousers. She doesn't know where the hell the idea came from; all she knows is it's so overwhelming she has to fist her hands into the sheets and squeeze her thighs together to stop herself from pouncing.

She's quickly saved from making an utter fool of herself when he pulls his bed-shirt on. It falls rather
far down, stopping mid-thigh, so that when he shrugs out of his trousers, she doesn't get to see his most intimate parts.

And the disappointment it brings makes her head swim.

'Did you enjoy that?' Jaal asks, his voice low and rough.

Sara's eyes dart back towards his face, realising that he'd quickly tugged his bed trousers on whilst her mind had been processing her disappointment at not getting to see what he looked like down there.

Swallowing thickly, Sara's head is too hazy to even consider lying. She nods. 'I rather did, yeah.'

Jaal gives another chuckle and circles the bed, coming around to his side — god, it feels wonderful to even just think of it as his side of the bed — and slips underneath the covers.

Immediately, Sara regrets moving Shep between her legs, for it means she can't turn and mould herself to Jaal's side like she wants to.

As if reading her mind, however, Jaal slides across to her side. He wraps one arm tight around her waist as his head falls to the crook of her neck. He presses a kiss or two — or three or four or ten — there before pulling back.

Sara can barely keep her eyes open, her entire body crashing at finally being able to rest and recuperate. She just manages to smile at Jaal, thanking him for being there, before she falls headfirst into oblivion.
Chapter 53

Sara heads into Kralla's Song, not surprised when she sees Peebee there. That is the reason she's dragged herself into this hellhole, after all. She rather hates Kadara Port. She has no idea if it's simply because she's spent too much time around Jaal and that's rubbing off on her, or if it's because of the smell, or the fact that every single person here was kicked of the Nexus and turned to a life of crime.

Not that she can really blame them. She doesn't really agree with the measures that were taken whilst Ark Hyperion was still floating through dark space, but still. There's just something that puts her on edge about the fact it's like a huge, real-planet Omega.

'Ryder!' Peebee's exclamation draws Sara out of her thoughts and she makes her way over to the table the asari is sat at with some human man. 'I'd like to introduce you to my new best friend... uh... what's your name again?'

Sara snorts, even as the man introduces himself as Samrick. He wears AI armour and Sara does not want to think about how he got that.

'Right, right,' Peebee dismisses with a slight wave of her hand, turning her attention back to Ryder. 'Samrick here's been so sympathetic about Poc being stolen.'

Sara's lip curls up at the edge. 'That's nice.'

'I know! Samrick here used to run with our pal Kalinda. And he knows where her crews congregate. Safe houses, rallying points, etc.'

'Wow, Samrick must be a truly important person,' Sara replies, turning her attention back to the man and crossing her arms over her chest.

'That's what I said! But he's having some trouble understanding that.'

Before Sara can say another word, Samrick shuffles in his seat, sitting up straighter as if poising himself to make an escape. Sara quickly steps to the side, effectively blocking him in.

'Look, uh, thanks for the drinks and the flattery and all that, but... Kalinda doesn't take too kindly to people discussing her business interest. She busted me up pretty bad when she kicked me out of her outfit. I don't really want a repeat.'

Rolling her eyes, Sara glares down at him. 'I'm in this shithole, lost my favourite little robot, have completely lost my only lead at making Andromeda truly habitable for us... don't get on my bad side, buddy, she thinks, hoping all that comes through with her narrowed eyes and hands clenched into fists.

Peebee grins. 'You've survived what Kalinda dished out, but you have no idea what Ryder can do. I once watched her take down a fiend with nothing more than her rage, biotics and an asari blade. It was pretty cool.'

Trying her best to ignore that — because she really hates the reason behind why she did such a thing — Ryder leans forward. 'Look, Kalinda will hunt you down regardless because you've been seen with us, and that means she'll think you talked, whether you say you did or not. You might as well get on our good sides, tell us what we need, and we can take care of Kalinda for you.' She grins. 'Or I could kick your ass, leave what's left for Kalinda and that'll be twice you'll be beaten to a pulp. It's up to you.'
Samrick's eyes widen. 'All right, all right. Shit, you people don't play fair!'

'Thanks, Ryder, I think he'll cooperate now. I'll know where to look for Poc soon.'

Sara gives Peebee a small salute. 'Pleasure to be of assistance. Now I'm heading back to the ship. Try not to take too long, I want off this heap ASAP.'

She turns away, heading out of the bar. 'Hey, Ryder,' Vetra's voice comes in through her comms.

'Yeah?'

'I've found something cool out here, if you wanna join me whilst Peebee does her interrogating. It won't take long... just something quick and quiet after the stress of Meridian if you're interested.'

Even though she had planned on heading back to the ship and seeing Jaal, Sara smiles at the idea of spending some time with Vetra, and she's a little curious as to what it is that she's found. 'Sounds good to me. Send me the NavPoint, I'll go and get my armour on and take the Nomad out.'

'All right! I'll see you in a bit!'

The comms click off and Ryder quickly makes her way back to the Tempest, quickly shoving on her armour and then making her way down to the slums of the port. It seems a little risky, going out alone, but she knows that she'll meet Vetra when she gets there... and looking at the map, it doesn't seem that far away from the actual port.

She reckons she'll survive.

It doesn't take her long for her to reach the location, and that's when the regret sinks in as she witnesses Vetra... standing at the bottom of a huge-ass mountain.

'Okay, I know what you're probably thinking,' Vetra declares, no doubt reading that on Sara's face. 'But believe me, it'll be worth it for the view alone. Despite being a place full of bad guys, Kadara itself is rather beautiful.'

Heaving a sigh, Sara throws her shoulders back and raises her head a little. 'Right. But know that if you're lying, I'm stealing your supply of Blast-Os.' Sara wanders past her, pointing a threatening finger at the turian as she starts to make her way up the side of the mountain.

She hears Vetra snigger behind her as she too follows, quickly whizzing past Ryder thanks to her stupid turian feet and hands. Sara has to scramble for purchase, trying to find the perfect little nook to give her another inch up the mountain — but Vetra just pushes on as if she's walking on solid ground, not scaling a mountain.

Sara's not even sure how long they go on for, but she can feel the sweat dripping down her back and her muscles ache. She has to pause, turning her head a little to see the view that Vetra had been talking about.

Her breath catches in her throat. 'You have a point about the view.'

Vetra grins. 'We're not even at the top yet. C'mon, I'll race you.'

Ryder's eyes go wide. 'Up this cliff? Do you want me to die?'

Vetra shrugs with one shoulder. 'Less talk, more climb! Let's go, Pathfinder.' She turns, starting to scale the cliff once again. 'And no jump-jets,' she calls over her shoulder. 'No-one likes a cheat.'
'Oh that's it! I'm gonna show you how it's really done,' Sara retorts, knowing she's talking utter bullshit, but it's worth it for the loud laugh that the turian gives.

Vetra continues to race on ahead, as Sara knew she would, and she continues to straggle behind. It's at that moment that Vetra's words come back to her: no jump-jets!

Honestly, Ryder hadn't even considered that. Even from the very start, the idea that she could use her jump-jets to get up the mountain quicker had never entered her mind... but now that it was there...

She cranes her head over her shoulder, looking at the two little jets strapped to her back, embedded in her armour. It was one of the adjustments they had to make from the RemTech blueprints she had discovered. First, they had to fit it to her shape and second the had to make it compatible with their technology (omni-tools, jump-jets) but it was totally worth it.

SAM, she thinks, not wanting to give her plan away. *If I use my jump-jets, it won't kill me, right? Or send me hurtling back down towards the ground? I've died enough to last a lifetime.*

*No, Pathfinder. I would alter the force needed to propel you upwards, sending you safely over the edge of the cliff.*

Ryder grins, watching Vetra edge closer and closer towards the finish line. *Do it.*

Without any further warning, the jets activate and Ryder finds herself propelled through the air, launching over the edge and thankful for her armour as she lands and rolls with a solid thunk.

She hears Vetra protest but she doesn't care, not with the adrenaline from that jump coursing through her veins. She's still giggling to herself when Vetra appears, asking her if she's having fun.

Ryder props herself onto her elbows. 'I did say I'd show you.'

Vetra shakes her head. 'Consider me shown.' She reaches down and helps Sara to her feet, both of them moving back to the edge to take in the view — the reason they had climbed up the cliff to begin with.

'It's all going to be like this, isn't it?'

Sara shakes her head, amazed at the sight before her. She had activated the vaults on Kadara, had even settled an outpost, but she couldn't get over the change. The waters were still blue but less deadly, the heat was bearable, and thanks to Sloane, there were less outlaws to run into. It was all just strange planets, lakes, and the promise of greenery.

'It's going to be better.'

Vetra glances down at her. 'For months I wondered if I'd made a mistake coming out here. And dragging Sid with me.' She looks back up to the view. 'I don't wonder anymore. Boarding the Tempest that day was the best decision I've ever made.'

Ryder reaches up, placing her hand on Vetra's shoulder. 'It truly was. I couldn't imagine doing this without you, Vetra.'

Sara feels that, if it were possible, the turian would have blushed at her words. That thought brings a smile to her face as she turns back to the horizon and enjoys the view in silence with her dear friend.
By the time Sara makes it back to the Tempest, she's dirty and horrible and there's sand everywhere. All she wants to do is take a shower, so it's really no surprise that Peebee is waiting for her in the cargo bay.

'Elaaden!' she exclaims by way of greeting. 'The hideout is on Elaaden. I said to Kallo that we should head there next, but he say he couldn't do that without your authorisation.' Peebee rolls her eyes. 'But yeah. That's where we need to go for Poc.'

Sara's eyes are wide as she stares at the asari, feeling just a little bit ambushed. It takes only a second to fade and then she starts stripping off her armour with Gil's help. 'Okay. I've got to get a shower but I'll get SAM to send a message to everyone, making sure to get their butts back on board and then I'll tell Kallo to get to Elaaden once I've showered and changed. Sound good?'

Peebee nods. 'Sounds good.'

Sara's eyes instinctively look up. 'Got that, SAM?'

'Message already sent, Pathfinder,' the automated voice replies, earning a smile from Sara.

She claps her hands together the second she's out of her armour. 'Right. I'm going for a shower. If you need me, try not to.'

Their laughter follows her as she quickly makes her way to the shower room, quickly dipping into her room for a towel and some clothes. She takes longer than she knows she should, washing all the dirt and sweat off her body and just enjoying the way that the hot water relaxes her muscles.

She knows she should feel a little bad, using so much water, but she thinks she's earned it after everything she's been through lately. She still wishes she could just have a bath... lie down and soak, but she supposes a ridiculously long shower will just have to suffice.

When she's finished — finally deciding it's been long enough — she shuts the water off, dries herself and dresses in some baggy trousers and an Andromeda Initiative hoodie. It's not the most flattering, something she's even more aware of when she walks into her room and finds Jaal there, talking to Shep.

Sara tugs at the hem of her hoodie, feeling just a little self-conscious, until Jaal lifts his head and meets her gaze. There's so much adoration and wonder and attraction in his beautiful eyes. Her cheeks flush, but when he extends his hand out to her, she goes without any hesitation, sliding into his lap and eagerly pressing her lips to his.

He gives a slight chuckle, no doubt at her enthusiasm, but his arms wind around her waist and pull her tighter to his chest.

When she pulls back, she rests her head against his shoulder, gazing up at him. Her blue hair is still damp, and he reaches up to run his bare hands through it, still mesmerised by its different textures.

'Glad to be leaving Kadara?' she asks him, even though she knows the answer.

'Yes. I wish we were going somewhere better than Elaaden...' he trails off and Sara just grins at him. She lifts her head. 'I'm thinking about heading to Aya after that, which should cheer you up. I got a message from Liam saying he had something planned... drinks or something? I don't know. And to be honest, I could do with going some place where nothing tries to kill me and no-one looks at me like their lives depend on me.'
By the time she's finished, her head has found its way back onto his huge shoulder. It still sends a trill through her when she thinks about how strong he is... how huge his muscles are. She thinks even the body-builders back from Earth were no competition for his strength.

Jaal hums. 'That is... that's good. I had meant to send you a message about this but whenever I try to write to you, it just turns into how much I adore you.' Her cheeks flush but he doesn't seem to notice. He just presses on. 'With angaran movies, we experience them through our bioelectricity. I talked to Liam and discovered this isn't the case for any of the Milky Way species?'

She kind of adores that, even though he trusts Liam, he still wants her confirmation — her input. She shakes her head. 'Nah. The angaras abilities with bioelectricity is rather new to all of us. Obviously we have biotics but that's different, even if it is a little similar? But no... why do you ask?'

'Well, I was thinking that I could maybe try and make some sort of device that would... mimic the experience for you. It adds to the experience so much and I'd... love to show you.'

His voice dips at the end, somehow turning it into something else and Sara squirms in his lap, acutely aware of how close they are... of how warm she is. She swallows, meeting his eyes and finding them hooded. But there's also something else there...

She reaches up and taps his forehead, before mapping out the intricate patterns there. 'You're planning something in there... I can see it in your eyes.'

It eases the sudden tension and he laughs. 'You know me so well.' He tightens his arms around her. 'I... it's a surprise, Darling One. At least, if I can make it work it will be.'

Before she can press — she's never been good with surprises — he continues, 'I just need one final component to make this device work and I found someone selling it on Aya.'

It takes Sara almost a whole minute to catch up, to remember what they had been talking about. She wants to keep pressing about this surprise, about where his mind went... because she certainly knows where her mind went when talked about this device and wanting to show it to her.

But she knows that it's not right to push. He had said about wanting to make their first time romantic... even more since it was her first time ever. If she presses, if she shares where her sordid mind went, who knows what would happen.

So, she smiles and nods. 'No problem. We can go shopping together because I have no idea what I'm looking for. I'm maybe fascinated with technology but I haven't a clue how it works. Rather hilarious when my dad loved inventing stuff... like SAM.' She snorts. 'Dad invents an Artificial Intelligence and I can't even tell you what wire is what.'

'Perhaps, but remember that you're wonderful in many other ways. Your... biotics...' he still seems unsure of the word, 'are amazing. I have witnessed you take down fiends with nothing more than these powers. You're strong, smart, a great fighter. You're kind and gentle, always seeing the best in people. He would be proud of you, regardless of your engineering abilities.'

Sara is speechless.

She can only stare at him in wonder. He knows her so well, knew where he mind was going before even she did. And he manages to say the right words to lift her out of it.

With words failing her, Sara leans forward and captures his lips with her own. Her fingers dig into his shoulders, gripping as she pours all her feelings — feelings it's getting harder and harder to keep to herself — into it.
When she pulls away, she's a little breathless and her face is on fire, but she doesn't care because Jaal is looking at her with such wonder. She leans forward, placing a quick peck on his cheek.

She feels emotions bubbling in her chest, desperately clawing up her throat. Three little wonders trying to break free and in that moment, she doesn't see the point in keeping them inside. She knows what she feels — is pretty certain with how he feels.

Why keep it inside?

'Jaal, I—'

The comms crackle. 'Ryder, everyone is onboard. What's our destination?'

'I told you it's Elaaden!' Peebee's indignant voice comes.

'And I told you only the Pathfinder can set the course.'

They start to bicker, and Sara sighs, the courage from before leaving her. She presses a gentle kiss to Jaal's lips and then slides from his lap. 'I best get up there before they kill each other. See you at dinner?'

'Of course, Darling One.'

Her heart is a just a little bit heavier as she leaves her bedroom and makes her way to the bridge.
Chapter 54

'Ryder, he's got Poc,' Peebee states as they walk into the abandoned hideout. 'She's broken though.'

Sara grits her teeth because honestly, she loves that little robot and if this asshole has tampered with her or ruined her beyond repair... her finger smoothes over the trigger of her pistol as she steps up to the turian. 'Kalinda must not have taken good care of her. Ass.'

The turian finally turns. 'Hey, I don't want any trouble. I found this site abandoned. By scavenger law, it's mine.'

Sara snorts. "'Scavenger law'? You totally made that up.'

The turian tilts his head. 'Uh... scavenger law. Which means the scavengers get to make up the law. No. Then they'd just make new ones.' He clears his throat, no doubt noticing the slowly increasing arch of Ryder's dark eyebrow. 'Well, I'm a business man. I'm willing to sell you anything you like.'

She asks a couple questions, mostly about Kalinda and her crew, but he makes it pretty obvious that he's not going to answer or even admit to knowing of Kalinda. It makes her want to laugh, in a weird way, how terrified everyone seems to be of this asari but to Sara, she's just a fucking pain.

'Right let's get down to business. The bot...'

The turian swallows. 'Look, what do you think would be a fair price?' He looks like he's not too happy about it all, but he keeps glancing at their gunpowder... and then to Drack who is lingering behind them at the door.

Nothing like a krogan to scare everyone shitless.

'Here. Take this.' Peebee brings up her omni-tool and pings some credits over. Sara can't see how much it is, but when the turian is happy with it, gladly moving aside, she knows it was more than enough.

She'll need to find a way to sneak that onto AI expenses to reimburse Peebee... at least partially. The bot is too good and beneficial for her to be shelling out of her own pocket.

Peebee moves onto the Poc, giving her a quick scan with her omni-tool. 'Thanks, Ryder. I'll get her back to the Tempest and get her fixed up.' She sighs, lowering her arm. 'Maybe this whole Kalinda thing is over.'

Sara snorts. 'Don't get naive on me, Peebee. Poc was left here for a reason and we both know it.'

Sighing, Peebee nods. 'Yeah.' She shakes her head. 'Never mind. This means I can finally upgrade my Remnant scanner, so that's a good thing. Let's just think about that.'

'Definitely.' Sara claps her hands together. 'All right, Drack do you mind lifting Poc back to the Nomad? I think we'll just head back to the Tempest. I can't think of anything else to do on Eladaan.'

Drack rolls his shoulders and steps forward. He easily takes the bot into his arms, as if it weighed nothing. It's not the heaviest thing in the world, she knows that, but it's still pretty damn heavy for her and Peebee. Another reason she's glad she's got a krogan adopted-grandpa.

She followed him out of the site and hopped into the driver's seat of the Nomad, quickly taking them
back to the ship.

Sara is in the middle of writing out reports, doing whatever she can to convince Tann about giving Peebee back a small amount of creds for Poc. She hits send and steps away from her terminal, her back aching.

She is torn between going to the galley and getting some food, and doing some yoga to stretch out her back because she knows that if she doesn't, she'll wake up tomorrow with tense muscles that'll destroy her.

It takes her a moment, but she decides to stretch and then get food. She moves over her closet, looking at the yoga mat that Lexi picked up for her. Just as she pulls it out and starts to spread it on the floor, the comms crackle.

'Ryder?' It's Suvi.

'Yeah?'

'The trap that we set? There's something in it, if you're interested.'

And like that, the desire to stretch and ease her muscles fades completely. She springs from her position and is out of her room, moving straight to the cargo bay with just a vague confirmation to Suvi.

She's not sure what she's going to be greeted with — in fact, it hadn't crossed her mind until that very second that it could have possibly just been Shep rummaging through their stores.

But she shakes her head. No. There's no way he could have sneaked around that much and not been caught. And she really doubts he would have fit in the trap. It has to be something else.

When she reaches the trap, her heart stutters in her chest before she lets out a loud squeal and drops to her knees beside it. 'So you're the one eating all our cereal, huh?' she says in a soft voice, not realising that pretty much the entire crew was watching her from above.

The little hamster gives a little nervous squeak and Sara coos again. 'No no, don't be frightened. No-one is going to eat you.' The hamster gives a little squeak again, but this one doesn't sound quite as frightened. More curious. It raises its little face towards her, squeaking once more and Sara can't help another noise from breaking free from her mouth. 'You are the cutest thing I have met in Andromeda so far!' She pauses for a moment. 'That is a lie. Jaal is the cutest thing I've met in Andromeda. He's special. You can meet him soon.'

It's at that moment, when a couple of chuckles fill her ears, that she realises that everyone is staring down at her. She looks up, her cheeks red as she scans and finds Jaal staring down at her, utter fondness in his beautiful eyes.

Clearing her throat, Sara turns back to the hamster. 'I should probably find you somewhere safer than our cargo bay, though.' She ponders, tilting her head. She knows that she's already pushing it with Shep... but... 'How about a warm cage in my quarters? With all the cereal you could wish for?'

There's some serious excited chirping from the hamster, and so with a giggle, Sara reaches into the trap and brings the animal out. She cups it into her hands, resting it against her chest.
'I guess this means you want me to start on a cage?' Suvi asks, calling down with easy humour in her voice.

Glancing up only briefly, Sara offers her a smile. 'If you don't mind?'

'Not at all. We should have something somewhere for it to sleep in right now, though. Don't want it getting loose again.'

'Yeah, that's probably a good point. If anyone knows of an old box-type thing, just bring it to my cabin, yeah?'

Before anyone can move, Jaal speaks up. 'I've got a box I kept my tools in... I don't use it anymore, what about that?'

Sara looks up from the hamster again and nods, smiling at him. 'That sounds great. And like I said, I do want to introduce him to you.'

'You two are disgusting,' Peebee grunts, pushing away from the railing and starting to move back to her room. 'Also, Ryder, I need to talk to you.'

'I'll get the little guy settled and then I'll come to you, all right?'

Peebee doesn't give her an answer, and it seems to be enough to thaw the rest of the crew. They start to drift away back to their previous activities as Sara goes back to her room.

She sits down on her bed, smiling down at the little hamster wriggling against her chest. She places the critter on the bed, letting it examine and explore, only lifting her gaze from it when the doors whoosh open and Jaal steps inside with his toolbox.

Moving over to him, Sara gives him a quick peck on the cheek before she takes the box off of him. It's got a clear top and a dark bottom, and looks secure enough. She's a little worried about it being airtight, but when she says that to Jaal, he pulls the handle off, giving two little air holes.

It takes only a short time to get it decent enough. Sara throws an old hoodie inside, puts some crumbs of cereal inside, and she then puts the tiny hamster inside. He looks around himself, before burrowing into the sleeve as he munches on some of the cereal.

'He looks happy enough,' Sara muses, stepping back to Jaal side. She reaches for his hand, winding their fingers together as thoroughly as they can.

'Your care for him is extraordinary — no wonder he is content.' He presses a kiss to her forehead. 'I understand we're heading to Aya now?'

Sara nods. 'Yeah. I told Kallo the second we got back from Eladaan. He said the ETA is around another few hours. It should be daylight still so I hope to get some things out of the way. I got a message from Moshae Sjefa... she gave me a few names from angara who were there when the kett first arrived... thinks hearing from them would help me out so I want to do that when we arrive.'

Jaal removes his hand from hers but before Sara can be disappointed, he smoothes them up her arms until they're cupping her face. They're huge against her cheeks, but she leans into them and smiles nonetheless. 'I do adore the way you want to help.'

Without another word, he leans down and gives her a slow kiss. Her hands settle on his hips, digging into the muscle there. She pushes forward as much as she can thanks to his hands still cupping her face.
When they finally part, she's smiling. 'I best get to Peebee before we land or she'll be in the huff.' She darts forward and places a quick peck there. 'See you later.'

Sara leaves her room, a little harder when she sees Jaal move over to the cage and start talking to the hamster, asking after it. She climbs the ladders and makes her way into Peebee's room, more than a little surprised when the asari doesn't move from her seated position.

'Earth to Peebee? Everything all right?'

Peebee finally moves, standing but her face is devoid of emotion. 'Hi.'

Sara snorts. 'Okay, who stole Peebee and put you in her clothes? Give me her back!'

'Not funny.'

Sara grins, taking a step forward. She winds her hands behind her back. 'It's a little bit funny.'

'Okay,' Peebee concedes. 'It's a little bit funny.'

Before she can even ask what is wrong with her, Peebee sighs. 'I received this.' She fiddles with her omni-tool and Kalinda's now familiar voice fills the room. 'Hey babe. Sorry I broke your bot. It lacked versatility. Couldn't keep up. Maybe I'll do the same with your other new toy. Ta.'

'She means you.'

'Yeah I got that.'

Peebee finally shows some emotion, her eyes tightening as her mouth presses into a thin line. 'I hate her.'

'Try not and let her get to you. That's what she wants,' Sara reminds as she takes another step forward. She almost wants to rest a hand on the asari's shoulder but she knows that Peebee isn't really that fond of contact.

Peebee shrugs a shoulder. 'Can't help it. It's not the fact that she took my bot and broke her. We got Poc back and I repaired her, better than ever. Now my scanner's fully upgraded and sweeping the cluster for Remnant signals. We won.'

'So...' Sara drags the word out and raises an eyebrow. 'What's the problem?'

'It's just—dragged up feelings I thought I'd put behind me. Turns out, I just buried them. This is what happens when you let people in! You acquire baggage. I travel light, dammit! No baggage.'

'Peebee, that's... there's nothing wrong with letting people in. Trust me, I sucked at it but life isn't meant to be lived alone. You need people who care about you.'

But Peebee just shakes her head. 'I don't know. I let Kalinda get close. I thought she cared about me. Look at where that ended up. And now you've become — or are becoming — important,' she corrects herself, as if the difference is of paramount importance. 'But you need to know I resist checking out of this hotel every day.'

'When this is the room that you're staying in, I don't blame you on that.'

Peebee snorts. 'You are funny.' She shakes her head and the small smile that had appeared falls off. 'I just need some space — time to think. Hopefully my now Rem-Tech-infused scanner will pick up something amazing and make all this Kalinda trouble worthwhile.'
There's more that Sara wants to say but she knows that they'll just fall on ears that won't want to listen. So she smiles and nods. 'Yeah, it'll be nice to experience some more Remnant fun.'

Sara thinks that because of Peebee's mood, she won't say anything more, so she's surprised when Peebee's eyes seem to light up. 'And speaking of fun... how are things with you and Jaal? I like to consider us friends enough to know the details. You know I've been curious about that... about whether asari and angara could mate.'

She speaks so eagerly and unabashedly that it makes Sara's cheeks flush. She licks her lips, sputtering in an attempt to get words out. 'We haven't— this is... nothing has... damn it's hot in here, how do you sleep?'

'What? Seriously?' Peebee tilts her head. 'Though, with the amount of sexual tension around you two that sort of makes sense. I'm surprised. I would have jumped him months ago.'

Feeling her mouth go dry, Sara blurts out the first thing that comes to her mind. 'I was always jealous of you two.'

There's silence. It lingers for what seems to be a solid minute, though it could have just been a second or two.

'Um. Wow. Why?'

Glancing down at her feet, Sara shrugs. She knows her face must be in stark contrast to her hair. 'I always thought he liked you. And you very obviously liked him. And you were... open to that... right away.' She shrugs again. 'I haven't. Ever. Done anything beyond kissing.'

She steels herself because the shame rushing through her body is something that infuriates her. So what that she's never found the right person to do that with? It makes no difference to her and she had spent years getting comfortable with her sexuality that she wasn't going to be bullied back into a box — especially by her own doing.

There's only a brief moment of surprise on Peebee's face before it melts away with a shrug. 'That's fine. I don't really blame you.' She offers a soft smile. 'But you have nothing to worry about. Jaal is cute but it was pretty obvious how much he was hung up on you. And you for him. But... I am sorry if my flirting made you feel...' she scratches her neck. 'I tend to flirt without realising it. But I think I've been good! Since you two got together!'

That makes Sara laugh. 'You have indeed.'

Peebee's eyes flicker over her face. She the groans and opens her arms. 'Come on, a quick hug.'

Sara chuckles again and darts forward before the asari can change her mind. She squeezes, letting her know that she's always there for her, regardless if Peebee wants to accept the "baggage".

And when Peebee gives a hard squeeze back, Sara realises that her message was understood.

Not wanting to push her luck, Sara draws away. 'I best go and get organised for Aya, but keep me updated with your fancy scanner. I want all the RemTech info that I can get. Especially when the Archon wants it too. I enjoy spiting that horned bastard.'

Peebee snorts, saluting Ryder and then goes back to Poc. Sara gives her a final fond smile before she disappears back to her quarters to spend some time with Jaal and her new little pet.
When Sara arrives at the tavetaan, her heart is rather heavy. She had spent all morning, talking to old angara who remembered what it was like when the Archon first arrived in the cluster. How he spoke all nice words until he turned against them, attacking in a way so sudden they didn't know how to fight.

Her mind is just so overwhelmed and to be honest, all she wants to do is curl up in bed and cuddle with Jaal. She even sends him a little ping, asking him if he is up for that.

She's not really surprised when his reply is instant, saying he'll be in her room waiting. She quickly sends her own message, telling him that she'll try not to be too long with Liam's thing, before she steps up to the bar.

'Right, what am I doing here again?'

'Just try and get some scans. I could do it, but with SAM in your head, it'll be processed quicker. Just... anything that looks interesting,' Ryder frowns at him, but Liam just presses on. 'I've sent Navs. Just... stroll the marketplace. Enjoy yourself.'

So Sara wanders up to the marketplace, finding the stall that Liam had pointed out. She smiles at stall owner but he growls at her. 'I'm not selling to aliens.' She takes a step back, the shock evident on her face because she rather thought that they had warmed up to her. It's more than a little surprising to hear them snarl at her like that.

She swallows, saying nothing else. 'I just want to scan—'

'Not today, Nexus,' another angara steps forward, forcing her to step backwards. She feels her head start to ache and so raises her hands, even though she's fairly certain they won't understand the gesture.

Sara backs off, turning away and snarling, 'Liam?' into her comms.

'Goddamnit!'

'What's going on?' she demands, looking around herself slightly in the hopes that no-one really noticed the encounter.

'Nothing to worry about. Just come and grab a table with me.'

Gritting her teeth, Sara storms back to the tavetaan, forcing a smile at those who call out to her. She's not really in the mood but hey, she doesn't want to piss anymore angara off — she's worked hard to get where she is right now.

She's not going to ruin it any further.
'Pathfinder!' Liam calls, not seeming to notice the fury radiating from Sara's entire body. 'You're good here. We'll worry about the data another time.'

'Liam what the hell is going on?' she hisses, her voice dropping to a low whisper. She sees Drack grin at her over Liam's shoulder, and it makes her lighten just a little.

'I, uh, figured we should end up somewhere nice and open. You were being cased.'

Taking a deep breath, Ryder tries to stop her voice from rising or her fury from turning into a full-blown fire. 'Are you getting me into trouble? Those angara were pissed at me. What the fuck is going on?'

'We're not in trouble exactly. But I don't blame them for being angry.' Liam pauses for only a moment. 'I wanted to get data that would help yields at our outposts. Verand told me what to scan. But I called it off. I still owe her but it's better than pissing off some gouging hard-liner. Sorry I didn't clue you in. It's a security thing. Food is security.'

Ryder can only stare at him. Her mouth falls open and she can barely process what she's hearing. Nothing makes sense. She feels like he's just saying what he thinks she wants to hear.

'...are you? Were you trying to steal their secrets? Copy their methods?'

'We're not competing companies. It's about learning to live here.' Ryder's blood starts to boil but he presses on without realising. 'Remember my Tempest freak out? I tried proper channels. Got blocked by the angara and the Nexus. There's only so much Jaal can tell us, so I did what we'd do back in crisis response. Bend the rules.'

Gritting her teeth, Sara takes a step closer. 'Liam, I deserve better than having this sprung on me mid-market. I'm trying to navigate first contact with the angara. I don't want them turning against us because they think we're going to undermine them or trick them like the kett did!'

Liam sighs. 'You're right. Of course you're right. And the angara are right too.' He shakes his head. 'The last people who showed up were the kett. The ultimate users. I don't want us getting lumped in with them. And I really don't want to ruin the market.'

Taking a deep breath, Sara dampens the anger rising in her. She knows that all Liam does is from a good place. He wants to make things good in Andromeda. He wants a good relationship between the angara and the Nexus and he wants to survive out here... but god, he can be so fucking idiotic about it.

'Let's just leave the market for another day, eh? Things take time but we'll get there, okay?'

Liam nods, turning back to the bar. 'Yeah. We do have some more important things to deal with first.'

'Exactly.' Sara swallows and the lets out a long breath. 'Now, I'm going back to the ship. I... need a rest.'

She doesn't wait for a reply. She just turns and leaves, making her way through the market. She feels those around that stall look at her, especially as she stops and picks up the device that Jaal had asked of her. She quickly pays and scurries off, not in the mood to fight or struggle through anymore awkward interactions.

By the time she makes it back to the ship and to her room, she can barely contain herself. Jaal stands from the bed and she dives into his arms, setting the component down on her desk before she does
so.

He gives a little grunt but otherwise wraps his arms around her, hugging her against his solid chest. She buries into him, clutching as if he's her solid lifeline.

Tears of frustration start to well and, without bidding, fall. They soak into his rofjinn and it's when they finally make it through to his skin that he pulls back, cupping her cheeks with his huge hands. Jaal wipes the tears away and she feels the thrum of his bioelectricity, trying to soothe her.

'What is it, my darling one?'

Sara shakes her head, as best as she can with his hands still holding her. 'I'm just... so annoyed and tired!' She moves herself forward and presses her face into his chest again. She starts to tell him about the stories the old angara told her, and then the whole ordeal with Liam. It makes her angry, reliving it, to feel that, even after everything she's done, there's still people who hate her simply because she's human.

By the time she's finished, her tears have dried. And she feels like there's a weight off her shoulders. The only sensation is Jaal's arms around her, a comforting embrace paired with the tingle of his electricity humming through her.

Shaking her head, Ryder pulls away. She reaches for his hand and leads him to the bed. She crawls into it, tugging him beside her. It doesn't take long for them to get comfortable, him on his back, arms around her, and her head resting on his chest.

'I got your electric-current-device-thingy,' she says softly, gesturing to where it lays on her desk.

He gives a soft laugh at her lack of technical words, his fingers starting to comb through her hair. 'I know you're feeling down, Darling One, but I have something that may cheer you up.'

That piques her interest, even though her muscles are growing weary and her mind foggy. 'Oh?' She raises her head off his chest, turning to look at him. Her chin still resides on his protruding sternum, in a desperate attempt to be as close to him as possible.

'There's a... place on Aya. I want to take you tomorrow. We can go in the morning when we wake up.'

Her eyes widen.

She can't think of any time that someone had offered to take her somewhere. That they had a special place they wanted to introduce her to... and yet with Jaal, it seems like he just wants to bring her into every part of his life.

Her smile expands until her cheeks hurt, and she slides up to press her lips against his. It’s a slow, sleepy kiss that makes her heart soar. It seems to be everything that she needs, that confirmation that things are going right in her life and she shouldn't let one little interaction or such get her down.

Pulling back, she beams at him. 'I can't wait.'

Sara lowers her head to his chest again and closes her eyes, dreaming of what tomorrow could possibly hold.
When she wakes up, it's to one of Jaal's arms around her and the other playing with her hair. It's rather similar to how she fell asleep and that brings a warm smile to her face.

She groans and stretches, moving up his body and pressing a gentle kiss to his lips. 'Morning.'

'Morning, Darling One.' He smiles, his hand still stroking through her hair. It's such a soft, amazing feeling that she almost wants to close her eyes and fall back asleep. 'I hope you haven't forgotten your surprise today.'

Sara's grin widens. 'Of course not. It's half the reason I'm not trying to fall back over.' She presses another kiss to his lips. 'When are we going? I've never been good at surprises, by the way. I don't have the patience.'

That just brings a smile to his face. His eyes seem to sparkle. 'Whenever you wish. Why don't we get some breakfast first and then I'll take you down?'

Without another word, Sara dives out of bed, heading to the bathroom to clean her face, brush her teeth and hair. She considers shoving on new clothes — having fallen asleep fully dressed last night — but she looks down and realises she's still presentable. Ish.

She's too excited to spend anymore time dressing, that's for sure.

When she rejoins Jaal, he's removed his rofjinn, looking far more casual. Sara grins up at him, overwhelmed by the sight of him, and the way his suit accentuates his muscles.

They quickly leave the ship and head into the cafe that sits across from the tavetaan. Thanks to the arrival of some Nexus personnel on Aya, there is food for both her and Jaal and it isn't that difficult to find a seat.

A part of her worries, as she sits down, whether this is a bit too much — too soon. The snarl from that angara in the marketplace yesterday comes back to the forefront of her mind. She doesn't want anyone to act like that towards Jaal because of her... because of their relationship.

Sahuna's message appears in her mind, telling her that people will whisper and judge... but not to give them any attention. It's just easier said that done.

'What is troubling you, Darling One?' Jaal asks, without bothering to lower his voice, and Sara sees a few passerby glance at them with frowns on their faces at his term of endearment.

'I...' She sighs and shakes her head, forcing a smile. 'No. I'm not going to cast a downer on today. I'll tell you about it tonight if it's still troubling me, but for now, I just want to enjoy this moment.'
Jaal beams at her, reaching over to squeeze her hand before going back to his nutrient paste.

By the time they're both finished, she's pushed those feelings down inside and forcefully ignored them. She's definitely not going to let such silly feelings ruin her day — especially when she has a feeling just what today is all about.

Jaal leads her through Aya, taking her into depths that she didn't even know about. In fact, she's pretty certain that if it weren't for Jaal's presence, she wouldn't have been allowed through the first door.

They pass a few other angara, but they start to thin out and she realises that they're definitely going somewhere rather private. Or secluded. And when she wonders just how much farther they're going to go, Jaal stops and asks if it's all right for him to cover her eyes.

She nods, just a little bit tentative but her trust in him is huge. She knows he won't hurt her or lead her into danger.

His gloves are soft over her eyes, and she feels the occasional brush of leaves across her cheeks but that's not what she focuses on. It's the amazing smells that drift towards her. It's a scent unlike anything she's ever smelled before. 'Wherever we are, it smells like Heaven.'

She's not really sure why she says it. Maybe it's to make sure that he's experiencing this as well.

He chuckles, and she feels it rumble as his chest is pressed close to her back. 'Heaven? Maybe it is.' He removes his hands from her face, allowing her to blink and adjust to the light. 'Take a look.'

In front of her is a large lake that seems to extend in each direction for infinity. Off to the side is a waterfall constantly churning and disturbing the peacefulness, whilst also adding to it. And all around her are flowers of varying colours and sizes, and it only takes a moment for her to realise that's where the glorious smell must be coming from.

'How is this place not packed with people right now?' Sara asks in wonder, looking around herself. She turns to Jaal, but even then her gaze darts over his shoulder to a large, flowery-tree thing. It's all so surreal and beautiful and there's no way this has been kept secret, with only Jaal knowing it exists.

'I have my ways,' Jaal says, his voice a rumble that makes her shiver. 'Trust me, we won't be disturbed.'

He comes up to her side and takes her hand, starting to lead them closer to the edge of the lake but Sara can't stand it anymore. The voice, the promise of not being disturbed, the hum of his bioelectricity coursing through her... she stops and turns, reaching up to cup his face and pull him down into a soft kiss.

She closes her eyes, leaning into him, feeling her heart beat rapidly. She just wants to lose herself in him, in the feel of his lips grazing her own. Later, her mind hisses for she has no disillusions of what's to come. And her skin is suddenly on fire with the anticipation.

She pulls away and smiles up at him. 'Thanks. It's an amazing gift.'

His smile widens, almost in pride at himself, before he leads her near the edge of the lake. He guides her in front of his body, wrapping his arms around her waist, allowing Sara to lean her head back against his chest.

Sara sighs. 'I can't believe this. There's real air and real sun and fresh water. It's surreal.'
Jaal nuzzles against her cheek. 'This is my favourite place in the universe. Where is yours?'

'I'm not sure. I don't think I have a place yet... but this place is... it's special.' She closes her eyes, leaning back against him.

After a brief moment, Jaal shifts. 'And now with you here, it's perfect.' Sara moves so she can look him in the face, smiling at his words. He takes her hand and rests it over her heart. 'Beyond all reason, I've fallen in love with you. And I... do you want to...?'

Sara's mind is still reeling from those words that she can barely get her mouth to work. Her chest is tight and she feels light headed, and it's not until she sees his eyes start to lose their spark does she get her voice to work.

'Yeah. I'd... I'd like that.'

Jaal's eyes just light up, and it makes her heart swell knowing that he's just as excited and nervous as she is that he couldn't even get the words out. And it's also heartwarming knowing that he asked. Even though she had said she was ready, even though she's been anxiously waiting for him to get everything organised, he still asked if she wanted to in case things had changed.

She honestly has no idea how she got so lucky.

'Come with me into the water,' Jaal says, pulling her out of her thoughts.

'Wait, what?' she asks, not really knowing what she's doing as Jaal steps away from her. And when she finally follows him, she finds him working on the buckles of his suit.

A part of her is tempted to look away, embarrassment overcoming her, but she doesn't. She blames the artist in her, but she knows it's because she's just utterly fascinated with his body. And attracted to it. Which is such a strange concept for her but hey, she's relishing it.

He undresses with no shame, casting his clothes aside with no care which betrays his eagerness, she knows, because having shared a room with him for so long, she knows he is particular about the care of his clothes. Everything needs to be folded and pristine.

But he's just casually throwing them away.

When he's fully undressed, he wanders into the water, stopping when he's waist deep. He turns back to her and holds out his hand, and she realises that he's waiting for her.

Gnawing on her lip, Sara feels her cheeks burn but she refuses to feel shame when he's looking at her with such passion.

Still, as her fingers work away on her clothes, she keeps her gaze downcast, not really confident enough to be stripping whilst keeping eye contact.

Her fingers graze the hooks of her bra, and she takes a deep breath, unhooking it and casting it aside. Her hands then go to her panties, the last piece of clothing she has to remove.

And finally the embarrassment is too much and her entire body stiffens. She draws in a shaky breath, finally lifting her gaze to Jaal still waiting for her in the water.

Sara can't quite believe what she sees in his gaze. The amount of lust and attraction shown in those beautiful eyes, as he drinks in her body unashamedly. He finally meets her eyes and the smile on his face makes it easy for Sara to finally shed the last article of clothing and step towards him.
Sliding her hand into his, she lets him lead her into the water, drawing her around until they're face to face, both hands entwined.

His gaze continues to flicker over her body, and she feels her flush spread over her chest but she doesn't care, because there's nothing but loving hunger in his gaze.

Jaal starts to spin them, the water cascading around them. 'You are more lovely than anyone I have ever known — in body and spirit.' He slows to a halt, his gaze open, almost as if allowing Sara to gaze into his soul. 'Wherever you go, take me with you.'

Those beautiful words wash over her, and the urge to admit how she feels suddenly comes rearing back to the forefront of her mind. And this time there's no Kallo to come over the comms and interrupt her.

She smiles, raising her gaze to his. She reaches up and cups his face, smoothing over that still scar still fresh on his face. 'I love you too, Jaal.'

A huge smile breaks out over his face and before she knows it, he's picking her up and twirling her around in the water. She lets out a loud laugh, allowing herself a moment to lose herself in the sensation.

When he stops, he brings their lips together in a searing kiss, pouring all the love he feels into the touch. Sara returns the embrace, wrapping her arms around his neck in a desperate attempt to get closer.

A part of her had thought they'd ease into it. When she saw the lake, the first thing that went through her mind was being able to swim. She's wanted to soak in water since waking up in Andromeda, and now she's finally got the chance... but all she can focus about on Jaal.

He pulls away, his eyes hooded, and he reaches up to cup her face. 'I... there's somewhere else, I want to show you.'

Sara grins. 'Another surprise? I'm intrigued.'

Saying nothing else, Jaal starts to lead her towards the waterfall. She gives a giggle, holding her breath as they swim underneath it. The pressure is rather welcome as it briefly rains down on her back, and when they resurface, she finds themselves in a small cavern.

The water naturally fades onto the surface, and that is where Jaal leads her, kissing her once before lowering her to the ground.

Sara goes willingly, taking a deep breath as her back lowers against the cold stone. It's quickly chased away when Jaal lowers himself on top of her, gazing deep into her eyes.

Gnawing on her lower lip, Sara lets her eyes drift away, but Jaal's hand on her cheek quickly guides them back up to meet his. 'Are you all right, my love?'

She nods. 'I... yeah. I'm just suddenly realising what we're doing.' She laughs, somewhere between humiliation and humour. 'I still want to, I just... kiss me.'

His eyes widen briefly, no doubt thrown by the sudden demand, but he recovers easily. His lips meet hers in a fierce kiss, and he uses his hand still on her cheek to pull her closer. Her neck strains as she chases after him.

When they pull away, his lips land on her neck, suckling and nipping at the sensitive flesh there. It's
enough to draw a moan from Sara's mouth, and so he repeats it, obviously taking aboard which gets the best reaction from her and what doesn't.

He moves from her neck to her shoulders, over her chest, only paying brief attention to her breasts, which she can't really blame him for — angara don't have them, so why would he think much of them? He makes quick work down over her ribs, her stomach, and as he goes lower, he grabs her legs, pushing them a little further open and wrapping his arms around them to get a better grip.

Sara quivers for only a second, as his lips trace over her hipbones and then dip to her thighs, but it's quickly morphed into a loud moan as his mouth closes over her clit. She jerks her hips, the sensation so utterly exquisite and new, as she reaches a hand down to stroke over his head.

She throws her head backwards, ignoring the painful grind of stone against her crown, but Jaal's tongue was more than enough to distract the pain. His tongue circles over her, once again paying attention to which areas got the loudest moans from her and focusing on them in future.

'Jaal…' she moans, glancing down briefly and finding a a smirk on his face. Or as much as is possible with his lips enclosed around her clit. She swallows, feeling the telltale signs on an orgasm building, and she's rather thrown by how quickly it's approached, and she lets out another loud moan, her hand desperately pawing and Jaal's head. And for the first time she's saddened by the fact he doesn't have hair, because she's desperate for something to grab.

Almost as if sensing this, Jaal removes one hand from around her thighs and reaches for her hand, letting her grab and anchor herself. He then moves his another hand, letting her occupy both hands and push herself onto her shoulders as her hips rose from the ground, desperately chasing the sensation of his tongue.

'Jaal, I'm… I…'

Sara can't get any words out. She can just focus on the overwhelming sensation of his tongue on her, inside her, and there's a subtle buzzing focused on her centre, and she knows it as his bioelectricity, and it's that sensation that sends her rocketing of the edge.

Her breath catches in her throat as her eyes clench shut. Her hands tighten almost painfully around Jaal's, as she rides out her orgasm, enjoying his gentle licks until it's too much and she lowers her hips sharply, removing his mouth from her.

Slowly, she's aware of Jaal kissing his way back up her body, and capturing her lips in his once more. She sleepily kisses back, opening her eyes and smiling up at him.

'Hi,' she says, suddenly at a loss for words.

His smile is huge and adorable as he reaches up and cups her cheek. 'You are exquisite.'

Sara snorts. 'You know, you're not so bad yourself.' It's then she feels him, brushing against her stomach. She swallows, then licks her lips as she raises her gaze towards him. 'Speaking of which… can I… can I see?'

Jaal grins and nods, moving from his position on top of her until he's lying beside her. Sara takes another deep breath, only looking at the ceiling of the little cavern until she's managed to gather the courage to roll over, perching on her elbow.

She's not surprised when she finds that his cock is a purple-blue colour. She guesses it makes sense with his colouring and the fact he has blue blood. He's thick, slightly ridged, slightly tapered at the top, and she can see that he can retract inside (which she sort of expected since he wears such tight
clothing and there's never any outline). There's a slight glisten to his shape as well, and she wonders if he's self-lubricating as well.

'Umm… wow,' she breathes out, her hand inching towards it before she even realises. She stops and turns back to him. 'Can I?'

Without a word, Jaal nods and that's all Sara needs. She reaches out and gentle wraps her hand around his length. Her confidence grows when he immediately lets out a shuddering breath. She turns her face towards him and grins, her hand tightening as she slowly slides up towards the tip, watching as his eyes flutter, desperate to stay open and watch her.

Her heart swells and she leans forward, capturing his lips in a fierce, short kiss. 'I love you, Jaal. You can't know how much.'

'If it's similar to how much I love you, then I am truly honoured.'

Kissing him again, Sara continues to stroke him until he rolls them over, once again hovering on top of her. He reaches down and spreads her thighs, hooking one leg over his hip. She feels his tip grazing her folds, as his hips rock forward.

When he pulls away from their kiss, it's with a question in his eyes, and Sara quickly nods her head. Jaal smiles, then leans down to kiss her again. It's a fierce kiss, distracting her, chasing away all of her worries and stress. She doesn't even feel him slide inside her at first, not until he's fully sheathed.

Her eyes are closed when Jaal pulls away. 'Darling One? Are you hurt? Is everything...?'

He trails off only when Sara opens her eyes, and he has no doubt why because it's entirely obvious that she's just enjoying the feeling of him inside her.

Releasing her lip trapped between her teeth, she lets out a moan, slowly shuffling her hips. 'Jaal. Don't stop.'

His smile this time around is dazzling, and she can feel it as she surges upwards, meeting him eagerly as he leans down to claim her lips again.

His hips start to rock, pulling himself out ever so and then rocking back in, giving her a chance to adjust to the feeling. But her hands eagerly claw down his back, desperate for more, and he more than happily obliges.

Jaal sets a pace that is slow but powerful, every thrust sends her back arching, and she knows she's going to be covered in scrapes but she doesn't care.

Nothing else matters except the feeling of him inside her, the way she feels so full and stretched. Nothing else matters but his lips on hers, not really a kiss anymore... more like sharing the same breath. Nothing else matters but his eyes on hers, gazing at her like she's the most wonderful thing in the galaxy; like he can see into her soul and is astounded by what he sees.

'Jaal,' she whispers, feeling another orgasm approach and once again that tingling sensation follows her breathless cry. His bioelectricity tingles over her skin, slow caresses that move from her neck down over her chest and stomach, tickling her thighs before focusing on her clitoris.

The sensation is too much and she lets out a cry of his name, her breath catching in her throat as she comes undone around him.

The pressure of her clenching seems to be enough to send him over the edge, and she feels him come
inside, his thrusts stuttering and stalling until he stops completely. He collapses on top of her, just remembering to catch himself on his arms so he doesn't crush her.

Sara feels like she's floating, a smile on her face that seems like it's never going to leave. She reaches up and plants her hand on his chest. Jaal seems to understand and rolls onto his back, letting Sara curl up into his side with her head perched on his thick shoulder.

'I love you,' Sara whispers, because she seems unable to say anything else. Everything just seems too weak and feeble compared to the feelings blooming in her chest.

Jaal turns his head and beams at her. 'I love you, too.'
Chapter 57

Sara lounges beside Jaal on the beach, letting the sun dry them off a little before they got changed and made their way back to civilisation. A part of her really doesn't want to — loving the idea of just spending the entire time in the water, forgetting about being Pathfinder and having the entire galaxy depending on her... but she knows it's just a dream.

'You never did tell me what was troubling you,' Jaal's voice pulls her out of her reverie. She turns, raising an eyebrow because she's got so many troubles, he's going to have to be a little bit more specific. 'At the cafe earlier. I know you said you didn't want to talk about it, but I'm... I want to make sure you're okay.'

Licking her lips, Sara sits up a little and turns away from him, gazing out to the water. 'Oh. Uh.' She heaves a sigh. 'Suppose I just realised that not everyone is going to be as accepting as your mom or the crew. There are going to be people like Teviint, and it worries me. I don't want to see you get hurt because of me... because of us.'

Jaal reaches for her, cupping her face and bringing it to his. Their lips meet in a soft, gentle kiss and it rather reminds her of the way he had kissed her the second time they had made love that day. So soft and gentle, as if she were the most precious thing in the world.

When he pulls away, his eyes are hooded with affection. 'Darling, you have nothing to worry about. I will never be ashamed of my feelings for you. And you shouldn't either. Those people are the ones in the wrong — not us. Remember that.'

Smiling, Sara can say nothing else. Mostly because she's not really sure what to say. A part of her agrees, entirely, that she can't let other people's opinions affect her relationship with Jaal. But she also knows that people can be horrible and she doesn't want them to be attacked or abused just for walking around holding hands.

She says none of this aloud, not wanting to ruin this perfect day. She's not going to let those people filled with hatred into this special spot.

Sara rolls onto her back, stretching her arms above her head. She notices the sun starting to set and sighs. 'I guess we should head back soon, eh?'

'As much as I wish to keep you here, to myself,' Jaal sighs, 'we probably should, yes.'

Groaning, Sara pulls herself off of the ground and onto her feet, scanning the little beach for her clothes. They had thrown them aside at some point, not wanting them to get wet as Jaal had lowered her onto the ground again, lips on hers. That had been their first attempt to go back to the ship. They had come out from the waterfall, made to the beach and no further, passion overcoming them.

She finds them thrown hastily over some tall plant and with a small smile at the memory it brings back, goes and retrieves them. She quickly dresses, her limbs just a little heavy and her movements a little slow because she doesn't really want to leave.

But she knows she has a job to do — she's got a duty to the Andromeda Initiative and her father. If she does this right, she'll have plenty of time in future to just lie around beaches with Jaal.

That thought makes her smile and it must still be on her face when she turns back to him, fully dressed, for her comes over to her and cups her face.
'What has brought that beautiful smile to your face?' he asks, making her grin widen. She can't seem to stop herself from rocking forward and pressing their lips together.

'Suppose I was just realising that, when this is all done and I've kicked the Archon's ass to kingdom come... you and I can... have moments like this all the time.' She tilts her head. 'I mean, I know I'll probably still have duties and shit to do but it won't be as serious or as life threatening as it is now. We can have vacation time.'

A smile starts to spread across Jaal's face as well. His entire face lights up and he reaches for her, pressing another firm kiss on her lips. 'Darling, that sounds wonderful.'

Giving a giggle, Sara reaches for his hand and they start the journey back to the Tempest.

When they make it back to the ship, the first thing Sara does is head up to the bridge. She presses a kiss to Jaal's lips, a promise to see him later, and takes off for the front of the ship, ready to see her pilot and start planning the next stages of their journey.

She still hasn't heard much about the plans for finding the real Meridian, though she knows that the other Pathfinders are working on it. And if they're going to ask anyone for help, it'll be Suvi and Kallo, so they'll know first hand what's going on.

But just as she reaches the bridge and starts to walk towards her pilots, Peebee pokes her head out of her little room. 'Ryder! You're back... can I talk to you for a sec?'

Frowning, Ryder glances over to Suvi and Kallo, before following Peebee inside. It's not like the asari to ask to talk... there's just something about her whole demeanour that makes Sara think that whatever she wants to talk about, it's important.

'Sure! What's up?'

Peebee gnaws on her lower lip before she turns away. She reaches for one of Poc's tentacles, under the guise of examining it even though Ryder can somehow tell she's not really paying attention. 'I... I need to know: if I had something really important to do, could I count on you to help? To come along?'

Sara's dark eyebrows shoot up to her hairline. It takes her a long minute to process that thought — that Peebee is asking for her help. It makes her wonder just how serious this thing is when she's actually asking for cooperation rather than just attempting to go it alone.

Taking a step forward, Sara offers Peebee a smile. 'Of course you can.' Her grin spreads, an attempt to ease the tension that's worked its way inside of Peebee's shoulders. 'And if it's as exciting as you're making it seem... you know I'm in.'

It works. Peebee lets out a snort and her eyes light up. 'It is pretty damn exciting! Thanks to my newly Remnant-augmented scanner, I'm onto something big... She moves over to her scanner and fiddles with it until a sound starts to emit from it. 'Hear that? It's a signal. Best I can tell it's coming from a piece of raw Remnant programming tech. A building block in an unused state.' She shakes her head with a huge grin on her face. 'Just thinking about what we could learn — or do — with it is...'

Peebee trails off, letting Sara form her own ideas. She can't come up with much — she's never been the kind for engineering or invention. It's probably one of the biggest reasons there was that strain
between her and her dad... they didn't have any common interests. Even her taste in guns varied from her father's.

Still, she knows that having some so powerful of the people who created the Remnant... it could give them a hint as to how, after so damn long, the equipment is still working.

'It's like a rem-tech wild card. The kind of mystery I live for. I have to go get it and there's no time to waste, right?' Peebee's eyes are wide and eager, and Ryder almost feels like she's five seconds away from clasping her hands and falling to her knees.

Before Sara can even say a thing, Peebee is pressing on, 'At the very least, it'll strengthen our bridge to Remnant technology. Even just getting closer data readings could help us break down Remnant programming and use their tech more efficiently. I need to find it! Like now. Well, now, now that now's gone... so now?'

Snorting, Sara reaches for her and places a hand on Peebee's shoulder. 'I was going to say okay, Peebee. Stop fretting.'

Peebee frowns. 'Wait, really? You're not going to ask a million other questions? Just... "okay" and we'll go?'

Giving a grin, Sara replies, 'You're a friend, Peebee. And this is important.' Her grin widens, remembering her last conversation she had with the asari in this room. She gives a teasing wink. 'Or maybe you just caught me in a really good mood.'

Her eyes narrow in confusion before they widen as realisation washes over her. She gives an excited squeal and reaches for Sara's hands, gripping them. 'You didn't! Tell me everything? What is he like? You know I've been curious about that since day one. Come on, Ryder, you can't just drop something like that and then leave it hanging.'

Gnawing on her lip, Sara mentally berates herself for saying anything, knowing that this would be Peebee's reaction. She can already feel her cheeks darken with heat as her gaze flickers over the asari's shoulder to the bot hovering behind them.

'Okay, I maybe did — twice — but I still don't think I'm ever going to be the kind of girl to talk about this. Maybe get me really drunk and we'll see. Just... just know it was good. Really good.'

Peebee gives a loud cackle. 'I'm gonna take you up on that. After hoop-head is dealt with, we're going out to a bar and you're going to give me all the details!'

Sara laughs. 'It's a date. Now tell me where the NavPoint so I can get Kallo to plot the course.'

Fiddling with her omni-tool, Peebee says, 'Just sent you the NavPoints.'

'Right. I'll go and tell him now. Then I'm gonna go for a lie down, I think. I'm actually starting to feel tired.'

'I bet you are.'

Sara feels her entire face flush as she hastily leaves the room with Peebee's loud laugh echoing after her.
Chapter 58

When Ryder makes it back to her room, Jaal is already there waiting. She smiles, walking over to him and sliding into his open arms. He sits down on the edge of the bed, holding her close as she settles onto his lap, both legs over one side. She wraps her arms around his neck and presses her lips to his in a quick kiss.

'I should warn you that Peebee may pester us with a million innuendos about today because I made the mistake of telling her.' She brushes her fingers along the scar from Akksul's shot. 'Just preparing you for that.'

Jaal only smiles. 'I have nothing to be ashamed of. Today was amazing, my love, and I'd tell everyone about it if you allowed me to.'

Her face must be bright red for he laughs and leans forward, pressing a kiss to her lips. They then trail over to her cheek, up her temple, and then down to her ear. His voice is low and sultry as he whispers, 'Don't worry. I won't. And I rather enjoy having you all to myself; knowing there are things I know about you that no-one else does.'

Sara tries to swallow as her fingers tighten around his rofjinn. 'You are insatiable,' she says, her voice a whisper as his lips trail down her neck.

She feels his laugh against her throat. 'For you my dear? Of course I am.'

That earns a giggle from her as her hands move to the back of his head, guiding him back up to face her. She gnaws on her lower lip, trailing her fingers over his face, marvelling at his features and how he chose to be with her.

She leans forward.

'Hey, Ryder, you there?'

Liam's voice cuts through the moment like her asari-blade. She draws back with a snarl caught in her throat. And by the look of things, Jaal is just as pissed as she is at the interruption.

Even though she knows they don't really have a right to be this annoyed, having spent all morning together... but it's still not the point!

'What do you want, Liam?' she asks, trying to keep any venom out of her voice. She has a duty first. She knows that. It's not fair to lose her patience with her crew just because she wants to screw her hot alien boyfriend.

'I, uh, need your help with something... a big something. That should probably be talked about face to face, rather than over the comms? And I know, you're going to hate me for the reason but... please?'

Suddenly, all thoughts of being with Jaal leaves her mind. She straightens in his lap and glares over at the comm. 'Kosta, what have you done now?' she asks, her mind going back to that whole ordeal in the marketplace yesterday.

'Ugh, I knew you'd be mad. Just, come down to my room and I'll explain it all, yeah?' Before Sara can say another word, Liam hastily mutters, 'Kosta out,' and cuts off the link.
Sara dives off Jaal's lap. 'I swear, I'm going to kill him.' She starts pacing back and forth across the room. 'I know he means well but he never seems to fucking think. He has no idea how to handle First Contact. It can only take one incident to screw everything up and what if we end up losing the trust of the angara over it?' She lets out a loud sound of frustration. 'I'm going wring his neck.'

As she turns towards the door, a hand grips hers and stops her. She turns back to Jaal, letting him pull her into a tight embrace.

'I know he can be difficult, Darling One, but you said yourself is heart is always in the right place. Sometimes, his approach works... even if most of the time it doesn't.'

Both of them chuckle and Sara pulls back, rocking onto the balls of her feet to reach his lips.

'We'll pick up when I get back. You're not the only one who's insatiable, love.' She winks and leaves the room, feeling giddy at his struck expression at her confession.

It's not a feeling that lasts, however, as she makes her way down to the cargo bay and to the room that Liam has claimed for his own.

As soon as she enters, he rounds on her. 'Hey! I was just... how are you doing? I'm great! Just... uh...' He sighs. 'We both knew I'd screw it up... and I have.'

Sara heaves a sigh and crosses her arms over her chest. 'Explain.'

'Remember Verand? My contact in the angara?' Ryder nods and so Liam continues. 'She's gone.'

That makes her frown. 'Gone? What do you mean "gone"?'

'I... I'm not sure! Her whole group is gone! Just sudden. Like they disappeared into thin air.' He licks his lips and glances away from her, looking off to the side. 'Soooo. yeah. Up for a rescue? Cause if we don't, we could be next.'

Sara sighs, remembering Jaal's words. 'Okay, this sounds serious. I get that. And sure, we can help... but I'm not hearing how this is your fault. How is this you screwing up? We know better than anyone how much angara disappear...'

And god, isn't that a depressing thought?

Liam rubs the back of his neck. 'Uh... because I gave Verand Nexus data and nav-points.'

Sara has to close her eyes. Mostly because she knows, if she doesn't, and she continues to look at him, she's going to end up breaking his nose. And she knows that it'll just end in a shitload of problems if she does.

'You. Did. What?' she asks, slowly, her voice dripping in frustration.

'Look, we need to know how to live here! I tried asking. I tried taking. No-one would help "outsiders". So I took initiative. Gave her data and tech so she could mod it. Verand was... is a good risk. But if pirates interrogate her or... barter her to the kett — it's our heads.'

Ryder says nothing for a solid minute. She stands there, eyes closed, concentrating on her breathing so she doesn't lose her temper.

When she finally reopens her eyes, it's the Liam looking sheepish and she's at least glad that he knows how much he's fucked up; how much he's angered her. 'Okay. We go and get Verand and her
group. But, if this goes south, you're on the hook, Liam. And if it doesn't, you and I are going to have a serious chat about your decisions. Understood?'

'I know. I'll fix it.' He swallows. 'I've got a lead from a trader. A grainy visual. We find that system, we find our bad guys.'

Sara nods, turning to leave and head to the bridge for Suvi and Kallo's help.

But Liam speaks up again. 'I... also asked Bradley for people to help intercept. I thought they might want to pitch in.'

Sara whirls around. 'The people on Prodromos are settlers. How are they supposed to help? And, also, why did you think you had the authority to do that?'

Liam's shoulders bunch up to his ears. 'Yeah. Bradley said pretty much the same thing. We're on our own.' He looks down to his feet. 'I'll forward the visual to the bridge for when you want to start hunting. And... I'm sorry.'

Sighing, Sara turns. 'That better be bloody genuine or I swear...'

Without another word, she takes off to the bridge.

---

Two hours later, Sara finally makes it back to her cabin. She finds Jaal already in bed, reading something on his datapad.

He sets it aside the second he spots her however, pulling himself into a sitting position. 'Darling One? Is everything all right?'

Sara holds her hand up to him, undressing as she goes towards her wardrobe. She pulls out her pyjamas and tugs them on, and then walks over to the bed.

Instead of going to her side, she walks over to Jaal's, collapsing onto his chest the second she's able. She buries her face into his chest and lets out a sigh, tightening her hold on him as his own hands come up to hold her. His hands smooth over her back, applying gentle pressure along with a gentle buzz of his bioelectricity that makes Sara moan.

'That bad?' he asks, his voice soft and Sara groans, turning her head to the side so she can speak.

'Liam ever tell you about his angaran contact?' Sara doesn't even bother waiting for an answer, the anger starting boil all over again. 'Well, apparently she and her team have gone missing. Because he's been giving her data from the Nexus. That pirates or the kett could use to completely fucking destroy us. So not only do we need to get the angara back... we need to do it ASAP to stop an attack on the Nexus.'

Pushing herself up so she's straddling Jaal's lap, Sara reaches for Jaal's hands and holds them to her face. 'And all we had to go off on was a grainy vid of a system. So I've spent the past hour and a half with Kallo and Suvi, narrowing down the location. And then after that, I had to tell Peebee that going after her piece of RemTech is going to have to wait because Liam fucked up... and she was ready to go down and fight him for his stupidity, and the only way to calm her down was fifteen minutes of zero-gravity in an escape pod.'

With a groan, Sara presses a kiss to Jaal's palm before she collapses back on top of him. She tucks
her head under his chin and closes her eyes. 'I wish we hadn't left that waterfall,' she admits, her voice a soft whisper.

Jaal's hands tighten on her, and she feels one run up her back, over her shoulder and towards her chin, tilting it upwards. She doesn't try to fight, raising her tired eyes to his with a small smile.

He gives her a smile before reaching for her lips, sealing his over them in a soft kiss. Sara follows him, letting him guide the movement of her lips with no concern for every parting — not for air or responsibilities or anything.

But he pulls away, and she whispers, 'Is it wrong to want you again? Even though we spent all morning together?'

Jaal's lips quirk up at the side in a crooked, suave grin. 'Not at all. I'm more than pleased to hear that. At least I know that it felt good for you.'

Sara lets out a chuckle. 'Oh definitely. I rather like the way you use your bioelectricity. And your tongue.' She gnaws on her lip, embarrassment starting to catch up with her. 'What... what about you? It... it was good for you too, right?'

Jaal's eyes soften and his thumb comes to brush over her lip. 'Of course, my love. You were exquisite.'

With nothing else in her brain that is an adequate response to that, Sara presses her lips to his again, giggling when he rolls them over. 'How about I help you forget all about Liam and Peebee and their problems?' he asks, voice low and husky as he kisses down her neck.

Sara's only answer is to grip his shoulder and urge him lower.
She's the first one awake, which doesn't surprise her at all. Her sleep had been shit, constantly worrying about Liam and his stupid decision to give information away and how that information could be getting used, whilst she slept, to attack the Nexus — to attack Scott.

He's all the family she has left. He's all she's got of home and Earth and the brief moments of happiness the Ryder family once had.

And the fear of losing him all over Liam being fucking careless...

Sara rolls over onto her stomach, ignoring the slight throbbing pain coming from between her legs. In all honesty, she's not surprised. Twenty-so years without nothing but her fingers, and then suddenly it's having to deal with Jaal... and the five times they'd had sex in less than 24 hours.

Rather than losing her mind to her filthy thoughts, Sara watches the man in question sleep. It's a rather spectacular sight, really, to see him so vulnerable and peaceful. There's not a hint of stress or worry or concern on his face — just relaxation.

And the occasional grimace from a particularly loud snore.

When the Moshae had mentioned his snoring, Sara had thought it was a joke. Then they had started sharing a bed, and she realised that the old angara hadn't been lying or joking. He snored. A lot. And loudly.

Not that it bothers her. She spent a lot of time sharing rooms whilst working as a peacekeeper. And there had been one colleague, Connor, who had snored even louder than Jaal.

It's something she's learnt to deal with.

And honestly, she's thankful for it. The silence sometimes gets to her. It allows her mind to wander, when she's trying to sleep. It tempts her down dark and dangerous paths, leading towards Shasi and the sight of him dying.

But Jaal's loud snores seem to ground her; stop her from following those thoughts.

Licking her lips, Sara crawls forward so she can press a kiss to Jaal's forehead. He rustles a little, turning towards her, seeking her out, but she slides out of bed and lets him settle back down into his slumber.

She knows she's got no chance of falling back asleep, and she doesn't want to wake him when he looks so peaceful. She gathers her clothes and heads for the shower, deciding that a nice warm shower will ease some of the throbbing and stop her from waddling about whilst dealing with Liam and the upcoming mission.

When she's finished — taking longer than she thought due to counting the bruises left on her skin thanks to Jaal — she dresses and heads to the bridge.

She passes the galley and hears the distinct sounds of breakfast. A part of her debates about stepping inside, but everything is still pretty tense and if Liam is there... well, she doesn't want to ruin the good mood her shower had put her in.

'How are we doing?' Sara asks as she steps into the bridge, eyes already roaming out in front of her.
She expected to see... something. Anything, really, but all that's there is debris. 'This is it?'

'Seems so. I told Liam but he said he had a plan. That doesn't fill me with much hope,' Kallo replies, causing Sara to snort. She scans the debris field for a minute, almost expecting something to jump out at her, but when she still just sees rubbish, she shakes her head and turns, heading for the armoury to get kitted out.

'Ping Jaal and Liam for me. Tell them to meet me up here. I want this dealt with ASAP.'

Kallo confirms her order, allowing Sara to get suited up without any worries. She digs out her RemTech armour, grinning to see some slight changes, no doubt from Peebee. The asari had admitted to tinkering with the armour now and then when she had nothing else to do. No doubt, after being pissed off with Liam last night, it had been the only thing to calm her down after Sara had left her.

After grabbing her beloved Isharay rifle, as well as her pistol and a SMG for good measure, Sara steps back out to the bridge.

'Right. I'm ready to go... somewhere.'

She's just about to ask after Jaal and Liam when the doors whoosh, signalling their arrival.

'This is on me, I'll take care of it,' Liam says, and Ryder manages to bite her tongue to stop herself from snapping at him. He's part of a team — he needs to stop acting as if he's the only one who can do fucking anything.

Sara turns and her eyes flicker to Jaal, who just looks at her and seems to know what she's thinking. He sends her a smile, a smile that tells her everything she needs to hear, as she turns her attention to Liam who's asking Suvi if there's any sign of the pirates who took Verand.

'There's too much background radiation. Could be anything hiding out there. All that debris in orbit.'

'I'd hoped Bradley or some of our colonists would follow. Join in.'

Shaking her head, Sara tightens her hand around the bridge. 'I still don't know why you asked them first. Why not a strike team? Ever since Kandros hooked me up, they're accessible for the whole ship. I made Prodromos a science-outpost; not militia.'

'I gave Verand a lot of Nexus data. If the pirates got that, they'd know a team was coming.'

'We're a team!' Kallo pipes in, making Sara grin and send him a teasing wink.

'I'm not risking the Tempest either. I say we play to their scavenger routes. With that debris.' He must see Sara's frown coming for he adds, 'I'll explain in the airlock. We've wasted enough time. Let's hit the "go" button, shoot some pirates and save people. We've got this.'

Sara shakes her head. He never learns. She turns away, already heading for the airlock. 'What we've got is a chance.'

Liam jogs to catch up with her. 'And I'll make the most of it. You'll see. We play this right, they'll deliver us just where we need to go. I have a plan.'

'I'm with you Kallo,' Sara calls over her shoulder. 'That doesn't fill me with any confidence.'

She has no idea how long they've been trapped inside this fucking container. She can barely see a
thing, just the light from her helmet and armour which doesn't reflect much.

'I am not loving this idea, Liam.'

'Come on!' There's too much cheeriness in his voice, even as he speaks in a soft tone. 'Hiding in derelict cargo to get scavenged. Sure, we don't know what we're up against — neither do they. Trojan horse simple.'

'What's... a trojan horse?' Jaal asks and for the first time since she woke up, Sara laughs. She knows it's reckless because people could hear her and they'd be dead before they even started, but she can't help it.

She fumbles for his hand, gripping it tight in thanks when she finds it. It's strange, because she knows that he was genuinely asking a question rather than making a joke to amuse her, but she's thankful for it nonetheless.

'I'll explain it later. It's a long story.' His hand tightens around hers and she understands the meaning. That he's always here for her. 'For now, let's worry about whether or not there's air on the other side of this container.'

There's a loud thump and they're shaken a little as the container is finally dumped on... whatever they've found themselves in.

Liam strides forward and kicks the door open. 'There's air.'

The three of them remove their helmets. Sara can almost hear her dad berating her but she's never enjoyed wearing a helmet. There's a centre claustrophobic nature to it... and having already died from suffocation, she doesn't really like the limited feeling of air it gives her.

Liam leads the way and Sara follows, coming up to his side when he stops suddenly with a, 'Woah. This isn't right.'

Sara's jaw clenches as she surveys the hold of the ship they've found themselves in. Filled to the brim with kett technology. 'Liam. You said to expect pirates! This is a kett ship! A big fucking kett ship!'

'Chan—change of plan?'

She takes a step forward, hand clenching into a fist, ready to bloody his nose, when a loud alarm fills the silence. She sends a glare at Liam before reaching for her rifle and rushing forward to a decent spot for cover.

'It doesn't change why we're here. Find Verand and get out. That's still the same,' Liam says over the comms, but Ryder is too focused on scoping out the oncoming attackers, expecting Anointed and Destined kett. But she's more than a little surprised when she doesn't see any kett aboard — there's angara, turian, salarian... 'Definitely not kett running this thing!' Liam declares, putting words to her thoughts.

The fight doesn't take too long — the pirates hadn't really been expecting them, and it's over in no time. Sara stands and surveys the area, wondering how the hell pirates managed to commandeer a huge ass kett ship like this one.

Opening her mouth to ask that very question to Jaal and Liam, Sara finds herself cut off by another voice. Frowning, she follows the sound, finding a comm terminal. 'For the last time, report! We just fixed those bay seals. If you idiots blew them, I'll have your skin!'
'Well, he's charming,' Sara quips before reaching forward to activate the comm channel. 'Everything's under control. Just a simple weapon malfunction... how are you?'

Liam and Jaal both snicker, even as the leader snaps for the cameras to be turned on so he can figure out what's happening.

A moment later, a holoscreen pops up with an angara framed inside it. 'Stows? This ship is property of talon wing. Now you're property too, just like the rest—'

Rolling her eyes, Ryder presses the disconnect button, turning to face her friends. 'Well, that was going nowhere. Back to the plan of "shoot pirates, rescue contacts"?'

A part of her should be worried how, being in the field and shooting a few people improves her mood... but that's for Lexi to figure out. All she can focus on now is the moment, and trying to save these people.

'Sure.' Liam takes a couple of steps forward. 'You heard him. She's got to be here... somewhere. Do you think they salvaged this thing?'

Sara shrugs. 'Fuck knows. They're not kett, so something happened for them to get it. I almost admire them if they managed that.' She swallows. 'SAM, you got us?'

'Not precisely, Pathfinder. Debris and radiation are still disrupting scans.'

Sara sighs. Of course. Nothing is ever easy. 'So where to?'

'We find Verand. And fast.' Liam moves over to the first door. 'This way!' He punches the control for the door, revealing a turret that immediately starts to arm itself. 'Fuck.' He hastily slams his hands on the controls again, shutting it just in time as the turret fires. 'Not that way.'

Before Sara can say that maybe the pathfinder should find the path, he takes off again. 'Start there. Let's go.'

There's a moment of silence, and then more pirates filter in through the door. As Liam suggests fighting to the door that they came through, Sara decides that's he's maybe not quite as stupid as he makes himself out to be. There's no guarantee that's where the captives are going to be, but it's the best lead they've got.

Ryder ducks in behind a container and reloads her rifle, glad to finally have a piece of cover that she can shoot her beloved weapon from. Jaal seems to have the same idea as he ducks in beside her, just as she deploys her assault turret.

'Are you okay, Darling One?' he asks as he ducks down beside her again after delivering one hell of a headshot.

She sends him a grin. 'Nothing like a good fight to improve my mood.'

Jaal laughs, a loud and hearty thing that makes her heart soar. For a slight second, she forgets about the shitshow she's having to deal with and focuses only on that sound.

Then it morphs into a shout of her name, and she knows something is coming up behind her. Without even looking to see what it is — be it krogan, angara or something else — she draws her asari blade and funnels all her biotic energy into it, swinging it around in a wide arc.

The blade rips through the adhi's head, nearly slicing it clean off. It falls to the ground with a whine,
just as Ryder pockets her blade and picks up her rifle that she had dropped in her haste.

'Thanks, love,' Sara whispers as she slides down beside him. She reaches for his hand, giving it one quick squeeze, before she pops back up to take a shot at one of the pirates.

'That's gear from Verand's outpost,' Liam informs, even as reinforcements start to pour in.

'Liam, we still don't know if she's alive.'

'Shit it!' he snaps.

There's so much venom in his voice, whether directed at her or himself or just the world, she isn't sure. But it's such a shock to hear it aimed at her, that she stills, her finger freezing on the trigger. She can almost hear Lexi in her head, telling her it's a response mechanism, but it doesn't help her.

Especially when a sniper hits her square on the chest and sends her flat on her ass, gasping for air as her shields beep in warning.

SAM! Am I hit? is the first thought flowing through her head, followed quickly by the sound of Jaal shouting her name.

No, Sara. Your armour took most of the damage, but there will be a bruise and you'll feel breathless for a little while.

Sighing in relief, Sara lets her head fall back against the floor, glad when the gunfire ceases a moment later. She doesn't have to wait long before Jaal's at her side, pulling her up and holding her face between his huge hands. 'Darling One, are you okay?'

Her voice is a little ragged as she answers, 'Just sore. SAM says there'll be a bruise due to impact.' She smiles at him, just thankful for his entire existence. She turns her head and presses a kiss to his palm. 'Thanks. Help me up?'

Jaal assists her to her feet, and she scans for Liam who is pacing in front of the door. 'The door just sealed itself! Ryder, can you and SAM override this?'

Gritting her teeth, she moves over to the console, rubbing at her chest even though her armour is too thick for it to actually do any good. She angles her glare at the console, not really wanting to get into anything right now with Liam.

Jaal walks by her side, his hands hovering as if expecting her to keel over at any second. It warms her heart and lifts her spirits just for a second.

Until Liam snaps, 'Come on! We have to find Verand!'

Sara clenches her jaw as she begins to work on the console, granting SAM access. 'Liam, we don't even know if this is the right way!'

She's barely finished when he snaps again. 'Well something has to go right! You take a risk for the right reasons! It's supposed to work!' He slams his fist into the nearest cargo, the sound sudden and causing Sara to flinch.

Finally having enough, she turns away from the console and rounds on him. Her eyes glare daggers, enough to make him cower even though he's nearly a whole head taller than him.

'You have become like a brother to me, but I swear to fucking god, if you don't calm the fuck down,
I will shoot you.' He doesn't even crack a smile, probably seeing in her eyes that she's not kidding. 'I promised to help you find them and that's what I'm gonna do, but you prancing around acting like a toddler throwing a tantrum over his favourite toy will get us nowhere. I swear to fucking god, I will lock you back in that container and me and Jaal will do this ourselves.'

He shakes his head. 'I know. It's stupid! It's... everything!'

'Oh save it. I don't care about that right now. I was just shot because of you and your fucking moodiness. So just zip it. Right now, I need you to stop expecting a goddamn miracle and stay on task. Compared to everything else we've done, this is nothing. So just calm the fuck down.'

There's a chuckle. Sara sees the hologram pop up with that Calot dude again. 'You turn on each other so fast.'

Sara slams her hand on the control, cutting the connection.

'I can't help it! I jumped us here blind! I don't know where anyone is or how anything works!' The hologram pops up again, but Liam quickly cuts it off. 'And now we're fighting some asshole who wants everyone chained! It's like hitting Andromeda all over again.'

'I will not be ignored anym—!'

Sara loses her patience, reaching for her pistol and firing two shots at the console with a scream of, 'Shut the fuck up!' She rounds on Liam, who takes a small, hesitant step back. 'Look, we've got a bad plan to rescue these people and we're doing it. Any questions?'

Liam shakes his head with a bemused expression on his face. 'Nope.'

'Good!' Sara lets out a long, deep breath as she turns back to the console, watching a few sparks fly from it. 'I shot the console... think he'll be mad?'

Liam grins, looking more like himself than he has since this whole mess started. 'What more could he do?'

As if in answer to that question, a loud alarm comes through the bay, and before Sara has a chance to say a thing, she finds herself being swept off her feet as the ramp opens.

A scream tears its way through her throat, only stopping when her hands manage to catch a railing. She glances to her left and finds Jaal and Liam there, and her heart stops thudding quite as much.

'You just had to ask, didn't you?' she says, sending a grin to let him know she's teasing rather than accusing.

He laughs.

Her eyes drift alongside to Jaal, and she feels her smile widen. Yeah. She'll definitely need to talk to Lexi about her fucked up brain making her feel better when faced with death.

But like she thought earlier. That's something for later. Right now, she lets out a bark of laughter as she says, 'What about a group hug, guys? I could use someone to hold.'

Liam says nothing, only lets out a loud guffaw that mimics Ryder's.

She sees Jaal shake his head. 'It's a good thing I love you,' he says, but there's a smile on his lips. And gods, she will never get over hearing those three little words come from his mouth.
Sara tries to ignore the ache in her arms, especially when paired with the throbbing in her chest. But she's pretty damn certain that there's no way out of this... until the comms click through her omni-tool. 'You folks need a hand?'

Liam is the one to answer, Sara just too damn relieved to speak. 'Augie? You have timing.'

It takes only a second before the door closes and they can relax, no longer being threatened with the risk of being spaced. No doubt Bradley and the settlers managed to hack the ship.

'We would have come in sooner but we didn't know how we could help. Settlers aren't soldiers. But a wreck of a ship with bad shielding? We've got engineers, son!' There's a brief moment, before the ship shakes a little. 'Oh! Power surge! This beast does not like being prodded!'

'Shit, shit, shit!'

'August that was the artificial gravity, everything is shiftin—ah!'

She finds herself falling ass over head, landing sharply on her side on top of a random container. She quickly rights herself and draws her assault rifle, stifling a groan as she does.

'Liam? Pathfinder, are you okay?'

'Fine. The world is a bit upside down, but nothing I can't handle.'

'That's good to hear! We'll keep this barge steady whilst you take care of the fighting and find Verand.'

'I like the sound of that.' Ryder checks the clip of her gun, then turns to Liam and Jaal. 'Ready to stage a rescue?'

'Hell yeah.'

'Then let's go, boys.'
Chapter 60

Talking with the captives sets Sara's mind at ease. If only a little. It's good to know that Calot hasn't doing anything... yet. He's just being an utter idiot, thinking that a small crew can run a huge ass kett ship that had been badly beaten up.

And hearing that Verand is alive and hasn't given up any of the info that Liam had given her is also a huge bonus.

As she turns away and follows the NavPoint sent to her to help her get the power working for the door, she lets her shoulders relax just a little. It's not over yet. She knows that. They've got to deal with this Calot — assholes who think the world has somehow wronged them are dangerous. And Sara's not going to let him threaten the Initiative.

Not when she's worked so hard and done so much to get it to where it is.

'There's a problem,' Verand's voice comes over the comms, her accent rather similar to Jaal's, making her wonder if she too was born on Havarl. 'Dace says the override only pulls the lock.'

'The most engineering I ever do is mod'ing my guns. What does that mean?'

'It lets the door open under it's own weight. But it's upside down.'

Before Sara can even say another word, Liam is grinning. 'So it's gravity held! You get that, Augie? Gravity!'

August's voice comes over the comms in reply, 'I get you. Kuriada, we've been fighting the shorts, think you can...?'

'Go with it?' a distinctly turian voice comes over the comms. 'Sounds easy enough.'

Smiling, Sara approaches the console, briefly eyeing her surroundings to find a way that will make the switch in gravity less painful... she sees nothing.

'Well, here goes nothing. Lexi is gonna kill me with all the bruises I'm gonna come back with,' Sara groans as she raises her omni-tool, hacks into the console and resets the whole thing.

The familiar jolt of the power surge comes just before Ryder feels herself fall. It's been an odd ass experience, knowing that the ship is still upright, it's just the artificial gravity weighing her down in different places. First the walls, then the ceilings, and finally — thankfully — the floor again.

She lands in an inelegant heap, leg twisted awkwardly that she wonders, briefly, if she's sprained her knee or something. It wouldn't surprise her. Still, she feels her armour deploy some medi-gel and it's enough to keep her going as she rises to her feet, feeling normal again that up is up and down is down.

By the time she's on her feet, she sees the captives running across the upper pathway, following August's directions as he informs them that the exit vehicle is at the nearest airlock.

'Right,' Sara starts, stretching herself a little as she draws her pistol. Jaal steps up beside her and she can feel the comforting hum of his bioelectricity. It makes her smile. 'Let's go and put a stop to this maniac.'
The NavPoint sent to her by Westie flashes on her omni-tool, and she follows that, loading her gun with some incendiary ammo just to make sure this goes quickly. The last thing she wants is for this to take any longer than it needs to, and have her end up with even more bruises.

'Fine, take them! I'll chase you down and burn you where you live,' Calot threatens over the loudspeaker. 'My Talon Wing will never let you sleep.'

Sara can only snort. 'I've taken out worse than you, Calot. Your hollow words aren't going to scare me.'

They make quick work of the pirates in the next room, and when they finally reach the room that Calot is apparently in, Sara can almost feel the hot shower that she's going to take — after seeing Lexi first, of course.

'Get a ship, fill it with shooters, and I'm still disrespected! Fine. Fine!'

Fighting to stop her eyes from rolling, Sara calls out, 'It doesn't have to end like this!' because like it or not, she's always going to at least try to get a peaceful option.

'No-one is ever taking anything from me ever again, Pathfinder! I'll kill you myself!'

At that, Jaal steps forward, his eyes narrowed. She briefly wonders if there's something being said between the two angara via their bioelectricity, especially as Calot's eyes widen and he takes a surprised step backwards.

But before she say anything, Calot raises his hand and all hell breaks loose. His huge shield actives — drawing energy from the drive core, according to Bradley — and he's using the last of his pirates. As well as a fucking eiroch.

'Right, focus on taking that big fucker out,' Sara orders over her team's comms as she ducks behind cover. 'Obviously, if someone is in sights and shooting, shoot them back, but I want that ugly bastard taken down first and foremost.'

Jaal and Liam let her know they've heard, before they all take off.

The entire fight is rather a blur. She remembers staying near some consoles, giving the settlers access so they can hack it and affect the shield; she remembers the eiroch falling and Calot complaining that it was "his"; she remembers ahdi being added to the mix, along with more and more pirates and mercs. And she definitely remembers Calot screaming ridiculous things over the loudspeaker that just made him sound even more stupid and made Ryder even more eager to kill him.

The second he drops, she signals for August and the other shuttles to pick them up and drop them off on the Tempest. The captives stay aboard the shuttles, the settlers helping them get to wherever they want to go.

'We'll check in after we're washed and checked over, okay Bradley?' Sara says as she leaves his shuttle, stepping into the Tempest's airlock. He mutters an affirmative, then takes off, letting Sara and the others remove their armour and then head to the med-bay.

Liam and Jaal take no time at all to be looked over, but Lexi takes one look at her and orders her, 'Sit.'

'Can't I have a shower first?'

'No. I was notified that medi-gel was dispensed from your armour. What happened?'
Liam quickly makes his excuses, leaving the room as quickly as he can since he's cleared. But Jaal stays by her side. It warms her heart, seeing the care in his eyes.

'We had several malfunctions with the artificial gravity. One time, I fell and hurt my knee. I think it was just a precaution.'

Without another word, Lexi starts examining her. She checks her leg first, saying that it's just a little bruised but nothing to worry about. She then moves onto her chest, examining the damage from the bullet. Her brows shoot up when Sara removes her shirt without the slightest bit of hesitation, even though Jaal is right there beside her.

Ryder can practically see the question swirling in her brain, but she keeps them at bay, knowing that her job of the Pathfinder's doctor is more important than her curiosity.

Examining that doesn't take long either, though she does hum in disapproval when Ryder answers why she had been shot in the first place. And Sara knows that's going to come up at their next psych-eval meeting.

'Nothing for a couple of days, Ryder. The sniper had good aim and was aiming right for you heart. It was a shock to the system and we want to give them time to adjust before they're put through their paces again.' Lexi shakes her head. 'I swear, you're going to be the death of me.'

Sara can only grin as she slides off the table and leaves the med-bay, glad she can finally get for her shower.

Ryder leads Liam to the conference room. She almost wishes that they had an actual room for things like this, because whilst she loves the layout of the Tempest, it's not exactly the most private setting when you need to have a serious discussion with a crew member.

Leaning on the bannister, Sara tries to keep her thoughts light by reminding herself that they got everyone out safe; Verand and the others are heading to Prodromos, and she may even be bringing some angara to the colony, which is a huge plus — when she first landed on Aya all those months ago, she could never imagine them sharing a colony on Eos.

'So, uh, that worked out,' Liam starts, no doubt taking Sara's silence the wrong way. 'Everything just... just so.' Sara turns to him, raising an eyebrow. He cuts her off, even though she didn't really have any intention to speak. 'Before you start! I want you to know. I... ah, well, I'm sorry. I mean, this was a mess. Even though we won, it wasn't by much. It was all worth it! You showed Verand that "Pathfinder" can stand for everyone. But...' He sighs. 'I need to be smarter about taking risks. So... you're right. Sorry.'

He takes a deep breath and raises his gaze to her. 'Right, go ahead.'

Despite herself, despite all the anger that had been coursing through her veins since Liam first mentioned this whole thing, she can't help but smile at his little speech-ramble-rant, whatever it was. She shakes her head. 'Liam, I don't mind taking risks. Coming to Andromeda was a risk. All of humanity is built on taking risks... that what we expect will happen, will happen, and learning to adapt if it doesn't. All I want from you is to include us. We're a team, Kosta. Remember that.' His lips part, no doubt ready to say more, but she holds a hand up. 'But despite that... we did good. I'm proud of you.'

The shock on his face makes her giggle as she turns, looking out at the windows to the kett ship that
they just escaped from.

'What? Really?'

'Hey, I've been making shit up as I go since Dad named me Pathfinder. It's good to see it working out for someone else, too.' He comes up by her side and she cranes her head to him. 'Just, remember what I said before, right? You've got a good heart, and good intentions. But you aren't alone anymore.'

'You say that, and all I hear is Jaal.'

Sara snorts. 'Yeah, I guess he's rubbing off on me.'

'I bet he is,' Liam says, a mischievous glint in his eyes that makes Sara roll hers. He says nothing for a moment, both of them just watching the kett ship. 'Think that thing could survive a jump back to the Nexus? Would give pretty good insights to the—'

The entire view goes red as the ship explodes, throwing debris all over the place. It's such a sudden shock that Sara can't help but burst out laughing, especially when realising just what Liam had been saying.

His laughter joins hers, even as he murmurs, 'Never mind,' in between them.

When her laughter starts to dwindle to a chuckle, Sara places a hand on his shoulder and turns, deciding to head back to her bedroom for some rest. After everything, she thinks she deserves a nap at the very least.

As she passes the galley, however, she decides that some tea would be good to help her relax. Lexi had talked about the benefits, especially different varieties and Vetra had managed to pick them up. So, she spent a few minutes getting that prepared to just how she likes it, mulling over the fact that Pathfinder seems to have several benefits — including getting hands on teas when everyone else seems to be stuck on basic rations.

Hell, Lexi had increased their caloric intake a good couple of times as the intensity of their workload increased. And no matter the difference to rations, Vetra always managed to find a way — no doubt throwing the Pathfinder title around.

When her tea is finally ready, she takes the nice warm mug in hand, and heads to her bedroom, unsurprised when she finds Jaal already sprawled out on the bed. What does surprise her is the sound of Sahuna's voice coming through his omni-tool.

He stops whatever he was saying to greet her, which immediately draws his mother's attention to her. Smiling, Sara makes her way over to Jaal's side, settling in beside him. 'Hi, Sahuna. How've you been?' she asks, as Jaal wraps an arm around her shoulder.

'Good. Busy with Resistance work.' There's a pause. 'Jaal tells me you're closer to making a move on the Archon?'

Sara briefly glances at Jaal, before taking a deep breath. 'We're getting there. I can't say for certain yet... there's still a lot to work out. Especially with Meridian... not being what we expected.'

'I understand. I almost cannot believe it at all; that it could be over soon.' There's a sound of someone
talking in the background, and Sara's unsurprised when Sahuna declares that she needs to go.

'Stay strong and clear, you two,' Sahuna declares, and after muttering their own farewells, Jaal cuts the comm link.

Sara cuddles until his side, resting her head against his shoulder. She drinks her tea, allowing the warmth to seep through her entire body, letting her relax further until she's practically liquid against him.

'Can I ask you something?' she asks after a long moment of silence. The questions comes to her as his hand smooths up and down her arm, tingling her skin with his bioelectricity.

'Of course, Darling One.'

'What did you day to Calot?' She straightens, turning to look at him. 'After he said he was going to kill me? You stepped in front of him and I feel you said something through bioelectricity.'

His eyes widen a little. 'I can't remember ever telling you we can communicate through it. How did you know?'

Her cheeks redden just a little, though she's not sure why. 'After we rescued the Moshae. I was exploring Aya and ended up in Resistance HQ. There was a console, so I started playing about with it and SAM said it was a disinfectant thing. After it was finished, a door opened so I went in. Turns out it was a hospital. One of the angara there told me when I asked about the ionising beds and how they worked.' She gnaws on her lower lip. 'Lexi also informed me after reading through the information that the Resistance sent to her at my request.'

Jaal is silent for a long time. No doubt taking in all that information. 'Why did you ask for angaran medical information to be sent to Lexi?'

Sara's cheeks are definitely flaming now and she turns her gaze downwards, gazing into her mug. 'I wanted to make sure Lexi knew how to treat you, if anything happened out on the field.'

His wonderful eyes soften then, and before she can say anything, a hand comes up and cups her cheek. He leans down and captures her lips in a soft kiss, lips gentle against her own. Her entire body tingles through his touch, and she can feel the overwhelming love and desire pouring from him into her.

"If you want to kill my Taoshay, you have to go through me" he murmurs as they pull away. Sara can only make a noise in confusion. His lips quirks up at the corner. 'That's what I said to Calot.'

"'Taoshay'? That's not translating.'

Before Jaal can answer, SAM's voice comes through the terminal sat on her desk, 'Literal translation would be "loved one" but due to its romantic nature, a better understanding would be "one I love most".'

Sara can think of nothing to say. SAM's own definition rings in her ears and her heart starts to speed up, juddering against her chest. She's surprised Jaal isn't mentioning how loud it is, when all she can do is stare at him. She stares and stares, her eyes starting to water as he gazes back with nothing but love and adoration.

When the first tear fall, concern wipes across his face as he reaches up to wipe it away. He uses the single finger, the triple-joined ones cupping her cheek as his beautiful eyes scan her face. 'Sara, what's wrong?"
All she can do is shake her head. 'Nothing. They're... happy tears, I suppose.' She smiles up at him, turning away for only a second so she can set her mug aside. Sara then returns to him, eagerly climbing into his lap and smoothing her hands along his shoulders. 'I just... can't believe that someone loves me as much as you do. That you look at me with nothing but love; that you speak to me with nothing but love. It's... I've never had anyone treat me like this. And sometimes, it's a little hard to remember that I do deserve it.'

His hands slide from her face, down over her shoulders, breasts, waist and settling firmly on her hips. He squeezes, bringing her forward just a smidge with a gentle tug. 'You deserve everything you desire, my love, and I will continue to do just that for you — perhaps one day it will no longer seem such a strange concept.'

An earlier conversation with this amazing alien comes back into her mind. How he had told her that, whilst he may seem confident and content, he wasn't. It was one of the reasons he volunteered to come on the *Tempest*; it was the reason he decided to stay even after they had rescued the Moshae.

He had his own demons, and damnit, if he was going to fight hers, then she was damn well gonna gun down a few of his too. 'Back at you,' she says, because she sucks with words. Her ability to speak her feelings is a new thing and still a rather difficult task.

But Jaal doesn't seem to mind or care. He smiles as if she had just recited one of the most loveliest poems known to man at him, before he claims her lips with his own.
Chapter 61

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Five days later, Sara finds herself looking over the harsh, volatile, volcanic planet that was apparently labelled Pas-10 by the Initiative in the Inalaara system. Suvi and Kallo chatter back and forth about the Remnant signal that is emitting from the planet, speculating about what it could be. Sara's rather surprised that Peebee isn't around for two reasons: one, this was her mission, and as a compromise for the rest time that Ryder had to take after her injuries, she had agreed to allow Peebee the lead on how it went. The second reason was that the asari always seemed to appear when there was talk of Remnant. It was like she had hacked into the mics and had an alarm set up for the mention of the word.

Deciding to leave Suvi and Kallo to their discussion — which is getting far too technical for Sara to make any sense of anyway — she makes her way to the armoury, finding Vetra already there and getting her weapons organised.

Vetra was Peebee's choice for a second squad-mate. 'Can't go wrong with a krogan,' she had said with a shrug.

It takes Ryder no time to get into her Remnant armour, having become much more accustomed to it over the past months. And when she's fully suited and has all three guns strapped to her, she turns to Vetra with a frown. 'You seen Peebee?'

'Nope. Not since she asked me to tag along at breakfast.'

Pursing her lips, Sara fiddles with her omni-tool, pulling up Peebee's comm check. 'The flight departs in five minutes. Any passengers not in the airlock will be left behind,' Sara declares, putting on her best "flight attendant" voice. 'Including asaris whose entire idea it was to go to this damn planet in the first place.'

'And for a second I thought you were getting less serious,' Peebee's cheery voice replies, followed by a short pause. 'Actually. I need to speak with you. And Vetra. At my place. Like right now.'

Rolling her eyes at the dramatics, Sara clicks off and checks with Kallo. When her salarian pilot informs her that there's no safe place to land yet, and that it might still be a little while, Sara heads over to Peebee's room.

The asari is standing in one of the escape pods, her back to them.

Frowning, Sara moves forward, stopping at the door for only a second, before climbing inside at Peebee's prompting. Vetra follows her a moment later, her expression just as confused as Sara's must be.

'Kallo isn't going to find a safe place to land,' Peebee says, even before Sara can ask for an explanation of the crypticness. She then slams her fist against the release button, sending the entire pod hurtling into space.

Sara stumbles, but Peebee merely leaps into a seat with an exclamation of, 'Safety first!' 'What is it with this crew doing shit like this?' Sara murmurs to herself as she dives into the nearest seat, letting the bars come down over her chest. She sees Vetra choose the one with the largest bars
to accommodate her carapace.

'I'm not doing this just because, Ryder!' Peebee informs, having to raise her voice to be heard of the rattle of the falling escape pod. 'The Tempest can't go where we need to be, and you can't get there from the ground. This is the only way in.'

That catches Ryder's attention. "'In'? Where are we going?"

Peebee presses her lips together, her eyes immediately darting away from Sara's, which doesn't fill her with any confidence. 'Peebee, where are we going?'

Turning away with a rather petulant huff, Peebee answers, 'It's not my fault that the signal is coming from inside a volcano.' She turns back to Ryder with a smile. 'But we should land on stable ground! Assuming my subterranean scans are accurate. And the impact doesn't alter the trajectory too severely. And that—'

'Just tell me you have a way for us to get back to the Tempest,' Vetra snaps and Sara can't even blame her for the anger in her voice. In fact, Sara hadn't even thought of that side of things when complaining about Peebee's decision.

'Uhhh,' Peebee starts, and that answers the question, even before she adds, 'Is that a thing? I mean, we came all the way to another galaxy with no plan for getting back home.'

'I am going—' Sara starts, but she's cut off by Peebee warning her to brace for impact.

It's a sudden and violent jerk. Her head clatters against the bars holding her in place, and she almost wishes she had put her helmet on first because there's a ringing in her ears now, and damn it, Lexi is going to give her another lecture.

Though this time she reckons it'll be Peebee getting the doctor's wroth. This wasn't Sara's plan and she's going to make sure that Lexi knows that.

There's more juddering and pain, and when they come to a stop, she's lying on her side, tilted rather painfully along the bars. She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, trying to think back to that day with Jaal at the waterfall because honestly, right now, she feels like she needs to soak in that lake again to get rid of all the pain from the past few days.

'So… are you mad, Ryder?'

Sara opens her eyes. 'I'm mad.'

Without another word, she pushes at the bars, pleased when they move rather easily, and climbs out of the escape pod. Vetra makes a comment about being glad she doesn't have a crest like the males of her species, and Peebee meekly says, 'Any landing you can walk away from, right?'

She's only been outside the pod for a minute at most, and she's starting to sweat. The heat from the lava surrounding her making her uncomfortable. She sighs and rolls her shoulders, planning on begging Jaal for a return to that waterfall the second she gets back on the ship.

As if reply to her thoughts, her comms start to rustle and overlapping voices beg for her attention. She can make out Cora, Jaal and Kallo. Kallo and Cora take turns through the main comm, but Jaal is begging for attention through her private channel.

Her heart yearns to answer him first, but she's Pathfinder before she's his lover. Taking a breath, she fiddles with her omni-tool and patches through to the Tempest. 'I'm fine. We all are. And since we're
here, we're just gonna investigate Peebee's signal. SAM will give you updates. Ryder out.' She cuts the comm before they can start to ask a million questions since her patience is already wearing thin. She then selects Jaal's channel.

'Taoshay, are you okay? Sara, talk to me!'

Moving away from Vetra and Peebee to get some privacy, she says, 'Honey, I'm fine. Hopefully won't be too long. I'm sore as hell from that landing. My desire for a bath is growing with every day spent here.'

Jaal breathes a sigh of relief, mixed with a small chuckle.

'I've got SAM to relay our info and updates to the bridge, if you wanna go there. I'll see you when I get back.' She smiles, just happy to hear his voice. 'Love you.'

'Love you too, Taoshay.'

The comm clicks off and Sara turns back to the group. 'Ready?'

Peebee nods. 'Yeah. I'm picking up the signal. It's housed within a Remnant structure not far from here.'

Nodding, Sara draws her pistol. 'Lead the way, my dear.'

Sara's jumpjets help her get to the top of the mountain, but the second she's there, she sees Kalinda. She never thought an asari could look so much like an asshole, giving that normally they look so attractive. But this one looks like an absolute asshole that she has no idea how Peebee ever loved her. Though Peebee did say that Kalinda woke up someone different… maybe back in the Milky Way she was a better person. Not that it mattered. They were in Andromeda now and she was an utter bitch here.

'Make sure they don't get inside! A triple share to whoever brings me their sweet implants.'

The three of them move up behind some Remnant pillars to take cover, Peebee coming up beside her as she hisses, 'Man, I hate her.'

Sara grins. 'Honestly same.'

As the shooting begins, Peebee sighs, 'We've gotta follow her inside.'

Ducking back down for some cover as a sniper's laser hones in on her position, Sara shoots a glare in the asari's direction. 'Gotta deal with the people shooting at us first, Peebee.'

Even though she says it as if it's a huge issue, it doesn't take long before they've cleared out Kalinda's men and they follow her into the structure. They follow hot on Kalinda's heels, catching up so much that they can hear when Kalinda orders the krogan, Krannit, to keep them at bay whilst she works on making sure they can't follow.

Before Sara can even ponder what that means, an explosion rocks the floor and Peebee voices her suspicions — that Kalinda has blocked the way ahead by bringing down rock behind her.

It's not too hard to deal with, Sara decides — not when compared to the krogan charging at them.
She almost wishes that they had brought Drack, just to even the playing field.

And it doesn't help with all Krannit seems interested in is her. He doesn't even try going after Peebee or Vetra, allowing his henchmen to target them... his main prize seems to be Sara.

She can't find a place to perch and pick people off with her sniper rifle, not with Krannit. She knows how krogans enjoy fighting — they're up close and personal, wielding shotguns and hammers and their size and weight. And it means that she's had to switch to her pistol, running about like a headless chicken, avoiding the enemies that Vetra and Peebee haven't gotten too, as well as trying to hit Krannit.

'What's wrong, Pathfinder? Too much of a coward to stand and fight?'

Thinking back to the time she took out fiends and destroyers with nothing but her asari blade and biotics, Sara's jaw locks in indignation. She slows to a jog and then turns, standing still as she faces him and pulling her blade from its sheath.

Krannit chuckles. A loud, cocky thing that makes Sara's blood boil even more than the lava that surrounds them.

Truth be told, she has no idea if her plan will work, but she's more than willing to at least try to wipe the smile off the fucking krogan's face.

He throws his shotgun to the ground, rolls his shoulders and then lowers his head. And Sara knows what's coming even before he starts to run.

For the first time since she started making meditation a regular thing with Cora, she understands what the other human biotic had been talking about. She draws a deep breath and everything seems to slow down, letting her focus on getting the timing perfect.

When the krogan is close enough, she draws on her biotic energy and slams out a nova, sending him stumbling backwards due to its force. Whilst he's stunned, she uses what remainder force she has and throws her asari blade towards him, watching as it lodges itself in the centre of his crest. There's a dumbstruck look on Krannit's face before it fades as he falls backwards, dead.

Swallowing, Ryder moves over to him and yanks her sword free, having to plant a foot on his chest to do so.

'Damn that was impressive,' Vetra says but Ryder just shrugs, honestly just wanting everything to be over with.

It takes a few minutes to figure out a way to get the door open again, and even longer to deal with the forces Kalinda sent to ambush them (including a fucking Hydra, which Ryder hates more than fiends) and then more time to get the bridge extended so they can finally catch up with Kalinda.

And the second they do, Ryder curses. 'Honestly, how many men does this bitch have?' she asks, ducking behind a platform as they start to shoot at her.

Peebee peeks around the corner. 'Kalinda is about to get the device!' And before Sara can say anything, she holsters her gun and takes off running, throwing the odd biotic at anyone who tries to get in her way.

'And she's off,' Vetra says, just as Sara lets out a scream of the asari's name.

Gritting her teeth, she focuses on the people shooting at her, vaguely seeing Peebee beat Kalinda to
the platform, thanks to her jumpjets. She grabs the piece of RemTech, but the second she does, the whole platform begins to wobble. She loses her hold on it and falls over, and Sara grits her teeth.

'Vetra, watch my six,' she orders, darting out from her cover and rushing towards the platform. Kalinda's pleads come into focus the closer she gets, and just as she reaches the edge, she sees Peebee spring to her feet.

'Aw, crap!'

'What? "Aw, crap" what?'

'I don't want her to die, Ryder!'

Glancing at the device rolling towards the edge, Sara asks, 'But the RemTech—'

Peebee cuts her off as she starts running. 'It's not worth her life,'

Ryder raises her gun. In all honesty, after all the shit Kalinda has put them through, it seems like the best option is to shoot her and make Peebee get the device. Hell, it's Kalinda's fault she's dangling over lava in the first place — because she just couldn't leave well enough alone.

But as her finger brushes the trigger, she knows she can't do it. It's Peebee's mission and she said she'd let the asari take the lead. Peebee had dragged them here, and it did suck having to leave without anything to show for it... but Peebee didn't want Kalinda to die.

So Sara watches as Peebee reaches Kalinda and drags her back onto the platform; watches as the device rolls off the edge besides them and is lost forever; watches as they both spring off the platform and back onto the ground beside her, and grabs both of their hands to steady them and stop them from falling back to their doom.

'That was close,' Peebee sighs, giving Sara's hand a quick squeeze in thanks.

Vetra rushes up beside them. 'Come on! Time to go!'

Not needing to be told twice, Sara pushes Peebee into action and follows behind. Kalinda also starts running, rushing up besides Peebee. 'Peebee. Thank you. Listen, no hard—'

Whatever she was going to say is cut off as Peebee raises her fist, punching her squarely on the nose. Kalinda curses, staggers, and then continues, informing them that she have two shuttles waiting for them.

When they finally reach them, Sara almost expects Kalinda to dive inside and take off, leaving them behind, but she doesn't. She ushers them all inside one, the remainder of her men going to the second.

Kalinda barks at her pilot to move, and it's only when they're in the air that Sara lets out a sigh and collapses onto a seat. She raises her omni-tool and links to the *Tempest*, Cora and Kallo answering at the same time.

'We've made it out. Coming in on a shuttle so get the airlock ready.'

Kallo murmurs an affirmative, but Cora asks after the piece of RemTech that they went down for. Sara raises her gaze away from her omni-tool, flicking over towards Peebee and then Kalinda, before she sighs. 'The volcano started to stir and it was lost to the lava before we could reach it,' Sara lies easily, already knowing the tension that lies between Cora and Peebee, without wanting to add to it.
She briefly notices both asaris' eyes widen in surprise, but they say nothing.

'If anyone is in the shower, tell them to get the fuck out. Pathfinder's orders,' Sara murmurs, before clicking off the comms, closing her eyes and trying to ignore the heavy stares coming at her from all angles.

Chapter End Notes

the next chapter is honestly one of my faves and i can't wait for y'all to read it!!
Chapter 62

Sara orders Vetra and Peebee out of the shuttle. She sees Peebee glance between Sara and Kalinda a little nervously, but ultimately makes her way into the Tempest.

The second they're gone, Sara rounds on Kalinda. Her eyes burn and she's pleased when the asari cowers just a little. 'I swear to fucking god, if I see your face again, I'm going to put a bullet in it, do you understand?' Sara growls as she storms towards her, her hand resting over her gun for emphasis. 'You're going to give Peebee all the RemTech you've gathered, then you're going to fuck off somewhere and leave her alone. Got it?'

Kalinda opens her mouth but Sara doesn't let her reply. 'If it had been up to me, you'd currently be cooking in that volcano down there and we'd have an amazing piece of technology that could help us live here, so don't even try and say anything. I don't even want you on my ship. You can send one of your little goons with all the tech.'

'Pathfinder, I—'

Ryder punches her and her nose starts to bleed, no doubt already delicate from the whack that Peebee gave her. 'I said no talking. Now remember what I said and kindly fuck off.'

Turning on her heel, Sara strides into the ship and makes her way through to the armoury. Vetra and Peebee are already there and she can see their worried and concerned faces, especially when she starts shoving at her armour, roughly pushing it back onto its holder.

Without a word, she leaves the room, storms out of the bridge and slides down the ladders into her cabin.

As usual, Jaal is sat waiting for her and he takes one look at her face and gathers her in his arms. She clutches at him, clawing at his back until she grips his rofjinn so tight, a small part of her mind is worried she may rip it. Tears of frustration build in her eyes and when he runs a hand through her hair, they begin to spill.

He makes soothing noises, shushing her and running his hands all over her body, trying to smoothe away her stress and worries. She wishes it were that easy.

When her tears finally dry, she pulls back and gazes up at him. It amazes her how he can look at her like that, even when she knows she's an utter mess. She's sweaty, covered in soot and ash, with her eyes red and her face tear-stained. And yet he still looks at her like she's the brightest star in the night sky.

Rubbing the sleeve of her under-armour across her face, she takes a step backwards out of his embrace. 'I should really get a shower,' she murmurs, her voice soft and scratchy. It's honestly the last thing she wants, because all she wants to do is stay here with him but she knows she really needs to.

'Take as long as you need, Darling One,' Jaal says, pressing a brief kiss to her forehead. Smiling, she moves to get her towel and leaves him as he sits down on the edge of the bed.

Jaal watches her go, his heart aching and breaking at the look that had been on her face since she walked through the door. His rofjinn was still damp from her tears, and the last time he had seen her face like that... it hadn't been a good day for her.
He wonders, briefly, whether he should be concerned for her safety, but ultimately decides not to be. He knows she's been working with Lexi and if she had those urges, she would have spoken of them, which is something that's coming easier to her.

He still remembers how they had lay together under the waterfall, after he had made love to her the very first time. They had been cuddling and his hands were mapping her body when he noticed the different texture at her thighs. She had seemed a little uncomfortable and he had planned to leave it alone, until she started speaking of them.

He had been a little surprised that he had missed them the first time around, as he had kissed his way down to her centre. But to be honest, he had been so consumed by lust that the Archon could have attacked them and he wouldn't have noticed. The second time he made his way down there, however, he made sure to press kisses to the scars (after asking that it was okay).

Shaking his head to clear those thoughts from his mind, Jaal stands and glances around the room. He told her to take her time, and he knows her well enough to know that she will. There's a good chance she'll be in there for thirty to forty minutes.

Deciding that if he wants to do something for her, he'll need to start now, Jaal leaves her quarters and makes his way to his old room in the Tech Lab. A few of his belongings are still here, mostly because he doesn't feel right moving them to Sara's room when she hasn't officially asked him to. He also sometimes still sleeps her when he's working on something late and doesn't want to disturb her, or when she's away on a mission and isn't back for the ship's nightly cycle.

Humming to himself, Jaal glances around the room, trying to remember where he put everything. Especially the very thing he's looking for. He's left the room in quite a sorry state and makes a note to tidy it up later.

For now, his main goal is finding the star map that he had brought with him from Havarl. Or rather, that he had asked his mother to send to the Nexus and had picked up the first time they had returned after he had asked Ryder to be his.

When he finds it, he tucks it under his arm and heads back to Sara's room, pleased when he still hears the shower going. He sets it down before going over to the drawer that Sara had cleaned out for him. It contains his most personal belongings, including the salves, creams and perfumes that he keeps stocked up at all times.

He picks out a cream which is one of Jaal's favourite, and has noticed Sara sniffing him more whenever he wears it, so knows she enjoys it. And he can't lie that the idea of her walking around, wearing a cream that smells like him isn't entirely appealing.

'SAM, would you turn off the lights?' he asks, directing his attention to the little node on the desk. There's no reply but the lights fade to darkness, leaving only the sight of the stars out of the windows. It's not enough of a light or atmosphere, as Jaal knew it wouldn't be, so he quickly turns on his star chart and is pleased with the way it makes the room look. It's as if they're out in space rather than safe in the room.

He quickly makes the bed, making sure it's soft and fresh. The last thing he does is remove his gloves and get dressed into something looser and more comfortable, before settling on the bed and waiting for her to finish with her shower.
It doesn't take too long. He hears the click of the shower and straightens, swallowing as he waits for Sara to appear. It occurs to him, briefly, that this may not be a thing she'll enjoy...

But that thought quickly fades from mind when she steps into the room, wrapped only in a towel, and stops. Her eyes go wide and her mouth falls open as she scans the room, her eyes occasionally flickering back to Jaal.

He smiles softly and steps off the bed, moving to stand in front of her. He takes one hand in his and presses it to his heart. He feels it trembling and so he raises it to his lips instead.

'What is all this?' she asks, her voice soft and quiet.

'I wanted to treat you. You've been through so much lately, it seemed only fair.' He gently tugs her along until they're both standing beside the bed. 'You had said that you were sore and tense, and I thought perhaps... I could...'

He gestures to the vial of cream because his words fail him, as they usually do whenever he speaks to her it seems. It takes a moment before she seems to understand, and when she does, a spark seems to light up her entire face.

'Are you asking to give me a massage?'

'Yes?'

Gnawing on her lower lip, Jaal can briefly make out the reddening of her cheeks. 'I've never had one before. Is it... a common thing among your people?'

'Mostly for lovers,' Jaal informs, finding it easier to talk about when he's not so much asking to do it but talking about other people. 'We use bioelectricity and specially formulated creams that give it more meaning and depth.' He frowns, realising a little too late that maybe this is one of those things that doesn't translate cross-species. 'We... don't... have...'

'No, no! I'd love to!' She beams at him, reaching up to press a kiss to his cheek. She then turns and as she climbs onto the bed, he can see her lip trapped between her teeth again.

Something seems to be warring inside her mind as she pauses in the middle of the bed, still on her knees. She glances at him once, takes a deep breath and then lets the towel fall, throwing it aside and off the bed.

Almost immediately, Jaal's brain short-circuits. All he can do is stare at her, watching in amazement as her skin starts to redden as her blush spreads from her cheeks down her neck, over her shoulders and chest. Sometimes, it amazes him how he can be so utterly attracted and consumed with lust when looking at a body so alien.

But he knows that Sara probably has similar feelings.

Then again, at least she grew up surrounded by other species. All Jaal had was the kett and never once has he looked upon them with anything other than hatred.

Sara moves, laying down on her stomach and she throws him a smile. He can see it wobble slightly, her nerves getting the better of her, but she still asks in such a teasing voice, 'Are you just going to stare?'

Jaal has a moment to feel just a little bit smug as he remembers just how bashful and shy she used to be. And now here she is, laying naked in front of him and teasing him to touch her.
Giving a crooked grin in return, he moves over to her side, coming onto the bed. His hand smoothes down her back, tracing the tantalising dips and curves. She lifts her head from where they had been perched on her forearms and when he turns to her, he can't stop himself from leaning down and capturing her lips.

_This isn't about you_, his mind hisses, but as her hand moves to caress his cheek, he can't seem to stop. But he does want to spoil her — he wants something to be just for her, something that she can lose herself to and just feel utterly content.

So he pulls back, gives her lips a final peck, and then adjusts himself away from the temptation completely. He reaches for his lotion, scooping some onto his hands as he studies her body, wondering the best place to position himself.

He almost wants to straddle her hips, but the image it creates makes his mouth dry and he knows they'll never make it through the whole thing. And he wants to make this entirely about her, with no care about his own desires.

He settles for kneeling beside her. He's still able to reach every area and that's all that matters.

'Ready?' he asks.

She hums, before lifting her head with a shake. 'Wait, hang on. SAM, play the relaxing playlist that Lexi sent over to help with my meditation.'

'Right away, Pathfinder.'

Music seeps into the room. He doesn't know much, but thanks to his time spent in the Cultural Exchange Centre, as well as talking to Liam, he can pick out a few instruments from how they sound. It's nothing like the music he knows, but he doesn't dislike it.

And when his beloved smiles and rests her head back on her arms, looking a little bit more relaxed already, he decides that even if he hated it, he would have tolerated it just for that look.

'Now I'm ready,' she declares, and so Jaal wastes no time.

He starts with her shoulders, following the long lines of muscles there and working out the knots of tension he finds. His bioelectricity tingles down his arms and he sends a soft current over her body, concentrating it on the areas that his fingers touch.

The smell from the cream seeps into the room and Jaal's head grows fuzzy with it, he almost thinks he's ingested some tavum. Especially when paired with the small sounds coming from Sara's mouth. They're nothing like the ones she makes whenever he's inside her or working her with his finger or tongue. They're loud and needy, and stars, he loves them.

No, these ones aren't like that. They're softer, quieter, more sighs than moans; more whispers than gasps. And he really loves these too.

Her eyes remain closed for the most part, and whenever she does open them to send him a smile, they're hooded and relaxed. It's such an expression he's never seen on her face, and he wishes it could be there more. He wishes that she didn't have so much weight on her shoulders that it takes him a solid thirty minutes to completely work out all the kinks there.

He works down her arms, easing the muscles from all the weapons she has to carry and the fights she's won. Her back is next and he makes sure to rub at her spine with his thumbs, knowing how often she complains about pain there.
When Jaal moves to her legs, it's just a little hard to skip over that fantastic ass of hers, but he keeps a chorus in his head, reminding him that it's for her. They'll have plenty of time to have sex and lose themselves in each other that way. For now, he just wants to show Sara that it's okay to get something without having to worry about paying them back.

The muscles in her legs are thick and strong, and his loves the feel of them as he applies pressure. He knows on the other side there are scars and so he spends extra time, gently caressing them and letting her feel how much he loves her. If she were angara, she would hear it — he can't stop his bioelectricity from saying "I love you" — but he hopes that, regardless of her not being able to understand it as obviously as his own kind would, that she can still feel it.

The last thing he deals with are her feet, kneading at her arches and musing over how odd and different they are. In fact, the whole massage has been a little bit of an eye-opener, letting him see what's different and what isn't.

When he settles her foot down and corks the vial of lotion, setting it back on the bedside table, he finds it a little strange that she hasn't moved yet, turning to say something to him. She always finds a way to praise people, finding the good in them, which he knows is why she ends up doing so much instead of delegating to other people.

‘Taoshay?’ he tries, but she doesn't move. He frowns and slides off the bed, coming around to face her. ‘Sara?’ he tries again when he finally reaches her face, but what he see stops him in his tracks. Her eyes are closed and her mouth slightly parted, and there's no doubt in his mind that she's fast asleep. There's a softness to her expression that he's not seen before. Yes, she always looks relaxed when she is sleeping, but there's just something utterly blissful about her expression.

He's not sure at what point she lost consciousness, but it warms his heart knowing that he's found something that helps her relax that much; something that isn't too complicated and that they both enjoy doing. If all he has to do to get her to fully reset herself and allow her body to recuperate is give her a massage, then it's something he'll do — more than a little willingly.

Jaal doesn't really want to disturb her and risk waking her, yet he knows that he can't leave her as she is. She's completely naked and on top of the covers, and sooner or later, she'll get cold and chilly. He wants her to relish this for as long as possible — to not have any disturbances to wake her. Especially silly ones that he can deal with.

As gently as he can, he slides his hands under her body and lifts her up, smiling to himself when she curls against him, moulding to his body so completely. It's so strange to him, how perfectly they fit together that it's odd to think that they're from separate galaxies.

With one hand, he peels back the covers and lowers both himself and Sara onto the bed. She has a tendency to sleep on him anyway, so all he does is straighten her a little and then pulls the covers over them both.

He watches her, how the stars from his star-map reflect back down and cover her skin. She looks so wonderful, her blue hair (once again a slightly different shade than it had been the day they met) falling into her face. He pushes it away and presses a kiss to her forehead, tugging her gently into his side as if fearful that she'll disappear in the middle of the night.

Jaal knows that there's still so much to do, that killing the Archon won't just end the threat of the kett, but he can't seem to stop himself as he thinks of what their future will be like.

His eyes drift to the stars projected on the ceiling. Will they continue to travel? Or will she long to
settle down like the original plan had been? And if they choose to settle, where would they go? There's endless possibilities now, thanks to her talent with the Remnant. Would she want somewhere like Eos, her "baby" as she calls it for being the first one she ever settled? Or would she want to go somewhere like Havarl? Or maybe even another planet that will become an option if Meridian works out as they hope?

There's so many decisions and choices, and yet Jaal knows that no matter what, as long as he can fall asleep and wake up to her beautiful face, he'll be happy with his life.
When Sara wakes up, it's with the strangest sensation that almost makes her wonder if she's actually still dreaming. There's no ache to her body, no weariness in her muscles, not even a dull ache in her head because her body has woken up before it was really ready to.

There's none of that.

All she feels is completely refreshed. Awake. Utterly relaxed.

It takes her a long moment before she recalls the reason for such a bizarre sensation, and when she does, she turns her head to the side, hoping to find Jaal and give her endless praise at this hidden talent.

Instead of finding his peaceful face beside her, however, all that she's greeted with is an empty pillow, which causes her to frown. She's never known Jaal to be up first, mostly because of her own shitty sleeping schedule. Even with being lulled to sleep by his touch, she can't see her sleeping that long... right?

Sitting up, Sara surveys the room and finds it empty. She knows it's silly but panic starts to swell in her chest, and she can't stop herself from glancing over to SAM's little node and asking if everyone is all right.

'Yes, Sara.' There's a brief pause. 'Jaal is in the Tech Lab as he did not wish to disturb you. Shall I ping him to let him know you're awake?'

Letting out a brief sigh that there's nothing to worry about, she agrees to SAM's question as she slides out of bed. There's a looseness to her limbs that she hasn't experienced in... well... ever. No doubt this was how childhood felt, but that's something she cannot recall.

The memories she can remember have always had a certain tautness to them.

Making her way over to her wardrobe, Sara starts rummaging for some clothes — finding some loose yoga pants and a tank top — and shoving them on. As she pulls her top over her head, she stops for a second, catching a whiff of such a familiar, enticing scent.

She brings her arm to her nose and inhales deeply, her heart blooming when she realises that the cream Jaal had used on her last night was the very same one he uses on himself.

There's a certain closeness and emotional-depth to that action that her throat grows tight as she finally tugs her top down. She makes her way over to her terminal but stops as the doors open and Jaal steps inside, pretty much right in front of her.

'You're awake!' he says in way of greeting, though his hands do reach for her, settling on her waist and drawing her close.
She stares into those beautiful eyes for a moment, before his words come back to her. Frowning, she asks, 'You sound surprised. Why?' She glances around herself, as everything seems to make sense. The complete relaxation that she feels; the fact that Jaal was up before her and down in his old room to "not disturb her". She turns back to him with a raised eyebrow. 'How long have I been out? What time is it?'

A small smile spreads across his face and she's pretty damn sure there's a certain smugness to it. If she didn't love the damn angara so much, she'd be rather tempted to smack him for it.

'Twelve hours. I did ask Lexi if sleeping for such a length of time was safe, but she was rather happy to hear that you were sleeping for so long she ordered everyone not to disturb you until you woke naturally. She says you needed it.'

A part of her almost feels indignant at that, until she remembers just how good she feels. She knows that her body probably did need it; who knows how long she could have kept going without her body crashing?

Especially when they're getting closer and closer to facing the Archon, she'll need all the energy she can get.

*Every time you miss out on a decent night sleep, it takes time off your life — it all adds up to years, Sara. This is serious.*, Lexi had once said to her as she had berated her about not sleeping more than four hours that night. It hadn't really scared Sara then, but now it's kind of getting to her — mostly because now she feels like she's getting to a point in her life that she has hope, she has a desire to live.

So the anger that had briefly started to rise ebbs as she leans heavily into Jaal's body. She grins up at him. 'You definitely have some talented fingers, my love,' she says, not realising just what that could be seen as until Jaal's lips tug up at one side.

'Oh, I already know that, love,' he mutters, his hands that are resting on her hips giving a gentle squeeze, causing her to bite her lip. 'I've seen your reactions to my talented fingers.'

Despite her burning cheeks, her own hands land on his chest, splaying wide and gliding up towards his shoulders. Her first instinct is to explain that hadn't been what she meant, but there's a teasing in his eyes that makes her decide to play along.

'Don't sound so smug, Jaal Ama Darav,' she coos, pressing closer to him. Her arms wind around his neck and her fingers brush against the grooves at the side of his head, already knowing that they're such a sensitive part on his body. He shivers and she grins. 'I've got talented fingers too.'

Making sure to keep her eyes locked on his, she leans in and presses a kiss to the underside of his jaw. She presses open mouth kisses along his neck and jaw, heading towards the nearest groove that's a deeper purple-blue than the rest of his skin. With a grin, Sara leans in and licks a long line across the skin.

The reaction is immediate. His hold tightens painfully at her hips and he tugs her upwards until her legs are wound around his waist. He pulls her head back, just to show her how utterly wild with lust his gaze is, before he tugs her forward and seals their lips together.

Utterly breathless from the utter fierceness of his touch and kiss, Sara returns in kind, squeezing her legs tight around him. She even feels a little more flexible after the massage. She had always been rather flexible but there's just a little bit extra bend to her that she relishes.
But it's that thought that makes her pull back. She feels so good and when she remembers just why that's the case, she wants to pay back the favour. Jaal had planned the massage because she had been tense and annoyed. He hadn't given a thought about himself, he just wanted to help her out.

'Sara?' he asks when she unwinds her legs and drops back to the ground.

She doesn't answer straight away, opting instead to place a hand on his chest and walk him backwards until the back of his legs reach the bed. He then sits down and with a smile, Sara stares down at him.

'I want to return the favour,' she says before she can stop herself. 'On making you feel good.'

His brows pull down a little as his eyes flicker over her face. 'Darling, I didn't do it to get the favour —'

'I know,' Sara cuts him off as she slides into his lap, smiling internally when his hands automatically come to her waist and then slide over her ass. 'I know you didn't. But I feel like you've done a lot for me, you've been so focused on making sure I feel good and I want to spoil you this time.'

Once again his eyes flicker over her face, no doubt searching to make sure that this is really what she wants. He nods to himself when he sees whatever it he'd been searching for and gives her backside a small squeeze. 'And just how do you plan on making me feel good, Taoshay?' he asks, voice deep and husky and god above, how can his voice do that?

Swallowing, Sara licks her lip. 'I would massage you but there is no way in hell I'd be able to apply enough pressure to get deep into your muscles,' she admits, squeezing his arm for emphasis. He barely twitches.

It reminds her of a conversation that had taken place between Peebee and Jaal in the Nomad, what feels like eons ago. When Sara was just pining over this strange new alien and thought he was more interested in the asari, because honestly, everyone was interested in asari it seemed. Peebee had complained about Jaal taking up too much room, stating that his thighs were massive.

And now, having seen them and touched them, she can't help but agree with that statement. And it makes her mouth water in such a bizarre, foreign way.

It's rather strange to her, still, this desire that washes over her whenever she really sees him. Even stranger when she knows that she can have him, now, instead of just having to live in fantasies.

Yet it's one of those fantasies that she wants to recreate today. She swallows as her hand moves over his shoulders and trailing a slow path down chest, towards the growing bulge in his pants. Her fingertips trace the shape that's already grown so familiar to her as she lets out a breathy, 'But I do have something I think you'd like.'

Jaal's breath catches in his throat and there's a certain pride Sara takes in that. 'Anything you have to offer, I will gladly take.'

'Obviously I've never done it before,' she declares, her fingers still tracing over the outline of his cock. 'So, try and guide me a little. It's... quite similar to the first thing you ever did to me, back on Aya.'

He looks a little confused, no doubt having trouble thinking whilst wading through the mist of lust. Recognition eventually floods his eyes. 'Oh.' His pupils widen and a smirk plays at the corners of his lips. His voice deepens as he repeats, 'Oh.'
The reaction is definitely a good sign, but Sara's existential doubt means that she needs to ask, 'Is that okay?'

'Stars above, Sara, yes,' he groans the last word and sends heat flooding between her thighs. She can't stop herself from capturing his lips again, pleased when one of his hands comes around to join hers, pressing it more firmly against the outline of his cock, letting her know how eager he is for this to get started.

It brings a chuckle to her mouth as she pulls back, watching in amazement as Jaal's eyes flutter closed, even though he fights it every few seconds. It's wonderful, seeing him so utterly lost already and she hasn't really touched him — just some soft petting through his suit. It makes her wonder just what he'll be like when she puts her mouth and tongue on him.

And never one for being patient, Sara slides off his lap and falls to her knees before him, more than eager to find out.

There's really no way to get his suit off partially, just a slit that allows him to go to the toilet whenever he needs. But she doesn't want that. She wants to cherish him and the only way she can do that is with him totally naked under her.

So, Sara pushes herself to her feet once more and grabs his hands to pull him up with her. 'Help me get you out of this,' she says, coming out more like an order than she had originally meant. Not that Jaal seems to care. His hands immediately go to the snaps at the top whilst Sara's work on the ones around the bottom.

When the suit is off his person and discarded to the side, Sara gives his chest a playful push, and he falls back onto the bed with the least grace she's ever seen from him.

His cock rests against his stomach, proud and begging for her attention, but Sara wants to tease. Whilst also giving herself the chance to mentally prepare for this. She's pretty sure it'll come naturally, and she's watched enough vids to have an idea of what to do… but obviously none of those vids had involved angara. She has no idea whether something will be different and she just needs to prepare herself for the embarrassing situations she could get into if she does something Jaal doesn't really like.

She starts with his lips again, going for something relatively safe. Her hands don't remain idle, exploring his body as if committing it to memory, which is something she very much wants to, if she's being honest with herself. She wants to know everything there is to know about him — the parts which bring him pleasure, those that bring him pain, the scars and the stories behind them. She wants to understand the biology and anatomy, the thoughts, desires, dreams of him as an individual.

She just wants to lose herself in him until she knows him as well as she knows herself.

She kisses her way down his neck, over his ridges (or "neck-flaps" as Peebee dubbed them) with mouth and tongue, driving him mad. His hands knead at her hips and ass, pawing at her, silently urging for more but never demanding. He takes all that she gives, and his touch tells her it's more than enough.

Once more, she finds herself kneeling between his legs as she kisses and licks and nibbles at his stomach. There's something about the taut, tense muscles there, the way it hollows whenever he takes a ragged breath in, that entices her. She's wanted to do this for the longest time, and now she's here, it's hard to stop.
Her hands massage his thighs, feeling the powerful muscles there and knowing just what they can do, the strength they bring. She conjures images of her pressed against a wall, much like she had been when she had been ready to admit how much she loved him, but this time there's no clothes between them. He holds her with one hand and rocks into her hard and fast, his other hand occupied with massaging her clit and driving her crazy.

She groans and her own hand slips down between her legs, cupping her sex and rocking her hips into her palm, just for that little bit of relief.

'Da-darling One?' Jaal stutters, propping himself up on his elbows and gazing down at her, no doubt spurred by the sudden heated groan that had escaped her lips a moment ago.

Their eyes meet and Sara chooses that very moment to reach for his cock and run her tongue along the side from base to tip.

The reaction is one she will envision for many nights, when, for whatever reason, Jaal isn't there and all she has is her hands.

He throws his head backwards against the bed, his arms splaying out on either side of him as his bioelectricity surges from his body in a pulse that shoots through Sara's body and leaves her tingling.

His reaction is invigorating. She had never really expected something like this, and it spurs her on. She continues to lick along his length, from base to tip and back down again, sometimes running along the slit that he emerges from, wondering if it's just as sensitive as the rest of him.

When she feels his thighs tremble beneath her free hand, Sara wastes no more time. She closes her mouth over the very tip of him and hollows her cheeks. It's a little strange, trying to work everything out — keep the suction, work her tongue along him still, and not go too far down so she doesn't choke. She's never had a good gag reflex and she honestly has no idea how the porn stars in the vids manage to take them all the way to the very base, so that their noses are pressed against the guy's stomach.

That'll never happen for her.

But Jaal doesn't seem to care about that. His hand flies to her hair, and with some encouraging from her, his fingers tangle into the strands and tug just a little. Not enough to move her, but enough for a stinging pain to course through her body and settle at her core.

She groans at that, and his body judders again. His hips thrust upwards and she rears back so he doesn't go too far into her mouth. He raises his head, his expression a little apologetic but she knows it was an accident, so she just swallows and returns her mouth to him.

One hand continues to rest on his thigh, unable to stop herself from massaging the powerful muscles there, relishing that she has him weak and undone. Her other hand comes to the base of his cock, pumping up and down the length in tandem with her mouth.

Her entire body starts to hum, his current running through her in non-stop waves. It lets her know that he's close, having relished this sensation plenty of times before. Sometimes, it's enough to send her over the edge, especially if she's a little oversensitive from an earlier orgasm.

'Sara, I—' he calls out, his hand tightening in her hair. She lifts her head from him, because she's not entirely sure what it would do to ingest his come. She's had no trouble with him inside her, and the lubrication that coats him has given her no trouble so far, but she'd rather be safe. And to be honest, she's not sure she'd be able to manage the task of swallowing.
That'd be too damn embarrassing. *The pathfinder choked to death whilst sucking angaran cock.* That would definitely be one for the history books.

Her hand continues to work him, squeezing a little tighter because she knows that when he's inside her, he loves it when she tightens her walls around him.

Sara moves off her knees and crawls over him. His eyes fly open when he feels her there, and before she can say a thing, he grabs her and rolls them, pining her beneath him.

'Jaal, this is supposed to be about you—' she reminds him as his hand comes up and grabs her trousers, tugging them and her panties down to her knees. It's just enough space for him to spread her legs a little and thrust inside her with a deep groan.

'I know,' he whispers in her ear, blunt teeth gnawing on her earlobe. 'And I want to be inside you when I finish. You won't deny me that, will you?'

Swallowing, Sara shakes her head and moans when he pulls back and thrusts into her. There's no pretence. He takes her hard and fast, one hand squeezing her hip that she's certain there'll be a bruise there later. His other hand reaches for her breast, rolling her nipple between his fingers.

His electric current rockets through her, seeming to spread through her nerves. It's like he's got more hands, working away at her other nipple, her clit, that sweet spot inside her that he caresses with every thrust forward.

It's all too much and Sara lets out strangled moan as she comes undone, throwing her head back and bearing her neck to him. He takes full advantage of that and bites down, as his hips give a final thrust before he spills inside her.

Her lungs ache, unable to get as much air as she needs. Her head starts to feel a little light, but none of that matters when Jaal gathers her up and rolls them over so she can splay across his chest.

'That was exquisite, Sara,' he informs and she smiles up at him, a finger tracing circles along his protruding sternum.

'Good. I'm glad.' She turns her head, resting her chin on his sternum. 'Anything to make you feel as good as you make me feel.' She's not really certain that makes sense, but she's too gone with pleasure to care about that.

And Jaal seems to understand what she meant when his hand cups her face. 'Being near you, seeing you look at me with love, smile at me with joy, share your secrets and worries and dreams with me... that makes me happy, Sara.'

Sara beams at him. There's a pressure behind her eyes, a telltale sign of tears, but even though they're ones of joy, she refuses to ruin this moment with them. She gives him a grin. 'But I bet being inside me is also pretty good, too, eh?'

His cheeks darken just a little, a sign that she's well accustomed to now. She remembers the first time he had admitted to blushing, she had no idea. There hadn't been as much of a change as what happened with humans. But now, she can spot it out easily — whether from embarrassment or lust or frustration.

When she laughs at his expression, Jaal joins in a moment later, reaching to pull her upwards for a soft kiss.

'I adore you,' he whispers when they pull back, breath washing over her mouth as his hands brush
her hair (which has clumped to her face thanks to sweat) away.

Sara smiles and leans into his palm. 'Right back at you, love.'
Sara knows she's avoiding Peebee.

And to be honest, she's a little ashamed of herself.

Cora had informed her that Kalinda had made good on her deal after she and Jaal had finally left their room. Sara hadn't even thought about that. Everything seemed to happen so fast — she cried to Jaal, had her shower, passed out from her massage and when she woke up, ended up fucking Jaal until they both needed a nap to recuperate.

Everyone had given her that look, as if they knew exactly why they hadn't seen her in twenty-four hours, but she didn't care. The throbbing between her legs was something she relished and no doubt, they were all just jealous it wasn't them being screwed senseless by the sexy, loving angara.

Still, even though Ryder was glad Kalinda had kept up her end of the bargain and promptly fucked off to places unknown, Sara couldn't bring herself to see Peebee. Mostly because a part of her wished she had killed Kalinda instead of letting Peebee save her.

And if she saw the asari, she knew she'd say that.

So instead she had headed to Havarl to talk to the salarian who insists that a salarian biologist had aided in the capture of the salarian ark by the kett. She then goes to Voeld and tries to find information or evidence about it, all the while not having said a word to Peebee.

When she finally gets back on the ship afterwards, and heads to the bridge to tell Kallo to head for the Nexus, Sara can't fight the guilt anymore. She moves straight to Peebee's room, finding it even more crowded thanks to the new pieces of RemTech from Kalinda.

Peebee is sat on a bench, looking over a piece of RemTech, yet Sara can tell that she's not really studying it. Just slowly rolling it over, her mind somewhere else.

'Hey, stranger,' Sara says in greeting, because she's not going to pretend that she's not been avoiding this very conversation. 'How're you doing?' Peebee glances up at her but she doesn't say anything which makes Sara's heart stutter. She gestures about the room. 'I see Kalinda delivered.'

To Peebee

From Kalinda

Pelessaria, with my compliments. In your debt. My crew won't bother you again. I hope your Pathfinder doesn't make good on her threat. Always, Kalinda.

Sara reads it aloud and then hands it back to Peebee with a shrug. 'I'd like to think she's sincere but you know her better than I do.'

Peebee doesn't seem to care about that. 'What threat, Ryder?'

Truthfully, she still stands by her threat. So maybe that's why she only shrugs and declares, 'I told her if I see her face again, I'm going to shoot it.'
Peebee's eyes widen and she sits the datapad down. She sighs heavily. 'You don't think I made the right decision, saving her?'

'It was your mission, Peebee, your decision. If it were me? I probably would have let her fall. She's given us nothing but grief, used her men as cannon-fodder, and I don't think she's the kind for a quiet life. She may stay out of our hair for a while, but I wouldn't be surprised if she comes back and we have to deal with her again.'

Groaning, Peebee falls back onto her bench and buries her face in her hands. 'Ugh, I know. I can pretend all I want that I'm distant, no strings attached, but when faced with it? I just couldn't watch her die. Not when I know how she was before.' She shakes her head and runs her hands over her face. 'And I've been sat here, wishing we had managed to get that piece of RemTech. We got some data from the scans but just think of what we could have learnt from it. I've spent every day wondering whether I made the right decision and I honestly have no idea.'

She lowers her hands to her knees. 'And to top it all off, my decision may have cost me the first real friend I've had.'

There's no way of pretending or misunderstanding what she means when she raises her gaze to meet Ryder's. Sara sighs and moves to sit beside her, reaching for her hand and giving it a squeeze. 'Peebee, I'm still your friend. We may have made different decisions in that moment, but the truth is, the decision is made and we've just got to deal with whatever comes from it. Meridian is still our best bet for building a home here, and no doubt that'll have plenty of tech for you to explore and examine. And as for Kalinda, if she changes into a decent person then good; if not, then we'll deal with it. But there's one thing for certain — you haven't lost me, okay?'

Raising her head, Peebee gives her a smile. There's a fine layer of tears in her eyes and Sara knows the asari well enough that her next words are purely to offer a distraction and a way to cheer her up.

'We did lose one thing though,' Sara says as she stands and tugs Peebee to her feet, dragging her to the area where the escape pod once sat. She turns back to her and cocks an eyebrow.

'Aw, nuts, I was hoping you had forgotten about that.' She sighs. 'Yeah, the Tempest is light one escape pod. It's going to cost me, isn't it?'

'Yep,' Sara replies brightly. 'We're heading back to the Nexus right now and the second we get there, you are buying a new one. If you don't have the money to, I'm gonna make sure you work it off overtime. Got it?'

'Aw come on! I'm the one out a bedroom, what do we do about that?'

Snorting, Sara makes her way back to the door, already feeling lighter at having gotten this out of the way. 'I don't know, Peebee, but you're banned from escape pods from now on.'

'You're a mean woman!' Peebee's voice follows her as she leaves the room and heads for her quarters to catch up on some paperwork.

When they finally make it to the Nexus, the first thing Sara does is make her way to the Hyperion Med Bay to check in on Scott. She doesn't bring Jaal along with her, knowing that he promised to check on some information for Sahuna — something Sara thinks relates to the email she received a little while ago about liking pie.
She also wants to make sure that all her duties are out of the way before she has to do the introduction. She doesn't want to be called away at a moment's notice or worry about anything. She just wants to enjoy her brother and her boyfriend meeting for the first time, maybe even sharing a meal... she may try and talk to Harry about getting Scott out of the Med Bay. He should be healthy enough for that.

When she steps into the room, she finds Scott out of his bed. Instead he's on the floor and occasionally pulling himself up into a sit-up. The gap between each rep is longer than she's seen him, but she guesses that's normal after everything he's been through.

'Look at you finally out of bed,' she says in way of greeting as she saunters of to him. She sits down beside him as he grunts in reply, and when he falls back to the ground, she follows him down. With a grin, she adds, 'Bet I could beat your ass now.'

'None of that, please,' Harry's voice appears comes and she finds herself smirking as she pulls herself up and sits cross-legged.

'You're no fun, Harry,' she jests, but turns back to Scott with a smile. 'How've you been?'

He lets out a huff. 'I'm sick fed up of this damn room and the same faces.' He pauses. 'No offence, Harry.'

The doctor merely waves as if he understands completely. Sara smiles a little at that before she ultimately turns back to Scott, and the smile fades. There's a look of utter dejection on her brother's face, and she hates seeing it there. Her poor baby brother, the one who's normally so upbeat and happy. It's normally Sara who is the down-and-out one.

Nudging her shoulder into his, she says, 'Well, I have something that may help with that. If Harry agrees.' The doctor turns to face them, but Sara's just looking at her brother, finding a little spark of hope and joy already beginning to appear in his eyes. 'Remember how I want to introduce you to Jaal? Well, I was thinking tomorrow you, me and him could have dinner in the Tempest. You can see around the ship, have dinner in my room, maybe meet some of the crew. I know it's not what you really want, but it'll at least get you out of this room.'

There's a brief pause in which Sara wonders if Scott maybe isn't too pleased with the idea, but before she can say anything, he throws both arms around her and squeezes her half to death. Sara can just get her arms around his back in return, giving a breathless laugh at his enthusiasm.

'I'm taking that as a yes.'

'That is a hell fucking yes. I'm almost sad we can't go right now.' He pulls back. 'Why can't we go right now?'

'You sound like a kid, just so you know,' Sara teases. 'But I've got to get a few things done today, otherwise I would have. And I want to also make sure you're all right and that Harry can make any preparations he needs.'

At that, they both raise their heads and turn to Harry, who is staring at them, eyes flickering between the both of them. He gives a little sigh and Sara almost worries that he's going to ruin all her plans and take away that sparkle in Scott's eyes.

But a similar thought must have ran through his own head, for he shakes his head. 'I wouldn't recommend it but knowing that Sara'll be there, and that she won't let anything happen, and that you do need a little change in scenery and a mood lifter... it should be fine.' Scott is already starting to
celebrate, pushing himself onto his feet and hauling Sara up after him. 'But only if you do all your
PT. With none of the usual complaints. Understood?'

Scott doesn't seem to pay much attention to Harry's words, focusing only on the fact that he said he
could leave the Med-Bay. But Sara's not that easily distracted. Her smile morphs into a frown and
she turns to her brother. 'Wait. You're complaining about doing your physiotherapy? Why?' Her
hands land on her hips and she knows that she's acting like a mother more than a sister.

In fact, she's willing to be that it weren't for her blue hair, she'd be a spitting image of Mom right
now. And that makes her heart ache a little.

'It's nothing,' he dismisses with a wave of his hand, and Sara wants to protest but she glances around
the room and sees people watching them. Nurses and doctors and patients, some of them trying to be
discreet, but all of them paying attention to the Pathfinder arguing with her brother.

So she sighs and decides to drop it for now. She can bring it up again later at dinner tomorrow.

Before she can say anything, her comms beep. She answers on reflex, so used to being able to deal
with things as they come that she doesn't even think about what that might look like to Scott, until he
grimaces and takes a step away from her.

'Ryder!' Suvi's voice comes over the comms, and she wants to say she'll call back, that right now she
needs to spend time with her brother, but that Pathfinder-automatic-override comes into play and she
asks Suvi what's up. 'I think I've found a way for us to find Meridian! Come meet me at the Science
Lab when you've got a sec, yeah?'

'No problem. See you, Suvi.'

Scott grunts as Sara disconnects the call. 'Gotta go, I take it?'

Sara knows she should. She knows that hearing what Suvi and the other scientists have to say is
important; she also knows that the other pathfinders want to meet her in HQ for a little catch-up... but
the truth is, she can see walls coming up between her and her brother, and it's the last thing she
wants. He's the only family she's got left — the only one who'll remember Mom and Dad and all
their shared memories.

And deep down, she knows that's more important that all of this Pathfinder business. After all, what's
the point of finding a home if she can't share it with those she loves most?

'Not at all,' she declares as she grabs his arm and drags him over to the weight bench. 'I've got to kick
your ass at sit-ups, remember? And weight training. And everything else. Whilst you've been
snoozing, I've been working on my guns,' she says, flexing her arms in a way that brings a ridiculous
look to Scott's face. It brings back a certain feeling of childhood in Sara's gut that makes her know
she's made the right decision.

'That Pathfinder title has really gone to your head.' He shakes his head. 'You're on, sister. Prepare to
be humbled.'

They both discreetly glance over to Harry, wanting to make sure that he's all right with this, but he
no doubt sees how important it is to them both and waves it off.

With mirroring grins, both Sara and Scott settle to the floor. 'Ready? One, two, three...’
Sara's core hurts as she makes her way to the science lab to find Suvi. She's not really surprised that this is where her research and science officer decides to hang out when they dock on the Nexus.

'Okay, I'm here,' Sara says by way of greeting as she walks over to where Suvi stands with Professor Herik, Chief Lucan and Dr. Aridana. 'What amazing discoveries have you geniuses made this time?'

'Ah, there you are! It feels like I've been waiting forever!' Suvi replies, moving to stand by Ryder instead. 'What took you so long?'

'I was having a sit-up competition with Scott. My abs still hurt like a bitch.' A huge grin then spreads across her face. 'But I won, so it's worth it.'

The scientists give a small laugh, before they all turn to Suvi. 'It's your discovery, Dr. Anwar, you should be the one to tell the Pathfinder,' Professor Herik says, causing Ryder to turn her gaze to her friend.

'Okay, so we've realised that Meridian was set on a path by its creators, which was then disturbed by the Scourge, resulting in it being lost to us. Like an unmanned ship at the mercy of ocean currents.' No doubt Sara's face is a picture for Suvi gives a giggle and continues, 'Imagine Meridian is the ship and the Scourge is the ocean... if we can somehow predict the currents and track them, we could figure out where the ocean's taken the ship.'

Sara takes a second to glance around, noticing everyone eagerly waiting to see what she'll say. She shakes her head, unable to believe she got landed with such amazing scientists. 'That is genius,' Sara declares, a little breathless.

Suvi's cheeks redden at the amazement and pride in Sara's voice. 'It's not a precise analogy, of course,' she starts, but Sara won't hear it.

'It's genius,' Sara reaffirms, causing Suvi's cheeks to darken further but a proud smile to spread across her face.

'Dr. Anwar's suggestion may indeed be our best chance at finding Meridian,' SAM declares as his holo pops up on the nearest node. 'The more we know about the Scourge, the better we can predict how it affects the things it comes in contact with.'

'We will need better data to get better analysis,' Dr. Aridana speaks up. 'Dr. Anwar recommended planting probes as well as analysing angaran star-charts.'

'And the Initiative also made star-charts of Heleus from the Milky Way 600 years ago,' Chief Lucan adds, 'which would be the perfect baseline to map any changes. We can compare that to the Heleus at present.'

'We'll need readings from within the Scourge itself, collected by probes planted at key points,' Suvi informs. 'With help from SAM, we've mapped three points. Once they've been planted we'll start collecting the data which SAM can use to build a predictive model of Meridian's path.'

'Totally blown away by this plan, Sara can't seem to stop the smile spreading across her face. 'You're all amazing, seriously.' She shakes her head in disbelief once more. 'Get the probes loaded onto the Tempest. We've finally got a plan — a real shot at making this home for everyone. Let's get it done.'

The scientists jump into action, now that they have a plan and approval and so Sara quietly makes her way to the door, deciding that when this is all done, she's buying them all a drink (or whatever they want, really) when this is all said and done.
Chapter 65

Sara is just a little bit tipsy when she makes it back to the Tempest. The other Pathfinders had gathered in HQ and when Hayjer brought out a bottle of wine... well, none of them said no. It had been fun, sipping the delicious wine and recounting some stories, listening to others do the same. It made her feel good knowing that she wasn't alone anymore.

Sure, maybe it was still up to her to find Meridian but that was because she wanted to finish what she started. And it filled her with such pride, looking around at Sarissa, Hayjer and Avitus and knowing that, were it not for her and her team, they wouldn't be here anyway.

Jaal isn't in their room when she arrives, but she doesn't give it much thought. Maybe he's still in the Cultural Exchange — it's one of his favourite places to go and learn about the Milky Way. And he seems to find it even more important since they started dating. It almost makes her wonder if he went there to study the anatomy of human females before he took her to the waterfall on Aya.

If so, she's tempted to make some sort of donation in thanks.

She gets dressed into her pyjamas but before she heads for bed, she moves over to the terminal, pulling up her messages. There's a few unread ones but she leaves them for the morning and instead pulls up a blank one.

To Jaal

From Sara

Hey love, just letting you know that I spoke with Scott. I've invited him back to the Tempest to have dinner with you and me, so he can meet you. Harry was a little hesitant but I think he knows how important this is both to me and Scott, so he said it's fine. Also plan on giving him a little tour of the ship since he'll probably join us one day when he's healthier. Just letting you know now in case I don't see you before I fall asleep -- since I'm heading to bed right now.

Love you,

Sara xx

She hits send and then immediately logs off and heads over to bed, pulling back the covers and sliding beneath them. She finds it rather funny how, even without Jaal there, she still sticks to her side of the bed, leaving a space for him whenever he decides to return.

She's spent more time sleeping without him than she has sleeping with him, and yet it's like they've been doing it her entire life. It almost feels strange, not having the mattress dip due to his size and weight, nor having his arms around her or the sound of his snoring to fill the silence of the room.

In fact, she's almost tempted to ping him, asking him to come and join her just so she can feel normal but decides against it. If he were ready to sleep, he'd be here... it didn't seem fair asking him to come to bed just so she could feel comfortable.

With a sigh, Sara closes her eyes and rolls onto her side, trying to get comfortable with the weird-yet-now-familiar press of Jaal's sternum against her back, only for them to fly open a second later as the doors whoosh open.
Sara sits up and finds Jaal already stripping and getting ready for bed.

It makes her smirk. 'Did you come running when I said I was going to bed?' she asks, making him jump just a little as if he had thought she was fast asleep.

A sheepish look comes over his face and he nods, still working on his suit and getting into his pyjamas. Sara can only watch, too sleepy to really do anything else, and when he finally makes it onto the bed beside her, she moulds to his side immediately.

'It's strange... being in bed without you,' Sara admits as she settles her head on his chest, throwing one arm over his stomach. 'It's a little scary how, even though I've spent more nights without you, I doesn't feel right anymore.'

He hums, a low content rumble that makes Sara smile. She feels the buzz of his electricity and wonders just what it says. Sometimes, she feels a little saddened that there are certain things she won't be able to give him — quiet and private "I love yous"; massages with the added tingle of a bioelectric charge; and god knows what sort of sexual things he could have preferred with Allia that she'll never be able to replicate.

His hand smoothes away the frown on her face. 'What are you thinking about, Darling One?'

The old Sara Ryder would have dismissed him, given a brief "nothing" and left it at that. But this angara has wormed his way into her heart and soul, and it's impossible to shut him out when he's looking at her with nothing but trust and openness and love.

She gnaws on her lower lip, turning away from him because whilst she may be getting better at opening up... that doesn't mean it's getting easier to admit her feelings face to face.

Taking a deep breath she says, 'Suppose I'm realising that... there's things I can't give you. Your bioelectricity is a huge part of your culture... no doubt its ingrained in your relationships. Your... sex life.' It's amazing, how even after everything they've done together, she still blushes like a teen virgin when talking about it. 'In fact, you said yourself that the massage was a thing done amongst lovers and you used it then. I just... worry... that maybe it'll get to you after a while. That you'll leave for an angara who can fulfil all those things.'

There's a long stretch of silence, no doubt as Jaal considers her words. And it honestly makes her entire body twitch, worrying that, maybe he hadn't thought of that — maybe now that she's pointed it out, he's realising all the feelings and sensations he's going to miss by being with her, and is deciding the best way to tell her he's leaving...

He shifts, sitting up and pulling Sara along with him. His huge hands grab her and haul her into his lap, a finger appearing under her chin to ensure she's looking at him.

Once again, there's nothing but love and adoration in those beautiful eyes... but there's a hint of something else. Hurt? Disappointment? Is he truly worried about the things he's missing out on?

'Darling One,' he sighs, leaning forward until their foreheads are pressed together. He nuzzles at her and she relishes the sensation, even more so when his hands wind around her back, holding her close. 'Is that what you fear?' He pulls back. 'It is true that our bioelectricity plays an important part in our relationships and culture. And yes, there are somethings that, perhaps, I'll miss because you cannot give.'

Sara's heart feels stuck in her throat and she can't get a single word out. She feels tears pooling in her eyes but she refuses to let them spill. This was supposed to be such a happy day — how did it end up
with her crying?

Jaal cups her cheek and his entire face softens. 'But you, Taoshay, you more than make up for it. I feel powerful when I'm with you. You look at me with such devotion that I am eager to prove myself worthy of it. I see you and the last thing I care about is what I may miss — all I think about is what we'll experience together. No-one could ever make me feel like you do. I would much rather spend my life with missing out on trivial experiences, than be without you. I told you at the waterfall that you are more beautiful than anyone I've ever met, in body and spirit. That, wherever you go, I want you to take me with you. That still holds true. I love you, Sara Ryder. Together, we will — have done — things that no-one else could dream of... so never doubt your hold over me. You have my heart, Taoshay, and it'll always be yours.'

The tears are freely spilling now, falling down Sara's cheek and disappearing into the crevice of Jaal's fingers. He brushes them away, before he gently pulls her forward until their lips are pressed together.

The salt of her tears flavours the kiss, but neither seem to care. Sara just wraps her arms around him — as much as she can, anyway — and kisses back, pouring all her love into it. She wishes she could have recorded that speech, to play back whenever she has doubts (because she's Sara Ryder and she's made up of doubt) but even still, she knows that her heart will never forget it. It has been carved into it, a way of Jaal staking his claim on her heart and soul.

When they break apart, Jaal gives a breathless laugh, brushing away the remnants of her tears. 'And beside, you don't need bioelectricity to tell me you love me. I see it in your eyes whenever you look at me; feel it in our kisses or the way you hold me; the way you always move closer whenever I come into a room or when you just reach out and brush my hand, even when on missions. We have our own secret language, Sara Ryder, one that no-one else can interpret. And that's much more special.'

Letting out a breathless laugh, Sara nods, reaching up to run her hand over the wound from Akksul. It's healing fast — she knows that he sometimes goes to Lexi for ionic treatment, and his countless salves and lotions are helping with the scarring.

'You are glorious, do you know that?' she whispers, her free hand coming to rest on his huge shoulder. 'It's so strange to think how much had to go right for us to meet — but I'm glad for all the powers that brought us together.'

She kisses him again because he's right. They do have their own secret language and it's one that she's fluent in. She may struggle with expressing her emotions with words, but she can pour it all into a kiss; the touch of her hands as they explore his body; the way she pulls him down on top of her and welcomes him between her legs.

His own touches speak volumes as well, and she loses herself in the meanings as much as she does the sensations they bring. *I'm yours, Sara. Body and soul and heart. You never have to worry or fear. You'll always have me.*

And Sara believes every single word he says.

Sara's hand tightens around Jaal's as they walk through the Hyperion towards the med-bay. She can feel a few looks cast their way; some judging, most just curious, but she doesn't give a damn about them. All she can focus on is the meeting that's going to take place and the fact that it could, possibly,
cause a lot of problems for her if the only two men she's ever loved don't get on.

'You're worried,' Jaal says, seeing right through her. She draws to a halt as they reach the door to the med-bay, just out of reach of the sensors for the door so Scott doesn't know they're there just yet.

'I am. If you don't get along...'

'We will. You love him, and so I love him too. You know angara have big families... he's already my brother in my eyes.'

Sara nods. 'I know. I'm not worried about you. It's Scott. It's... for a long time it's just been me and him. Even when Mom and Dad were still here. And now, we've got to a new galaxy and he's woken up to find... everyone gone. Including me, thanks to the job as Pathfinder. I worry... I know that if I were in his shoes, I'd be a little resentful.'

'I understand.' He squeezes her hand. 'I will follow your lead, Sara. But I believe that this will go well — he is your brother; he will see you are happy and that will be all that matters to him.'

He speaks the truth. She knows he does. After all, it was Scott who she turned to when she was unsure about dating Shasi. He had told her that, if she wanted, she could give it a try and if nothing developed, she could always leave. He just wanted her to be happy. When he learnt of what transpired the night before Shasi died... he was the first to tell her it wasn't her fault. And that he was proud of her for not giving in to the pressure to have sex when she wasn't ready.

He's been the one constant throughout her life.

Nothing will ever change that.

Drawing a breath, Sara draws her shoulders back and nods. 'You're right. Come on. Let's go and rescue Harry.'

'Harry? I thought his name was... Scott?'

Sara snorts. 'It is. But we're a little late and no doubt he's annoying the fuck out of Dr. Carlyle.'

The second they're through the door, Scott bounds of his bed. He wobbles just a little and Harry is there to stabilise him. 'What did I just say, Scott?'

'Yeah, yeah,' Scott dismisses with a wave of his hand causing Harry to roll his eyes and mutter something about "Ryders, always eager for danger".

Sara releases Jaal's hand so she can pull Scott into a tight hug. He squeezes back as tight as ever, and she briefly catches Harry give a small smile at them before turning back to his work.

When they part, she steps back and retakes Jaal's hand, tugging him forward a little. 'Okay, so, Scott, this is my... boyfriend, Jaal Ama Darav.' She swallows. 'Jaal, this is my brother, Scott Ryder.'

Nothing is said for a beat. She can feel Jaal tense a little, no doubt due to not being able to embrace or get the angaran equivalent of a handshake out of him. He seems to know that it's up to Scott to make the first move, and it's hard for him to stay still.

Scott's eyes, so much like Sara's, trail over him, lingering just a little longer on their entwined hands, before he returns his gaze to Sara. 'He's fucking huge, Sis, you look tiny next to him.'

That brings out a snort from Sara. 'He's all glorious muscle, Scotty. Just admit you're jealous.'
His eyes flicker back over to Jaal, once more giving him a look over. He then gives a little nod. 'You
got me. I'm a little annoyed I slept through all of that. Has he got a brother I can have?'

Sara gives a little giggle.

'I have five brothers. Three sisters. And around thirty cousins. You're welcome to any of them.'

Scott's eyes widen at that and Sara can't stop herself. She lets out a loud laugh that gathers the
attention of the whole med-bay, but she doesn't care. Her stomach starts to hurt and she straightens,
trying to calm herself down but Scott is still looking so gobsmacked that the odd giggle continues to
break free.

'He's... kidding right?'

Ryder shakes her head. 'Nope. Not at all. I've met some of them. There's also five mothers.' She can
see the questions already circulating in Scott's head, so with a grin she reaches for his arm. 'Let's not
worry about that right now. We'll get you to the Tempest, then you can ask questions.'

He looks like he wants to protest a little but ultimately goes along with it. Sara grabs his hand and
starts to haul him out of the Med-Bay, calling over her shoulder that she'll have him back in time for
his nightly meds.

She gives him a tour of the Nexus, realising it's his first time out of the Hyperion. If it were Sara
waking up to this, she'd be desperately trying to cling to the walls and stay near what's familiar, but
Scott's never been like that. He loves people and attention and new things, so he's wide-eyed and
asking questions as she leads him to the landing pad where the Tempest is getting kitted out with
fresh equipment.

She had sent a message to her crew saying she'd be bringing Scott aboard but that she'd also seek
them out when they were done with dinner, so not to worry about staying aboard if they had shit to
do.

So, she's not surprised when she finds Vetra near the railing, talking through her comms to someone
down by the ship, asking if they're surprised she's keeping an eye on her cargo being loaded.

'C'mon, quick detour,' Sara informs as she decides to head over to Vetra.

'How many times do I need to tell you to take time off when we're here?' she calls out when she's
close enough, causing the turian to jump just a little.

Her mandibles flare in a grin as she turns to Sara. 'I guess once more?' Her eyes then flicker over to
Scott. 'I guess this is your brother? Vetra Nyx, Requisition Officer for the Pathfinder Team.'

'That basically means that if you want something, she gets it. She's good like that.' Sara nudges the
turian's arm with a grin. 'And yeah, this is Scott. You're the first to meet him, consider yourself
honoured.'

'Besides. Jaal, you mean?' There's a teasing tone to Vetra's voice. 'Not that honoured, after all.
Though to be honest, I'm more jealous he gets to sleep in the bed in your room. I helped get that bad-
boy, I know how comfortable it is — whereas the ones in the crew quarters are killers.'

Sara's cheeks redden as Scott's eyebrows shoot upwards and he turns to her with a 'Is that so?'

'Oh-kay,' Sara draws out, her voice shooting up in pitch, 'gotta go, Vetra! See you!'
The turian's hearty chuckle follows her as she takes Scott's arm and guides them down to the *Tempest*. 
'You'd think, being Madam Pathfinder, you'd get better food,' Scott declares as he throws his fork down onto the plate, a slight look of disgust on his face even though he scoffed down all of his ration.

Sara snorts. 'You'd think that but nope. Same old rehydrated shit everyone eats right now.' She too sets down her fork and pushes her plate away, having finished hers too. She has no doubt in her mind that Lexi will be pleased to see that. 'I know Prodromos is working on getting some better, real food out there. And the other Pathfinders are working on documenting more stuff, so we'll—'

Before she can finish, Scott cuts her off, 'No, no, no, no and no.' She raises a brow at his outburst and he elaborates, 'No talking shop. Learn to take your own advice, woman! Chill out.'

Ryder snorts. 'When have you ever known anyone in our family to chill out?' she enquires, before she shakes her head. 'But okay. I'll try. Though if I can't talk about Pathfinder business, how am I supposed to fill you in on things that has happened?'

Scott shrugs. 'Stuff like that is fine. I just mean what you did there. Taking a simple statement and then turning it into a spiel about work.' His eyes flicker over to Jaal, who has sat quietly throughout the exchange, nibbling away on his paste. There's a warmth to his eyes as he mostly focuses his attention on Sara, no doubt pleased at seeing her so relaxed. 'How did you two meet?'

He's not really sure what he expects. Maybe for Sara to take control and tell the story. She sometimes has a habit of doing that — bolstering ahead when she's nervous.

But instead she remains quiet and lets Jaal answer. Her cheeks are already starting to colour so he wonders just what that means.

'She landed on Aya. With the Tempest on fire.'

At his words, Sara's cheeks darken further and Scott can't help himself. He lets out a loud guffaw of laughter, aware that his sister is ordering him to shut up. Not that he listens. He keeps laughing until his stomach hurts and he wipes tears of mirth from his eyes. 'Way to go, big sister. What a way to make a first impression.'

'It wasn't intentional!' Sara defends. 'We had just ran into the Archon and had to fly through the Scourge. I was just glad we didn't crash.' Jaal snorts then and her eyes narrow in a way Scott knows will spell trouble. 'And you're one to act like you were smooth — you told me you'd kill me in my sleep if I did something you didn't like.'

It's Jaal's turn to look bashful and the two share a giggle, but Scott can't really help himself. 'You said what?' And there's anger in his voice because he threatened to kill his sister.

'Scott, it's all right,' Sara says, reaching for his hand. She gives it a squeeze and offers him a gentle smile. 'He quite clearly didn't and it's all fine. If I thought for a second he had been serious, I wouldn't have let him on my ship.'

Scott draws a breath because he knows his sister is right. And anyway, he wasn't there. He can't exactly have an opinion on it — he was too busy being in a coma to help his sister deal with being a Pathfinder, something that she hadn't ever wanted or thought she would get.

He changes the subject because, whilst he may understand that they've gotten passed that, it's rather
odd for him to hear. He doesn't want to listen to either of them talk about how they managed to bond beyond that — he knows it's a little petty but the constant reminder that everyone has been out there, risking their lives and making this cluster a safer place for them to live, whilst he's just lay on a bed... it's not an easy thing to hear.

'It's a nice room,' he says, glancing around himself. 'Is that even a space hamster?'

Sara snorts. 'Yep. He was a stowaway.' Her eyes then brighten and she perks up. She holds her finger up to him. 'Don't move. I forgot the best part.' She then stands and darts out of the room, leaving Scott alone with Jaal.

Awkward silence comes over them and he somehow can tell that Jaal is itching to say something. From that brief things that his sister has told her about the angara — and the information he's pestered out of Harry and anyone else who wanders into the MedBay — they're rather fond of airing their emotions.

Sara had once said that they struggled with keeping their emotions in far more than they did letting them out. So the exact opposite of the Ryder family it seemed.

It was a wonder that she and Jaal got along so well.

'You make her happy,' Scott says because there's not much else he can really say. All of his feelings are selfish and he knows that. It has nothing to do with Jaal or any other member of the crew — it's just his own shitty luck that it was his pod they were defrosting when the Hyperion hit the Scourge. And the fact that none of the Ryder family has ever been able to just sit still and do nothing — it's hard for him to do just that.

Jaal beams at him and there's a sparkle in his eyes that, for the first time since seeing the strange new alien, Scott can see just why Sara would be attracted to him. He knew that his sister didn't really experience much attraction and that there needed to be a strong foundation there before anything could ever start, so the fact that she's said "I love you" to this man; the fact that she's sharing a bed with him? Scott knows just how deep his sister's feelings must go and he's not going to mess with that.

'I adore her,' Jaal declares and with such an affirming tone that there's no doubt in Scott's mind that, whatever Sara feels, Jaal returns it completely. 'I would do anything for her.'

Scott's smile stretches just a little. 'That's all I need to hear.' He wants to say a little bit more; wants to let Jaal know that Sara is the only constant he's ever had and that any time he seems a little angry, he's never going to be annoyed with Jaal, but just circumstances.

But before he can form the words, the door whoosh open again and Sara steps back into the room, holding a... 'Is that a pyjak?'

Letting out a giggle, Sara nods and deposits the creature on the bed. It sniffs around a little before curling up and seemingly going to sleep, as if it does this quite a lot.

'Apparently one got defrosted early and they wondered if I wanted it. Naturally, I said yes. His name is Shep.'

Scott frowns. 'You mean after the Commander? Who was a woman?'

Sara waves her hand. 'Yeah, yeah, I know, but we had no idea just what this little guy was before I named him. It doesn't matter anyway, that's his name.' She reaches over and starts to scratch behind its large ears, and Scott can only shake his head, utterly bemused at his sister's attention to the pyjak.
'So,' Scott says in order to pull his sister's attention away from the animal. 'Who is all part of your crew again?'

It works. Sara moves back over to sit back in her seat, her fingers brushing Jaal's shoulders as she walks by him. 'Well, the pilot it is a salarian called Kallo Jath. I have a research officer; a human called Suvi Anwar. Jaal is our official angaran liaison. Vetra, the turian you met before, is our requisition officer. There's also Peebee, an asari who studies the remnant technology we've found.' She counts them off on her fingers. 'Drack is our krogan who keeps us up to date with the krogan colony and generally helps kill kett. Our doctor is Lexi T'Perro. Then there's the two humans, Cora, who we met before we were frozen, and Liam who was a crisis response specialist. And there's Gil Brodie who's the engineer.'

'Damn, all of you in this tiny ship? Doesn't that get to you?'

'A little. But they're good. If I need space, I just come here and they don't really bother me unless it's an emergency.' She glances over at Jaal. 'And thankfully, I think all of that is accounted for now. Unless Liam decides to almost cause another attack on the Nexus, I think we're good.'

Jaal reaches for her hand then, taking it in his own and entwining them together as best they can. Scott watches as he rubs soft circles into the back of Sara's hand, and watches as Sara immediately seems to relax.

It brings a smile to his face.

'So are we getting dessert or do I get to go straight to the tour of the ship?' Scott questions after a moment of letting Sara and Jaal just share a smile with each other.

Sara's cheeks redden, almost as if she's just remembered that her brother is there, but she clears her throat. 'Uh, well, sweet things are rather in low supply, so I—'

'I bought something in preparation for this evening,' Jaal admits. 'Just one moment.' He stands and leans down, pressing a soft kiss to Sara's lips before he takes off.

Scott raises an eyebrow but Sara just shrugs, her gaze focused on the door, waiting on Jaal to come back with this mysterious "something". 'You really have no idea what he's got?' he asks, because really, from what he's seen of these two, it seems unlikely that they don't share every single detail.

She shrugs again. 'Nope. Most of the time when we're on the Nexus, we only see each other at night.' Her cheeks darken when she realise just what that sounds like.

'My big sister, sharing a bed with someone. Never thought I'd see the day.' He giggles when her faces reddens further. Her eyes are downcast and he sees her gnaw on her lower lip, a clear sign that she's embarrassed. 'Hey,' he says, getting her to raise her eyes to his once more, even though she looks like she doesn't really want to. 'I'm glad you found someone you trust enough for it. Honestly. After all the shit Shasi put you through, you deserve it.'

'I... worry...' she admits slowly, her eyes trained on the door, ready to stop talking the second Jaal reappears. She then shakes her head, apparently having some sort of internal argument with herself. 'I'll tell you later, okay?'

He wants to press what she worries about, whether Jaal isn't all he seems behind closed doors, but before he can, the whooshing of the doors open and Jaal reappears holding... a... is that a fruit?

He turns to Sara, wanting to ask questions but she's focused only on Jaal and the thing in his hands. It's huge. The size of a watermelon — maybe even larger since it's been oh, six-hundred years since
he last saw one — and yellow/orange in colour with some strange looking spikes coming from it.

'You... bought a paripo for this?' Sara questions and her voice is soft and full of emotion. She stands from her seat and moves over to stand in front of Jaal, reaching for the strange fruit... paripo, his sister called it. Though he has no idea why it's making her look like she wants to cry.

Jaal smiles at her, reaching with a free hand to cup her cheek. 'It is something to celebrate, no?' His thumb travels along her cheekbone and down her jaw. He then clears his throat, apparently remembering that Scott is still there. 'I'll go and prepare it.'

He leaves once more and Sara is still stood rooted to the spot, watching him go. Scott frowns and stands, walking over to her side. It hurts much more than he likes to admit, but he doesn't let it show — his big sister has enough to worry about.

'I feel like I'm missing something? What's so special about a piece of fruit?'

Sara sniffles a little but a huge smile is on her face which reassures Scott. 'It's a paripo fruit. And they're considered a luxury to angara. They don't buy it in its fruit form unless it's a special occasion or a gift for someone they love.' She moves back over to the table and gestures to the strange paste left on Jaal's plate. 'This is what angara eat. It's a nutrient paste made from a mixture of fruit. They've developed a way to process it that means that one piece of paripo can feed twenty people if transformed into paste. Meaning it's very rare, expensive and like I said, only for special things.' The smile that blossoms across her face then is radiant. 'And he bought it for this dinner tonight.'

Her eyes lose focus just a little. 'I'm... going to go and help Jaal get it ready.'

Scott chuckles. 'Yeah, I bet you are.'

Her cheeks redden once more but she doesn't stop as she leaves her chambers and no doubt throws herself into Jaal's eager arms.

Scott has no idea how long they'll be — for all he knows, they could end up having a quickie in the galley and God, he does not need to think about that.

He stands and wanders over to the space hamster, gently tapping the side of the cage and grinning when it comes wandering right up to him. 'What's your name, little guy?' he wonders aloud, but he only gets a squeak in reply. When it's clear that Scott doesn't have any food, the hamster quickly retreats and so Scott straightens and glances around the room once more.

There's a few datapads littered around the room, as well as a pile of dirty clothes — both Sara's and what he assumes are Jaal's. The bed isn't completely made but that doesn't seem to bother the pyjak still fast asleep there.

His attention then turns to the desk nearby and he sees a terminal, around which are many model ships... some from the Milky Way and some from Heleus. He recognises a model of the Citadel and the similar shape of the Nexus. There's even an ark, and as he move closer he sees the familiar name Hyperion engraved on the side.

It brings a smile to his face before he moves away, plopping down on the couch once more. It's rather nice to see his sister make herself at home aboard this ship. He knows that none of this has worked out the way they thought it would, and now he thinks about it, it was rather naive of them to think things would stay the same since they went into cryo and started the journey to Andromeda.

Six-hundred-years had passed and a lot could happen in that time. No-one should have been surprised when they arrived and shit was different.
Still, he's proud of his sister for getting things up and running, for accepting the role of Pathfinder and finding them homes. Four colonies, an alliance with the local civilisation, five planets starting to transform back into those golden worlds that had been promised thanks to SAM and these "vaults" she talked about.

He just hopes and prays that there's still things for him to do when Harry finally gives him the all clear and lets him leave the Hyperion, and the Nexus.

After all, he had come to Andromeda in an attempt to start over with his family. They had never really been a family, thanks to Dad being awkward and distant, and that had completely fallen apart when Mom died... but when the chance was given to start again with no shame from being the child of Alec Ryder... he and Sara jumped at the chance.

And now their father was dead and all he had left was Sara, which was pretty much how it had always been. He wasn't going to lose that either. If he had been okay with that idea, he would have stayed on the Milky Way and waved them off.

'Well, whatever you're thinking about must be serious,' a familiar voice pulls him from his thoughts as he blinks, focusing his gaze once more as Sara and Jaal reappear. Sara holds two bowls and Jaal only holds one. 'And whatever it is, I want you to stop. If I'm not allowed to talk Pathfinder duties, you're not allowed to get annoyed about missing out.'

He snorts, unable to help himself because honestly, it's a little scary how well they know each other, even when it's been a good few months since they've actually hung out like this.

Scott agrees to those terms as he accepts the bowl from Sara and finds the fruit inside. It looks much more appealing now that the skin or shell or whatever has been removed from it, and it is has been cut up into smaller, edible chunks.

When he takes his first bite, he's rather surprised by the taste. It reminds him of some strange hybrid of pineapple and mango, and despite how weird that combination seems to be, he rather loves the taste, and eagerly wolfs down the remainder of his bowl, happy to taste some real food for the first time in eons.
Sara keeps glancing at Scott, barely able to mask her concern as they make their way back to the Hyperion. She knows they're later than they thought they'd be and no doubt Harry is going to lose it, but her main concern is Scott and how slow he seems to be walking, how there seems to be a slight twinge in his face every few steps.

She gnaws on her lower lip and moves closer. 'Scott, you sure you're okay?'

He stops and takes a deep breath. 'Not really, no.' She can tell it's killing him to admit that, but she's proud of him for doing so. She tries to remember the map for the Hyperion and recalls that they're just a few feet away from some steps, so she guides him towards them and then urges him to sit down.

It's just her and Scott.

Jaal had opted to stay behind on the Tempest and clean things up. She also guesses that he wanted to give the siblings some time, since he knows how rare such a thing is between them lately.

Sara lowers her head to his shoulder, grinning when he rests his own on top of hers. It reminds her so much of them being little, as they had sat together and wondered, for the millionth time, what they had done to make their father dislike them so much. It had taken them years to work out that they hadn't done anything, even longer to work out that their father really did love them... he just had a hard time showing it.

'So, did you like the crew?' Sara asks after a brief moment of silence. She tries glancing up at him but with this position, the only thing she can see is his sharp jawline (that she's always been jealous of because she inherited Mom's rounder face) and his straight nose.

'They seemed nice. A bunch of oddballs, but I'm sure that has it's own charm. And Peebee definitely seemed to be flirting with me.'

Sara chuckles and shakes her head. 'Don't flatter yourself, buddy, she flirts with everyone. She once asked if I wanted to fool around... and she was definitely for wiring into Jaal before we got together.' She frowns, her dark brows pulling down. 'I still worry about that.'

'How come?'

She sighs. 'Everyone loves asari. Even Jaal seems interested in them. And I don't doubt he loves me but ugh, what if I end up too boring and he decides he wants to go for the upbeat asari?' She's never been one to open up but there's always been an exception with Scott. He's been the one person throughout her life that she knows she can turn to without any worry of rejection or mocking. She knew that Mom would also have been like that, but she had been so involved in her work that a younger Sara had gotten it into her head that her mother's work was more important than any problems she had to be having. 'And I... I think he's not really over his ex? And I feel horrible for being jealous, since the chances are she's dead or exalted.'

Lifting her head off Scott's shoulder, she runs a hand over her face, shaking her head. 'Ignore me. The anxiety and self-doubt is just getting to me. You know what I'm like: anything good starts to happen to me, and I seek a way to ruin it.'

Snorting, Scott wraps an arm around her shoulders. 'I'm seeing some definitely improvement here. Six-hundred-years ago, you'd never have admitted that.' That earns a chuckle from Sara. 'But I'm
here and I'm going to make sure that you don't do that because Jaal really does seem to care about you. I don't know what happened with this ex, but he's with you. If he were still hung up on her, then he wouldn’t be with you, or at least, he wouldn't look at you and talk about you the way he does. No doubt it's just the ghost of an ex and you should know what that's like… Shasi still haunts you, doesn't he?'

Sara's thighs tingle like the always seem to whenever the drell is mentioned. Her hand flutters over them and she sees Scott’s eyes tighten just a little. She knew that he spoke true… she still loved Shasi in her own way. And she'd never be able to forget him, even if she sometimes wished she could. And no matter what, she's always going to wonder what if to so many situations regarding him and her.

And no doubt Jaal is the same.

It doesn't mean he loves her any less or would want those "what-if" situations to be true.

'Right,' she says, giving her hands a small clap. 'That’s enough of that. Let's get you back to Harry before he sends out a search party.'

Giving a chuckle, Scott agrees and takes her offered hand, before they both set off for the Med-Bay.

By the time she makes it back to the Tempest, Jaal is already in bed and fast asleep. She quickly strips and changes into her pyjamas, then slides in beside him. She lies on her side, hands tucked under her head as she watches him sleep, a soft smile tugging at her lips as she traces over his features.

She's honestly amazed by his colouring — there's so many shades and variations and textures, the most beautiful colour palette ever. His skin is soft and silky, like the softest, most supple leather that they used to have back in the Milky Way. Her fingers itch to touch and feel it under her fingertips, but she doesn’t want to wake him up so she rests her head more firmly on them to keep them at bay.

Smiling, she just watches him sleep, feeling her eyes grow heavy as she does so. She had never once done this with anyone — well, not by herself. She had bunked with her colleagues because room was tight, but that was different. Sharing a bed with a friend and sharing a bed with a lover was a different experience. Despite her being awake and Jaal being asleep, there was still a closeness between them.

She almost feels silly for her doubts that she had aired to Scott earlier. And the thing is, she knows deep in her soul that he loves her so completely and utterly. Whatever he had with Allia had been a young, puppy-love type thing. More fascination than love, she reckons from what she's heard, and she somehow knows that, should Allia magically reappear, he wouldn’t think twice about it.

He’d stay with Sara.

Her smile grows and this time, her hand moves before she realises, resting on his shoulder and she slides herself closer to him. His arms move almost immediately, wrapping around her frame and tugging her against his chest.

'You're awake?' she asks, astonished, before she realises her mistake. He hadn't been snoring. Not for the past ten or so minutes anyway. He had been too quiet. She should have noticed that.

Jaal chuckles. 'You seemed so focused on studying me, I didn't want to disturb you.' He keeps his
eyes shut as he nuzzles his chin along the top of her head, tousling her hair. 'And I wanted to see how long you could wait before touching me.' An eye finally cracks open a slit. 'I must admit I'm impressed — you lasted longer than I would have.'

Sara rolls her eyes, even as she gives a chuckle. 'Be even more impressed. I've been here for twenty minutes.'

His only answer is a chuckle and she nuzzles further into his body. 'Scott liked you,' she admits as her hand moves from his shoulder to rest on his waist. 'I know it probably didn't seem like it, but he did.'

'He would probably like me more if you hadn't told him that I threatened to kill you on our first meeting,' he admits, just a tiny hint of real concern in his voice, but Sara can only laugh at the memory.

She pulls back. 'It's amazing to think about, though, isn't it? That was our first encounter and now look at us?'

To emphasize her point, she moves her hand around to caress his stomach and grins when she feels the muscles there tense and then relax.

'When you put it like that...' he trails off as Sara moves her hand again, resting it back on his waist. She yawns and presses closer, letting her eyes flutter shut.

'Go to sleep, Sara,' Jaal whispers and there's a gentle hum on her skin from where his touches hers. It's pleasant and relaxing and she feels sleep coming closer.

'I love you, Jaal Ama Darav,' she admits.

The last thing she hears before sleep overcomes her is his reply, 'I love you too, Sara Ryder.'
Ryder is still more than a little bit confused after her encounter with Rand Lon, but it doesn't stop her from heading to one of the merchants and getting the brandy that Lexis had mentioned. It was called Akantha and the most expensive liquor Sara had ever bought... not that it said much since she almost always went for the cheapest poison because she was almost always broke, but still.

She's getting ready to leave when she bumps into Keri. 'Out of prison, I see?' Sara jests with a grin as she moves the bottle of alcohol to her other hand. 'Glad to see it.'

'Yeah. My arrest was a "technical error" which loosely translates to "our Pathfinder took an interest and now you're bad PR." The asari journalist sighs and shakes her head. 'Never thought my work would scare people that much... I want to finish the segment but all of this has me doubting. I have no idea what's best for the people... what do you think?'

Gnawing on her lower lip, Sara fidgets just a little, shifting the bottle of drink to the other hand once more. 'To be honest, I can see the benefits of both. Things are looking up with the outposts and vaults being reset, but it's still not what was promised nor are we anywhere close to the schedule that was promised. So doing a segment that keeps up everyone's morale would be important. But at the same time, we owe it to future generations — and even the current population — to know exactly what's happening. No rumours or misrepresentation.

'Exactly. That's what's been going around my head lately — or at least as I sat in that prison cell.'

'Is there... anyway you could continue telling the truth, giving a true account of what happened but whilst also ending it on a positive note? What were you going to do the next segment on, anyway?'

'I had hoped to get information about this Remnant city you discovered. It is unlike anything we've experienced in so long, rather akin to when each species stumbled upon the Citadel.'

'That's a valid point. Why do you lead with that angle? Tell the truth of what we found and what we faced, but remind people that it's still just a beginning of something better — that we're still on the hunt for Meridian and we'll get there because I'm not going to give up until we do.'

At that, Keri beamed. Her smile was infectious and Sara had to return it.

'That is a great idea, Pathfinder! Thank you! If you don't mind, could you get SAM to send me the recordings of your time on the Remnant city so people can see what it was really like — what we're dealing with. And I'll overlay it with some commentary. And a direct quote from you with what you've just said. It should be uplifting enough to appease Tann, but still honest that I won't feel like I've sold out.'

Grinning, Sara nods. 'Got it. It was great talking to you, Keri. Can't wait to see the next part.'

After saying her goodbyes, Sara made her way onto the Tempest and towards the Med-Bay.

'It's my day off,' Lexi declares as she steps through the doors.

Sara draws to a halt and glances around briefly, before she puts on a grin and continues walking. 'I don't remember agreeing to that.'

Without looking up from her datapad, Lexi replies, 'I can break bones just as well as I can mend them. Remember that, Sara.'
Snorting, Ryder moves over to her side. She sits the bottle down on Lexi's desk. 'Just bringing you this.' Lexi thanks her and Sara goes to leave until she something catches her eye on the datapad. Scott's name. She stops. 'What're you reading?'

'It's Harry's latest report on Scott. He's proving to be quite the handful.'

Sara snorts again because honestly, that is putting it mildly. 'He's a pain the ass, always has been. Never knew how to sit still.' She then frowns deeply. 'Wait... if you're reading up on that, you're not really taking a day off, are you?'

Lexi laughs as she sits the datapad down. 'Work-life balance has never been my strong suit,' she says as she pushes herself up out of her seat. Her fingers trace over the bottle of the liquor. 'Thanks again for getting this.'

But Sara doesn't really pay attention to that. She takes a step forward. 'Nothing wrong with that, Lexi. You love what you do — that's the way it should be.'

'Tell that to my exes,' she retorts, and Sara wants to tell her that those exes obviously don't deserve her, but before she gets a chance to, Lexi asks, 'How do you do it? Be both Sara and the Pathfinder? How do you find that balance?'

Initially, Sara wants to make a joke about Lexi asking her for advice and how lost she must be if that's the path she's going down, but she can see a certain hint of seriousness in Lexi's blue eyes, so she swallows that down.

'I... the Pathfinder thing doesn't really matter when it comes to friends, family...'

'Jaal?'

Her cheeks redden a little. 'Yeah. My title, my duty, doesn't define my life or relationship. Yeah, it's a large part of who I am but it is just a job that is going to end at some point, and all that matters after that would be my loved ones.'

Lexi studies her for a second before a slow smile spreads across her face. 'Sometimes — just sometimes — real wisdom comes out of that thick skull of yours.'

Sara keeps her face completely neutral. 'So think I'm equal to a Matriarch?'

Shaking her head, Lexi snorts, 'And there's the joking back, as usual.'

Sara smiles before her eyes widen. 'Wait a second, are you psychoanalysing me?'

'Always.' Lexi glances off to the side and gnaws on her lower lip. Before Sara can ask what that means, she's continues, 'Jaal told me... about you and him. He came seeking advice.'

Sara knows her cheeks are burning now, trying not to picture that conversation or the fact that the conversation happened at all. She doesn't really relish the idea of Lexi giving Jaal sex advice.

'I...'

'Do you... would you mind answering some questions about it? For science, of course. It's just, this is the first known relationship between an angara and a human, the implications that it has... we could learn so much... and you know I focus on alien biology, it would be a perfect start to this galaxy to know more about the angara. It could have huge settlement implications!'
More than a little overwhelmed with Lexi's words, Sara takes just a little longer to reply. Her cheeks are flaming red and she wonders how she must look, but thankfully Lexi doesn't comment on it or press her, she just waits patiently until Sara lets out a breath.

'I'll need to talk to Jaal about it, but if he's okay, then yeah. I can't promise I won't stutter and stammer through it, but sure. I think Jaal will be okay with it since it's for science.' She swallows. 'Just promise that if you want to talk to both of us, you do it separately because I'd still like him to be attracted to me and not just think of me as something clinical.'

'Of course, Sara. And thank you.'

Trying her hardest to get over the humiliation of such a conversation, she clears her throat and points to the drink again. 'I think that's been the best addition to this movie night so far, not going to lie.' She grins. 'Never expected it from my doctor, but it seems you're full of surprises.'

'You rack up a few tricks over two-hundred-years.' Lexi grins and sits back down onto her seat, picking up the datapad once more. 'Now, I think I'll get back to my day off.'

Snorting, Sara salutes her and then turns on her heel, leaving Lexi alone with her non-work. She heads to the bridge to find Kallo, asking him to get everything ready to head to Elaaden, the origin of the dust that she had scanned in Rand Lon's apartment, more than eager to get to the bottom of this whole ordeal about the salarian ark.

'Is everyone aboard, SAM?' she asks as she stands at the bridge, glancing out over the Nexus. It's more than a little emotional, seeing how far the Nexus has come since the Hyperion first docked all those months ago. There's more lights, the building has started up again thanks to more people coming out of cryo due to her outposts and resources. There's a certain pride that swells in her chest as she looks out and sees just what has grown from her hard work.

She knows that there's still so much to be done, that even though she had told Lexi that she knows Pathfinder won't be forever, it will be for the foreseeable future, and the fight won't just end with the discovery of Meridian and the death of the Archon. And that is also evident with the construction still needed on the Nexus, and the bodies still lying in cryo. Sara knows that she cannot consider herself fit to retire or call it quits until every soul has been defrosted and has a home somewhere in Heleus.

'Everyone is on board, Sara, yes,' SAM's voice replies and so she gives the order to Kallo to take off.

It's a little harder leaving this time, because she's seen Scott on the Tempest — she's seen him be apart of her crew and it's hard leaving, knowing that he's not there, that she's leaving him behind once again. But she knows that it won't be long before he fit and well and can join her.

'Suvi, are there any of those prob locations on the way to Elaaden? To help us study the Scourge in an attempt to find Meridian?'

Suvi's hands fly over her console before she nods. 'Two locations, Ryder. SAM reckons we'll need three, so that would be a good start for us. All other potential areas are in the star map so, depending on where we go after Elaaden, we can deploy the last one and wait for the information to be analysed.'

Nodding, Sara pushes herself away from the bridge as the ship finally flies out of the Nexus' orbit and starts it journey to Elaaden. 'Then be sure to get those two planted on the way, even if it requires a little detour.' She claps her hands. 'Now, if you don't mind, I'm heading for something to eat cause I'm starving — haven't had breakfast yet.'
Kallo and Suvi say goodbye and so Sara eagerly turns and leaves, heading straight for the galley.

As soon as Sara's finished eating and has washed her dishes, she decides to make the rounds, check up on everyone and see if there's anything else on their minds. She rather hopes that, after all the problems she's helped her crew deal with, that there won't be anything but she just wants to double check.

She heads down to the cargo bay and finds Cora, Jaal and Vetra there, which makes her smile because three down in one talk. 'Everything all right?' She asks, instinctively moving to Jaal's side. She sees Cora and Vetra share a teasing look, but decides to ignore it as Jaal reaches for her, winding his arm around her waist.

'Yes, Vetra, Cora and I were just discussing the best weapon mods. As well as battle tactics.'

Sara raises an eyebrow. 'Never know what Meridian will throw at us. Gotta be prepared,' Vetra says with a shrugs. 'Though, it doesn't help when these two are so wrong.' She scoffs. 'Imagine thinking cryo ammo was superior.'

Sara steps out of Jaal's arms with a mock-appalling look as she steps up to Vetra's side. 'You have got to be kidding me! Incendiary ammo all the way, disruptor at a push but cryo takes the fun out of fighting! What good is shooting at a block of ice?'

'Thank you!' Vetra interjects. She reaches out and pats Ryder's shoulder. 'I knew you were my favourite.'

'It incapacitates your enemies. Isn't that better? So they don't sneak up on you? It's quick and efficient!'

'And cold,' Vetra adds again making Sara snort, remembering the turian telling her all about their species dislike for cold weather.

Turning her attention to Jaal, Sara cocks an eyebrow. 'Don't tell me you sided with cryo over incendiary.'

Jaal gave a shrug of his huge shoulders, and Ryder was momentarily distracted by memories of having her fingers digging into those glorious muscles. 'In all honesty, my stance is that if it kills kett, it is effective. But cryo is useful for the likes of ahdi… it stops them from sneaking up on you.' He fixes her with a level stare and there's a teasing to his beautiful eyes, that Sara can almost guess what's coming out of his mouth before it does. 'It leaves you less likely to get bitten.'

'You little shit,' Sara replies, reaching forward to give his shoulder a shove. He barely shifts but he grabs her wrist and tugs her forward, into his chest. He grins down at her and she knows that she just needs to rock up onto her tiptoes to kiss him, but then there's the sound of two throats being cleared.

Her cheeks are on fire as she steps out of Jaal's arms, finding Vetra and Cora stood side by side, arms over their chest, and a faint look of disgust on their faces at their PDA.

Clearing her throat, Sara claps her hands together. 'Well then, I'm going to go and, uh, see how Gil is doing. Yep. I'll just…' She trails off and with an another awkward clearing of her throat, she turns and dashes off to engineering.

'What on Earth is wrong with your face?' Gil asks with such a teasing tone that Sara almost wants to smack him. She narrows her eyes in a glare and says nothing, deciding it's for the best — he really is a great engineer, she doesn't really want to go through the hassle of replacing him after killing him.
'How's Jill?' Sara asks instead because she somehow knows that it'll be the best way to distract him away from the humiliation on her face.

A thoughtful look crosses his face and Sara wonders just what that means. He almost looks... serious? For once. She almost wants to tease him about it, but since her own face is still roasted due to receiving her own teasing, she decides against it.

'Good! I've actually... remember how we talked about Jill wanting to have a baby? And wanting me to be the father?' Sara can only nod because honestly, how on Earth do you forget that kind of conversation? 'Well... I've been thinking about it. A lot. And I think I'm going to do it.' He shakes his head and clears his throat a little. 'In fact, no, I'm definitely going to do it.'

Sara smiles, even if it is a little forced. She's not going to let her own feelings ruin this moment for him. Just because she wouldn't do it, doesn't mean it's the wrong decision.

She steps forward and gives him a hug. 'I'm so happy for you, Gil! You're going to be a great dad.'

Gil snorts. 'And you're going to be an amazing auntie, Pathfinder. My baby is going to have all the connections.'

Giving a laugh, Sara steps back. 'I know I should say I don't play favourites, but we know that's a lie. Baby Brodie will get whatever they want.' Gil laughs and Sara gives him a gentle pat on the shoulder before she turns and leaves engineering.

Vetra, Cora and Jaal are still there when she steps out, and so she just stays on the upper level, not even bothering to look down even though she can feel their eyes on her, teasing. And Jaal's are hungry and send a shiver all through her body as she tries to fight the desire to just haul him to the nearest empty room.

Liam, Drack and Lexi are in the research room and she quickly checks in with each of them. Drack gives her updates on the krogan colony and how things are going with Kesh and Vorn. Lexi reminds her that she's due a checkup, preferably before they find Meridian. And Liam asks her to head to Kadara at some point in an attempt to find better movies for the upcoming movie night that everyone is looking forward to.

When she's finished with those three, she realises that her last port of call is Peebee. So she heads to the escape pod, thankful to see the new one docked and none of Peebee's sleeping material inside it.

'Oh, Ryder!' Peebee sounds surprised when she realises Sara is there. She fiddles with Poc. 'Wait there. I'll be... uh... right back.'

Before Sara can say a word, the asari takes off darting out the room and heading left to location unknown.

With a frown, Sara moves to follow her when Peebee's voice fills the room. Sara turns and realises that it's coming from Poc — that it must have been a prerecorded message just waiting for Ryder to stop by so it could be played.

'Hello! Don't worry, I'm not springing anything terrible on you — actually, you be the judge of that. So, you and your team are like a... fungus, y'know? You look and smell funny, and you grow in the weirdest places. And somehow, you've found root in my — oh, it's so corny to say it — in my heart, ugh. I'm recording this so that when I get antsy — and believe me, I will — just sit my ass down and play it. A "shut-up-Peebee-free-card".' There's a sigh. 'Now if there's anything you'd like to say for posterity, say it at the beep. Oh! And then meet me in the meeting room? Uh. Beeeeeeeeep.'
Sara snorts and crosses her arms over her chest with a grin on her lips. 'A fungus, huh? That's one way to worm your way into someone's heart.' She shakes her head and then turns, leaving the room and heading for the meeting area just like the recording had asked.

As she walks down the plank and approaches the research room, she can see that the rest of the team is there. And can hear Peebee start to talk.

'So, uh, the reason I asked you all to meet me here is—'

'Uh-oh,' Jaal starts with a grin on his lips. 'Did you mutiny and jettison, Ryder?'

Ryder climbs the ramp into the meeting room. Vetra is the first to notice her. 'No such luck. She just showed up.'

Sara stops at the threshold of the room. She crosses her arms over her chest and cocks an eyebrow at Vetra. 'You sound a little disappointed about that,' she grins when Vetra just chuckles. 'But yeah, she did ambush me but I managed to survive that.'

Peebee turns to her. 'No harm, no foul, eh?' Ryder nods and so Peebee turns back to the group in front of them. 'I just want to say: whether or not you all know it... I've had one foot out of the door since I got here. And well, that's gonna stop. I'm proud and happy to be part of this team. This... family.' She turns slightly to Sara and smiles. 'That's... that's really it.'

'Uh, okay,' Cora states, the first to break the silence that follows Peebee's declaration.

'About time you caught up, kid,' Drack adds.

Vetra snorts. 'Yeah, you're one of us whether you like it or not.'

Peebee seems a little surprised. 'Well, great! So, uh, my place is an utter mess... who wants to help me clean it up?'

Sara gives a small laugh, almost knowing how that is going to go.

Drack is the first to move. 'Think I left the stove on.'

'I'm making ice,' Liam declares.

Jaal moves over to Sara's side. 'It's an angaran holiday,' he grins at Sara as he passes, his fingers brushing hers.

'Reports don't file themselves,' Cora announces as she takes off.

Vetra shrugs a little. 'I'm helping Liam make ice.'

Sara can only giggle as Peebee sputters and watches everyone leave. She turns to Ryder with an almost hopeful expression, causing Sara to slowly starts to retreat. 'Pathfinder business.'

'But, but—!'

With a huge grin on her face, Sara turns and leaves Peebee to lament about having to tidy her room all by herself.
Sara heads to the Tech Lab once she's finished her little walk around and checked up on Suvi and Kallo and the progress of the probe placement in the search for Meridian.

She finds Jaal there, sitting down on a bench and she gives a little grin. 'So, what did you think about Peebee's little declaration?' She starts to tug off her hoodie and cast it aside on the nearest table. 'It's about time that she caught on, eh? But it's still nice to... hear...' She frowns when Jaal still hasn't really given her a grin or anything. He looks so... lost in thought. She rushes over to his side and reaches for his hand. 'Jaal, is everything all right?'

He nods and grabs her hand, entwining their fingers as best as they can. He pulls her to his feet and a smile finally breaks across his feet. 'I... had some wonderful news.'

There's still a feeling on unease in her stomach but she still gives a little grin and asks, 'Should I sit down?'

Jaal frowns a little. 'Is... is that an other idiom, or? Yes, of course, do what you want.'

Sara gives a giggle, briefly debating whether or not to explain it when Jaal squeezes her hand and draws her attention. 'I've been offered an advancement in the Resistance and my own command.'

Just like that, Sara feels her entire heart break and shatter. Tears spring into her eyes but she refuses to let them shed. She'll cry later. Afterwards. She should have known that things would have ended like this... nothing ever works for her. She's cursed to always have her heart broken — it's a Ryder thing, she knows.

But she refuses to cry and scream. Because despite it all, she still loves him and who is to say that this is the end? Maybe, they'll make it work somehow. It'll be hard, not having access to him all the time, and worrying about his safety, but her heart belongs to Jaal. And knowing that he's always wanted this...

'That's great! I'm... happy for you!'

She tries her hardest to put as much joy into those words, but she knows she fails when Jaal's smile falters a little. She curses internally and wants to immediately apologise for not trying hard enough to make him happy.

'But you don't sound...' Realisation floods his gaze. 'Ah, another idiom?'

Sara takes another deep breath and slowly nods her head. 'Kinda?' She draws in another breath because she needs to remember how far she's come. Thanks to Jaal, which is rather ironic. Just swallowing her feelings and trying to please everyone and saying whatever people wanted to hear — she knows that's not healthy and that it'll only get her in deeper trouble. 'When did this happen?' She asks as she lets go of his hand and lowers herself onto the nearest surface.
Jaal remains standing which somehow hurts her heart a little further. 'Recently,' he admits. 'You know that I wasn't satisfied with my position and direction in the Resistance.'

Sara can't seem to stop the snort that breaks through her. 'Or life.' She briefly raises her head, meeting Jaal's eyes before they dart away, unable to stay there for long.

'True. Very true... yes.' He takes a deep breath. 'After my successes with you, they see me with new eyes. But more importantly, so do I.'

That does make Sara smile because she knows that. She's seen his growth in confidence. She has seen him become someone who hadn't been sure about himself or the decisions he made, and now he feels confident enough to lead his own command. She is proud of him. So proud.

She's just being selfish.

She sniffs and raises her head, putting a little smile on her face. 'So, you get your own command?'

'It's a covert squad. Tech ops. Commanding a small group of elite specialists that infiltrate advanced kett sites. High danger and high reward.'

But that's what we do right now! she wants to scream but she tampers it down, because it's not. Not really. She'll always be an outsider; an alien. The Resistance are his people; his family, and of course he'll want to pick them over the Initiative.

Over her.

'That is a hard choice to make. I... won't stand in your way.'

Saying those words breaks her heart in a million pieces. But she forces them out because it's the right thing to do. She loves him and she'll let him go if that's what he wants.

'That's kind. It was a hard choice.'

The tears are coming and she cannot stay here longer. She won't cry in front of him because it's not right. It's not fair to him.

She claps her hands against her knees and pushes herself to her feet. 'Okay then! I'll go and say to Kallo to head to Aya once we're done with Elaaden.'

Sara goes to move by him, making it a few steps from the door when a hand wraps around her wrist and draws her to a halt. She squeezes her eyes shut to stop the tears from falling, before she turns to him.

'What? Why would you—?' He gives a chuckle that almost angers Sara. She already has some venom on her tongue when he admits, 'I'm not taking the position!' and it all disappears as she goes slack. Her eyes widen and before she realises what she's doing, she moves forward and cups his face.

'Jaal, what? Are you crazy? This... this is what you've always wanted! You can't just turn it down!' And she knows her mind is running riot, because she doesn't want him to go but she also doesn't want him to stay without really thinking this through.

Jaal chuckles and tugs her a little closer, and Sara goes willingly. 'What I wanted, yes. But not what I needed. Not what I need.' His hand cups her face and she leans into it. 'With your help, I broke free of expectation. I found my better self.'
There's such an earnest look in his eyes that makes Sara's legs weak. She stares at him, completely overwhelmed by his words. She wonders if she should keep pressing the issue, making sure that he's completely, one-hundred-percent certain but she's too damn selfish for that. He's told her that he wants to stay, that he's already said no to this new, advanced position, and God almighty, she's so utterly relieved that she could kiss him.

But his hand is still on her cheek as he drinks her in, and she can't bring herself to move from such a loving embrace.

'I love you, Sara Ryder. You have given me so much: love, confidence, hope, desire, faith. I do not wish to leave your side, Taoshay.' His hand on her wrist tightens and Sara's mind is overwhelmed by the words, how they sound so much like a marriage proposal from the old vids Mom and Dad used to love. Her heart aches at the thought, of one day having a wedding with his family and Scott, and this little family they've made through the journey.

Except she has no idea if angara even do marriage, what with there being so many mothers and what if there's no such commitment in their culture?

But then Jaal's lips are on hers, tugging her forward with the hand on her cheek, and she can't think of anything else. Her free hand reaches for him, coming up to cup his face before she immediately decides it's not enough and goes to his rofjinn, tugging him closer and closer. She pulls her other hand free from his grasp so that they can both work at quickly undressing him.

'SAM,' she says between heated kisses, 'lock the door.'

There's a click to let her know SAM has complied with the order, before she then resumes her previous actions of getting Jaal out of his clothes. She can feel his smile against her lips as they kiss; can taste his laughter on her tongue as she eagerly pushes the top part of his suit off his shoulders and down his arms until it's bundled at his waist.

'You're so eager,' he husks as Sara pulls away so she can quickly push it down over his hips, but it trails off into a moan when she falls to her knees and presses a kiss to his stomach. Her tongue traces the skin that becomes visible as she pushes the suit off his person. Down the tight muscles of his stomach, over to his hip, nipping at his thighs and what she can reach of his lower legs without contorting weirdly.

His feet lift without prompting, stepping out of the suit and allowing Sara to carelessly push it aside as she kneels in front of him, gazing up to his face. He's fully presented in front of her, yet she ignores that for now in favour of just looking in his eyes and trying to pour as much emotion into her own so he understands just what he means to her.

A part of her desires to take him into her mouth, but his hand is in her hair and on her shoulder and pulling her to her feet once more, and she doesn't protest. She goes willingly until their lips are pressed together once more, tongues teasing and teeth sometimes clashing in their haste.

Jaal's hand trail down her sides and it's when he reaches her chest that he grunts and pulls away.

What's wrong? She wants to ask, until his hands travel to the hem of her shirt and tug it over her head in one swift move and she understands completely. She's still dressed.

The buttons for her trousers are a little awkward for his fingers so Sara deals with that, closing her lips over Jaal's as she does so. She can't stand to be apart from him for a single second, and so she rids herself of her trousers mostly through some awkward shimming. It brings a smile to Jaal's lips that Sara just has to mirror.
She hadn't bothered with a bra today knowing that she wasn't going to be doing anything too active, and she's suddenly glad of that decision for it's one less article to remove.

When Jaal's hands land on he waist and pull her close, she hisses at the sensations that course through her. There's so much and it's almost overwhelming — his hands heavy on her hips, his tongue sweeping inside her mouth, his electricity coursing through her nerves, his erection pressed against her stomach.

Without another thought, Sara pushes at him a little and he quickly gets the message, allowing her to guide them to the nearest surface.

Yet, when he goes to lay her down first, she pulls herself away with a shake of her head. 'No, you sit. Let me ride you,' she whispers, knowing that her cheeks are flushed with lust. She can be embarrassed about her words later, because right now all she cares about is the way his eyes widen and his mouth falls open.

He eagerly sits and reaches for Sara again as she slides onto his lap, straddling him. His length is hot against her and, as she gnaws on her lower lip, she rolls her hips over him, not taking him inside her but allowing her wetness to coat him.

Jaal mutters a curse that her translator doesn't pick up, but his hold on her waist tightens, and his pupils seem to blow even further until there's hardly a trace of those gorgeous blues she's come to adore.

'Sara,' he groans, so low and guttural that Sara can't stand it any longer. She rises up and reaches between them, taking his length in hand and lining it up to her centre. She takes a deep breath, then leans forward and captures Jaal's lips as she starts to sink down onto him.

The angle is breathtaking, allowing him to fill her so completely that when she is flush with his lap once more, she almost doesn't want to move. It's just exquisite having him inside her like this, so close and personal, and her entire body is alight with Jaal.

They're no longer kissing. Their mouths are open, pressed to one another, sharing the same breath as they both rejoice in the sensations flowing through them.

Sara's hands trail up his arms and reach for his shoulders, giving them a squeeze before she decides better and just wraps her arms around his thick neck. She tilts her head a little, pressing their foreheads together as she finally gives a tentative rock of her hips.

Both of them give a groan.

It's a little awkward, getting used to the movement at first, but neither really seem to care. She goes slow, allowing herself to adjust to this new position and the sensations it gives, before she descends into something faster, more urgent. Her face never moves from Jaal's, their lips almost always close together, swallowing each other's moan and sharing each breath.

As her movements grow more frantic, Jaal's hand snakes between them and his thumb starts to circle at her clit.

'Oh, fuck,' she grunts as her head falls to his shoulder. His other hand smoothes up and down her back, leaving a tingling sensation everywhere it touches.

Her hips stutter as she chases her orgasm, a constant stream of Jaal's name pouring from her lips in breathless moans. Her chest heaves from the exertion and pleasure, and when she finally crashes over the edge, she feels like her lungs have collapsed. She briefly compares it to the sensation that
had come over her as she lay dying on Habitat 7, but quickly dismisses it.

That had only panic and pain.

This is only pleasure and love.

She continues to rock her hips as best as she can, coaxing Jaal to his own orgasm a moment later. He spills inside her and she gives a low groan at the feeling, falling still and allowing the spasming muscles of her cunt to keep his pleasure going for longer.

Her head is swimming as she tries to recover. She is vaguely aware of Jaal standing and bringing them over to his old cot that was still set up there. She knows that they need to get cleaned up, but she knows it can wait for a bit. After all, she's pretty sure she couldn't stand on her legs even if the Archon had to attack them right this second.

She sprawls across his chest and loses herself in the sensation of Jaal's hand carding through her hair.

'I think this proves it,' he mutters eventually and Sara hums in questioning, craning her head so she can look at him and raise an eyebrow. 'That you're stuck with me. That I won't be going anywhere.' A sly grin spreads across his lips then as a teasing glint appears in his eyes. 'And that you need me.'

Sara snorts and gives his chest a halfhearted prod with her finger. 'Don't push your luck.' She rests her head back on his shoulder.

'But luck can't be pushed.' Sara can barely hold back her giggles, and she fails a little as her shoulders start to shake, letting Jaal realise his mistake. 'It comes to us, and ah... idiom.'

'Yep.'

'Shit.'

Sara's giggles finally overcome her, and they're only silenced when Jaal brings her face to his and silences them with his lips.
Chapter 70

Sara is still reeling from the fact that the Saelen Varn who asked her to look into Aden for working with the kett isn't the real Saelen Varn, but in fact Aden using a cloaking device. And that, by investigating and scanning his equipment, had cleaned the devices of any proof that he had been working with the kett.

Her brain hurts whenever she thinks about it, so she just decides not to think about it. She had offered Saelen a lift to Kadara, as he wanted to be the one to arrest Aden. He was... somewhere on the ship. In the Med-Bay, she hopes, since he still had that poisoned dart in his chest that he refused Lexi to remove just yet.

Scrubbing a hand over her face, Sara heads to the galley, surprised when she finds pretty much everyone already there. She gets her explanation a moment later when Drack sets a few dishes down on the table, allowing everyone to help themselves.

'Sure you don't want to retire and become the *Tempest* cook, Drack?' she asks as she moves to get a plate, helping herself to the larger dish that he made for the humans onboard.

He snorts. 'You wouldn't survive five minutes without me on the field. Everyone needs a krogan.'

'True that,' she murmurs as she leans against the counter, not wanting to struggle for a seat. She takes a bite of the food and has to stifle a moan. 'Oh, we're heading to Kadara next, Liam, so I'll see if I can find that movie you mentioned. Suvi mentioned a final probe on the way, so whilst we wait for SAM and the scientists on the Nexus to analyse it all... I thought we could have movie night. So everyone mark your calendars. As soon as this business with Saelen and Aden is done... we get to relax for a few hours. No responsibilities. No worries.'

'Where are we even having this thing?' Cora questions.

'My room. It's huge. I'll move the couch out so we can have better view of the screen.'

'You have a screen in your room?'

Shrugging with one shoulder, Sara says, 'I mean, SAM told me that if I shutter the windows, there'll be a holo displayed.' She took another bite of her food. 'In fact, Jaal, Liam, Drack, if you don't mind getting the room organised whilst I'm out on Kadara? Just bring the couch out, move some tables around so there'll be enough room for everyone? Use one of the tables to sit all the drink and snacks on, get the bioelectric-device-thinky hooked up. Just the little things so that when we get back, all that needs to be done is get the movie plugged in. After I have a shower to wash the stain of Kadara off, of course.'

That earns a chuckle from her friends, before the three men she had asked for assistance agreed to her request.

'Hey! Why is it when Ryder asks for help you say yes, but when I asked you were all busy?' Peebee speaks up, indignation in her voice.

The three of them shrug.

'The angaran holiday is over.'

'Already got enough ice made.'
Drack looks at the stove. 'Yep. Remembered to turn it off this time.'

Sara snorts, turning to put her empty plate in the sink. She turns the tap on and starts filling it with water. 'Seems I just got lucky with timing, Peebee.'

'Pfft, as if,' the asari says with a pout to her lips that makes Sara snort with laughter again.

'Okay, I'll do the dishes. I think it's long overdue,' Sara declares as she turns off the water and adds some soap. Her friends are all finishing up their food and at that offer, they seem more than happy to give Ryder this job. They all seem to stand at once, coming over and dumping their used cutlery in the sink and then quickly leaving as if expecting their Pathfinder to change her mind about this small task.

Ryder gives a shake of her head as she turns to the sink as the door whooshes shut behind them. She thinks that they've all left and she's alone, when strong arms wrap around her waist.

She jumps just a little but relaxes almost instantly. She gives a breathless laugh. 'I thought you had gone with the others.'

'And leave you by yourself?'

She wonders if this is because of their conversation a couple of days ago, about his new position and her worry that he was going to leave her. She wonders if he can sense the constant fear she has, and it's an attempt to show her that he'll never abandon her — not willingly anyway.

'You're adorable, do you know that?' she says as she cranes her neck a little and allows him to place a kiss there. He nibbles just a little before stepping away and to her side. He reaches for a towel and picks up the ones she's already washed and starts to dry them, placing them back into the cupboards.

'This is... rather domestic, isn't it?' Sara whispers after a moment, when she hands him another plate. Her heart swells at the thought of having a lifetime of this... when things settle down and they do this regularly, sharing dinners together and then helping tidy up the carnage. Nothing more serious that decide which one washes and which one dries. 'I like it.'

'So do I,' Jaal replies, leaning over to press a kiss to her cheek which makes her heart swell some more until she's almost certain it's going to burst.

A comfortable silence falls over them as Sara continues to wash and rinse the cutlery and Jaal dries and puts them back where they belong.

When they finish, Sara's hands are all pruny and wrinkled, and feeling just a little bit sore from being submerged for so long. Jaal takes both of her hands in his, pressings kisses to each fingertip with a gentle smile on her face.

'Be careful down there. Anyone who works with the kett is likely to be dangerous. They have nothing else to lose.'

'I know, babe, don't worry, I'll be careful. I've done so much running around for this movie night that not even the Archon could stop me from reaping the benefits.' She giggles and rocks forward onto her tiptoes so she can press a kiss to his soft lips. 'You be careful and not let Drack and Liam completely ruin our room, okay?'

She takes a step back and wipes down the counter top. When she turns back to him, she's surprised to see him looking at her with a strange sort of fondness in his eyes.
'What?' she prompts.

'You said "our room".' His voice is thick with emotion and Sara moves to place a hand at the side of his head.

'Well, it is, isn't it? We both sleep there.'

'Yes... it's just... rather nice to hear you say it aloud. To hear the words "our room". I don't think you've said that before.'

'Haven't I?' Sara tilts her head to the side and shrugs. She honestly can't remember if she has or hasn't, all she knows is that she has definitely considered it their room for some time. She winds her arms around his neck and rests her palms against his back. 'Well, I'll need to start doing it more from now on.'

Sara presses another quick kiss to her lips before she pulls away. 'I need to go and get suited up. Kallo said we won't be long before we land on Kadara, so...'

'I'll have the room organised for movie night when you get back. And I'll keep an eye on Drack and Liam as well.'

'You better, big guy.' She pats his arm and then saunters away with an alluring sway to her hips. 'You better.'

Jaal says goodbye to Sara down in the cargo bay and watches them drive away in the Nomad, before he finally decides to head to their room to ensure that Liam and Drack aren't wrecking the place.

Thankfully, he arrives and finds them standing on the outside of the door. Drack leans against the galley door and Liam is fiddling with his omni-tool.

'Are you trying to break in, Liam?' Jaal asks as he steps up to the room. SAM unlocks the door automatically upon his arrival as Sara had asked him to do when they started this new sleeping arrangement. He steps into the room, gesturing for the other two to follow him. 'Ryder would not like that.'

Liam sputters. 'Not at all, was just messaging her to see if she had forgotten about her order when the door was locked. Didn't realise you had unlimited access.'

A grin appears on his face then and Jaal just turns and levels him with a stare. 'I sleep here, Liam. It'd be rather foolish not to have access if I wished to nap.'

Before Liam can say anymore, Jaal turns and examines the room. He sighs. 'I wish I had gotten to tidy it up first. Sara is... messy.' He gestures to the pile of clothes that she's left at the side, as well as some datapads, ammo-clips and her sketching equipment, all spattered around the room.

'Liam and I will get these devices from Gil and give you a chance to square things up,' Drack declares as he moves for the door. Jaal offers the old krogan a smile and a nod, ignoring the way Kosta sputters as if he wanted the chance to rake through all their mess and see what he could find.

But Drack just gives the human a look that has him clamping his mouth shut and following behind him as they leave for engineering. Jaal sighs and gets to work, finding it a little adorable just how much his Taoshay left things lying about — he couldn't really blame her, since she was always so
damn busy that, when she wasn't working, she was sleeping or eating.

And truthfully, he has no problem cleaning up after her. It's something he's used to doing, what with living with such a huge family. He got used to just tidying as he went, putting by whatever was left out, regardless if it was his mess or not.

Getting the clothes organised was easy enough because most of them had been washed when they docked on the Nexus and just needed to be put away. The datapads and other pieces of paper that she used to do her Pathfinder work on were stacked and returned to her desk, which he also straightened up. He took some time to throw in some food for her little space hamster — finally named Blasto after some vids from the Milky Way — and then focused on her sketching utensils.

He hadn't really seen her drawings before, mostly because she enjoys keeping them private. He's sometimes walked in on her working away with a pencil on the paper, but whenever she realises he's there, she shuts her pad over and sets it aside.

She hopes that one day, she'll feel confident enough to show him the work she's done.

Unsure of where to put the sketching pad, he decides to just leave it on the desk and put her pencils and pens back into the little pouch that Vetra had also picked up for her.

'Oh wow, is that Ryder's drawing stuff?' Liam's voice is closer than Jaal expected, and before he can really do anything about it, the human is picking up the pad and opening it to a random page.

'Liam!' Jaal hisses, snatching it back from him as he glares at the man. It's strange. Liam was one of his first friends on this ship — the one who helped branch the gap between them. He'll always consider Sara the first person who truly opened up to him and tried to be his friend, but Liam was a close second. Where the others had been hesitant, he had been eager to get to know everything there was to know about the angara.

Despite all of that, despite Liam being his closest friend on this ship besides Sara, he can truly understand why Sara always wants to scream when she thinks of the human male.

'Sorry. Just I heard Vetra and Lexi say that she was good. Wanted to see for myself.' He shrugs and turns back to Drack, starting to create some sort of plan for the layout for the movie night.

Yet Jaal finds her can't move.

She... showed the images in the book to Vetra and Lexi? There's an ache in his heart as he processes that information, trying to understand why he wasn't worthy to be shown her work.

He glances down at the sketchpad in his hands and sees the rough outlines that litter the paper. They're not complete and are very messy, but it's clear it's a study in anatomy. He recognises angaran hands and feet; sees the familiar outlines of turian fingers and human feet. There's some legs dotted around, both ones like him — that he shares with krogan, salarians and turians — and ones that are more similar to that of asari and human.

They may be quick drawings, but they're beautiful to Jaal. He can see the care and attention Sara has put in to every stroke of her pencil.

He's tempted to turn the page, to see more, but he fights down that desire and closes the pad over, setting it on the desk. It still hurts, knowing that this is something that Sara will share with others but not him, but he won't violate her trust by looking without permission.

Instead, he turns his attention to Liam and Drack, who are having a curt argument about how things
should be handled. He sighs and steps forward. 'The plan is to have it done before Sara gets back. And that'll never happen if you two don't stop.' He moves over to the couch. 'Come. Help me move this.'

Jaal is still in the room when Sara returns. The others are putting the final touches to everything they plan to bring, whether that's the alcohol or snacks. Jaal had stayed behind in the guise of making sure the bioelectric rig is set up right, but in truth he just wants a moment alone, still trying to process his thoughts.

She wears nothing more than a towel and her skin and hair is damp, signalling she's fresh from a shower. A smile immediately spreads across her face when she spots Jaal, and instead of going for her clothes, she moves to his side, leaning down to press a kiss to his lips in greeting.

'Things went well?' he asks when Sara finally pulls back and goes to fish out some clothing. She goes for a pair of dark grey trousers and a black hoodie. Jaal watches as she dries herself and tugs them on, apparently not bothering with underwear.

'Yeah. He tried to convince me to let him go. Said he did it all to study exaltation in an attempt to get one up on the kett.' A disgusted scoff breaks free from her lips. 'You know, if everyone had signed up for that, I may have been tempted but they were innocents. They put their trust in those higher ups and how was that trust repaid? They were sacrificed, put through the most terrifying ordeal and—' she stops with another disgusted sound and Jaal has to move to her side, wrapping his arms around her from behind.

He presses his cheek to the top of her head, mesmerised by the sensation of her wet hair against his skin. 'You got him, though. Revealed them for the traitors they are and they will pay for such a betrayal.' His hands slide to her hips and he uses his hold to coax her around so they're face to face. 'Put him from your mind and enjoy this moment.'

Sara closes her eyes and leans her forehead heavily against his chest. Her own hands settle on his waist and it still amazes Jaal how her small, gentle grip can make his breath hitch like it does.

'You're right.' She pulls back and smiles up at him. 'What'd I do without you?' She rocks forward and presses their lips together for a soft kiss.

When she pulls away to survey the room, Jaal realises just how much she has grown. There was a time when she didn't talk about her feelings — her rant about this salarian would never have happened to the Sara he first met several months ago.

It seems only fair that he be the same — that he air his feelings as well. For he knows that if he does not, it'll ruin this movie night for him, which he doesn't want. Not when it'll probably be the only down time they'll have before tracking down Meridian.

'I... whilst we were getting the room organised, Liam saw your sketchpad. I pulled it off him but he mentioned that you had shown your works to Lexi and Vetra... and I was... well...' He clears his throat as she turns to him, eyes wide in shock as she tries to process the information. 'Why haven't you shown me?' He rather dislikes how small his voice sounds.

The process of emotion that flickers across Sara's face is rather amusing. Even in his disheartened state, he can think that. Her cheeks redden rather beautifully and her eyes convey so much emotion — shock, hurt, worry, settling on reassurance.
'Oh, Jaal,' she whispers. She turns her back to him and moves to the desk, swiping the pad up and then moving to sit on the bed, beckoning him to join her. 'First of all, it was an agreement I had with Vetra. She picked everything up and she just wanted to see my work — to see if it was worth calling in a few favours.' She gives a small laugh at that, no doubt reliving the conversation. 'As for Lexi... remember how we said we'd try and assist her... by talking about *us*? ' When he nods, she bites on her lower lip and starts rifling through the many sheets of paper. 'This is what I was showing Lexi.'

Jaal's eyes widen and his mouth falls open slightly as he takes in the drawings that cover the page. He feels blood flow to his cheeks and he's thankful his blushing isn't as noticeable as his beloved's is.

On the page is drawings of him. There's one or two small difference, no doubt due to her working off of memory, but it's definitely him. Naked. And erect in a few. She focuses on his chest mostly, some dedicated to his stomach. There's a few only of his penis and in the corner, he sees a small one, almost done as an afterthought, which has him lying, stroking himself.

'I know Lexi's examined you and she's read files, but *obviously* seeing you... *all of you*... isn't something she's experienced. She asked for details about your shape and size and, ugh, a million other things. And you know I suck at words. Especially when it comes to talking about sex. I kept stuttering through and then just told her I'd sketch some things and show her them. That's the only reason Lexi and Vetra have seen my work.'

She takes the pad back and shuts it over in clear embarrassment. She holds it close to her chest. 'And well... the only reason I don't show you anything is because it's... ugh... *I do* want to show you but sometimes I worry that they're not good enough to show you. It's weird. My drawings are *super personal* because it was one of the rare things I did that stopped me from, um, hurting myself. So, if I had to show you something and you didn't seem overly pleased... I don't know, it'd fuck me up a lot. So it was just best not to risk it and not show you anything.' Her lower lip is trapped between her teeth as she finally raises her gaze to his. 'I never meant to hurt you, Jaal. I promise.'

Suddenly, he feels rather foolish and guilty for making her explain such a thing, for even making her say such things to him. He reaches for her hands and brings them up to his lips.

'I should be the one apologising, Sara. I shouldn't have forced the issue. I was just... my emotions may have gotten the better of me.' He pulls one hand free so he can cup her cheek, trailing his thumb along her soft skin. 'But from what I just witnessed, you have nothing to worry about — your skills are rather incredible. Maybe not as quite as good as the real thing, but...'

He trails off with a loud laugh as Sara blushes furiously and gives a push to his shoulder. His hand catches hers once more and tugs her in close, whirling them around so her back is pressed into the mattress and he's sprawled on top of her.

'If you don't behave yourself, the *real thing* is going to be on display for the entire crew. Movie night is still happening, bud, whether you're horny or not.'

Despite her words, she arches towards him and takes his lips with hers. He wants to lose himself to her taste, her feel, her softness. She's utterly exquisite.

He pulls back and rests his forehead against hers, eyes fluttering closed and he just breathes her in. 'I never thought I'd fall for an alien.'

Sara giggles and there's a mischievous sparkle in her eyes as she replies, 'You're the alien.'

'No, you are,' Jaal retorts, going along with this little game. He loves getting to witness this playful side of her and wishes that everyone else could see some form of it as well — that there wasn't so
much weighing on her that she didn't have to be so serious all the time.

'No, you are.'

Jaal can't help but laugh and he leans down to quickly capture her lips in a fierce kiss. 'Stars, I want to devour you. In the best possible way.'

A low groan tears its way through her lips as her legs squeeze together. 'Later.' She winds her arms around his back. 'When the movie is done and the others go, you can devour me until you're content.'

Jaal hums. 'We best block out the next year, then. Maybe longer. Perhaps it'll be a lifetime before I'm content.'

Her answering laugh as she presses a final kiss to his lips and rolls out from underneath him to page the others is like music. Heavenly music.
Chapter 71

'I've only got one rule,' Sara declares as everyone starts to settle in and get comfortable. She's busy organising all the food and drink on her small table as the others try and work out a seating arrangement. 'Spill anything on the floor and you're getting down on your hands and knees and scrubbing it clean, okay? I'm also not going to set a cap on how much you can drink — you wanna get hammered, feel free. We're blowing off steam before we have to fully focus on Meridian, so go wild.'

'I, however, will be keeping track of your intake so I know how best to deal with your hangover the next day,' Lexi declares almost immediately after Sara's finished speaking.

Almost everyone groans at once and it's Drack who turns to the asari doctor and says, 'Doc, you really need to take a day off.'

Sara gives a small smile and pours out some of the liquor that Lexi had asked her to retrieve. She moves over to the doctor and presses the cup into her hand. 'Drack's got a point. Knowing us, you'll be doing some serious patching up after Meridian, so just relax. Besides, we all know you've got a million and one remedies for hangovers organised by severity, so that excuse isn't going to wash.'

'All right, all right,' Lexi mumbles as she takes the proffered cup and takes a drink.

Grinning, Sara heads back over to the table and pours one for herself, before moving to the couch. 'Pathfinder coming through. Move your butts.' She whacks Drack's thigh with her hand and plops herself down in the centre of the sofa.

She glances around herself and almost wishes they had also brought Liam's couch up as well. He had volunteered it but she didn't see the point when she had one already there... but there's no way it'll hold everyone.

Not that they seem to mind.

Suvi, Vetra and Gil have pulled chairs from the galley and her desk and claimed them, settled behind and to the side of the couch. Peebee, Kallo and Cora have claimed the area in front of the sofa. Liam is perched on the armrest beside Lexi, whilst Drack and Sara take up the remaining seats, the krogan thankfully saying nothing about they pyjak sleeping on the footrest. And Jaal has his own seat beside Liam.

'All right, everyone ready?' she asks the room, waiting until everyone replies before she turns and grins. 'Play the movie then, SAM.'

Sara's never seen the movie before and has no idea what it's about, though that doesn't really bother her. She's never really been big on movies, always too busy to just sit down and spend a couple hours watching something. She has a feeling that's the Ryder-gene at it again.

Yet, what makes this whole thing special, what stops her from wanting to get up and just do something, is the commentary from her friends. They throw quips at each other, laugh at some corny dialogue or inconsistencies. And it makes her feel more relaxed, looking forward to whatever is going to spur them on next.

'They need you, Jorax! I know you left the Legion—'

'I never left the Legion! It left me. But I know my duty.'
Sara snorts at that, pleased when Liam speaks up, 'All right, folks. We can sit through a training montage, with what many critics describe as "excessive turian flexing"—'

'No such thing!' Vetra cuts in, coming back from refilling her drink.

'There really is!' Kallo retorts and Sara has to hold back her giggles at the indignant look that crosses Vetra's face as she sits back down in her chair.

'Or we can fast forward to a ship crashing into an asteroid crashing into a moon!'

'Fast forward to the crash!' Jaal quickly agrees and Sara raises her head to grin at him.

'Nah, montage — don't cut bits out!'

'I say forward to the crash!'

When no-one else speaks up in favour of watching the montage, Sara shrugs. 'Seems like we're cutting to the good stuff.'

Vetra boos but falls silent as they watch the scene, everything exploding in loud bangs and a large ball of fire.

'But it's a vacuum! The ship explosion would be silent!' Kallo points out, causing Gil to snort as he leans forward. 'I hope that's not the voice of experience talking.'

Liam shrugs, informing that they blew up a derelict to get the shot so no doubt just wanted to get their money's worth for that.

'Too bad the script wasn't caught in the blast,' Lexi replies and Sara can only mutter an "amen" as she takes another drink.

She's maybe drank a little too much as is starting to feel a little lightheaded and breezy. Her cheeks are on fire, a clear sign that she's been drinking — it's something that had made night outs impossible when both her parents could tell when she'd been drinking just by looking at her.

It's probably half the reason her input for the quickest way to end the ship was "a charm offence". And half the reason her eyes go hooded as she hears Jaal describe how it would work, his eyes meeting hers as he says, teasingly. 'And then strike! Or not. Why ruin the evening?'

And the alcohol in her veins is definitely the reason she says "if I wanted to" when Cora jokingly says that she could do better than the turian onscreen. Everyone turns to her, eyeing her expectantly.

'Oh. Yes. Please.' Jaal grins and she wants to smack (or kiss) that smug look off his face. Thankfully, she's saved from the decision when Kallo gets to his feet and moves to the front of the room. 'Come on! I'll be dead for you!' He giggles and Sara hands Drack her drink and gets to her feet.

'Fine, fine, fine.' She goes over to Kallo's side as he lies down on the ground. She closes her eyes for a brief moment, trying to get herself in the right mood before she reopens them and glances down at the salarian in her arms. 'No. No, Kallo, not now. Not when we're so close...'

She can't even remember what she really says, but the sound of their applause brings her back to the present and she stands with Kallo and takes a bow, which quickly dissolves into a giggle.

'I have so many hidden talents,' she declares before she makes her way around the couch. 'Now if
you'll excuse me, I need the toilet. Keep the movie rolling if you want, though.'

They seem to agree with that, the movie still going on as she leaves her quarters and heads to the bathroom, thankful that it's right next door. Honestly, whoever designed this ship was a saint — the galley and bathroom right beside the Pathfinder Quarter's? That her dream come true.

After quickly doing the toilet and washing her hands, Sara moves over to the galley to find something sweet. The popcorn had been good, but now she wants a bit of chocolate and if she's not mistaken, she still had a bar left somewhere.

She starts to rake through the cupboard that have her rations in it, giving a triumphant shout when she finds the bar. Honestly, thank God for Vetra and her amazing talent to get everything.

Sara opens the bar and takes a chunk, popping it in her mouth and groaning as it starts to melt.

She turns when the door slides open and she finds Jaal there. 'You're missing the best battle scene, according to Liam.' He moves closer to her, though, instead of trying to lead her back into their room.

Sitting her bar of chocolate aside, Sara smooths her hands up his chest until they rest on his shoulders. 'Call me when we get to the "charm tactic" then I'll care.' She grins as she brings up the previous conversation. 'You seemed really into that idea. Makes me wonder if you had a similar plan when you said you would've killed me in my sleep. Seduce me, fuck me and then well...'

'Hmm, maybe, but now that I have slept with you, I'd probably be so amazed by how good you felt that I couldn't go through with it.' His hands trail down her body, settling in her hips and it makes her grin that it's always his go to place. It's rather funny that one of the biggest differences that she has from angaran women is her curves, and it's one of Jaal's favourite things about her physically.

'You're too warm, too soft, too wet... it's intoxicating. No doubt, if that were my plan... it would have failed miserably.'

He presses her backwards until she's pressed against the counter, and she knows that she shouldn't — that the others are just next door and will probably come searching, but she can't help herself. Maybe it's the alcohol or the worry that knowing this next mission could end up going to hell.

So, she surges forward and captures his lips, pleased when he presses back just as eagerly. She knows that he bought some tavum for this, and he's no doubt just as intoxicated as she is.

Both of his hands move from her hips to cup her ass, squeezing and pushing her hips forward until they grind into his. His hold on her is more rough than he's ever held her, and it sends a glorious heat spreading through her body. He keeps pawing at her, his huge hand managing to take pretty much all of her in his hold, until she feels one circle back around to the front.

When his hand presses against her centre and a pulse of his electricity rockets through her clit, she has to tear her mouth away to let out a curse. But Jaal quickly presses his free hand to her lips.

'Quiet, Darling One. We don't want anyone seeing this...' His voice is a low rumble that somehow manages to echo the feelings that his relentless pulse brings.

Her mind still can't quite believe that she's doing this, that she's letting his hands slip beneath her trousers to slide against her core. She can see by the look in his eyes that he's just going to use his fingers and electricity to bring her to completion, that he won't even fully remove her trousers in case someone comes looking for them.

And judging by the way his fingers start to circle her clit, hard and fast, his aim is to get her to come
as hard and fast as he possibly can. All the whilst keeping her silent with his other hand pressed over her mouth.

Sara fights to keep her moans trapped in her throat, letting nothing but breathy sighs and whispers free to flutter against Jaal's palm. The only sound that fills the room is the sound of her wetness as Jaal rocks his fingers in and out of her, his thumb focusing on her clit.

'Stars, you are glorious,' he breathes as he leans forward and presses his forehead to her cheek. 'I cannot wait until this movie is over so I can be inside you; so you can finally moan my name as loud as you want. Oh, Darling One, you're so wet.'

His words seem to be all Sara needs to dive over the edge, her teeth biting at the supple leather of his gloves in order to stop herself from sobbing aloud. She shudders against him, collapsing in a heap in his arms and she feels his hand smooth down her hair, a content rumbling in his chest that feels almost boastful.

It feels like an eternity passes before he moves yet she knows it couldn't be more than five minutes. She worries she looks a state and turns to glance on the nearest reflective surface she can find. Her cheeks are definitely more flushed and there's tears in her eyes due to having to keep herself quiet. 'How can you expect me to go back into that room looking like this?' she asks, voice trembling as she tries to stand on her own, legs still shaking. 'They're all too focused on that movie. They won't even notice. Come on... mustn't make them think we're... up to something.' His lips twist in a teasing grin and Sara grumbles, smacking him on the shoulder as she pushes by him.

She takes a deep breath before she opens the door and enters her room, thankful when Jaal seems to have spoken true — they don't even glance away from the screen. They seem to be in the middle of an intense scene between the hero and the love interest, so she makes her way back to the sofa to reclaim her seat.

She's more than a little surprised when Jaal follows, sitting down beside her, squeezing in the small space between her and Lexi. He wraps his arm around her shoulder, and she leans into his embrace, turning her attention back to the screen. '...I swear to love you, a thousand times, a thousand stars,' Jorax is saying and Sara can't stop the smile as her hand settles on Jaal's thigh, creeping upwards until he starts to tense below her touch. 'Oh Jorax, so many years lost. We were so foolish. Our hearts are one. No enemy fleet, no sea of stars can ever separate us again.' The words are enough to stop Sara in her teasing, just overcome with emotion as she turns her head to glance up at him, meeting his gaze to find that same feeling echoed back at her.

She can pay him back for that little surprise later... for now, she's content to just focus on the movie and this moment with her friends.
The pounding in Sara's head is unbearable. Her alarm clock goes off and only adds fuel to the fire, making her groan as she fiddles with her omni-tool to silence the damn thing.

With a grunt, she falls back against the pillows and rolls to her side, practically throwing herself on top of Jaal's body with the movement. He gives a snort but somehow manages to remain sleeping. Sara honestly envies that about him — sleeping through the alarm, her weight on top of him... she swears that if he wakes up as bright as a cucumber, she's calling it off between them.

Then again, the images of last night come to the forefront of her mind. How she had pounced on him the second everyone else had left. The film was over and she had drunk even more and just told the crew to come by the next day to help tidy up her room, to get as much sleep as they could to help with the hangover.

Yet, the second the door had shut, she had ordered SAM to lock it and threw herself at Jaal. The alcohol had made her bold, bolder than she thought possible as she fell to her knees and worked him with her mouth, stopping whenever she felt the tingling sensations that meant he was reaching his orgasm. She climbed on top of him afterwards, riding him until she came, only for him to stop and go down on her to bring her to a second, before finally fucking her senseless, taking her from behind as he tugged at her hair (with her urging) before finally spilling inside her.

It hadn't been for her damn alarm that she had forgotten to turn off, she was pretty certain she'd still be sleeping too — too exhausted from that thorough fucking to do anything else.

'Ugh, SAM, crew status report?' Sara asks as she rolls of Jaal onto her back again. She then adds, 'Private channel, please,' because she doesn't want to wake Jaal.

'Kallo is on the bridge, flying the ship, Sara, he didn't drink much last night. Suvi is still asleep. Drack is in the galley preparing breakfast — krogan metabolise alcohol faster so the effects have worn off. Cora is awake in the Bio Lab, she shows just traces of alcohol left in her system. Liam and Gil have received medication from Dr. T'Perro which is quickly reducing their levels — they should be fit for duty in two hours. Vetra is... also sleeping.'

That last part made Sara frown, wondering just what SAM's intonations meant as he said that. She turned towards the glowing orb of his node on her table, even though they were still speaking via their private channel.

'SAM? What's going on? Is Vetra all right?'

'Yes, Pathfinder. It is just... she and Dr. Anwar are... sharing the bed.'

Sara's eyes grew wide for a moment before a smile slowly spread across her face at this information. She remembered Vetra one time telling her about loving Suvi's voice, and just generally how
amazing Suvi was. And she knows that Suvi only prefers women, so it's not as surprising the longer she thinks about.

*In Vetra's little hidey-hole? Or in the crew quarters?*

*They are down in the cargo-bay storage room that Vetra has taken up as her own room.‘*

Sara nods and throws the covers away from her naked body. *Make sure no-one walks in on them. And let them know you're willing to assist with them leaving if they're not quite ready for anyone to know.*

*Of course, Pathfinder.*

SAM goes silent then and Sara stretches her arms above her head, groaning at the pop and stretch of her muscles. She jumps just a little when she feels lips against the small of her back, but it evolves into a smile as she cranes her head over her shoulder and finds Jaal, still lying down, sleepily pressing kisses to her skin as one arm snakes around her waist.

*If you think I'm going to survive another round, you're in for disappointment,' she mutters with a teasing glint in her eyes. 'If the Archon shows up at that Remnant City, we're doomed. I don't think I'll be able to walk for a few days.'*

Jaal hums deeply, featherlight kisses still being pressed against her skin. *Isn't that how it's supposed to be?*

Sara can only snort, turning forward and standing from the bed. She makes her way over to the wardrobe and fishes out some khakis and an Andromeda Initiative t-shirt. Jaal gives a petulant whine, one that only grows as she lifts his rofjinn off the floor and hurls it towards him.

*We need to eat. Get checked over by Lexi. And then have a meeting about Meridian.' She stops when she has his suit in hand, turning towards him. 'I feel like we're nearing the finish line, don't you? Like one way or another... something is going to end.'*

Jaal stands from the bed, moving over to stand in front of her. He wraps his huge arms around her, tugging Sara into his chest and holding her. She feels safe, content, as she wraps her own around his back, her hands still holding onto his suit.

*We will be victorious. I have faith in you, Sara.*

Sara beams, rocking forward so she can press their lips together. *Thank you, Jaal,' she whispers when she pulls back. She hands him his suit and then turns, heading for the galley. 'I'll get breakfast started.'*

A few hours later, when Lexi had given everyone the once over and whatever medication they needed to lessen their hangovers, Sara calls them to the meeting room. She had given them all time, making the rounds to see how everyone was doing, and only when she was certain that nothing was going to end in disaster had she called the meeting.

Now, as she looks around the group at their faces, she almost wishes one of them had been worse — that Lexi didn't have the right vitamins and whatever-else it is that helps flush out the alcohol from their systems. She just wants to put this conversation off for a few more hours.
But she's here now.

'Right, I'm guessing we've got the results from the data probes?' Sara opens, turning to Suvi and Kallo who've also joined the meeting. And somehow that makes Sara even more nervous because they haven't joined the meetings before, because it hadn't really concerned them... now it does.

Kallo gives a quick nod as he fiddles with his omni-tool. 'We managed to approximate Remnant ship dynamics. SAM?'

'Building predictive model.'

Suvi takes a step forward. 'Between the Remnant city, Meridian and however the Scourge fits in... pardon my Martian, but it's all weird as shite.'

At that moment, something pops up on the console, something that almost looks like... the Scourge? Sara has no idea what to really make of it, and rather than stare and try to figure it all out, she turns to the two brain-boxes and raises an eyebrow. 'What do I do?'

'Take this back to the Remnant city, find an override, and their ships will fly the same vector as Meridian.'

'And with this correction for the Scourge, you'll have it's exact location,' SAM informs and Sara's breath catches in her throat. It's surreal to believe that, after all they've been through, they're finally getting to Meridian — they may yet find a way to turn all vaults back online, make Heleus a home for them all. Not just Eos, Voeld, Kadara, Elaaden and Havarl... but all the previous "golden worlds" that had lured them away from their own stars.

'Then let's do this. Kallo, take us back to that Remnant city. Jaal, Cora, you're coming down with me. The rest of you, be ready for anything. Let's do this.'

The group disperses and Sara heads to the armoury with Jaal and Cora to get their armour and weapons. She knows it'll be some time before they reach it, but she wants to be ready.

The journey seems to last forever, though she's certain it couldn't have been more than thirty minutes by the time they reach the Civki system.

'It feels different coming back here now,' Kallo says as he brings them into the city.

'We're different. We're ready for this,' Ryder replies, her hands tightening around the railing of the bridge. I hope we're ready, her mind adds even as she tries to ignore it.

'SAM's marked a potential override for Remnant ship control. A tower with its own energy grid.' Suvi turns her head towards Sara with a kind smile on her lips.

SAM adds, 'It may be one of the controls that deployed Meridian. And the means to find it again.'

Sara's head seems to nod constantly before she pushes herself away from the bridge. Kallo brings them down to dock on the ship this time around, no sign of the kett anywhere. Somehow, that doesn't sit right with Sara — she knows the Archon hasn't just given up... so where is he?

'Everything looks right, Pathfinder. Find the override, apply the hardware and the Remnant will fly the same vector as Meridian,' Suvi informs as Sara strides from the bridge, heading down to the cargo bay so she can leave the ship.

Cora and Jaal are close behind her and as she finally leaves the Tempest, glancing around herself at
the huge Remnant city, she hopes that feeling in her stomach is just her being paranoid.

Cora reaches up to her and puts a hand on her arm, guiding her to a halt. There's a warm smile on her face. 'This is a big move. The Archon is definitely going to notice. Are you ready?'

Sara reaches for her hand and gives it a gentle squeeze. 'It's time. And we're due this.'

Jaal's gently grazes her waist as he reaches her side. 'Then let's show the Archon what we're made of.'

Ryder takes a deep breath. 'Okay. Tempest we're going in.'

The journey isn't quite as long or as confusing as the last time they landed on the city. And when they find their way to a gravity well, Sara inputs the commands and it takes them down.

She gives a smile at the sensation, sure that she'll never get used to this floating-flying feeling that comes with them. She breathes out when her feet hit solid ground, glancing around herself as she draws her pistol. 'We're here. Something feels... different though.'

'Orbital scans identified a separate energy grid within the tower,' SAM informs as she loads some incendiary clips into both her Ushior pistol and her Isharay sniper rifle.

'So that means...?' Cora asks as she steps up beside Sara.

'Defences here may not be on our side.' She gives both Cora and Jaal a teasing grin. 'But when are they ever?'

That brings a smile to both of their lips and Sara takes that feeling, holding onto it as she leads them towards the door as SAM informs them that they're only 145 metres away from their override console.

The room through the door is rather beautiful. Then again, Sara thinks that of everything Remnant — there's just something about the many lights and lines and shapes that appeals to her artistic heart.

Yet as she steps further into the room, her desire to just stare disappears when she feels the all-too-familiar sensation of an Observer bot eating away at her shields.

'We've got company!' she informs as she takes off running towards the nearest cover, falling to her knees to hide behind it. She reaches for her rifle instead, knowing it tends to work better when it comes to Observers — especially when they've got a target as they don't move quite as much.

'Cora, Jaal, I see a Nullifier up ahead. Take one each. I'll work on the Assemblers and Observers and then give you a hand when I'm done.'

'Got it,' they both declare and Sara raises her gun, gazes through her scope and squeezes the trigger. She sees, thanks to her implant, that the single shot took down the shields so she fires two more in quick succession, watching with pleasure as the bot drops to a useless heap on the floor.

The fight seems to blur. She takes out several Breachers with her asari sword, and uses her biotics to deal with the Assemblers, throwing them in the air with her lift and letting Zap and her assault turret deal with them.

By the time she's done, she finds Cora and Jaal working together to take down the last Nullifier. With the three of them together with Ryder's helping bots, it falls in no time and Sara gives a sigh of relief as she straightens.
She can feel sweat trickling down her back and she cannot wait to just get back to the Tempest for a shower.

Still, she has a job to do first.

She straightens. 'SAM, is it just through the door?'

'Yes, Pathfinder. And I detect no other lifeforms.'

Nodding, Sara holsters her gun and starts to lead her team through the next door. Her eyes hone in on the console that SAM has marked out and she feel her breath catch in her throat as she steps closer and closer towards it.

'It's right there. After everything, we just need to apply the override and they'll show us they way.' She stops at the very edge of the console. 'Is everything ready, SAM?'

'Yes. The necessary information has been queued for uplink.'

A smile tugs at the corner's of Sara's lips. 'Right. Time to find a path.' She raises her hand over the console, watching as a few of the buttons jump as the order is inputed.

'Remnant ships have taken off. They're following the override vector,' SAM declares and Sara just wants to scream in happiness, glad to hear that they're getting there. After everything they've gone through, all the loss and heartbreak and fear and worry... they're so close to making this home.

An holo of Meridian appears and Sara vaguely hears Cora and Jaal discuss it, how it looks strange and that it's hollow, and SAM is there giving his expert opinion... but Sara can't really focus on any of it.

It's like there's a ringing in her ears, distracting her. Something just out of reach, straining for her to hear.

And then it comes to the forefront of her mind. 'Congratulations, Pathfinder.'

She turns, stumbles. Something niggles, as if eating away at the back of her mind, and the pain starts to spread.

'A glorious day for us all.'

The Archon's face flashes in the forefront of her mind.

Everything aches. Hurts. God, it reminds her of when they were back on Habitat 7 and she lay dying. Even after her father had given her his helmet, there had been pain racking through her nerves, setting her alight.

'SAM? Tempest? What's going on?' She thinks she says it aloud but she can't be sure. The ringing is loud, too loud, and when she tries to take another step forward, she falls to her knees.

A scream finally breaks its way from her lips and whilst before she had hoped for it to be one of victory, this is only one of pain. She can't seem to stop screaming, grunting, moaning. She tries everything to lessen the pain, to dampen the sounds of the Archon's voice.

'I believed you a fitting rival, but you are a false thing. A lie.'

She vaguely feels arms around her, lifting her upright. Something, the last remainder of herself that she has that isn't just pain recognises it as Jaal; hears him murmur in her ear. She can't make out the
'Once I saw what made you special — your connection — I knew how and when to take it from you.'

Somehow, even through all the pain, she understands what's being said. She hears his words, and the threat, and somehow knows he isn't talking about Meridian.

She wrenches herself out of Jaal's hold and tries to stumble towards the door. She needs to get back to the Tempest. She can't just... let... him... win.

'I let you find Meridian. And now I'll use your SAM to weaponise it. All Heleus will be exalted, or, one by one, your worlds will die — starting with Eos.'

No. She wants to scream. I won't let you. The panic and worry claws its way up her throat. The desire to not be beaten, to help those who have no idea what's coming. She wants to scream and shout; wants to find the strength to fight and do whatever needs to be done.

Whispers still tickle at the back of her mind, and she wonders if it's Cora and Jaal. Jaal. God, what is he thinking?

'All I need to start is an implant like yours. And thanks to your memories, I know who else has one. Another reason to take the Hyperion.'

Scott. No no no no no no no.

There's a final burst of energy and she manages another couple of steps. She can vaguely feel tears running down her face.

The door... it's right... right... there...

She stumbles and falls to her hands and knees, glancing up to find the door sealing itself shut right in front of her.

All at once, the fight, the energy, the pain leaves her. She feels arms around her once more, but it means nothing. She thinks of Scott, wondering what the Archon will do to him; thinks of Jaal, wondering what he's feeling as he watches this.

'I'm sorry,' she whispers, unsure if it leaves her lips. She says it to them all. Scott, for not being able to save him; Jaal, for leaving him alone; her crew for not being able to fight; the people of Heleus counting on her to win as she lies there failing.

'Fall to darkness, Pathfinder. You were almost worthy.'

Perhaps you're right.

She closes her eyes and knows no more.
The alarms are what pulls Scott from his nap.

In truth, he hadn't really meant to fall asleep, especially since he's been doing better and slowly improving, so much so that Harry had even hinted at him joining the *Tempest* soon, so long as he kept up his exercises and promised to listen to Lexi. He knew that it meant he wouldn't get out on the field, not for a while, neither Lexi nor Harry would allow it, but he would still be out there, exploring. It was a step in the right direction which is all that mattered to him.

So, in an attempt to prove that he was ready for that, he had been sure to do all his exercises, pushing himself harder than necessary, and also taking the time to mingle with some other people — mostly those who were just being woken up as Sara's progress meant there was a place for them.

In hindsight, he can totally understand why he ended up falling asleep on his bed, even when he had told himself he was just going to lie down to catch his breath.

And now alarms were ringing and he has no idea what the hell is going on.

He bolts upright and glances around himself, seeing the signs of panic and alarm as red warning lights flash in time with the alarm sound. He swings his legs around off the edge of the bed and stands, feeling just a little bit of dizziness from the sudden movement.

There's no-one around. They've no doubt all ran off to see what the hell is going on. But Scott isn't a fool. Something very wrong is going on and so before he can talk himself out of his decision, he makes his way from the med-bay towards the armoury, finding the armour that had been made for him for being part of the Pathfinder team.

It's a little gut-wrenching seeing it, and he almost wants to reach out and stroke over the curves, study it and think about how different things would have been had they chosen to wake him up first before Sara.

*Always ten minutes ahead of me,* he thinks with a soft grin on his face as he starts to put on the armour. *And never lets me forget it.*

He finds a Carnifex pistol as well as a Disciple shotgun which makes him smile. He picks them both up and then starts to head back to the med-bay, fiddling with his omni-tool to ensure that his omni-blade is still installed.

He finally finds people as he goes. Or maybe they had always been there and he had just been so determined to get armed that he didn't notice. Not that it matters now.

The sight of him in his armour and with weapons holstered makes people stop and turn to him. *They're looking to me for guidance,* he realises, wondering if this is what it was like for Sara. The
sudden onslaught of just being there so being the one in charge. He really doesn't envy her position.

'Get everyone to the med-bay and hole up there.' He pushes moves out of their way as the go to fulfil that order, just as Harry comes up to him, asking what the hell is going on. Scott can only shrug. 'I have no idea, but it's nothing good. Go to the med-bay,' he presses the pistol into Harry's hands. 'I'm guessing you remember how to use it.'

The doctor sighs. 'Wish I didn't. Staying on here was supposed to be my retirement.' Still, he takes the gun and moves away, giving Scott a small pat on his shoulder. 'Just take care of yourself, Scott.'

Nodding, Scott moves away only to fall still a second later when a voice comes in through his mind. 'Hello, Scott.'

'SAM?' He asks in utter disbelief. Why… why is the AI talking to him? Through his implant? That only happens if… 'Oh, God. Sara? What's happened to Sara?'

'Kett forces have boarded the ship. They're looking for you,' SAM informs and Scott grits his teeth because that's not what he asked.

'Damnit, SAM, what's wrong with Sara?!!'

'The Pathfinder needs your assistance,' SAM says instead and Scott has to start moving again because standing still is getting him nowhere.

'What? Don't be stupid, she sent me a message last night — she's closing in on Meridian.'

'I'm afraid that the Archon has severed my connection with your sister's implant.' There's a pause that brings Scott to a halt again. 'If connection cannot be restored… she will die.'

'What?' he demands, because out of all the things that had flown through his mind, that had not been it. 'What do you mean she'll die? SAM what the fuck is going on?!!'

SAM's voice is the same as always, though Scott wonders if there's just a little bit of panic hidden in its automated tones. 'Please, Scott. You must hurry. I will explain as you head towards communications. But you must move now.'

'Son of a bitch,' Scott hisses but he takes off anyway, unholstering the shotgun and wishing to god that he hadn't given the pistol to Harry. He'd do anything for that extra security.

'Right SAM, I need info.'

'The Archon isn't stealing the Hyperion. He wants you and me. Your implant is the same as Sara's. He'll use us to control Meridian and your sister will die.'

Scott rushes through the doors as they open, heading into a hangar. He sees a few spare ammo clips laying around and so quickly grabs them, just in case. 'The Archon will kill her.' It's not a question. He's heard enough from her sister to know what kind of monster this Archon is.

Which is why it's such a surprise when SAM says, 'No.' There's a brief pause. 'Losing me will.'

That makes him stop dead in his tracks. 'What? SAM!'

'Hostiles are through the next door, Scott. Be ready.'

Scott grits his teeth, wondering if this is what Sara has to put up with all the time — the half answers and short replies. He knows it's a serious situation and no doubt SAM is just desperately trying to
save Sara... but she's Scott's sister! He can't just be expected to take the news that she's dying right this second in his stride!

It's almost a relief to load his shotgun and head through the door, finding three ugly looking aliens in front of him. They're unlike anything he's ever seen — green-black bodies with what looks like bones on the outside, as if some natural armour. It's vaguely turian but even that's not fair — turians are far more attractive than this.

He braces himself against the side of the door, bringing his omni-tool up to boost his shields before he steps out. They haven't noticed him yet and it only takes two blasts to take down the nearest kett.

That brings the others attention to him, and they turn towards him. Their guns start to fire against his shields until one of them calls out. The shooting seems to divert away from him, moving back to their previous target.

_The Archon needs me. They can't kill me_, Scott realises. He knows it's a huge risk because whilst he's probably needed alive... he probably can be wounded. So, he is careful to remain in cover and keep his shields strong as he moves to crouch beside another crew member, helping them take down the remaining two kett bastards who have found their way onto the Hyperion.

'Head to the med-bay!' Scott orders as he fills another clip, darting over the container he had been using for cover. He quickly searches the kett bodies, finding a few more clips that'll no doubt help him further down the line.

Scott doesn't have time to ensure that the other person is safe. He needs to save Sara, so he takes off at a jog, gritting his teeth when the sound of shooting fills his ears once again.

As he bursts through the door, he's surprised to find Captain Dunn fighting the kett. He dives towards the fencing beside her, reloading his shotgun as she asks him for help in killing the fuckers.

He's more than happy to oblige, firing his shotgun whenever one tries to get cocky and move closer, whilst Dunn attacks them from a distance with her assault rifle.

By the time the final kett falls, he feels just a little lightheaded. He tries not to think about that — nor the way that his body seems to be shaking. It almost makes him thankful for his love of shotguns that don't require such precise aiming to be effective. If he were his sister, favouring a sniper rifle, no doubt he'd be a goner.

'Scott!' Dunn gathers his attention, rushing to his side. 'SAM said you're fighting to the override? You can't!'

Scott snorts. 'You're telling me! It's crazy.'

A small smile tugs at the captain's eyes, even as her eyes are still wide and panicked. 'No, I mean take the access route. The Pathfinder is in trouble — that's all we need to hear. Keep pushing to the maintenance access and we'll ensure no-one follows.'

He almost wants to protest. The fact that people are going to stay behind and fight whilst he runs and slides down maintenance routes... but he knows it's ridiculous. He needs to get to the override to help Sara. If he stays behind, trying to be the hero, his sister will die. And what good will his pride be then?

With a deep breath, Scott takes off running. There are several people, decked out in armour and shooting at the kett, and he _wants_ to stop and help. He wants to keep fighting until the last kett has fallen but he knows he can't.
'SAM, the Captain and the others won't last long. What is the plan here?'

'If you manually send a reboot signal, it will manually reset your sister's implant,' SAM informs as they move further through the Hyperion, thankful when he finds no other kett in their way.

'So, it's like a reset to default settings?'

There's a brief pause. 'To restore the functions I shouldn't have taken.' Scott pauses, wondering what the hell that means but SAM keeps talking, unaware or uncaring of the confusion waring in Scott's head. 'With luck, her heart will not have stopped.'

Suddenly, he understands. Sara told him all about how SAM had killed her — stopped her heart dead so she could escape the Archon's trap. The fear and panic that courses through his gut is sickening and he almost retches. 'Since when you rely on luck?'

'I am... not sure.'

Gritting his teeth, Scott steps up to the console and holsters his shotgun. 'Okay. We're here. What do I need to do?'

'Reset. Sara just needs one pulse. That is all she needs to survive.'

He starts to fiddle with the console but people run past the room. It strikes him, in that second, that if he presses this button, no doubt the Archon will know. If he does this... 'The Archon will be alerted. He'll know where I am.'

'I am sorry, Scott,' SAM replies, voice soft and it almost brings a smile to Scott's face. Not that he really cares about being caught. His earlier thoughts come back to him — the sight of those kett lowering their guns and trying to capture, not kill. If he only fights to protect himself, Sara is dead.

At least this way... 'Yeah, me too, SAM.' He presses the button, watching as a little progress bar pops up. He has no idea how long it'll be before the Archon knows and sends its goons to come and find him... so long as the reboot is done, Scott doesn't give a fuck.

A single kett comes through the door. Scott doesn't even hesitate as he lifts his shotgun and fires, watching with grim satisfaction as it blasts through the chest, sending green blood everywhere. He gives another shot, ensuring that the thing is dead before turning to the console.

56%... 63%... 70%... 84%...

Two more kett come rushing through the door, shouting at him. His translators may not have been up to date with the kett language, but he understands a "put the weapon down or die" tone, regardless the species.

He's more than willing to fight these two. More than willing to risk it all if it means making sure Sara is safe... a beep fills the room and Scott turns and finds 100% staring back at him.

Scott's shoulders collapse in relief and he lowers his pistol as another two kett join their little group. As three keep their guns pointed at him, the fourth steps up and removes his shotgun, throwing it aside with no thought. Scott almost wishes the thing had gone off and shot the kett, just to teach it a lesson about mishandling guns.

His translators finally start to work. 'Come with us.'

They form a ring around him, marching him out of the room and to the bridge where the Archon
remains. And as he goes, he just hopes and prays that what he did was enough — that he gave Sara that one pulse that she needed.
Chapter 74

As they stepped into the control centre, Jaal had wanted to laugh in joy and relief. He had watched Sara step up to the console and felt pride swell through him, knowing that they had done it. They had found a way to find Meridian and they were going to rid the cluster of the Archon and kett and unliveable situations.

He and Cora had started to talk about what to expect of Meridian after the glimpse the control centre gave them. He had been curious, feeling a strange connection because the reason it existed was for his people — they had been created for these golden worlds, and Meridian was the control of all that.

That had been hard to explain to the other human, yet still he had tried... until he sees his beloved flinching in pain. He runs to her side, unsure what is happening to her. Her hand flies to her head and there's tears streaming down her face. She screams, demands answers and Jaal's heart cannot take it as he stares at her.

'Cora! Radio the Tempest, Sara needs help!' Jaal snaps, his voice strong despite the fact he's shaking non-stop. His hands are on her, trying to keep her upright and he can feel the strength leave her body. She trembles beneath his touch and is starting to go cold.

'Scott—' she breathes out, wrenching herself from his grasp. She takes a few steps towards the door, but seems unable to support herself. She stumbles and falls to the ground in a graceless heap and Jaal is at her side again. He holds her in his arms, for once really seeing how small and tiny she is compared to him.

He can feel tears fall freely down his own face, a constant stream that matches the one on her own, which is contorted in pain and suffering. He just wants to end it for her — take whatever is hurting her far away and end it all.

But the truth is, he has no clue what's hurting her. It had all come on so suddenly that he's at a loss. All he really can do is hold her in his arms, praying that this will all go away soon. He's read of illness in humanity that come on and go away — what were they called? Fits? He doesn't know of such a thing occurring with Sara, but who is to say that's not what this is? That all he needs to do is hold her and she'll come through it and be fine.

In need of a checkup and some meds but fine.

Yet as he stares at her. As he watches her fight with whatever is going on inside her, he knows, deep in the pit of his soul, that isn't going to be the case. Her beautiful blue eyes stare up at him but unseeing. They're miles away and drenched in pain. He wants to do whatever he can to ease that look from her face... but how?

'Sara. Darling One. Taoshay.' His voice cracks on every syllable, tearing at his throat as if those words cause him pain to say. He just wants to make her better. 'Please. Please.'

It's all he's able to say it seems. He feels tears running down his face, a non-stop stream, yet he doesn't care. Not as he watches her eyes flutter, fighting to stay open. Not as he feels her go even colder in his arms, her body slumping against his as if she's unable to support herself.

'I'm... sorry...' her voice is weak, breathless, dragged from her lips as if by some unseen force, rather than spoken with intention. He holds her closer, unsure what to do as her eyes fall shut and her body goes limp.
'Tempest we need an evac! Now! The Pathfinder is...' Cora's voice trails off, as if she's unable to say those words. *The Pathfinder is down, injured, dying, dead.* It makes no difference what she had really planned to say for Jaal's mind fills in every ending and none of them are good.

He raises his head, just briefly, and finds the shut door staring at them. It had been Sara's destination before she had collapsed, desperately trying to crawl her way out of the room with her brother's name on her lips.

And just like then, Jaal finds it sealed. They're still locked inside.

No matter what they do, how quickly the others get here, it won't do them any good if the door is still locked and they can't get in to help.

Jaal presses a kiss to Sara's forehead, flinching when he finds it cool to the touch, before he lowers her to the ground. It pains him to step away from her but he must fight to get the door open. There needs to be some sort of way to get out of this room that doesn't involve a Remnant console.

He marches to the door and with a grunt, throws his shoulder into it. His fingers reached for the seal along the middle, desperately digging into the crevice and trying to pull the two doors apart. He can hear Cora screaming for assistance, trying to get through to the Tempest, even though he *knows* it doesn't matter. Not if they don't get this door open.

He grits his teeth and keeps trying, tugging and pulling, praying to whatever was out there for this to work. For a chance. All he needs is the slightest opening and everything will be fine. They will be able to let the others into the room, Lexi will be able to analyse Sara and *save her.* It'll all be okay.

'Come on! Open! *Open*!' he hisses, battering his fists against the metal but it doesn't budge. Whoever these Remnant creators were, the definitely didn't seem to care about his people — they may have created them, gave them golden worlds... but why bother giving them a means of technology they couldn't control; that recognised them as foe?

He curses them all — the Remnant, the kett, the Jardaan. He damns them all to whatever they think of as hell as he batters another fist against the door.

Then his heart seems to stop.

A sound filters into his mind, through the haze of his anger and pain.

The sound of breath being drawn.

---

End Notes

hope you enjoyed!

don't forget to leave kudos, comments and bookmarks.

reminder that I also have a shakarian fic up now

[https://archiveofourown.org/works/14368410](https://archiveofourown.org/works/14368410)
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!